Palmer's Kiss

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Summary

Tony takes advantage of serendipity. Written after Iron Man and now AU.

Notes

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Production notes can be found under that tag at my LJ (username vr-trakowski).
Chapter 1

Their footsteps echoed in the marble lobby of the big bank, just like everyone else's, but unlike most of the customers Tony never bothered to keep his voice down. His ego liked watching people turn around to see who was disturbing the hush, just as the small wicked part of him liked to see Pepper's near-invisible wince as his words bounced off the ceiling. The bank manager, however, never even blinked as Tony held out a hand and spoke. "Gregory, good to see you."

"Mr. Stark." Ndibe gave him a wide smile and returned his grip without hesitation, then shook Pepper's hand as well. "It's always a pleasure to have you here." With practiced ease, Ndibe swept them off the main floor and into his office. "How are you, sir?"

They exchanged pleasantries for a moment, Pepper smiling genuinely at Ndibe's gentle compliments. Tony kept his smirk to himself. Normally he didn't like people flirting with his assistant, but Ndibe was married, and Pepper had admitted more than once that she loved the man's melodious accent. Tony liked to see her relax on occasion, though it didn't alter his plans to tease her about Ndibe's "crush" later.

"Ms. Potts says that you are here to see your safe-deposit box," the bank manager said at last, after coffee had been offered and politely declined. "Shall I have it brought here?"

"Nah, that's okay." Tony waved a hand and rose from the seat to which he'd been shown. "Just give us one of the rooms. I don't think we'll be too long."

"Of course." Ndibe escorted them to the row of tiny rooms used by customers who wanted to examine the contents of their safe-deposit boxes in privacy, and as they entered another bank employee followed them in with the long, heavy box. The woman set it down on the table and she and Ndibe withdrew. It was all very efficient, but Tony expected no less; Pepper had, after all, called ahead. And while Stark patronship was enough to get excellent service anywhere, Tony suspected that Ndibe would have done much the same for any customer important enough to warrant his personal attention.

"Okay, what have we got in here?" Tony asked, flipping open the lid of the box. Beside him, Pepper riffled through a handful of papers.

"Birth and death certificates, various securities dating from the 1960s, ditto some savings bonds, your great-aunt's collection of silver spoons, and your parents' jewelry." She consulted one. "It doesn't look like the box has been opened since they died."

Tony hid a small pang. "I did stop by right after their deaths, but I think you're right." He started lifting out the velvet boxes and bags inside, laying them out on the table. He actually possessed several safe-deposit boxes in several locations, but most of them held less personal assets, or things like backup copies of Jarvis' basic coding and plans for various inventions. This one, however, had really been his parents'.

It wasn't quite impulse that had led him back to it; Pepper had been going through an old box out of the storage sub-basement and had turned up a photo of his father consulting the pocket watch that had lived in his vest pocket. Tony's conscious mind had all but forgotten about that watch, but the sight of it had brought back memories of how it had fascinated him as a small child; the solid weight of it, the intricately engraved lid, the rich tick of the works and the delicate pointed hands making the rounds of the face. To him it had been an icon of manhood, one of the treasures that only grown-ups could have--and something that would be his own someday, his father had promised with a fond
But by the time Howard Stark had died, Tony's focus had moved to electronics rather than simple
gears, and in the initial rush of disbelieving, furious grief he had locked away all the reminders.
There were more items in the house safe, but these were the most valuable and some of the oldest.

And the sight of that photo had stirred Tony to hunt up the watch, to feel its cool roundness in his
hands again and remember.

He set aside the flat case that held the spoons and finally reached the smaller box that he
remembered. As he picked it up, he was aware that Pepper had opened the spoon case and was
murmuring in appreciation, but his attention was on what he held.

The box creaked open, and there it was, gleaming gold. Tony lifted it carefully out, the long chain
trailing after, and with a press of his thumb sprang the carved lid open. It was just as he remembered-
narrow black Roman numerals against a background of creamy white, the slender hands frozen at
2:38; the tiny scratch along the edge of the crystal that Howard Stark had refused to have fixed,
because--he claimed--it came from dropping the watch out of sheer surprise when his wife had first
told him she was pregnant.

Tony ran his thumb slowly around the curve of the casing, remembering not so much incidents as
feelings--the absolute security of his childhood, the tall powerful presence that was his father and the
energy and safety that was his mother.

"Does it still work?" Pepper's soft question pulled him from reverie, and Tony snapped the lid shut.

"Probably, it wasn't damaged in the crash. I think I'll take it to a jeweler first, though." Come to think
of it, he could probably fix it himself if it were broken, but somehow he felt that the watch deserved
the attention of an expert in the craft. On impulse, he turned it over in his palm. "Check this out."

"Hm?" Pepper stepped closer as Tony tried to open the back of the watch, but his nails were too
short to pry open the lid. Grumbling, he reached for his pocketknife, but cool fingers suddenly
covered his.

"Here, let me." Pepper took the watch carefully, and slipped one nail under the catch. With a tiny
pop, it opened a fraction, and she handed it back.

Tony lifted the thin lid. Instead of a window to the works, the back was plain unadorned gold, but
between the lid and the base was a scrap of paper, an old and faded photo. His mother's face, young,
smiling, looked up at him from a cloud of dark hair, and slowly Tony smiled back.

"Dad always kept this in here." His voice was soft. "I think it was from before they were married."

Next to him, Pepper sighed, a wistful sound. "She was beautiful."

Tony nodded. "She was." He snapped the lid shut and put the watch back into its box, then slipped
the box into his jacket pocket. "Take it off the list of contents. What else do we have here?"

Some of the jewelry he remembered, some he did not; there were bracelets and necklaces from his
mother, cufflinks that had belonged to his dad. Some of the pieces were considerably older than his
parents. One small plush box held their wedding rings, and Tony looked down at them thoughtfully
for a long time before closing it and setting it aside.

He'd refused to think about his parents for so long; not until a gentle question in a firelit prison had he
finally chosen to remember them, looking back at last with the eyes of an adult. At this end of history
he didn't really know what kind of a marriage they had had, but he did know that they had loved each other. There were enough memories of kisses and laughter, embraces and teasing arguments, and just the simple solid security of a childhood that had known no uncertainty.

He glanced up at Pepper. She was going through the items with careful precision, making notes on the inventory list, smiling now and then over a particular piece that pleased her eye. She never wore much jewelry to work, though he'd seen her wear the occasional elegant necklace or bracelet when a function called for it. Tony suspected she spent her money on shoes instead.

Family. Love. Intimacy. Yinsen had made him very aware of what was lacking in his life—made him admit to himself that he missed them. Life had been so hectic since he'd gotten back that Tony hadn't had much time to think about those lacks, but some things had become more clear nonetheless.

And some had remained so. Like red eyes in a smiling face. Pepper walking into danger because he asked it of her. Choosing to kill him, even, because it was the right thing to do.

Strength, loyalty, integrity. Did she have any idea of how much he admired her? Tony was pretty sure she knew he lusted after her, that wasn't really something he tried to hide, but every time he tried to bring up the subject of something more, Pepper seemed to sidestep it with a practiced grace that made it hard to tell whether she was consciously avoiding the issue or just clueless.

Tony supposed that a gentleman would take the hint, if it was one, and let the whole thing go.

*Good thing I'm not a gentleman.*

He began opening the bags and boxes, spilling metal and gems into his palm for a quick examination. Most of it was gold; his mother's strong coloring had defeated silver.

"You should take these too," Pepper said, pushing one small container towards him. Tony opened it to find a set of diamond cufflinks, elegant sparks that bespoke wealth without ostentation.

"Good idea." That box, too, went into his pocket, and Tony watched Pepper cross it off her list, then circled around the table to see what she was looking at. "Oh hey, I remember that."

He picked up the tiny box for a better look. The wide-banded ring was gold and enameled black, a spiral pattern of leaves and coils set with a round opal—an antique, almost Renaissance-style piece that he'd only seen his mother wear a few times. "It came from Dad's side of the family. Belonged to his grandmother."

Pepper smiled. "It's very pretty, I've never seen anything quite like it."

"Here, try it on." Tony pulled it free of the plush and held it out, but Pepper gave him an admonishing look.

"Certainly not. It's--" He grabbed the hand closest to him. "--Tony!"

"Come on, Pepper, what woman doesn't like jewelry?" He slid the ring onto her pinky finger, gripping her wrist tighter to keep her from pulling away, but the ring was too loose, so he moved on to the next one. This time it fit perfectly. "There."

Pepper succeeded in jerking her hand free. "Tony, this is completely inappropriate."

He raised his brows. "How so? There's no one here but us." Tony kept his eyes on her, waiting for her to debate the issue, but she just tightened her lips and let it slide. Piqued, he took her hand again.
"It looks pretty good, actually. Why don't you wear more jewelry, Pepper? You've got great hands, you should show them off." It was true; she kept her nails short but manicured, and her long shapely fingers had figured in more than one of his more pleasant dreams. And the ring stood out against her pale skin, the opal glowing blue-green-pink in its setting.

"We've had this conversation," Pepper said with exasperation. "Professional appearance, remember?" She tugged, but Tony closed his fingers, not done looking. Or feeling; her cool skin was warming against his, and he stroked his thumb over her knuckles, savoring the softness.

Pepper coughed. "Besides," she said, her voice a little constricted, "I'm allergic to silver, and it kind of restricts my choices." She finally pulled her hand free.

"There goes my piercing fantasy." Tony watched as she rolled her eyes and began to tug the ring off. It slid up to her knuckle...and stopped.

Frowning, Pepper twisted it and pulled again, but it didn't budge. "Um..."

Amused, Tony grabbed her hand once more. "If you keep yanking, it'll never come off." He lifted her hand for a better look. "It went on just fine..."

Her knuckle was already reddening from her attempts to remove the ring, and Tony could see that it was starting to swell a little. He looked past her hand to her face, and Pepper was blushing hot pink. "PMS," she muttered. "Water retention."

Tony bit back the quip that sprang to mind--one thing he had learned was that it was not wise to tease a woman about period-related matters--and shrugged. "Well, let's try the obvious solution first." Folding back her other fingers, he slid the beringed one into his mouth, wrapping his tongue around her knuckle and smothering a laugh at her squeak. Pepper went from pink to bright red, and he had to hold her still again, but nonetheless Tony took his time, making sure that her finger and the ring both were thoroughly lubricated before removing them from his mouth. The ring tasted of old metal, but her skin had a flavor he couldn't quite name, something sweet and tempting.

"Tony--" He would almost have thought her disgusted, but for the pulse beating rapidly in her throat. Tony smirked at her and tugged gently on the ring. Unfortunately, it still wouldn't budge.

"For the record, you taste divine, but alas, no ring removal," he sighed, and reached for the handkerchief in his breast pocket. "You have petite hands, but it looks like my mother's were petiter. Is that a word? Petiter?" He started to dry her finger, but Pepper yanked it away, snatching the handkerchief from his hand.

"No, it's not." She turned away, ears still heated, her movements jerky. "I can't believe this--"

Tony picked up the empty box and added it to his stash, since it was clear that the ring wasn't coming off just yet, and went back to looking through the collection. "Relax, Pepper. When we get back to the house we can try KY jelly."

As he expected, that produced a hiss of suppressed swearing, and he grinned and went on sorting, listening to his assistant take deliberately deep breaths as she tried to calm her temper. By the time she'd stuffed the crumpled handkerchief into her pocket, he had finished, and was repacking the safe-deposit box.

Pepper picked up the sheaf of papers once more, and cleared her throat. "Did you want to take anything else?"

"Not unless you have a spoon fetish." Tony replaced the last few bundles. "Why is it that nobody
"collection forks?"

His assistant, her composure restored, snickered. "I'm sure I could research that question for you if you really want to know."

"Nah, I'll ask Jarvis. It'll give him something to do." He closed the box. "Let's get out of here."

The woman was waiting patiently in the corridor outside to take the safe-deposit box back to the vault, and as they left the room Ndibe met them, still smiling. "I trust everything was in order?"

The bank manager walked them out to the front door, chatting easily, and shook hands once more as Happy emerged from the limo idling at the curb to open the door. "May I offer my felicitations, Ms. Potts, Mr. Stark?" Ndibe asked genially, which made Tony blink in confusion and Pepper go dead white.

"It's not--" she began, but another employee came up behind Ndibe and tapped him on the shoulder, whispering urgently in his ear. The man gave them one last smile and turned away, and Tony frowned as Pepper whirled and all but ran for the car.

"Whoa, Potts!" He caught up with her at the curb, but she dove into the vehicle before him, so Tony just slid inside after her, shrugging at Happy in bafflement. The chauffeur merely tipped his head and closed the door; it took a lot to ruffle him.

Tony turned to his PA, who was yanking once more at the ring, her face set. Alarmed, he grabbed both her hands this time. "Hey, hey! That's not going to work. What the hell is the matter?"

"The matter, Mr. Stark?" she spat. "The matter is that Ndibe now thinks we're engaged." She shook the beringed hand in his grasp, which, he noticed belatedly, happened to be her left one.

Tony gaped down at it. He should be horrified, he thought vaguely, but the thought uppermost in his mind was actually what a great idea.

"It's not an engagement-type ring," he managed, ignoring Pepper's attempts to pull free.

"That doesn't matter--you heard him." Pepper sounded angry and a little panicked. Tony looked up at her, intrigued by that panic, and let his forefingers find the pulses on the underside of her wrists, stroking gently. Her lips moved in a silent oath, and she drew in a breath. "It's a good thing he's not inclined to gossip--"

"Destination, sir?" broke in Happy's voice from the front of the vehicle. Tony didn't take his eyes from Pepper.

"Home. We have a date with some lubricant." He smirked at his now beet-red assistant, but Happy was used to such quips and merely pulled the limo out into traffic.

"Mr. Stark, if you want to keep this quiet you had better shut up."

"Ooh, you're really pissed if you're back to using my last name. Why should I keep it quiet, Pepper? It sounds to me like a pretty good thing." Her pulse wasn't slowing under his touch; in fact, it seemed to be speeding up despite his attempt to soothe.

She sucked in another long breath, held it, and then exhaled sharply. Her hands relaxed in his, and Tony loosened his grip, only to have them snatched away. "Tony. This is not the time for one of your jokes. Do you realize what kind of effect a rumor like this could have? Stock prices, the press, the board--not to mention my credibility--"
Tony slumped against the seat, his mind turning over the possibilities rapidly. The idea of keeping Pepper, though, as a permanent part of all his life, kept intruding. He hadn't thought much beyond coaxing her into a relationship, but contrary to all his past, the idea of forever was...tempting.

And for Tony Stark, the best way to deal with temptation was to give into it.

Given how stressed his assistant seemed to be, though, now was perhaps not the best time to broach the subject. "Pepper...Pepper, take it easy. As you said, Ndibe doesn't tell tales. We'll get the thing off as soon as we get home, and that'll be that." He patted her knee. "I'm not sure you're right about the effect, though. The board's been trying to get me to settle down for years."

Pepper grimaced, sitting back a little. "Not with your PA, Tony. A sordid office romance is hardly the sort of thing to reassure them."

"Who says it has to be sordid?" Tony protested, surprised at his own mild offense. "Dirty, sure, I'm all for that, but anyone who thinks you can be sordid needs his attitude adjusted. I have wrenches..."

Pepper blinked at him, her cheeks pinkening again and the corner of her mouth turning up. "Public perception is the problem, not reality, as you well know." She picked up the papers she'd dropped on getting into the limo and stacked them neatly. "And I can't do my job if no one respects me any longer."

He had a hard time imagining anyone not respecting Pepper Potts, but the idea made him genuinely angry. The woman does the work of six people and keeps me in line. She's worth a hell of a lot more respect than I am.

"If you were married to me, Pepper, they'd have to respect you," he said, pitching his voice to tease but very curious as to how she'd react. To his delight, the roll of her eyes was accompanied by a deepening of that telltale flush. "But if anybody gives you any trouble, let me know. As I said, wrenches."

She sniffed dismissively, fished out her BlackBerry from her pants pocket, and began scrolling. Tony put his feet up on the opposite seat and folded his hands on his stomach, and considered the situation.

The more he thought about it, the more the idea of being engaged to Pepper appealed. Especially if there was going to be a wedding at the end of it. One of the things Tony knew he feared was losing the people he cared about, and Pepper was at the top of that list. And she keeps her promises.

It was a worthy fantasy--his ring on her finger, her kiss on his lips, and taking her home with him forever. He'd spent his adult life avoiding romantic entanglements, but the idea of belonging to Pepper felt nothing like a trap and entirely like something he should be working on, right now.

But does she want you, genius? He frowned. Pepper was attracted to him, no question about that; but a marriage, a true one, would require more than that.

I want what Mom and Dad had. It was a strange realization, given how long he'd refused to remember, but nonetheless it was the truth. And something like that had to have a firmer foundation than lust, honest though it might be.

So break it down. One--find out if she's in love with you. If yes, then all you have to do is talk her into a real engagement. If no--

The thought made his chest ache, but Tony didn't stop. If no, then...you'll have to woo her.

Which, he had to admit, he had no idea how to do. He could flirt, sure, and while he didn't usually
have to put much effort into seducing a woman there had been a few times when he'd played a merry game of chase. **But how do you offer a woman your heart?**

Obviously, he had work to do. Tony closed his eyes, and began to plan.

When they got out of the limo, Pepper outdistanced him into the house. Tony followed her to the kitchen, and found her rummaging through the cabinets. When she retrieved a tall bottle and walked to the sink, he snorted. "Cooking oil, Potts? If you don't want to borrow my KY I'm sure there's some Vaseline around here somewhere." He thought for a moment. "Or machine oil, if you prefer."

Pepper shook her head, yanking a dish towel from the rack where it hung in snowy folds and tying it around her neck—to protect her blouse from any splashes, Tony surmised. "Opals are fragile, Tony, and this is an heirloom stone. I can't even use lotion."

He drifted closer to watch as she trickled a generous splash of the golden oil over the ring and her finger, and set the bottle down. Because he wanted to, Tony reached out and took her dripping hand in both of his, using his fingers to work the oil in under the ring and ignoring Pepper's abortive protest. He wasn't sure if she was more worried about his sleeves or the fact that he was touching her again, but either way he wasn't going to stop. "You're going to smell like a French fry."

"As opposed to a machine shop?" she shot back, and he grinned.

"Some people find the odor of fine lubricant arousing." The oil was making her skin even softer. "Now relax."

He gripped the ring carefully and slid it up her finger, but again it stopped at the knuckle, and no matter how he twisted, it wouldn't go further. Tony frowned. "I don't want to hurt you."

Pepper brushed his hands away and took over, pulling much harder than he would have dared, her lips in a tight line. Tony flinched as she yanked, and when she had no more success he grabbed her wrist. "Stop, Pepper. This isn't working."

She sighed, shoulders slumping. "I guess not."

Tony gave her wrist a squeeze, and reached for the sink dispenser with his other hand. "You can try again tomorrow." He pumped a dollop of detergent into his hand and began to lather it with his fingers.

"Wait, no soap," Pepper said in alarm, but Tony snorted again.

"I doubt once will hurt it much, Pepper, and anyway you need to get the oil off. If necessary the stone can be replaced." He ignored her wince and scrubbed her hands gently. "The swelling should go down overnight."

Pepper sighed again, a tired sound. "Three days," she said. "That's how long it usually takes."

Tony turned on the faucet and guided her hands to the water, rinsing both pairs before letting her go and plucking the towel from around her neck. "Three days, then." He gave his hands a cursory wipe and held out the towel, smirking again. "You can wear a Band-aid over it if it worries you so much."

She rolled her eyes, and took the cloth. Tony glanced at the clock on the microwave. "Since we're here, Potts," he went on, "why don't we call it quits for the day? By the time we get back to the office it'll be time to leave anyway." It was a slight exaggeration, but he really didn't want to bother going back, and he was betting that Pepper wouldn't either with the ring still on her finger.
She hung up the towel, looking at the time herself. "You're right," she said reluctantly. "I can handle
the budget reports by video, and there's nothing else there that can't wait until tomorrow." She looked
down at the ring still stubbornly clinging to her finger, and shook her head. "It's probably just as
well."

"Probably," Tony agreed dryly, and picked up the oil, turning to the cabinet to put it away. He felt
Pepper's eyes on him for a moment before she spoke.

"Tony...it's not..." She hesitated. "It's not the idea, you know--it's just all the problems involved--"
She huffed a distressed breath, and that made him turn back. "I mean, I'm not assuming anything but-
-
"I know," he said gently. Pepper was red once more, and all he wanted to do was hug her until she
stopped being so embarrassed. For a moment, he almost did, but--No. Don't screw this up. "It's okay,
Potts. I get it. I'm not insulted. Now go make your call."

With a distinct air of relief, Pepper fled. Tony watched her disappear, amused, and went to change
clothes. Suit schematics were calling him.
Chapter 2

As usual, Pepper arrived at the mansion bright and early the next day to make sure he was dressed, fed, and coming to work. When she entered his bedroom, Tony was impressed to see that instead of a bandage, she was wearing a wrist brace that extended past the ring, neatly concealing it from view. "Nice one, Potts. Sudden-onset carpal tunnel syndrome?"

She smiled and handed him his morning espresso, her spirits obviously restored. "You have to admit, it's a good excuse."

"It is indeed." Tony swallowed the scalding thick liquid with relish, feeling his synapses snap awake, and handed her back the tiny cup. "What's on the agenda for today?"

Before Pepper could answer, her BlackBerry chimed, and she grimaced apologetically and answered it. Tony waited, using the time to straighten his tie and set his cuffs, but just as he got them aligned Pepper's voice broke into his concentration. "What?"

He couldn't remember hearing quite that combination of horror and outrage before. Pepper was pale again, her mouth hanging open as she listened to the caller, but her eyes were beginning to flash. "No. That's not--no! Where the hell did that come from?" She paused. "What do you mean, photos?"

Tony stuck his hands in his pockets, ruining his cuff placement, and leaned against the wall, trying idly to guess what disaster had her so riled. Can't be me. I haven't even been on a mission in days. Pepper was used to dealing with his escapades, even if they had morphed from women to heroism, but it had been a quiet week, and unless someone had unearthed old news, he was clean this time.

"I'll call you back," Pepper said, her voice glacial, and lowered her phone. Before Tony could ask, she whirled and stalked from his bedroom down to the living room, and he followed, curious.

Pepper halted in the middle of the big room and spoke to the air. "Jarvis, call up all the current news items related to Stark Industries. Display here, please."

The window flared with light, and a dozen separate pictures appeared on it, news clips and headlines predominating. At the bottom, the company's stock price showed up, and Tony raised his brows at the numbers displayed. "Wow, that's impressive. What the hell happened overnight, and why didn't R&D tell us they'd solved cold fusion?"

"It's not R&D," Pepper said flatly, ignoring the joke. "It's us. More specifically, it's me."

Tony focused on the various displays, and felt his own jaw loosen slightly. All the news ran along the same theme--his sudden engagement to his personal assistant.

"Oops."

"I thought Ndibe didn't gossip," he said mildly, wondering what exactly had happened. Certainly Happy didn't tell tales, and as far as he knew there was no one else who'd seen--

"Jarvis, magnify number four," Pepper said, and the picture in question swelled, answering his question. The photos were black-and-white, but pretty high quality for security cameras, and they clearly showed the dark band on Pepper's ring finger as the two of them walked down the bank hallway.

"Gregory's going to be pissed," Tony remarked. "Which one do you think it was, the box handler or
Gregory's assistant?"

Pepper was still staring at the screen with an expression he usually only saw when someone underage tried to press a paternity suit on him. "My guess is the woman, but it doesn't really matter." Her phone rang again, but uncharacteristically she ignored it, her attention taken up by the images before them. "Hell."

Tony snickered; Pepper so rarely swore out loud that it was always a bit funny when she did, though it also meant very serious trouble for someone. She glared at him, but only for an instant. "I'm going to have to get PR in on--but I can't--" She hissed, and Tony understood her frustration. The moment she set foot outside the property, the paparazzi would be all over her. And the brace was absolutely no use, because no one would believe that it wasn't hiding the ring.

Her phone chimed once more, and Pepper snatched it up to her ear. "Hello?"

Tony moved past her for a better look at the display. "Jarvis, analysis," he requested quietly.

"The news of your putative engagement has had a remarkable effect," Jarvis answered, equally quiet. "Stark Industries' stock price has climbed nearly forty points since the opening bell, and while many of the headlines are deplorably sensational, the overall attitude is positive." Several newspaper articles appeared on the array. "The consensus seems to be that the engagement is proof of stability on your part, particularly given the importance of Ms. Potts' role in maintaining the company. It is early, of course, but many financial analysts are hailing the move as propitious."

Tony whistled softly, astonished. "You mean, to get everybody to calm down about the changes all I had to do was promise to get married?"

"Not quite, sir," Jarvis said. "You had to promise to marry Pepper."

Tony opened his mouth to debate that statement, realized he didn't really want to, and closed it again. Behind him, Pepper spoke.

"That was the board," she said, her voice flat, and when Tony turned to see her she looked shell-shocked. "They called to offer their congratulations."

"They called you, and they didn't call me?" Tony asked, insulted, but Jarvis broke in.

"They called you first, sir, but as you ordered all calls from the board made before noon are automatically shunted to voice mail."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Details. How'd they sound?"

Pepper sank slowly to the couch. "Enthusiastic."

Her eyes were wide and disbelieving, and Tony began to laugh at the sheer absurdity of the whole thing. So much for damaging the company. He supposed the reaction could be interpreted as an insult to himself, but he didn't care. It couldn't be more perfect if we set it up on purpose.

Pepper buried her face in her hands despite the brace. Tony got himself under control and sat down next to her. "Look at it this way, Potts, you didn't lose any respect."

She made an undecipherable noise, something between a growl and a groan, and lifted her head, peeling off the brace and tossing it onto the coffee table with more force than necessary. "This is a disaster."
"Not necessarily," he pointed out. "Nothing's irrevocable yet. We can claim anything we like about those photos, and the press doesn't know where you are. For all they know, you're home sick with a bad cold for three days, and when you're back on the job we can deny the whole thing."

Pepper shook her head. "Tony...do you really think that will work?" It wasn't a true question. "If we wait three days to counter it, the repercussions will go on for weeks...and it'll wreak havoc with the company. Think about it."

Tony frowned. I hate to admit it, but she's right. Other companies survived such rumors with few ill effects, but most other companies weren't headed up by celebrities-slash-superheroes. For good or ill, his own actions did affect Stark Industries--more so now than ever. And the company wasn't just stock points and manufacturing, it was people as well--

"If I may point out," Jarvis broke in, "engagements can be broken as well as made--but there is no reason to do so immediately."

That made him pause. Tony looked over at Pepper, who was frowning also, but thoughtfully. "What, you mean pretend for a while?" he asked.

"Exactly. Given time, the media frenzy will die down, and eventually you may end your 'engagement' with a minimum of fuss. Stark Industries will still feel the effects, but they will be much milder than if you try to deny the rumor now."

Pepper bit her lip, then started to smile. "Jarvis, are you suggesting we lie?"

"Prevarication is a common and accepted practice in the business world," Jarvis said placidly. "Given the alternative, it may be the wisest course."

Tony snorted. "I'm starting to wonder about that last memory upgrade." He regarded Pepper, who was twisting the ring on her finger thoughtfully. "What do you think, Ms. Potts?"

She slid the ring up to her knuckle, which was still too swollen to let it pass. "It does make a kind of insane sense," she said reluctantly, holding the ring there but not pushing. "If we confirm the rumors, it'll be a circus, but..."

"...But it'll be a happy circus," Tony finished for her. "I could bring in a couple of dancing bears if you'd like. Or would you prefer elephants? Would that be overkill?"

Pepper sniffed, lips curling up again. "It's a tough decision, Tony."

Her voice was serious despite her smile, and his heart chilled at a sudden thought. "Is there someone who'd object to this, Pepper? Some boyfriend I don't know about?" He tried to keep his voice light, but wasn't sure he'd succeeded.

Her brows drew together. "No...as you've mentioned repeatedly, you don't like it when I have plans," she said tartly. "And boyfriends usually require plans of some kind."

Tony let out a breath and rubbed his hands on his thighs, relief coursing through him. "What can I say, I'm possessive."

"You're greedy," Pepper grumbled, but it lacked force.

"That too." Tony reached over and took her left hand, thumb running over the band. "Pepper, if you really want to, we can go down to the workshop and I can cut this thing off in two minutes, and that'll be that, rumors be damned. I don't want to put you in an impossible position here."
Pepper winced slightly, presumably at the thought of destroying the ring. "You put me in impossible positions on a regular basis, Mr. Stark. It's part of my job description."

She bit her lip again, obviously thinking, then spoke slowly. "All right. Let's do this."

He couldn't stop the grin that spread over his face. "In that case, we'd better formalize it." He drew her hand forward. "Virginia Potts, will you do me the honor of--"

Her free hand landed on his mouth, cutting him off. "Not. Another. Word," she said sternly, eyes wide with panic. Tony snickered and nipped at her fingers, and Pepper yanked both her hands away and stood up with a huff.

"First of all, we need to construct a consistent story," she began, smoothing one hand over her hair distractedly. Her phone began to ring again, and Tony rose as well.

"Let me handle that. I'm sure I can come up with something. You can confirm things with PR and start the ball rolling."

"Agh." Pepper took a deep breath, spine straightening. "All right." She nodded once, sharply, and lifted her phone to her ear once more. "Hello--"

Tony got out of her way, heading down the stairs to his workshop and peeling off his jacket as he went. By his guess they would be leaving the mansion shortly all the same, but for the moment he didn't have to be formal. He draped it over his diagnostic chair as he passed, and dropped onto a stool and began pondering.

The temptation was there to just wing it, to make up some outrageous tale and see if the media and everyone else would swallow it. Not this time, genius. It wouldn't be fair to Pepper, and while there were plenty of times where he'd gone ahead anyway, this time was different. For one thing, she's doing you--and Stark Industries--a huge favor.

For another, she was going to be under a tremendous amount of stress. Tony grimaced, wondering if he'd really done the right thing in going along with Jarvis' suggestion. Pepper had a great poker face, but she didn't lie well, and nothing about their faux engagement was going to be easy for her, at least in public--

Public.

We're going to have to act engaged in public.

The grin that he could feel spreading over his face was positively unholy, Tony knew, but he made no effort to stop it. Instead, he reached for paper and a pen.

It was almost forty-five minutes before he heard Pepper coming down the stairs. Scribbling a last couple of notes, Tony ripped the page off his scratch pad and looked up to watch her come into the shop. To his expert eye she looked no less stressed, but more in control, which didn't surprise him at all; Pepper functioned best when she had a plan of attack. "How'd it go?"

She raised her brows. "Okay. PR has a bare-bones press release going out now and I have Cedric in the main office triaging calls for the moment. Legal is already moving against Wells Fargo concerning the leaked photos."

"Tell 'em to go easy if the bank gives up the employee," Tony interjected. "That had to be a personal move, not a corporate one."
Pepper nodded. "I agree, but there's no recalling them now, they're out on the Internet as well as the major news services."

Tony shrugged. "Since we're confirming instead of denying, it doesn't matter, though remind me to see about putting together a file-specific virus for future use... How many interview requests have we got?"

"So far? Thirty." Pepper grimaced. "More than half want both of us."

"Makes sense." Tony grinned at her. "I'm afraid you're going to have to come out of the shadows for a bit, Ms. Potts."

She rolled her eyes and picked up his jacket, shaking it out. "Have you got a story for us?"

Tony waved the paper. "On the principle that simple is easier to remember, we've been dating secretly since I got back from Afghanistan--six months is a nice round number--and this past weekend I bit the bullet and asked you to marry me. And we went to the safe-deposit box to pick up the ring, natch."

"Under the radar, good," Pepper approved. "Am I going to keep my job after the wedding?"

She was smiling, getting into the spirit of the thing, and Tony relaxed a bit more. "For the stockholders' sake, I certainly hope so." He glanced at his notes. "I figured it was better not to set a date, though."

"That sounds wise." She lifted a finger. "I also got a call from your attorney. He wouldn't tell me why he wants to meet with you, so I'm guessing he wants to discuss a prenup."

"Big surprise." Tony stood up, turning his back so that Pepper could help him into the jacket. It wasn't something she'd done until he'd come back hurt and needed the assistance, but even after he was healed she'd kept the habit, and Tony wasn't about to stop her. He loved feeling her breath on the back of his neck, and her hands smoothing out the wrinkles over his shoulders as he settled the garment. "Well, I think you can trust me to be generous, Ms. Potts."

He expected a sardonic comeback, but behind him Pepper laughed as he put his arms into the coat. "I honestly wouldn't expect anything less from you, Tony."

Her tone was gentle, and he straightened his lapels and turned. Pepper wore a soft little smile as she reached out to adjust his tie. "When it really matters, you can be amazingly generous. It's one of your finest traits."

Tony had to curl his hands into fists to keep them from settling on her hips. He cleared his throat. "Careful, Potts, you'll ruin my rep."

She snickered and stepped away gracefully, heading for the stairs. "Time to go, Mr. Stark."

As they neared the front door, Pepper slowed. "Can we tell Happy the truth?" she asked, looking pained. "I really don't want to lie to him."

Tony smirked. "He probably figured it out after yesterday anyway. I think we'd better let Rhodey in on it too, or things will get really awkward."

"Like they're not already?" Pepper muttered, and opened the door.

Hogan was waiting outside the limo, which had one door swung wide like a wing, and as they
emerged he straightened from his lean against the vehicle. Tony bounced down the stairs ahead of Pepper. "Morning, Happy. How bad is it at the gate?"

"Thick," Hogan replied easily, touching his cap to Pepper as Tony ducked into the vehicle. "But the SI security Ms. Potts called for is in place, so we shouldn't have any trouble getting out." He shut the door as Pepper climbed in, and went to the front.

"Good, good." Tony leaned forward as the chauffeur settled into his seat. "Listen, given what's happened this morning we've decided to roll with this thing for the moment, so as far as you're concerned our engagement is real."

Hogan glanced at the rear view mirror, his gaze finding Pepper, and apparently she gave him whatever reassurance he was looking for, because he nodded. "Got it, sir. How long have you two been a couple?"

Tony sat back. "Six months. I finally came to my senses and asked her to marry me."

Beside him, Pepper snorted, and Hogan grinned. "Wise of you, sir."

The divider hummed up behind Hogan's head and the limo pulled forward. Tony poured himself a scotch and relaxed, satisfied. Happy was legendary for his silence; over the years, Tony estimated, his chauffeur had been offered almost three-quarters of a million dollars, total, to spill information about Tony or Stark Industries, and he had refused every time. Loyalty like that can't be bought.

Loyalty like that can't be bought.

He glanced over at his PA, who was now texting busily. And it's priceless when you find it...

As Hogan had said, the crowd outside the mansion's gate was considerable, a mix of paparazzi and the curious, but the SI security team had them well-cordoned. The limo slid through without a hitch. Tony sipped his drink and considered the day ahead.

The crowd outside company headquarters would be worse, that was a given, though there again Security would be in place to handle things. Tony ran down a mental checklist of probable events--certainly a videoconference with the board of directors, possibly a press conference--and sighed. Responsibility's a bitch.

As they neared their destination, Tony broke off his reverie and turned to Pepper. She had set down her BlackBerry and was staring out the window, her right hand worrying absently at the ring on her left. He felt a rush of tenderness at the sight, a feeling he'd only recently learned to recognize. It was coupled with an odd sort of regret.

Fuck. I wish this was real.

"You do realize," he said, keeping his voice light, "that we're going to have to make this believable."

Pepper stopped fidgeting and turned to face him. "Hmm?"

Tony glanced out the window. The limo was rolling into the Stark Industries front driveway, and it was as bad as he'd foreseen--there had to be at least twenty security guards holding back the crowds. The mass of people started to sparkle as flashes went off.

"If we're engaged, Potts, that entitles us to public displays of affection. Starting as soon as we get out of the car." He jerked a thumb at the paparazzi. "They're going to expect it."

Pepper blinked, and a flush began to climb up her throat. "I...is that really necessary?" Her fingers twisted together.
Tony grinned at her. "We can start small. I won't kiss you until we get up to the office."

She sputtered, and the limo glided to a stop. Tony sat up as one of the guards reached for his door. "Showtime, Ms. Potts. Put your game face on."

The door swung open on her muffled protest, and Tony got out, ignoring the cameras and the calls with the ease of long, long practice. But instead of heading straight for the building and trusting that his PA would be right behind him, he waited as she slid across the seat, and took her hand to help her rise.

He was proud of her. Despite her dismay seconds before, Pepper looked as cool and collected as always, and they moved smoothly towards the front door as if they'd rehearsed it a dozen times. The fact that her muscles tensed beneath the hand he settled on the small of her back was evident only to him.

They swept into the huge lobby, leaving the crowd outside, though there were a few people moving around besides the usual front-desk security. Some days Tony stopped to talk to whoever was on duty, but today he kept moving, straight towards the elevators. Pepper paced him perfectly, her face calm, as though the stares from every employee they passed didn't exist at all.

As the elevator doors closed behind them, she let out a sharp breath. Tony glanced sideways at her and let his fingers circle soothingly along her spine. "So far so good."

Her glare was not muted by the fact that she was still facing the front of the elevator. "I understand the necessity of...this, but next time--"

The elevator stopped, and she bit off her words. Only one person was waiting, a young intern as fair as Pepper who stepped in automatically and then blushed a vivid crimson when he realized who else was occupying the car. He was clearly too intimidated to say a word, and Tony let it go rather than distress the poor kid further.

Two floors later the intern was gone, scooting out through the doors as if pursued. Tony waited until they closed again before speaking. "You were saying?"

He still hadn't removed his hand, and he wasn't sure if Pepper was being cautious or was just too distracted to take offense. She sighed. "Never mind."

Tony let one corner of his mouth curl up. "Nervous about that kiss?"

Pepper sniffed dismissively. "That would be highly unprofessional in the workplace--"

She really was rattled, he thought with amusement. Since when have I ever been professional?

The doors opened on their floor, and they stepped out in tandem. The path to Tony's suite and Pepper's adjoining office was straight through the main floor, whose open plan housed a handful of top support staff. Given the mid-morning hour, most of the seats were occupied, and a low mannered hum of voices kept the big room from silence.

As they traversed the expanse, though, heads lifted, and a slow patter of applause began, spreading to fill the room like rain and punctuated with a whistle or two. Tony grinned widely, and beside him Pepper blushed again, shaking her head at the smiling workers and smiling back.

"Looks like they approve," Tony said in a low voice, waving to acknowledge the tribute.

Pepper shook her head again. "It's terrifying." Her voice was dry, but edged with humor.
They made it into his office, and Tony closed the door behind them knowing that they had about three minutes before someone would want Pepper's attention. She apparently had the same thought, glancing at her watch. "Cedric's going to--"

Tony cupped the back of her head in one hand, ignoring her startled jerk, and kissed her. Nothing too intense, just a warm easy touch that conveyed affection rather than sex. Her lips were soft, and cooler than he expected, and instantly made him want more, but Tony kept it to three seconds. Releasing her, he stepped back and gave her a small smirk. "How's that for practice?"

Pepper's eyes were wide with outrage. "Tony--" She--quivered was the only word for it, he decided--with anger and surprise and presumably the desire to punch him.

"Did you really want our first kiss to take place in front of an audience?" He strolled towards his desk. "Now that's out of the way and we don't have to worry about it."

Tony collapsed into his chair and looked back at where she was still standing near the door, and licked his lips. "You still taste great, though." He winked.

Pepper growled, then closed her eyes and regulated her breathing. Tony watched, still amused--his comment about an audience was perhaps unfair, but it was logical, and Pepper throve on logic. "Cedric will have a list for me shortly," she said in very measured tones. "And you're an ass."

"Guilty, Potts, but you know I'm right." He watched as her eyes opened in a glare. "Just think of all the fun you're going to have jilting me when we call it off."

Pepper's lips tightened further. "The day's schedule will be on your desk in fifteen minutes. You'll have to decide about some of the interviews, so don't put it off." She whirled and headed for the door, her back very straight. Just as she reached it, she glanced back. "And I'd assumed that you would be the one doing the jilting. You're not known for your fidelity."

She opened the door and was through it and gone before Tony could move. He stared at the spot she'd occupied, astonished at how badly her words had hurt.

Okay...I guess she's a little more pissed than I thought. He clenched one fist, rubbing his thumb over his knuckles, and tried to figure out why she was that angry. He'd taken advantage, he knew that, but he hadn't expected to do more than ruffle her feathers like usual.

Maybe I should stay out of her way for a while.

The wisdom of his choice was borne out when the schedule was carried in by Cedric, who put it down, pointed briefly to the various sticky flags poking out along the edge, and waited. Tony was used to the man by now--Cedric spoke to Pepper all the time, but almost never to Tony, though the latter had no idea why. He didn't bother worrying about it; Pepper didn't, so he figured it wasn't a problem.

He picked up the schedule and scanned it quickly. A videoconference with the board in half an hour, then a few smaller meetings after lunch with Legal and the microengineering section. Notes in Pepper's precise script told him that the time in between the afternoon meetings could be filled with a couple of interviews, and did he want her to attend?

Yes. Tony scribbled in addenda and handed it back. "Please request Ms. Potts' presence at the board meeting as well," he said, and Cedric nodded and took himself out. Tony sighed, and pulled up the pinball game on his computer. Half an hour wasn't enough time to get involved in something more interesting.
Twenty-five minutes later he opened the side door in his office that led to Pepper's. She was on the phone, mostly making acknowledging noises, but when she saw him she straightened and held up one finger in a gesture to wait. Tony leaned against the doorframe and put his hands in his pockets, and watched her, listening as she wrapped up the conversation. When she hung up and sighed, he walked forward to rest a hip against her desk, and opened his mouth to apologize.

Pepper beat him to it. "I'm sorry about what I said, earlier," she began, rubbing her forehead. "I lost my temper, and--"

Netted, Tony took her nearest hand in his. "Stop it."

"I--what?" Pepper looked up at him, brows drawing together.

"I'm the one who should apologize," Tony told her, annoyed and amused both at being upstaged so neatly. "I got a little carried away."

Her smile was sardonic. "Tony, you always get carried away."

He squeezed her hand and let it go. "Which is one of the many reasons I have you, and that fact is why the board is all happy this morning. You're coming, right?"

She sniffed. "I think I'd better." But the line between her brows was smoothing out, and Tony was relieved to see it.

He stepped back as she rose. "For the record, I really am sorry, Pepper."

She picked up her BlackBerry and put it into her jacket pocket. "I know. And you did have a point. Just...take it easy, Mr. Stark?"

He gave her a Hogan salute, two fingers touching his temple. "I'll do my best."

"That's what scares me," Pepper sighed, but the dimple that accompanied her words made them a tease. Tony grinned and followed her back into his office, snagging a chair so that they could both sit in front of the camera at his desk.

The board as a whole was clearly not expecting Pepper's presence, but no one was stupid enough to object, and Tony spotted approval on more than one face--especially those of the female members. Tony had done a little housecleaning after Stane's death, but replacing all the members was neither practical nor desirable. Nonetheless, he felt fairly confident that they would be eating out of his hand--or, to be more precise, Pepper's hand.

And he was right. It was fun to watch the powerful people who helped run his company shower his putative bride-to-be with compliments, and he didn't feel terribly guilty about deceiving them. For one thing, it was still his company, and for another...

*I still intend to end this with a real wedding.*

Pepper bore up magnificently, answering questions with composure, shunting a few to him. It was a good thing they knew each other so well, Tony thought as the meeting went on; they hadn't discussed how things would in theory change after they were married, but the answers she gave were pretty much what he would have suggested anyway. Pepper already knew how Stark Industries was run and was empowered to act as Tony's proxy should he be unavailable, so the board was used to regarding her as a power in her own right.

"As my wife, Ms. Potts will share my controlling interest in the company," Tony stated in response
to one question. "Beyond, of course, any stock she already holds." Which was quite a bit, in fact, though nowhere near a major share; stock options were part of the SI executive package, and while Pepper was not exactly an executive, she had all the benefits of one.

"What if a conflict arises?" asked one member, raising her brows. Tony turned his attention to her; Takayo Fukushima was astute, no-nonsense, and someone he actually trusted.

"I'm sure any conflict between us can be worked out in private," he said smoothly. "If not, we'll cross that bridge when we reach it."

Fukushima did not look convinced, but let the matter drop. Tony saw more than a few glances pass between members, and held back a grimace. It was clear that his reassurance wasn't enough to soothe everyone. Too bad. They can suck it up, or they can leave.

On the whole, however, the meeting went well, and broke up for lunch with many congratulations and best wishes. Tony watched Pepper smile graciously at the effusions, and made a mental note to add another bonus to her next paycheck. Bad enough she has to put up with me--

"Let's go get some lunch," he suggested as they stood, but Pepper shook her head.

"I have too much to do. You go ahead, just make sure to be back in time to meet with Legal. I mean it, Tony, we don't have time for you to be late today."

"I know," he sighed. "Are you sure? 'Cause we could make it quick."

Pepper chuckled as they headed for the door to her office. "Your version of quick is ninety minutes. I can eat in ten."

"That's bad for the digestion," Tony began, then trailed off as she opened her door. "Whoa."

Her desk was all but invisible under what seemed to be a dozen vases of flowers, all different. Pepper's eyes widened and she stepped inside, glancing back at him, and Tony raised his hands. "Wasn't me. Though I wish I'd thought of it."

"Yes, well..." Pepper shrugged, and he understood what she meant--they were playing a part, not the real thing. She plucked an envelope from the nearest explosion of blooms and opened it. "Felicitations from Jack Roberts."

Roberts was the CEO of Robitech, one of Stark Industries' competitors. Tony snorted, and Pepper smirked. "He's just being polite, Tony."

"He's a sore loser." Roberts had put himself on Tony's permanent blacklist by blatantly trying to hire Pepper away every time they met. The last offer had been a position as vice president of finance, and Pepper had hesitated just long enough to make Tony start sweating, though in retrospect he suspected she had just been yanking his chain.

"He's very nice." Pepper replaced the tiny card, her dimple showing again, and now she was yanking his chain. She reached for the next one, and Tony couldn't resist rising to the bait.

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"Maybe we really should, just to keep you from running off to my rival." Tony absently snared a card from a vase full of irises, recognizing the name of a prominent senator.

Pepper snickered. "Tony, if I really wanted to change careers, being married to you wouldn't stop me." She scanned the card and replaced it as well. "However, I like my job, so you can stop glowering."
"Mmm." As Pepper took a third envelope, Tony replaced the one he held, then scooped up Roberts' offering and carried it with him into his office. If Pepper noticed, she didn't say anything, and Tony kept going into his private washroom. With vindictive pleasure, he dumped the flowers in the trash and the water down the drain, then mashed the blossoms into the wastebasket using the vase. Roberts had a more than professional interest in Pepper, Tony was sure, and while she had never displayed any return interest, the mere idea made Tony testy.

She's mine now, Jacky, and she's going to stay mine. Sneering at the crushed flowers, Tony dropped the lid on the container and stalked out of the washroom, feeling better even though he knew the entire thing was irrational. The suspicion that Pepper was quietly laughing at him in her office didn't mute the feeling.

Dropping into his chair, he reached for his phone.

Thirty minutes later he returned to Pepper's office carrying a large paper bag. She looked up from her computer, surprised; the vases were now neatly arranged on one of her cabinets. "I thought you went to lunch."

"Nope, I had lunch come to us." Tony set the bag on her desk and began unloading the contents—sandwiches and a salad, and the bottled tea Pepper liked. "Figured it would look bad if I went out by myself and left my fiancée alone the first day we got engaged."

The quirk of her mouth told him he wasn't fooling her, but her eyes were crinkling with pleasure, and that was plenty for him. Tony handed her a fork. "Eat up, Potts, you've only got ten minutes."

They took twenty, chatting easily about the board members and the people who'd sent flowers, and he counted every minute well-spent. When he went back to his office, though, her voice followed him. "I'd like the vase back, at least..."

Tony sighed, and retrieved it from the trash.

It wasn't until they were back at the mansion that evening that Tony brought up what he'd been thinking about off and on all day. "If we're supposed to be engaged...shouldn't you be living with me by now?"

Pepper's head snapped up from the report she was studying and she glared at him over the back of the couch. Tony swung one leg over the piano bench to sit sideways and held up his hands. "Hey, I'm not suggesting that we share a bedroom here--but as you said, public perception's an issue. This place has a dozen rooms--"

Pepper was already shaking her head. "No," she said firmly. "I need my own space, especially now. I'm prepared to be seen as eccentric on this, Tony, but I...have to maintain a boundary."

"Boundary? Against what?" Tony asked, smirking at her, but her glare grew stronger.

"You're pushing."

"All right, all right." Tony turned back to the piano, disappointment mingling with hope. Having her live at the mansion would make it easier to get her used to the idea of really marrying him, but the fact that she felt there was something to guard against was a good sign. "Sorry."

He heard Pepper sigh, and played a few bars of "Imagination". "The press may catch on if you never spend a night here, though."
Papers rustled. "Let's see what happens, okay? It's just the first day."

Tony kept playing, saying nothing. He had a strong suspicion that the media was not going to let them alone until they got married, if it did happen--he was just too big a story, and half the time there was some third-stringer hanging around the mansion gates anyway, looking for a scoop. But there was no point in arguing at the moment; time would prove him right.

Or not, but he was pretty sure.

He looked back over at the couch, letting his fingers find the keys with thoughtless precision. All he could see of Pepper over the back of the couch was the back of her head, but the sleek ponytail drew his eyes all the same, making his dancing fingers itch to stroke that shining fall of hair. It was a familiar allurement, and Tony fell into equally familiar reverie, imagining walking over there and bending over to cup her chin in one hand and kiss her. In his fantasy she always kissed him back, letting her work fall aside and reaching up to touch him--

*Have you ever felt a gentle touch and then a kiss, and then and then, you find it's only your imagination again...oh well...*

Somehow the song seemed a bit too appropriate. Tony wound it to its wistful conclusion, then rose and quietly took himself downstairs, away from temptation.
Chapter 3

Rhodes turned up the next evening, striding into the mansion with his eyes alight and curiosity in every line of him. "All right, Tony, what the hell's going on? First I get your mysterious 'Play along' message and then the next thing I know the whole world's saying you two are engaged." He laid his cap and jacket neatly over the back of the couch. "Say it ain't so, Pepper--tell me you didn't agree to marry this fool."

Pepper rolled her eyes at his grin. "It's a long story, Jimmy."

Rhodes reached out and grabbed her left hand to look at the ring. "Well, that's not bad, Tony--at least you're doing it right."

Equal parts exasperated and amused, Tony knocked Rhodes' hand from Pepper's. "You're just jealous that I asked her first, platypus."

"Don't call me that," Rhodes said automatically. "Seriously, you two are engaged?"

"No," Pepper interjected, sounding just as exasperated. "This whole thing is a mistake."

Rhodes raised his brows. "Do I need to get my shotgun?"

Unexpectedly, Pepper burst out laughing. Tony stared at her, taken aback. She shook her head and wiped her eyes. "Sorry, sorry..."

Rhodes sighed. "Why don't you all start at the beginning?"

They ended up sitting in the living room as Tony explained the events of the past two days. Soon Rhodes was laughing too. "You've got to be kidding me. You manage to avoid so much as a second date for years, and then you get engaged by accident?" He shook his head, putting his feet up on the low table in front of the couch. "This is classic."

"It's temporary," Pepper corrected. "Jarvis says that when things have stabilized a bit we can break things off quietly."

Tony slumped in his chair. "Yes, well, as you can see we need to keep the real situation a secret." He didn't know quite why he was feeling annoyed; maybe it was Rhodes' blatant amusement at the whole concept."

"Sure, sure." Rhodes smirked. "You know, Pepper, this could be really good for you. How many guys are going to try to catch you on the rebound?"

Pepper tossed a throw pillow at his head, a shot he blocked easily. "I think Tony will have more to handle on that score. Iced tea, Jimmy?"

"Yeah, thanks." Pepper nodded and rose, and Rhodes watched her leave the room before turning back to Tony and leaning closer. "If you let her get away from you you're a bigger idiot than I ever took you for."

"If I let her get away from me, you can fetch that shotgun," Tony replied in a low voice, completely sincere. "This may not have been planned, but I know a good thing when I'm hit over the head with one."
Rhodes nodded once, decisively. "Glad to hear it." His smile sharpened. "You better be serious, though. If you hurt Pepper I'm going to have to damage you."

Tony raised a brow. "You don't think I can be a good husband?"

"I think you've got no practice at being anything," Rhodes replied, though his tone was gentle. "And if you break her heart you'll lose her for good."

His words stung. Tony looked away, knowing Rhodes was right. "I'm a fast learner, Rhodey."

His friend sighed. "I hope you're fast enough."

It was surprising how quickly they settled into the routine of deception. When he'd thought about it, Tony had expected their "engagement" to be more disruptive, but most of the people around them seemed to accept it easily. The press was a problem, but a careful ration of interviews seemed to help, and there was something to be said for having one's own private security force.

Pepper handled the raised pressure with her usual superb grace, which only increased Tony's admiration. Her workload grew even heavier, with more people pressing her for her time as well as his, but the flip side was that he could interfere when he felt like it--making her shut off her computer and leave the office with him, for instance, without it being taken as abnormal.

Tony found he enjoyed playing the part of doting fiancé. It allowed him liberties that Pepper would never normally permit, such as all the little touches he liked to indulge in, and it was fun as well. For instance, one of the first things he'd done was order a daily delivery of flowers to her office. Partly because it seemed the right kind of gesture, and partly to show up Jack Roberts.

And there's nothing she can do about it. The thought gave him a wicked sort of pleasure, because he'd wanted to do these things for months, ever since he'd gotten back from Afghanistan. Wanted to touch her, even just the fleeting brush of his fingers on her arm, or the palm resting on her spine that told other men that she was taken. Wanted to have the absolute right to look after her, no questions asked. Wanted her to lace her fingers with his, or lean over and brush a quick kiss across his lips.

He wanted a lot more than that, of course, but it would do for a start, and Tony was intrigued by the fact that Pepper hadn't seemed to notice that he was touching her more often in private as well as where other eyes could see them. Or maybe she had noticed and was just letting him do it without saying a word. The uncertainty drove him a little crazy, but in a good way.

And she was adapting. That drove him crazy too, and definitely in a good way. For instance, the second morning she'd left the door open when they'd reached his office, and then bent down and done the kiss thing in full view of Cedric. Who'd promptly blushed crimson and vanished, but by then she was already straightening and heading for her own office, and Tony had to regulate his breathing and admire her sense of timing.

Now, two weeks into their faux engagement, things seemed to be going pretty well. He was still trying to figure out how to convince Pepper that getting married for real would be a good idea, but in the meantime Tony was enjoying himself pretending that they were in a romantic relationship. In fact, it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember that they weren't.

As they got out of the limo in front of the mansion, Pepper took his hand as usual and let him help her stand, but then stepped pointedly away. "No cameras, Mr. Stark," she murmured. "You can relax."

After a day of boring meetings--it was harder to blow them off these days when he didn't want to
stay home and give up the chances to act the lover--Tony's temper was a little short. "What, a guy can't be polite? My mom would have something to say about that, Ms. Potts."

"I don't think your mother would have approved--" Pepper stopped short, and rubbed the bridge of her nose tiredly. "I'm sorry. I had no right to say that."

And he was instantly torn, because she was correct, and yet he wanted her to have the right, even though she had never met Maria Stark--wanted her to have the right to be intimately snippy on occasion.

Tony sighed. "My mother wouldn't have approved of a lot of things, but they got me where I am today," he said shortly, irritation mounting at the whole situation. Actually, his mother would probably have metaphorically slapped him upside the head years ago, but it was not a thought he'd allowed himself to entertain before. Nor was the somewhat unpleasant conclusion that a lot of his former behavior probably stemmed from the fact that she wasn't there to keep him on the straight if not the narrow.

Pepper's mouth twisted, a rather sad look. "True." And her eyes didn't have to flick over his chest for Tony to know that she was thinking of his arc implant.

His annoyance was completely irrational, he knew that, but he gave way to it all the same. He stalked up the front steps to the door and let the scanner read his palm. "Coming? I don't know about you but I have things to do tonight."

Given that Pepper was shouldering the bulk of the workload, that was patently unfair, but she didn't riposte, instead just climbing the stairs behind him and following silently inside. Tony stripped off his coat as he walked, balled it up and tossed it on the couch just because he knew it bothered her, and headed downstairs. "I won't be up for dinner."

He didn't quite dare look back. By the time Tony had reached the basement, he was already regretting his words--but not enough to go back upstairs and apologize.

Anger slowly congealed into shame, but Tony still didn't leave his work until well past midnight, and by then Pepper was long gone. The plate of sandwiches he found neatly covered on the kitchen table only added to his black mood, and he didn't sleep well. He was running mostly on espresso by the time Pepper reached the mansion in the morning.

She rapped on his open bedroom door, and her "Good morning" was imperturbably cheerful. Tony glared at her from where he stood brushing his teeth at the sink; normally he didn't feel at all self-conscious about confronting her in nothing but his boxers, but his guilt was making him feel inadequate, and her perfectly-pressed outfit didn't help.

Pepper ignored his mood with sublime indifference. As he finished his ablutions she laid out a suit for him. "What tie do you want?" she asked, pulling socks from the appropriate dresser drawer.

He grunted. Without so much as sighing, Pepper chose three from his closet and held them up, and Tony gave into the inevitable and pointed at one. The last time he'd refused to choose, she'd scheduled him back-to-back budget meetings and given Happy the afternoon off.

Her air of repressed amusement was getting to him; nothing spoiled a good sulk like someone refusing to take it seriously. Just to piss her off, Tony started pulling off his boxers while Pepper was still in the room, but she merely walked out, already tapping away at her phone.

He considered refusing to go into work at all, but he really did want to talk to the nanocircuitry
division, they had some ideas that might apply to the armor, so he dragged himself out to the limo and brushed Pepper's hands away when she went to adjust his tie.

"You're in a mood," she commented offhandedly when they were settled in the vehicle. "Did something happen?"

Tony merely grunted again, and reached for the whiskey decanter. Pepper didn't roll her eyes, quite, but she left him alone for the rest of the drive, which was what he told himself he wanted.

Bad mood or not, though, he shifted into the expected role as soon as they reached SI headquarters; there weren't always reporters outside any more, but any public appearance meant they had to be in character. They walked inside and entered the elevator, which was empty; as it started to climb, Pepper finally spoke. "The gossip columnists were speculating yesterday that we're too distant."

Tony stared at the elevator doors. "Want to make out in public?" he said sarcastically.

Pepper eyed the floor indicator thoughtfully. "I was thinking more of lipstick on your collar, but if you insist..."

Her words penetrated just as the elevator passed the third-to-last floor. Tony started to turn, only to find Pepper's hands on his lapels and her mouth on his. This was not a casual brush of lips--it was an actual kiss, sweet and hot and absolutely mind-blowing. Tony gave one instant to startlement and then let his mind blow, and kissed her back with just as much enthusiasm, his hands finding her waist and pulling her close.

The bell pinged. The doors slid open. Pepper let him go and stepped smoothly from his grasp, smiling just slightly, and straightened his tie with an expert tug. "Come on, Mr. Stark," she said, and took his hand.

Dizzy, Tony let himself be led past two marketing executives who had been waiting for the elevator. Both were staring, and as Tony recovered enough presence of mind to arch a brow at them, they looked away hastily and hurried into the elevator.

No one else seemed to have noticed--at least, the noise level didn't change. Pepper deposited him in his office, gave him an amused, professional smile, and closed the door behind her as she went to her own desk.

Tony collapsed into his chair, still stunned, the taste of whiskey completely driven out by the taste of Pepper and his bad mood utterly gone. Slowly he leaned back until he was staring at the ceiling, and grinned. Oh yeah...game on.

"Care to explain that, Potts?" he asked later, strolling into her sanctum with his hands in his pockets and a counter ticking down in his head. Pepper didn't set aside the file she was reading, but she did glance up, her expression serene.

"Frank and Teddy are two of the biggest gossips in the building," she said easily. "I expect that item to hit the streets before closing bell."

"How did you know they were going to be there?" Tony sauntered closer.

"They always come upstairs first thing for the muffins Cho brings in on Wednesdays." She made a note and turned to a fresh page.

"Your efficiency is terrifying." He took one hand from his pocket and gently brushed Pepper's
ponytail away from the nape of her neck.

"Tony--" She glanced up at him. "I know the idea annoys you but--"

The counter hit zero, and he bent and nuzzled the newly bared skin, letting his mustache scrape gently over the fine hairs there. *Mmm...so soft...*

Pepper squeaked, just as the door opened and Cedric backed in with an armload of cardboard lunch boxes. Tony took two more seconds to savor the goosebumps that were rising on that tender skin, then lifted his head.

Cedric had just turned, and was becoming a nicely flaming red. Pepper cleared her throat, and Tony could see the curve of her cheek pinkening. "On the table, please, Ced," she said quickly, and her assistant hurriedly set the boxes down and took himself out with haste.

She waited until the door closed before glaring up at him. "Tony, what--"

He wrapped his fingers around the smooth, cool fall of hair and stroked down it, careful not to pull. "Just doing my part to counteract the rumors." Her hair had always held a mild fascination for him, one that had actually increased as soon as he first touched it.

Pepper huffed, and stood, moving briskly away from him and around her desk. "*Cedric* doesn't gossip, Tony."

*No, but he now has proof to counter anyone saying otherwise.* "Oops." Tony rubbed his beard absently. "What is it with him, anyway? He never talks to me if he can help it."

She snickered. "You mean, you haven't figured it out? You're slipping." Pepper frowned at the boxes. "I didn't order lunch."

"No, I did." Tony walked over to the table and started pulling off the box lids. "Let me guess, he's got a huge crush on you. You want Caesar or garden?"

"Caesar, and you're half right." Her eyes narrowed, and Tony could tell that she'd just figured out his timing, but uncharacteristically she let it pass.

"Here you go then." Tony held out a box and a fork. "What half am I right about?"

Pepper took the items and leaned back against the table, lips curling up. "If I tell you, you have to promise you won't make a big deal out of it."

"Okay, fine." Tony held up a hand as if taking oath. Cedric was an expert at moving under the radar, as it were, and the man mostly interacted with Pepper anyway. "Do I pay him enough?"
Pepper laughed around a mouthful of lettuce, and covered her lips with a paper napkin before swallowing. "He's happy, Tony. Don't worry about it."

"Mmf." Tony chewed greenery, knowing there was a more substantial sandwich in the third box. He liked salad, but it wasn't enough to keep him going for long. Pepper chased a crouton with her fork. "The photographer is scheduled for tomorrow--do you want to work from home?"

"Yeah, sounds good." He fished for a napkin. Part of handling the media frenzy was giving them what they wanted, to a degree. In this case, it meant formal engagement photos. "Hey, can you wear the thing you wore to the last holiday party? Because, wow." Tony leered genially.

Pepper laughed.

She did not, to his disappointment, choose to wear the green velvet concoction that had stuck in his memory, but nonetheless Pepper looked lovely the next day, arriving at the house in a white blouse touched with lace at the collar and a full skirt that rippled distractingly around her calves. Tony surveyed her with both admiration and honest lust, neither of which he bothered concealing--the first was deservedly hers and the second was hardly a secret. "You look entirely edible, Potts."

Pepper sniffed gently, smiling nonetheless, and smoothed the forest-green fabric with an absent hand. "Please tell me you're not planning on wearing that."

Tony looked down at his tattered shorts and his "Aerospace engineers do it with lift and thrust" t-shirt, smirking at her tease. "I suppose the sight of my legs might be too much for the susceptible."

Pepper snickered. "That, and I think the glow behind 'engineers' might show up a little too well on film."

"Yeah, well, it's one of my favorites, I didn't want to cut a hole through the words." Tony looked her up and down again. "I wanted to see what you wore--it's more fun if we coordinate."

She gave him a cockeyed look. "'Coordinate'? Tony, don't you think that's a little...twee?"

"Hey, I'm just getting in the spirit of things here. Presenting a united front and all that." Tony winked and went off to change into a suit.

He almost wore a tie the same shade as Pepper's skirt just to make her roll her eyes, but that was really too formal, so instead he went for a shirt two shades darker--complementary but not exact. The corollary to having a woman around that made you look good was making your woman look her best in turn, and he very much wanted the world to see them as an established couple. Because the thought had occurred to them that the closer they seemed to be, the harder it would be for Pepper to "jilt" him.

He'd already decided that there was no way he was going to break off the engagement himself. *The longer we're in it, the more time she has to get used to the idea.*

Tony felt a bit guilty about manipulating Pepper, but he figured that since she did it all the time to get him to stick to his schedule, he was entitled to a bit of it himself. *Besides, it's not like I'm going to force her to marry me. Nobody ever forces Pepper Potts to do something she truly doesn't think is right.*

Like raiding Stark Industries' own servers for information incriminating its CFO. Tony fastened his
cuffs, remembering that strained argument in the workshop, Pepper's refusal to act until she was satisfied with his reasons. Of course, if he'd known then what was going to happen...but there was no changing the past, and things might have turned out worse if she'd quit and left.

Hell, I know they'd have been worse for me.

The memory shifted forward a fraction, to her grudging, almost embarrassed confession that he was all she had. Tony hadn't had much time to think about her statement then, but in the months since he'd replayed her words, trying to interpret them. He knew Pepper had no family left, but until then he'd never really thought about what that meant for her. She had friends, certainly, both at the company and outside of it, but... It's not the same, and you know it.

None better.

He wondered suddenly if she missed the family times that he had finally let himself remember--dinners, vacations, hugs, the simple solid security of love. From what little she'd said over the years, Tony guessed that her family had been a good one, her parents loving and her childhood unmarred, but he wondered if that just made the losses harder when they came, the loneliness deeper.

I'm tired of being alone.

And if he had his way about it, neither of them would ever have to be alone again. He couldn't tell if Pepper really did love him, but if it were at all possible he would persuade her to it.

Tony shrugged into a suitcoat, leaving his shirt unbuttoned at the throat, and went to find his fiancée.

She was chatting with the photographer in the living room, handing the woman a glass of iced tea from a tray that held a pitcher and two more glasses. Tony could smell the lemon, and it made his mouth water. He smiled at both ladies as he came in. "Vee, you're more gorgeous every time I see you."

Vralia Penn was famous for her shots of celebrities, and Tony had worked with her before. He liked her sharp wits and sharp tongue as well as her efficiency, and the way she would snub him when he flirted with her; it was all in good fun, since she was very publicly a lesbian, and to them both it was just a game. Tony reminded himself to tone it down this time, however; game or no, it was bad manners to banter quite so openly in front of one's betrothed.

Vralia, a tall bony woman with grizzled hair, smiled and lifted the glass. "Congratulations, Stark. Though it's a crime to take Ms. Potts here off the market."

Pepper chuckled and handed Tony a glass as well; she and Vralia shared a mutual respect, and she never seemed to have a problem with the woman's blatant compliments. "I think you'll find that the common opinion is the other way around."

Vralia snorted. "Playboys are a dime a dozen, especially in this town. Glad you've got sense, though, Tony."

He sat down next to Pepper on the couch, letting his fingers find hers and playing absently with the now-loose ring. "Occasionally. No dog-in-the-mangering, Vee--I'll tell Jen on you." He'd known Vralia's partner of sixteen years longer than he'd known Vralia herself.

The photographer snickered and drank from her glass. "She'd agree with me." Setting down the tea, she rose and reached for her camera case. "We can start right here--you're good just as you are."

Tony felt Pepper's fingers tense slightly, and let his thumb rub soothingly over hers. "How is Jen, by
"Preggers and loving it." The camera Vralia lifted to her face eclipsed her smile. "I've never seen someone so happy to lose her cookies. It's downright weird."

Tony snickered as Vralia began snapping photos. "Just as well--I can't see you being the mommy-to-be."

"Too old," Vralia said, grinning, "and you're right." She lowered the camera for a moment. "Stark, sugar, kiss your girlfriend, she's looking way too uptight."

Pepper made a faint sound, but her only objection was a flash of panic in her eyes when Tony leaned in. He winked at her and closed the distance, cupping her face with one hand and taking her mouth in a slow sensual caress that had her first stiffening slightly and then relaxing. He let his tongue taste her bottom lip and then sat back, enjoying the pink on Pepper's cheeks and cocking a brow at Vralia.

The photographer grinned again and kept shooting. "Much better. I'm thinking pseudo-formal here, very crisp images but with an intimacy behind them. Almost studied, but not quite."

"I trust you, Vee." Tony savored the delicate flavor of Pepper that still lingered.

"I suppose this means no more topless shoots," Vree added, and Tony barely held in his flinch. "Too bad--want to consider letting him do it, Pepper? The set we did for Cosmo six years ago was really something."

Pepper managed a wry smile. "I think it's early days yet," she said smoothly.

Vralia lowered the camera and popped out the film, exchanging it for another roll. "Well, we could always do a set of you, too--that skin of yours would be spectacular. Or a paired nude sitting. You'd knock the Europeans on their asses."

Tony was instantly fascinated by the idea of Vralia's artistry applied to Pepper alone, particularly to what he suspected was truly glorious nudity. He looked over at her, smirking. "What do you think, Pepper? Want to take it all off for Art?"

She gave him her best unamused look. "That would hardly do my reputation any good."

"Maybe private then," Vralia said, snapping the camera shut. "Let's move this out to the terrace, I like the light there."

The sun was on the other side of the house, so the light on the terrace was indirect though bright, and Vralia posed them with the sea behind them, Pepper sitting on the low wall and Tony leaning on it next to her. "Speaking of kids," the photographer said as she began shooting again, "how long are you planning on waiting before you start?"

Pepper's glance was as startled as his own, Tony thought; the topic hadn't even come up as an issue that might need to be addressed. She rallied quickly, however. "Perhaps a year. Things are still very...busy right now."

"Suppose so." Vralia changed angles. "That reminds me, Stark, Pop Mechanics was after me to get you to do a spread with the armor. I told 'em to call you but they said they already had."

Tony wrinkled his nose, secretly relieved at the shift in topic. "I turned them down--how many times is it now, Pepper?"
"Three," she answered promptly. "The last time I sent along a dictionary with a Post-it on the
definition for 'no'."

Tony had to laugh, and Vralia's hoarse chuckle chimed in. Pepper smiled sweetly, and Tony hoped
that Vralia caught it, because whatever else, he wanted a picture of that to keep--the edge of fun in
her proper expression, the intelligence behind her eyes.

"Engineers." Vralia shook her head in mock sadness. "They never can take a hint."

"We just like a challenge," Tony shot back silkily, glancing at over at Pepper. As he expected, she
blushed, and Vralia cooed appreciatively.

"Oh yes, that's it. Sugar, this is going to be great."

Pepper saw the photographer out when she was finished, and Tony took off his jacket and started
lunch, listening to the women's laughter with a sensation he could only label contentment. He liked
this feeling of domesticity, the pretense that he and Pepper were comfortably intimate enough to
appear so on film...and he had to admit, Vralia's suggestion of a private shoot of Pepper was very
intriguing indeed. *Maybe I can talk her into it someday.* It wouldn't even have to be nude; a
collection of Pepper in various poses around the mansion would be almost as delightful.

"Sure you don't want to take her up on her offer?" Tony asked as Pepper entered the kitchen.

She sniffed, apparently taking it as his usual banter, and reached for a towel. "Tony, you're going to
get sauce on your shirt. Lunch is my job..."

Tony plucked the towel from her hands and tied it around his waist. "Not today, Potts. Relax, it's
hard to mess up spaghetti." He stirred the sauce he was defrosting in a saucepan. "I'm serious,
though. Not nude, necessarily, but Vee does excellent work, you know that. And you photograph
really well."

"Tony--" Pepper glanced over her shoulder at him, her hand reaching into a cabinet for a box of
spaghetti noodles. "Have you forgotten this is just temporary?"

He shrugged, irritated at the reminder. "I know. That doesn't invalidate the idea."

She chuckled, and closed the cabinet door. "I couldn't afford her. And what would I do with them,
anyway? You're the narcissist in this re-, ah, partnership."

Pepper crouched down to retrieve a pot for the noodles--and, Tony suspected, to conceal her chagrin
at her verbal slip. *One, I'd pay for them, and two, you could give them to me, Pepper.* But he had
sense enough to keep those thoughts to himself. "I'll just have to give you another raise, then." He
admired the way her skirt pooled around her, vivid against the smooth floor.

His PA chuffed and straightened, moving to the sink to fill the pot and hand it to him. "You just gave
me one."

"And your point is?" The banter was easy, familiar. Tony turned the burner on under the noodle
water. *Maybe I could make it a Christmas present.*

She just sighed, and collected silverware from a drawer. Tony grinned, stirring again. "By the way,
how many kids are we having?"

Pepper snickered, laying out forks. "Oh, two at least."
"Twins?" He turned to eye her lean frame. "Not sure you'd have room for more than one at a time."

"You'd be surprised." She folded a couple of napkins and set them in place. "But admittedly it would be easier to have them singly."

Tony contemplated the idea of Pepper pregnant. It was hard to imagine, comical almost, though the idea gave him a warm and protective feeling. "Seriously, do you want kids? I mean, are they on the list of things you want in your life?"

She looked up, surprised, though he couldn't tell if it was at the question or the fact that he was the one asking it. "I guess...the topic hasn't been on my mind much recently."

"Still waiting for the right guy?" Tony asked, forcing himself to keep his tone light.

She laughed. "Still waiting for enough time. As Ms. Penn and her partner are proving, one doesn't necessarily need a 'guy' to have children these days."

"You have to have one involved at some point," Tony riposted, nettled.

"It's a moot point right now anyway." Pepper shrugged. "I'd rather raise kids with a partner than without one."

Well, Tony thought, there was one way to make sure she had no children that might take her away from him--keep her busy. It was not an entirely satisfying solution.

"What about you?" She cocked her head, regarding him with faintly shy interest. "Do you want kids?"

He blinked. "Hadn't really thought about it." Which was odd, but there it was. Children had always been an abstract concept labeled later, and even Yinsen's gentle question about family had only made Tony look to the past and present, not the future. "They've never been...an ambition...of mine. Though I suppose if my parents were still alive they'd be bugging me for grandchildren."

"Undoubtedly," Pepper agreed with a curl of a smile. "Don't you...I don't know, want to leave the company to somebody?"

"'The company', you make it sound like something with a mind of its own," Tony said dryly, making spirals in the sauce with the spoon. "And no...I'm not sure that I do." He thought for a moment. "Maybe when we have Stark Industries moving in a better direction...maybe then it'll be something worth inheriting."

Pepper nodded, and he knew she understood.

The proofs were delivered by special messenger three days later. Pepper brought the envelope down to the workshop, and Tony spread the sheets out on a worktable, whistling softly at the sight. Pepper leaned over for a look. "Wow."

Tony grinned. "We do make a very handsome couple, Ms. Potts."

Vralia's genius had come through. The images were intense in color and very crisp, producing an effect of something just a little more real than reality, as it were. The shots of them on the couch were almost casual, the two of them smiling as if in conversation, but the terrace photos were stunning. Tony nudged the print of the two of them facing each other, Pepper's crossed ankles peeking out from the hem of her skirt and Tony leaning one hip against the wall. Vralia had posed them, so Tony
had Pepper's hand in his, lifted between them, and his head was just slightly bent as if he were about
to kiss the back of it, though his eyes were on hers. It was ridiculously romantic, and he thoroughly
approved. "I like this one."

Pepper shook her head. "She's amazing," she said quietly.

"So are you." Tony admired the way her skin and hair all but glowed in the picture, then looked up
to admire the satin sheen of that same hair in the bright light of his workshop.

Pepper turned her head away, and Tony smirked. "Which ones do you want?" she asked, clearing
her throat slightly.

He surveyed them for a long moment, then shrugged. "Get copies of them all. And release these to
the press." He separated out three of the terrace photos, including the romantic one.

"Are you sure? That's kind of..."

"I'm sure. They'll eat it up, Potts." Tony looked at it again, realizing belatedly that the expression in
his eyes in that particular shot was not at all pretense. So what.

And suddenly he wondered what had been behind Pepper's expression of reserved pleasure.

Pepper sighed, and stacked the proofs together. "Yes, Mr. Stark."

"That reminds me." Tony sat back down on his stool as Pepper slid the photos into their envelope. "I
got a call yesterday from Allan Tierney wanting to know about the portrait."

Pepper looked up at him. "I'm sorry, what portrait?"

Tony shrugged slightly, trying to appear casual. "The wedding portrait. You haven't heard of
Tierney?"

"Oh--you mean the artist who did your mother's picture?" Pepper pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I
didn't know he was still alive."

The portrait in question hung in what passed for a den, a heavy-furnished room that currently went
unused. Maria Stark smiled down from over the mahogany desk, her cloud of dark hair and vivid
eyes rich and compelling against a crimson background. Tierney had captured her earthy beauty and
charm as well as her intelligence, and Tony occasionally slipped into the room just to look at the oil
painting and remember.

"Tierney did my grandmother too. He was ancient when he painted Mom, but he's still around. He
wants to know when he can start on yours."

Pepper gave him a puzzled look. "Why are you bringing this up? There's no need for a portrait of
me."

He turned one hand up. "No, but he really wants to do it--kept going on about it being tradition and
all that. I'm not sure I have the heart to turn him down."

Her skeptical expression was eloquent. Tony gave her his best pleading look. "Come on, Pepper.
What would it hurt? You'd make an old man happy, and it'll be just one more proof that we're
serious."

"It's--unnecessary." But she was wavering, he could tell. "And no doubt expensive."
Tony cast his gaze theatrically at the ceiling. "Since when does a price tag matter around here? Besides, given what our engagement is doing to SI stock prices, it seems to me that you're entitled to a little of the profits."

"Tony, where would I put an oil portrait? That kind of thing is meant for big rooms." Pepper put a hand on her hip, shaking her head. "Besides, the stock price will fall again when we end this thing."

"Not that much, that's the whole point. And we could keep it here and you could come by and look at it." He grinned, and Pepper smiled reluctantly at his silliness. "Look, it's optional, but seriously, Tierney's really excited by the idea."

"I'll think about it," Pepper said in a driven tone, but she was still smiling, and Tony let her go and made a mental note to schedule the first sitting.

After all, he wanted a portrait of her. No matter what happened.
Chapter 4

The mission had gone smoothly, for once. Tony let Jarvis handle the driving, tired and bruised but not really hurt, and used the return trip for thinking. Nick Fury had been pestering him again lately, showing up uninvited in Tony's New York penthouse during his last lightning trip to the East Coast, but Tony had turned him down cold. He found Fury's idea of a strike group intriguing, though he had no intention of admitting it to the man's face; but at the moment he had enough on his plate.

*Maybe when I'm done cleaning up Stane's mess.* It was easier to think of Obadiah by his last name, to relegate him coldly to the status of an enemy. Eventually, Tony knew, he was going to have to come to some kind of terms with the memory of his mentor-turned-killer, but he was still too angry.

*He's dead,* Tony reminded himself as Jarvis flew the suit over horizon-spanning expanses of cloud. *Dead and gone.* By Pepper's hand, at that, and if he still turned up in nightmares from time to time, Tony supposed it was natural.

"Your blood pressure is high," Jarvis commented coolly in Tony's ear. "Is something troubling you?"

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly, consciously relaxing. "Memories, Jarvis, that's all." He turned his head to take in the endless sea of sunlit cloud, mountain-tall peaks of brilliant white set off by the deep blue of the pure sky overhead. "Nice view."

"Aethereal," Jarvis agreed. "Ms. Potts has asked me to remind you that you do have a meeting with the SI legal team prior to your appearance before the Defense Appropriations Committee."

"Nggh." Briefly Tony considered pretending to be more injured than he was, just to get out of both, but gave it up. For one thing, Jarvis had undoubtedly already tattled to Pepper; for another, she'd just reschedule the whole thing anyway, and was probably ready to do so just in case he *had* been seriously hurt.

Sometimes her efficiency was a pain in the ass.

"Where is Pepper right now?" Normally she just called him when she wanted to harass him about something.

"She is currently on the set of *Oprah.* The taping began ten minutes ago."

"No kidding? Can you hack it?" Tony wasn't surprised that the talk show host had requested Pepper's appearance; his personal assistant had been on Oprah's show once before during a segment on career women, though the only reason Tony remembered it was because of the irrational annoyance that had seized him when his lover of the moment had made a disparaging comment about Pepper's interview.

His HUD flickered, and then began displaying the show in question. Oprah was laughing, presumably in response to something Pepper had just said; Pepper herself sat opposite, poised and relaxed, her business suit neat and trim and her heels delicate and high. She looked, Tony concluded, entirely edible.

"So, tell me what we're all wondering," Oprah continued, smiling. "How did this come about? Tony Stark's playboy reputation doesn't leave much room for serious relationships."

Pepper shrugged one shoulder, managing to look unconcerned. "It was entirely his idea," she said, her lips pursing in a small smile. "I was definitely surprised."
The audience laughed. Oprah leaned a little closer. "Was it romantic? Or more like a business proposition?"

"Definitely the latter," Pepper replied promptly, which brought more laughter, and a wince from Tony despite the fact that it was exactly what had happened. "But--" Her mouth softened. "Tony can be very romantic when he puts his mind to it."

The audience cooed. Tony grinned in the confines of the helmet, pleased. Between the flowers in her office, the chocolate and fruit he kept sending to her apartment, and the public kisses, he seemed to be succeeding.

"As you know, Pepper here was on our show a while back to discuss women in the workplace," Oprah said to her viewers. "Pepper, how has your engagement affected your working relationship with Tony?"

Pepper's long fingers tapped on her knee. "It hasn't really. Mr. Stark and I have been working together for quite a few years now, and our patterns are fairly established." She smiled again. "I still have to drag him out of his workshop on a regular basis, and he still makes me go to budget meetings as his proxy."

This won more laughter from the audience. Oprah smiled. "And do you plan to keep working after the wedding?"

"Certainly." Pepper smoothed the nap of her skirt and said nothing more, and after a moment Oprah continued, her voice dropping to a confidential level.

"Ladies have been dishing about Tony Stark for the last twenty years--the man's known for his, let me say, extravagance. Now that he's settling down, can you tell us--is he really all that?"

Pepper pinkened beautifully, glancing down. "All I'm going to say is that his reputation isn't exaggerated."

The audience whistled and cheered, and Oprah laughed again as the picture began to flicker. Then it dissolved into snow and disappeared.

"My apologies," Jarvis said. "I have lost the signal."

Tony shook his head, amused and annoyed both at the questions, and proud of Pepper for handling them so well. "I'm going to have to update your stealth routines."

"Ms. Potts was remarkable," Jarvis said. "All her replies were the strict truth, yet concealed the true circumstances perfectly."

That stung. Tony grimaced. "Yeah, well, Pepper's great at misdirection."

"When do you intend to reveal your intent concerning your engagement?" the AI asked in a tone of scientific curiosity.

"When did you--oh. Rhodey." Tony would have shrugged if the armor had permitted it. "I dunno. When the time's right, I guess."

The truth was, he had no idea when--or how--to tell Pepper that he really wanted to marry her, but improvisation was one of his strengths. "Consider that proprietary information, Jarvis. I don't want you blowing my cover."
"As you wish," Jarvis replied, and if there was an overlay of doubt in the AI's tone, Tony ignored it. "Are you aware that you and Ms. Potts were mentioned on last night's Entertainment Tonight?"

Tony snickered. "Since when do you watch gossip TV, Jarvis?"

"Since Ms. Potts asked me to monitor news concerning yourself--approximately six-point-three-three years."

"Huh." Tony blinked. He knew he was fodder for the news services at any time, but he hadn't been aware that Pepper had recruited Jarvis to help her wrangle them. "So?"

His HUD came to life again, a standard shot of himself striding from limo to building, Pepper on his arm. Tony didn't recognize the clip specifically. A woman's voice cut in. "--And rumor has it that Pepper Potts isn't really Stark's fiancée at all. Sources say she's being paid a huge bonus to act the part so as to reassure the public of Tony's sanity."

The clip ended and was replaced by a still photo taken during his first press conference on his return from Afghanistan, one that showed his injuries to best advantage. "Given that many also claim that Tony's personal assistant is a lesbian, there may be more to this than meets the eye. In any case, it's said that the entire thing was the idea of the SI board of directors. Observers expect a blowup soon. In other news--"

"Off," Tony ordered, more than annoyed. He knew better than to take the innuendo seriously, but the implication that Pepper would lend herself to that kind of scheme made him angry. "Does Pepper know about this yet?"

"I included the clip in her morning report. She viewed it at 7:21 a.m."

Tony's mouth twisted as he thought. "Jarvis...what's our ETA?"

"Ninety minutes. You will return home before Ms. Potts does."

"Good." Normally Tony preferred to see her waiting for him after a mission, but he had a plan. "I need to make a phone call."

The music surrounded him, thrummed through him like a living pulse, let his mind flow faster through the intricacies of his latest idea. It was as much a tool as any of the devices scattered around his workshop, and it never failed to jar him when it stopped mid-phrase. As it just had.

"Don't turn off my music," Tony said automatically, not even bothering to look over his shoulder at Pepper. She never obeyed, but it was part of the ritual nonetheless.

"Tony." The wrath in her tone brought his head up. Tony ran down a quick list of his recent activities, but nothing stood out as being outrageous enough to anger her. Pasting an innocent look on his face, he turned.

"Something wrong?"

Judging from the flash of her eyes, there most definitely was. "Care to explain the alteration to my schedule?" She waved the BlackBerry she was holding.

Oh. "Pepper, I've been up for at least thirty-six hours, you're going to have to be more specific." Actually, Tony knew exactly what she was talking about, but it was a poor day when he couldn't yank her chain a little.
She huffed. "I'm scheduled for a sitting this afternoon. For the painting I didn't agree to do."

"You didn't disagree either." Tony smirked at her.

"I don't have time for this--" she began, and he reached out and caught her hand, ignoring the grease he was transferring to her skin.

"Yes you do, that's why I had Jarvis handle the scheduling. Pepper, look. Tierney really wants to do this, and he even agreed to come here to do it, which is pretty much unprecedented. Adding that item to the next press release will give us extra credit, because trust me, there are members of the Fourth Estate that will remember that he did Mom's portrait." He squeezed her fingers, which she was trying feebly to pull free. "In fact, it's probably the best thing we could do to demonstrate that we're serious."

He winked. "Besides you moving in with me, that is."

Pepper made an exasperated noise. "I'm not sure this is necessary." She pulled harder, but Tony didn't relinquish his grip, instead nudging the ring with his thumb. It fascinated him, he had to admit, the wide circlet that signified his claim on her, however spurious it actually was. It was atavistic of him, but he liked seeing a mark of possession on her. And it's not like she doesn't already own me. Whether she knew it or not, Pepper had laid her stamp on him, and he didn't want to lift it.

"I think it is." He cocked a brow. "Remember that Entertainment Tonight soundbite?"

Pepper grimaced with reluctant distaste; she hated the gossip shows despite her skill at making use of them. "It's just one..."

"And these things spread, you know that." He reached for a rag with his free hand, and loosened his grip enough to dab at the smudges on hers. "Look at it this way, it's easy and doesn't involve me groping you in public."

She blushed, and took the rag. "You'll never get it off like that." Jerking her hand free, she wiped the grease away. "All right. Though what you're going to do with another portrait--I guess there's room in storage."

Or in my bedroom. Tony let his victory stand, satisfied. "If you like it, Pepper, you can keep it. Think of it as an investment if you want." He took the rag back.

Pepper looked down at him, her mouth softening into an expression that almost seemed wistful. "Tony..."

He raised his brows encouragingly, but she only shook her head and turned back towards the stairs. Tony watched her step out through the door, and opened his mouth, but before he could order Jarvis to restart the music, Pepper tapped the lock panel and it blared out again.

He grinned, and turned back to his work.

Three hours later Jarvis alerted him to the limo approaching the mansion, and Tony scrubbed up hastily before jogging upstairs. He'd sent Happy to fetch Tierney, wanting to give the old man every courtesy; he respected Tierney's talent, and besides that was grateful for the glimpse of his mother in her youth.

Hogan gave the little man a discreet arm to help him up the stairs to the door; Tierney was fragile with age, bony and slightly stooped, but his eyes were bright and clear and his hands steady. He
peered up at Tony with a dry smile. "Anthony, you're looking well."

Tony reflected wryly that Tierney was about the only person who could get away with calling him that—not even Pepper dared. "Allan, it's good to see you again." He shook the long-fingered hand extended towards him. "Come on in."

He led Tierney inside, leaving the door open so that Hogan could bring Tierney's supplies in from the trunk. Pepper was waiting in the living room, and whatever residual annoyance she might have felt towards Tony was nowhere in evidence as she came forward to greet the artist. "This is my fiancée, Virginia," Tony said with genuine pride. "Pepper, Allan Tierney."

The old man's face lit at the sight of her, and Tony smothered a grin. Tierney had made his reputation on his paintings of beautiful women, and obviously Pepper met his standards. "It's an honor, Mr. Tierney," Pepper said softly, letting him envelop her hand in both of his.

"My dear, I am so glad to meet you." Tierney beamed. "Anthony's taste is as impeccable as his father's."

Pepper blinked, but her smile didn't waver. Hogan appeared with the equipment, a case in one hand and a canvas in the other, the folded easel under one muscled arm.

"Where do you want to set up, Allan?" Tony asked.

"I need southern exposure," Tierney said, still holding Pepper's hand. "Yes, sunlight will be best."

Pepper glanced over at Tony, who nodded. "The white guest room," he said. "This way."

He led the small cavalcade to the little-used room, listening to Tierney politely refuse Pepper's offer of refreshment. She would do just fine, Tony knew; her innate graciousness was an asset, and he judged that Tierney was half in love with her already. *I'd be jealous if I didn't know better.*

Tierney's love of beauty was what had drawn him to painting in the first place; he adored the women he chose to paint with the pure passion of an aesthete, free of lust or yearning. It was part of what made his work so compelling.

Tierney nodded in approval when they reached the room, which held a bed, a dresser, and an armchair. They were clean and dust-free, but Tony didn't think the room had actually been used in over a year. The wide windows, though, filled the room with light. "Yes, yes, this will work," he said, and at Tony's nod Hogan set down his burdens and melted away.

"I'll leave you to it," Tony said cheerfully, and did so, knowing that Pepper and Tierney were both in each other's good hands. Besides, he preferred to leave rather than being chased out; the old man never let anyone watch him paint. Pepper already looked interested in the process, and that pleased Tony. *She's always looking to learn.*

And she was sharp. Sooner or later, he knew, Pepper was going to ask him how he knew so much about Tierney when the portrait of Maria Stark had been painted before Tony was born. Resigned, he headed for the elevator to fetch his answer.

The sub-basement of the mansion was set up for storage—it had temperature and humidity controls, and was quite a bit larger than might be expected even for a billionaire's home. But then, Tony thought as he walked down the main corridor, even other billionaires didn't quite have the collection of *stuff* that he possessed. Artwork and records, to be sure, along with antiques, but there were also engines, plane parts, a couple of vintage motorcycles, and various inventions—some dating from his father's day.
That was also part of the reason for the triple security of the house. Items that one of the members of the Manhattan Project had worked on—even discarded ones—could not be trusted to an ordinary storage facility or the dispassionate care of Stark Industries. The sub-basement was hard to get into—and first one had to know it was there. Tony wasn't sure that even Obadiah had known of its existence.

Pepper knew, of course, he mused as he unlocked one door. She was the executor of his will and the one person he trusted absolutely. And Rhoyde knew the codes, though he'd never actually entered the place. If we all buy it at once, though, it'll be up to Jarvis to decide who gets in. And given how he'd programmed his AI, Jarvis was more likely to seal the doors forever than to let anyone enter.

That suited Tony just fine.

The overhead light came on automatically as the door opened, and Tony stepped inside the storage room. The cases that held the various paintings stored there had been designed not by his father, but by his mother, who had possessed a strong appreciation for art, though her tastes did not match those of her son. Tony wasn't exactly sure what some of the cases held—though no doubt Pepper could call up an inventory for him at a moment's notice—but he did remember where his goal was, because he'd put it there.

Tony found the case, lifting it out of its rack and laying it on the stand built for just that purpose. He opened it, and looked down at himself.

He hadn't even known who Tierney was when the old man had called him, a month before his twenty-first birthday. And Tony hadn't been inclined to listen to him, either, but Obadiah had talked him into the portrait that Tierney had promised Howard Stark years before.

The young man in the picture stood in front of a background as stormy gray as his mother's was velvety crimson. He had his hands in his suit pockets, deliberately casual, but his posture bespoke tension, movement held in check. His face was smooth, bony even—still hinting at childhood behind the faint smile.

It was undeniably Tony, but a different Tony—not just younger, but harder. It was odd to think of it that way, Tony thought, but it was true; there was arrogance there, confidence in his own power, but...it took him a moment to figure it out. I refused to admit there was such a thing as suffering.

He'd known pain by then, to be sure; his parents' sudden death had shattered something in him that had never quite healed completely. But the—the kid, Tony admitted ruefully—in the painting hadn't let anything touch him. He was carefully shielded against whatever life might throw at him, armored with money and power and his own hard shell, despite the gleam in his eyes.

The portrait had hung in the main boardroom in Stark Industries' headquarters for four years, Tony recalled, opposite that of his father, though the picture of Howard had been done by a different artist. Tony had removed both in a fit of petulance one day, and Obadiah had claimed Howard's portrait and hung it in his own office. It was currently in company storage with the rest of the furnishings from that room.

His own image, however, Tony had brought home and put away, and as far as he knew Pepper had never seen it—he'd taken it down before she'd been hired.

Bemused, he lifted it from its case and took it upstairs to his workshop, knowing that Jarvis would lock the doors behind him. Tony propped the painting against one wall, and promptly forgot about it as he began dismantling the engine of his latest vehicular acquisition.
The sudden cessation of his music made Tony look up again. Pepper was stepping through the door, a tray in one hand, and judging from her expression she was no longer pissed, for which he was grateful. Tony set down a wrench. "How'd it go?"

"Pretty well. I think." Pepper set down the tray. "Mr. Tierney seemed pleased, anyway." She put one hand on her hip and regarded him. "You didn't eat lunch, so come have supper."

His stomach was growling. Tony pushed to his feet and sniffed; chicken noodle soup, it smelled like. "Did you eat?"

"I had a late lunch." Pepper watched him approach the table where she'd put the food, probably to make sure he actually sat down and started eating. Tony complied: Pepper made a mean soup. "He wants a sitting every day for at least two weeks. I told him I'd try."

"Mmm," Tony said, his mouth full with his first spoonful. He swallowed. "Talked you into it, didn't he?"

Pepper sniffed, but her lips curled up. "He's very charming, in his own way."

Tony nodded, and kept eating. Pepper drifted across the shop, idly examining his latest efforts, and Tony concentrated on the food. He really was hungry. _When's the last time I ate?_

He'd just figured out that it had been dinner the night before when he saw Pepper crouching down to look at the portrait he'd forgotten. Tony stopped mid-chew, then continued, wondering what she saw in his post-adolescent face.

Pepper glanced back over her shoulder. "May I?" she asked, and Tony shrugged acquiescently. She picked up the canvas and straightened, turning so that the light fell fully onto the image.

She looked at it for a long time before setting it back down where she'd found it. Tony took a swallow of water and watched her as she came back over to where he sat. When she said nothing, he raised his brows in inquiry.

"It's good," she said thoughtfully. "He really caught the humor in you."

Tony blinked. _Humor?_ He hadn't seen that at all.

"You look so young," Pepper went on, then blushed. "I mean--"

"I do, yeah," Tony broke in, grinning a little. "I'm trying to remember how he got me to hold still long enough to finish the thing."

That made her chuckle. "Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to have known you then," she said whimsically. "But I don't think we would have gotten along."

Tony regarded her, intrigued by the concept. _I have no idea what she was like at that age._ He wanted to think he would have admired her then as now, but he was ruefully aware that at age twenty-one his main interest in any female around his age was pretty much limited to whether she was hot. "How old would you have been? Seventeen?"

"Something like that, yeah." She shrugged. "I was busy with my senior year and working two jobs."

His mental picture rearranged itself to a slender girl busy with books and trays, hair pulled up in a messy bun, big eyes shy. Setting down his spoon, he slid off his stool and went over to the painting, picking it up in turn and regarding it. "I was a prick," he said truthfully.
"You were, what, twenty? Twenty-one?" Pepper said, following to look over his shoulder. "You were hardly more than a kid, and your parents were gone. It was kind of natural, Tony."

The feel of her just behind him set all his nerves alert. "Maybe."

She laughed, and her breath brushed his ear and made his skin prickle delightfully. "I was no prize at that age either. It takes time to grow up and learn grace."

"I can't imagine you as anything but graceful." Tony set the painting back down but kept his eyes on it, afraid she would move away if he turned.

"Not the same thing. And as a matter of fact, I was a terribly clumsy kid. It took me years to grow into my legs."

Pepper was still there, and Tony turned just his head, so he could see her as well. "Yeah? I'll bet you were cute, though." He tried to imagine that too, the long-limbed girl-child with strawberry hair, tackling the world with her brains and her courage.

She was smiling, as if at a happy memory. "I had my moments."

That did it. Tony pivoted, catching her gaze with his, and just like that the tension was back, singing in the narrow space between them. Pepper's smile faded and her lips parted, and Tony inhaled, savoring the scent of her that filled the gap, not letting her eyes move from his. He held on with all his will, leaning forward, this time he was going to make the connection and--

Pepper blinked, and stepped back. "I need to get back to work," she said, her voice tight. Tony rocked slightly with her sudden turn, all his senses reaching out for the woman now making her hasty way towards the stairs. Disappointed arousal cramped his breathing for a moment, but Tony was nothing if not a fast thinker. By the time she was opening the door, he was heading back to his interrupted meal.

"Were you a waitress during college?" he called after her, as casually as he could manage, as he resumed his seat. "Because I can just picture you all dolled up in a frilly apron."

Pepper glanced back, and the embarrassment on her face faded, replaced with mischief. "Not exactly." She slipped through the doorway, pausing just long enough to speak once more. "I was a model."

Tony froze, soup spoon halfway to his mouth as she disappeared up the stairs. His brain was suddenly running in high gear, tumbling over a thousand imaginings of Pepper stalking down a catwalk, posing for photos, seducing the camera--is that where she learned to walk in those heels?

It took him a few minutes to break the spell she'd laid on him. He cleared his throat. "Jarvis, run a search for any available photos of Ms. Virginia Potts. Advertisements, head shots, anything."

"Actually, sir, Pepper has authorized you to access her personal photo file." The big screen on the wall beyond his workbench lit up. "To, and I quote, 'save me time since I know you won't leave me alone until you see them'."

"Actually, sir, Pepper has authorized you to access her personal photo file." The big screen on the wall beyond his workbench lit up. "To, and I quote, 'save me time since I know you won't leave me alone until you see them'."

"She knows me," Tony commented under his breath, then raised his voice. "Let's see them, Jarvis."

A file icon appeared on the screen. "In what order?" the AI inquired. "By agency?"

"Chronologically, oldest first," Tony instructed. He pushed the soup bowl absently aside and leaned forward.
The picture that flashed up on the screen didn't exactly kill his lust, but it did throttle it back, because the girl smiling back at him couldn't be more than fifteen years old. It was the kind of image found in department store catalogs, a tall teen in jeans and a winter coat, her red-blonde hair in two braids. She looked impossibly young and even more innocent than Pepper usually managed, despite her bright blank grin.

Tony stared at her. The image was making a lump rise in his throat, and he didn't know why. He cleared it with a short cough. "Next picture, Jarvis."

There were a dozen more in the same vein, all winter clothing for teen girls. Tony told Jarvis to transfer control to the keyboard under his soup bowl, and clicked through each one, studying them, looking for some hint of the Pepper he knew. But the traces were scant; she might have been a cardboard cutout, presenting the same untouched glossiness in every shot.

The next photos were a little older and a lot more sophisticated. They were all close shots, selling cosmetics; Tony barely noticed the occasional brand logo, too taken up with Pepper's features so dramatically highlighted in the flashier styles of the time. She normally wore very little makeup, which made the contrast all the sharper, and Tony zoomed in on exaggeratedly fringed eyes and lids blotted with a rainbow of colors and tried again to find her.

There were hints in the curve of her lips, the tilt of her head as she regarded the camera. A bit of secret humor, a touch of the searching look that he saw more often these days—all combined with a blatant commercial seduction meant to sell whatever she was wearing. Tony had dated many models, and he was familiar with how they could put up a professional mask without a moment's thought. Until now, he'd never bothered to try to look beneath.

Past the makeup ads, though, were more clothes, and this time he pegged her age at twenty at least. She was taller, cooler, more confident, obviously practiced in the smoky glance and sauntering stride of the living mannequin. This was an adult, and Tony's libido stirred again as she showed off dresses and blouses, skirts and jeans so tight they should have been illegal. Even when her hair abruptly became a sleek short cap of shimmering red, his attention didn't waver.

But the next set made him blink, because they were mostly of her feet. "Huh," Tony said softly, watching her ankles and toes showcase high heels of almost every description. She comes by her fondness honestly.

The shoes ran out, and that was all. Tony propped his chin in his hand and paged slowly back through, watching Pepper grow younger, thinking. I figured she was uncomfortable with Vee's shoot because she wasn't used to it. After all, Pepper usually managed to avoid the cameras that were trained on him every week, and even when they caught her she was almost always in the background. But if she did all this, then...

...Then she must have another reason.

Tony pursed his lips, considering. Remembering. When he'd looked at the proofs, he'd seen more than he'd expected to in his own face. Is the same true for her?

Had Pepper feared what the camera might reveal?

It was an idea worth considering. Tony tapped the keyboard one more time. "Jarvis, copy all to my private server, folder name Pepper Two."

There was already a Pepper One folder, storing a handful of e-mails and other messages that for one
reason or another had amused Tony enough for him to keep them. However, Tony figured that some of Two would be worth looking over again. In private. Lack of lingerie notwithstanding.

He regarded the blank screen for a moment. "Run that search," he said finally. "Check for anything in the SI files as well. Dump them all in the folder and I'll look at them later."

"Very good, sir," Jarvis replied. "Shall I inform Pepper of your new trend towards voyeurism?"

Tony let the corner of his mouth twitch up wryly. "Smartass."

*Odds are she knew I'd do it anyway.*
In the interests of furthering their scheme, they'd begun to go out to eat once a week or so, putting up with the media attention that was really the main purpose of such outings. They'd dined together in public before, though not anywhere near as often, but now Pepper gravely scheduled in dinners at Malibu's most popular restaurants, and they made no effort to dodge the paparazzi. Tony, used to their scrutiny, enjoyed the meals, but Pepper took a while to loosen up. Tony figured she was just too used to being in the background.

The proprietors of the new local sushi restaurant, Tony found, were smart people--he and Pepper were escorted to a good table in a quiet alcove, and their server was attentive but not slavish. Four weeks into the deception things were going smoothly--at least, in his opinion; Pepper was still muttering about unsolicited wedding advice from all and sundry. He watched her across the table as they placed their orders, and sighed when she immediately became absorbed in her BlackBerry.

He let her text two messages before reaching over and plucking the thing from her hands. Pepper squawked, and Tony evaded her grab and thumbed the device off, stuffing it into his coat pocket. "You're off the clock, Ms. Potts. Time for dinner and conversation, not e-mail."

She inhaled, and Tony braced himself for an argument, but then Pepper's lips tightened and she subsided. "You're right."

Tony relaxed and gave her his most charming smile, though he didn't miss the annoyance that gleamed in her eyes. She would not be forgetting his move quickly. "Thank you. So where do you want to go for our honeymoon?"

The corner of her mouth quirked, a move he recognized as a stand-in for rolling her eyes. "The Moon."

"She's in a mood. "Low blood sugar, Potts?" he asked softly, smiling, and then leaned back with a shrug. "We might be able to manage that, but it'll take me a while to set it up."

Pepper's petulance faded as she regarded him. "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

Only about half, but part of his mind was already playing with the idea. Propulsion wouldn't be a problem, and that gave him an idea for a whole new branch of Stark Industries, but the life support issues... Tony made a number of mental notes and pulled his brain back on track. Meeting her eyes, he told the truth. "If that's where you want to go, Pepper, I'll make it work."

She blinked, and dropped her gaze to the table. Tony frowned to himself. This was becoming a problem--they kept to their personas in public, but he at least found himself making statements that were true for the real him as well, and the lines were definitely getting blurred.

Pepper shook out her napkin, and laughed politely, glancing back up. "No, that's okay, Tony. Why don't you just surprise me?"

"No, he wanted to say. No, tell me what you want, the place you've always wanted to go. I want it to be special. "If you want," he said lightly instead. "Someplace...warm. With beaches. Nude beaches, possibly."

Pepper snorted at that, and Tony relaxed, the odd tension ebbing. He grinned at her. "What? You've got nothing to be ashamed of in that department." He gave what he could see of her a blatant ogle,
though it only reminded him that he actually didn't know exactly what she looked like under her clothes. "You ever been to Ulavuta?"

Before Pepper could answer, another voice cut in. "Pepper, Tony, if I'd known you were coming here tonight I would have called you." Rhodey came up to the table smiling, and leaned down to kiss Pepper's cheek as she smiled back. "We could have carpooled."

"You mean you could have bummed a ride," Tony said cheerfully, scooting out of the booth and elbowing Rhodes genially as he passed. "Sit down, we haven't ordered yet."

He slid onto the opposite bench next to Pepper, secretly pleased at an excuse to get into her personal space but also genuinely glad to see Rhodes--busy schedules had kept them from seeing much of each other lately.

Rhodey hesitated. "Am I interrupting?"

Tony glanced at Pepper, but she shook her head. "No, Tony's just putting up with the fact that I haven't eaten since breakfast." Her smile was truly apologetic as she looked back at Tony, and as Rhodes dropped into the seat Tony picked up her hand, lacing their fingers together.

"Given what you put up with from me on a daily basis, Pepper, I can deal with a bit of whininess." Her eyes narrowed at the mingled compliment and insult, but Tony raised their joined hands to his mouth and pressed a quick kiss to the back of hers, half showmanship and half affection.

Rhodes snickered. "You two are sickening," he said easily, the gleam in his eyes betraying his enjoyment of their playacting.

Pepper pursed her lips, but didn't draw her hand away, instead letting it lie relaxed in Tony's. He kept his hold, looking back to Rhodes. "Make up your mind fast, platypus. We're both starving."

Dining on sushi was the only time Tony ever saw Pepper eat what seemed to him to be a reasonable amount. He wasn't sure if she was concerned about her weight or just didn't have a large appetite, but sushi was the exception either way, and he had to admit he rather enjoyed watching her devour her selections with an expression that bordered on bliss.

He'd kind of been hoping for an intimate evening, but instead the meal turned merry, the three of them laughing and teasing one another, and Tony found pleasure in that too. Pepper gradually loosened up, and by the time she was stealing scraps off his plate he had his arm behind her, Rhodey grinning at them over his sake.

"So how's this thing going?" He waved one hand back and forth, eyes gleaming with amusement at the double meaning.

Tony let his thumb stroke Pepper's far shoulder. "So far so good. We're still arguing about where to have the ceremony, though." This was camouflage; Pepper had refused to book something that they would only cancel later, and Tony had decided it wasn't a battle worth fighting. Part of the point of not declaring an actual date was avoiding the pressure to begin preparations.

Rhodes snickered again. "I always figured you'd just run off to Vegas if you ever did get hitched."

"Hitched? Seriously, what century are you living in?" Tony sneered genially at his friend.

"Better than 'parson's mousetrap'," Pepper interjected, and both men looked at her with some puzzlement. She was a little flushed from the sake, and that and her smile made her extremely kissable to Tony's eyes. She laughed, and he was thrilled to feel her arm slip behind his back in turn.
"It's a nineteenth-century term."

Tony shook his head. "You're worse than Jarvis. What do you say, Pepper, how does Vegas sound?"

"A lot more practical than St. Paul's Cathedral," Pepper sighed.

Tony blinked. "Who suggested that? Is it even possible?" London hadn't been his first choice of possible venues, but if Pepper liked the idea...

She groaned. "One of the board members, and I refuse to find out."

All right, so much for that one. "Not that fond of England?" Tony knew she'd been there at least twice in his company, but she hadn't had much time to sightsee.

"Not at this time of year." She grimaced. "And as much as I'd love to make Tony get married by Elvis, Jimmy, I'm not up for Vegas."

Rhodes bellowed with laughter, and Tony couldn't help joining in, inexpressibly tickled by the idea. Pepper leaned against his side and smirked at them both.

"Oh come on," Rhodey finally choked out. "I'm begging you, Pepper. That would be priceless."

"Not worth it." Pepper shook her head. "For one thing, no one would take us seriously afterwards."

"You're right," Tony agreed, sobering slightly. "I'm afraid we're going to need more than the minimum number of witnesses to make this stick."

"You make it sound like you're setting up a frame," Rhodes commented, still laughing. "Or an alibi."

"The great wedding caper?" Tony suggested.

"Plenty of people won't believe it anyway." Rhodes shrugged. "Sorry, man, but you do have kind of a rep."

That too stung, but again Rhodes was right. Tony's lips tightened, but he kept his voice level. "I'll just have to prove them wrong."

Rhodey lifted his cup. "Here's to you both, then."

They parted with him outside the restaurant, Rhodes loping off to the parking lot while Happy pulled the limo up just down the street. Pepper hooked her arm through Tony's as they strolled towards the vehicle, and he snuggled her in close. The foot traffic was light, and if anyone recognized them it wasn't obvious.

As they reached the limo, however, Tony spotted a semi-familiar figure a little ways up the block. He swung her gently around so that her back was pressed to the car door. "Paparazzi at nine o'clock."

She raised her brows, and Tony planted one hand on either side of her and leaned in. The kiss was sweet and hot, and he found it easy to forget that they were putting on a show despite the flash going off. Pepper's mouth tasted of sake, and she slid her hands up his chest to the back of his neck, pulling him closer with an eagerness that Tony dared to hope wasn't entirely feigned.

No, not entirely. He edged closer, feeling that live-wire tension between them, the way her breathing was speeding up, and bit back his smile lest it break the kiss.
Finally their lips parted, and Pepper wasn't the only one breathing hard. Tony let the smile out. "I think we should do this every time we get in the car."

She smiled back, her cheeks pink. "Did you arrange for that reporter to be here?"

"No, but make a note to leak our itinerary to the press," Tony shot back, amused and nettled. He straightened, and Pepper stepped out of the way so he could open the door for her.

She slid inside with practiced grace. Tony dropped down next to her and glanced up at Happy. "Pepper's place, then home," he instructed, and his imperturbable driver nodded and raised the divider.

Pepper stretched and yawned, then covered her mouth with an expression of surprise. "Oh! Excuse me."

Tony chuckled. "Long day, Potts?"

Her expression was less sardonic than usual. "You might notice, Mr. Stark, that you don't exactly do short days."

He leaned back, letting his arm fall across the back of the seat. Pepper didn't seem to notice. "You sure you don't want to stay at my place? It would save you time in the morning."

Pepper shook her head, and smothered another yawn. Her eyes were closing, and Tony didn't know if it was the sake, the protein, or just the long day, but it was obvious that she was falling asleep.

He could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen her sleep. Curious, Tony watched.

It took less than three minutes for Pepper to slump against the back of the seat, her head lolling, and Tony inched closer, holding his breath and hoping that the discomfort wouldn't wake her back up.

But when he slipped his arms around her and tugged, Pepper merely sighed.

She was limp and warm and molded nicely to him when Tony gathered her in. He settled her head against his shoulder and let himself relax and enjoy the rare sight of Ms. Potts completely unguarded.

As he half-expected, his libido was enthusiastic about this unscheduled cuddle, but Tony ignored it. Somehow it was more important to savor the moment, to examine the protective feeling that was welling in him. Tony brushed a strand of hair out of Pepper's face and bent his neck to inhale the faint vanilla that rose from her skin; unlike many women of his past acquaintance, she didn't douse herself in perfume, but somehow her scent persisted, until he knew he would know it anywhere.

It had been one of the things he'd dreamed of, in the cave. A ghost of smell that vanished on waking, leaving him baffled and yearning...

The ride to her apartment wasn't long, and Tony was tempted to tell Happy to drive around the block a few times, but decided in the end that delay wouldn't make it easier. But when the limo stopped and he looked down at the woman sleeping in his arms, he couldn't resist.

Her lips were softer still against his, unresisting, warm. He kept it gentle, a tender caress that woke her slowly. When she stirred and whimpered, Tony lifted his head.

"Wakey-wakey, Potts," he said softly, watching her eyes open and blink up at him sleepily. "We're here."

"Okay," she said obediently, and Tony smirked. She's still out of it.
Pepper sat up, apparently not noticing that she was leaving his embrace, and Tony reluctantly opened the door and got out.

As the cooler night air reached her, Pepper seemed to wake a bit more, and she followed him out, straightening without a wobble. But her eyes were still blurry, and Tony pulled her arm through his again. "Come on, I'll walk you up."

"I'm sorry," she said as they entered her building. "I don't know why I'm so tired."

"You work too hard," Tony told her cheerfully, nodding to the guard at the front desk. "Maybe you should take tomorrow off."

Pepper straightened. "No, not this week--"

Tony was badly tempted to kiss her again in the elevator, but she was too awake, he decided ruefully. He'd gotten more than he'd expected that evening, and despite his generally pushy nature, he didn't want to ruin everything. Courting someone, he was discovering, required a certain amount of restraint as well as enthusiasm.

Pepper fished her keys out as they neared her door, and had no trouble slipping them into the locks. Tony braced a hand on the doorframe next to her head as she turned the knob. "Going to invite me in?" he teased.

She muffled another yawn. "Not tonight..."

He took pity on her sleepiness, and just pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. If anyone was watching, they'd just have to make up their own interpretations. "Get some sleep, Potts. I'll see you in the morning."

She nodded, and opened the door, slipping inside and closing it before he could get a real glimpse of her apartment. Tony waited until he heard the locks click into place, and then pushed off the wall, heading back downstairs and humming thoughtfully.

_Was that progress? I think it was._

Pepper was her usual efficient self in the morning, greeting him serenely when she arrived at the mansion, and Tony couldn't tell whether she didn't really remember the end of the evening, or if she was choosing to ignore it. _Hell, maybe she just doesn't care._

Given that he was half-expecting some sharp words for that kiss in the car, Tony was somewhat relieved, but her reaction--or lack thereof--also left him a little confused. Pepper angry he could deal with, Pepper pleased was his goal--but Pepper unchanged left him feeling like he'd set a charge to explode and seen it do nothing more than puff a little cloud of smoke.

_Time to tap the fuse._

He went along to work with no protest, and by mid-morning he had the beginnings of a plan. By the time he finished lunch, he had worked out the details, and all he had to do was wait until the proper time to implement it.

He had a late afternoon meeting with R&D that ran over time, and rather than make Pepper wait around, Tony sent her a text telling her to go home and let him play with the boys in peace. He knew Happy would get her safely there, and in the meantime he had reactor specs to discuss.
But after the meeting, Tony gave his chauffeur very specific instructions, and put his plan into motion.

There was one advantage to being notorious, Tony thought as he politely held the building door for an elderly lady and slipped in behind her. The security guard at the desk recognized him, asking for ID but not calling up. Which was a good thing, because Pepper didn't actually know he was coming.

He rode the elevator up with his hands in his pockets, wondering if he should make enough noise to attract an observer, but as it happened when he stepped into the hall there were two women talking just a couple of doors down. He smiled cheerfully at them, and knew by the sudden buzz behind him that they too knew how he was.

He grinned to himself. *Perfect.*

His sharp rap on Pepper's door brought a muffled "Just a minute," and Tony waited, rocking on his heels. He could feel her gaze on him through the peephole, and then the locks clicked and she pulled the door open, frowning at him. "What--"

"Hi honey, I'm home," he said cheerily, and pulled her into a kiss.

Since they had watchers, he felt justified in making it a good one, and Pepper let him, though the muscles under the hands he laid on her waist were tense. Still, her mouth was sweet, and he chased the hint of lemon he found there until she pulled back, breathless. Tony felt more than a bit breathless himself, but he gave her his most charming smile. "Sorry I'm late."

Pepper lifted her chin, and he braced himself for a scolding, but then her eyes flicked right and she stifled it. "You'd better come in," she said in a low voice.

Tony didn't look back at their observers as he stepped into Pepper's apartment. She closed the door behind him. "Tony, what the hell are you doing here?"

He didn't answer, too busy looking around. Her place was large, which was only right given the quality of the building she lived in, and it was open and airy and filled with light, or would be if the sun were still up. Tony loved it instantly; the décor was much softer than his own home, but it had a lot of the same feeling, room to move and think without feeling lost. The carpet was light-colored and thick, the furniture low and inviting, and artwork made for glowing spots of color along the walls.

"Nice place," Tony said admiringly. He walked over to look more closely at one print. "I didn't know you were a fan of Matisse. You know, I think I have one of his in storage--"

"You have three," Pepper said in the measured tone that meant she was annoyed. "Tony--"

He turned back to her, raising his arms in a helpless gesture and admiring the loose cotton pants and fitted t-shirt she wore. "You won't spend the night with me, so I figured I'd better spend one or two with you. People will start to wonder when we're getting the sex in, you know."

Pepper blushed, red creeping up her throat to her cheeks and hairline, though her severe expression didn't change. "And you couldn't discuss this with me first?"

Heartened by the fact that she hadn't immediately kicked him back out, Tony smirked. "And give you a chance to veto it? No way, Potts." He softened. "Look, seriously, we need to be seen spending more time in each other's company, and the separation looks weird. I promise I'll stay snug in your guest room, Pepper, no hanky panky." He winked. "No matter how much I want to sneak in and
snuggle up to you."

Pepper growled something he couldn't make out, though it sounded like *snuggling* was part of it. "I don't *have* a guest room, Tony. I have a library with an armchair, and I have a couch. If you're really determined to do this, then you pick which one you want."

She stalked off into her kitchen. "Give yourself a tour," was tossed back over her shoulder.

Curious, Tony did. The living room was clearly the largest space, and held plants and books and actually looked lived in, with a sweater draped over a chair and a coffee mug sitting on a low round table. There was a small TV hung on one wall and an antique lady's desk placed in one corner, somehow not rendered incongruous by the ultramodern laptop sitting on top.

The library turned out to be the smaller bedroom, fitted with shelves that not only lined the walls but half-filled the room, leaving just enough space for a cushy chair and a reading lamp. Tony glanced over the titles; the collection was eclectic, ranging from accounting texts and mystery novels to computer manuals, children's books, and the occasional romance novel. He had no doubt that they were organized within an inch of their papery lives--this was Pepper, after all--but the pattern eluded him for the moment.

She was still in the kitchen when he emerged, so Tony kept going, trying doors. Bathroom--very feminine in a restrained way, though he liked the ferns--linen closet, and finally-- *Jackpot.*

Unlike her living room, which was mostly cream-colored, Pepper's bedroom was done in jewel tones, mainly greens and deep blues. It was dominated by a canopy bed that lacked a canopy; instead, Pepper had trained some kind of climbing plant to wind over the frame, so that the bed looked like it belonged in a fairy-tale garden. In fact, he instantly pictured her sleeping there, one hand under her cheek and the dark blue comforter drawn over her shoulders, all sweet innocence waiting for a prince's kiss to wake her--

*Not sure I'm the princely type.*

The doubt was sudden, and Tony stuffed his hands back into his pockets, looking over the rest of the room with melancholy eyes. It too was feminine, but without being frilly--just a warm and welcoming space that was at the same time private. The dresser and bedside table were dark smooth wood, solid and uncomplicated, and a pair of fuzzy slippers lay discarded by the bed.

"I might have known you'd end up here," Pepper said behind him, without much rancor, and Tony turned. She handed him a glass of lemonade, presumably the source of the flavor that still lingered on his tongue.

"I really like your home," he told her sincerely, and took a sip. The stuff wasn't as sweet as he was expecting, and tasted somehow fresh.

"I'd offer you something stronger," Pepper said with a nod at the glass, "but I don't have anything."

Tony shook his head, and took another sip. "This is fine. It's really good," he said after letting it slide down his throat.

Pepper made a small negating gesture. "Have you eaten?"

"Didn't get that far," he replied. "May I take you out to dinner?"

She sighed. "It's late, and I have stuff here. Come on back out to the living room and I'll fix something."
He followed her back up the hallway. Her posture was still stiff, and Tony wondered if he should just excuse himself and go, but then he discarded the idea. **No. I'm right, and besides, it's time she got more used to the idea of us being a couple.**

So when they reached the living room, he took off his jacket and tie and draped them over the back of the couch, then rolled up his sleeves and sought Pepper out in the kitchen. It was a good-sized room for an apartment, with a breakfast nook that held a table and two benches, and the window over the sink probably had a nice view during the day.

Pepper had her back to him and was rummaging in the freezer. Tony waited until she closed the door, then cleared his throat. "Can I help?" he asked humbly when she turned.

For a moment he thought she would refuse, but then her mouth quirked. "You can chop the green onions if you want. Cutting board's there--" She pointed at a cabinet. "--and knives are in the block."

The onions were lying on the island, already rinsed to judge by the droplets on the green stems, and he scooped them up and assembled his tools before beginning his assigned task. In between stalks he watched Pepper, who was moving around the kitchen with the assurance of someone who knew her space absolutely, pulling together eggs and cheese and other ingredients. When he'd finished chopping, Pepper swept up his efforts and added them to her ongoing concoction, and Tony returned to the living room for his glass of lemonade.

Pepper was just putting the dish into the oven when he came back, so Tony sat down on one of the benches and waited. Pepper closed the oven, set the timer on her microwave, and sighed again.

Her face was closed when she looked over at him, but then her lips twisted, a wry, sad look. "I'm sorry I'm being such a bitch," she said, picking up a half-filled glass from a counter and walking over to slide onto the opposite bench. "I'm not used to having other people in my space."

Tony considered her across the little table, the weariness that lay in the corners of her mouth, and wanted to gather her up and soothe it all away. All the more so because he knew that he, or at least working for him, was a large part of the reason why she didn't have many visitors. He lifted his glass. "If this is how you treat unwelcome guests, Potts, then I'm going to wangle an actual invitation."

She sniffed, but smiled, if reluctantly. He grinned at her and went on. "It's odd to think how long we've known each other, and yet this is the first time I've been inside your place."

"There's never been any reason for you to be here," Pepper pointed out with dry logic as he drank more lemonade. "I manage your life, Tony, not the other way around."

"Yeah, I know." He couldn't quite articulate why it still seemed unbalanced to him. **We're friends, aren't we?** he wanted to ask, but even that didn't quite cover it. "I like it, though."

"So you keep saying." But she was relaxing. "I don't suppose I can convince you to sneak off into the night, can I? If you leave through the parking garage you can probably avoid any prying eyes."

Her tone was half-teasing, and Tony slumped a little, relieved. "Not a chance. Besides, I sent Happy off--how would I get back home?"

Pepper rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Tony, I doubt the couch is very comfortable. And before you ask, no, I'm not going to trade with you."

He wrinkled his nose in pretend hurt that held a touch of genuine emotion. "I wasn't going to, even if you offered. What kind of gentleman do you take me for?"
She snickered. "So many possible answers...I think I'll just let it go." Pepper drained her glass and rose. "Do you want salad with your casserole?"

He watched her go and savored his lemonade. It really was tasty--he didn't normally drink the stuff to begin with, but it somehow had an extra flavor he wouldn't expect in what amounted to diluted juice with sugar in it.

When he finished the glass, though, and Pepper refilled it silently from a pitcher she took from the refrigerator, Tony saw the lemon slices floating in the liquid. _Oh. She makes it herself._

Just as she started making the salad, Pepper's phone rang, and judging from the resultant conversation it was an old friend. Pepper glanced over at him apologetically early on, but Tony just wiggled his fingers at her and went on sipping, sitting back against the wall with one leg propped on the bench. She was interesting to watch as she moved around the kitchen, the handset trapped between her shoulder and her ear, her hands free to tear lettuce and slice tomatoes. Tony eavesdropped shamelessly, figuring that if Pepper wanted privacy she could leave the room, or make him go, and amused himself trying to figure out what she and her friend were discussing from only Pepper's side of the conversation.

She didn't mention him, which disappointed Tony a tiny bit, but she kept laughing, merry and warm, and it warmed _him_ even though he had no idea what was so funny. A savory smell gradually filled the kitchen, and he felt his stomach start rumbling.

Finally Pepper said goodbye and clicked off the phone. "Who was that?" Tony asked.

She smiled, pulling salad tongs from a drawer and sliding them into the wooden bowl now filled with greens. "My college roommate. She's back from overseas for the weekend, otherwise I would have told her I'd call her back, sorry..."

Tony waved off the apology. "Contrary to popular opinion, I don't need to be constantly amused." That made her laugh again, and he smirked. "What does she do?"

That led to conversations about college, and they got through supper trading tales of impossible professors and terrible classes. Tony had more stories, he thought, given that the engineering section at MIT was never a group to let mischief lie idle; but Pepper had apparently gotten up to a fair bit herself, and her retelling of how she and five of her dormmates had stolen the hands off their university clocktower had him shouting with laughter.

"I never would have guessed you for a practical joker," he said at last, still chuckling.

Pepper's smile was demure and just a touch wicked. "Only when the situation calls for it. Ask Philip in Accounting some time why no one down there ever pulled a prank on me after the first time."

"Scared of you." Tony leaned across to snag her empty plate and stack it on top of his own. "You cooked, I wash." Which was not something he did on pizza night at Rhodey's, but here it just seemed fair somehow. _Besides, at his place we just eat it straight from the box._

"Most of it can go in the dishwasher," Pepper said, rising. "But if you want to do the rest, I won't object."

Cleanup took very little time. Tony made sure to get all the eggy residue off the casserole dish, knowing that on some level he was being tested, and Pepper dried each utensil as he finished it and put them all away. As she was hanging up the dish towel, she glanced back at him. "Tony...you do realize you didn't even bring a change of clothes, right?"
"Hey, I'm a genius," he informed her. "Be right back." At her front door he turned. "No fair locking me out."

Pepper shook her head, and Tony winked again and closed the door. The hallway was empty as he trotted down to the elevator, and the security guard--a different man than when Tony had come in--was the only one in the lobby. Tony walked over to the desk. "There should be a package waiting for me."

The guard reached under the desk and hoisted a decent-sized cardboard box onto the counter. "ID, please."

Amused and approving--alert security was what he wanted to see in Pepper's building--Tony produced his driver's license. The guard looked at it, nodded, and handed it back, and Tony picked up the box. Decades of dealing with servicepeople told him that a tip would not be welcome in this case, so he merely thanked the man and took his parcel back upstairs.

The door was unlocked, and Tony stepped inside and balanced the box on one hip so he could throw the locks, then walked into the living room to deposit it on the couch. "Potts, you need lessons in security, leaving the door open like that. Anyone could have walked in."

Pepper was sitting at her desk, and the dry look she sent over her shoulder told him what she thought of his tease. "What's that?"

Tony fished his microlaser from his pocket and cut through the neat tape job. "I got Happy to pack me some stuff."

Pepper twisted enough to rest her arm on the back of her chair. "You had Happy pack you a box? Tony, you have enough luggage to stock a store."

"Yeah, but we've been lovers for six months, remember?" he pointed out with what he felt was irrefutable logic, opening the flaps. "I'd have stuff here already."

The container held a selection of clothing, neatly folded, and the toiletries kit Tony expected. He kept an emergency overnight bag on hand just in case--there had been times when he'd taken off at a moment's notice, and he did like to be presentable sometimes--and he'd told Happy to just dump the contents into a box and have it delivered to the apartment building.

But as he dug into it Tony felt the hard corners of a smaller box, and looked down to see a package of condoms under the dress shirt. Since he hadn't bought any since getting back from Afghanistan, they had to be an addition.

Tony felt his cheeks heating--not because his chauffeur had bought him condoms, though it was interesting to note that Happy seemed to be on his side, but because it felt...wrong. He wanted Pepper with every fiber of his body, but he wasn't about to try to seduce her in her own home, not when he'd come uninvited.

"What's the matter?" Pepper asked, and he looked up quickly to see her frowning at him in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Tony said brightly, and buried the packet at the bottom of the box. "Just fine. Um, what do you do at night?" Ouch. "Before going to bed, I mean--"

Pepper's lips were curling up. "Your ears are bright red," she observed.

Tony closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Sorry," he managed, and opened them again, giving
her a confident smile. "I'm just trying to figure out how to fit into your routine."

Pepper sniffed. "Tony, you don't fit people's routines, you crash in and let them sort things out in your wake." But she was smiling again. "Usually I check e-mail, do personal stuff online, a few chores, that kind of thing. Read, maybe."

"Personal stuff, or personal?" Tony asked, raising his brows in mock hope.

"Bill paying," Pepper said primly, though the screen behind her seemed to be showing a page full of shoes. "But if you're bored there's some DVDs in the cabinet under the TV."

"Actually, can I raid your library?" Tony slipped the box flaps under one another and put the box on the floor next to the couch. "What?" he asked at Pepper's look of surprise. "I do read."

"Yeah, but I don't have any technical journals. Sure, go ahead." Pepper waved one hand and turned back to her computer.

Tony took a while to study the shelves, trying to work out her system of organization. *Fiction shelved by title, he decided at last, except for certain authors, and series by title of the first book. Non-fiction by subject, then author*.

It seemed both convoluted and logical.

When he returned to the living room, he was carrying a book on forensic accounting, one about the race to the Moon, a thick paperback on Asian economics, and two Heinlein juveniles. Pepper was still at her desk, tapping away and muttering under her breath, with slightly tinny jazz flowing out of the laptop's speakers. Tony settled himself on the couch and began reading.

He was almost halfway through *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*--a first edition, he'd noted with some surprise--when Pepper rose and disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later she came back with two bowls, one of which she handed down to him before taking her laptop to the easy chair across from the couch.

It took Tony a moment to surface--it had been a long time since he'd read that one--but when he looked in the bowl he discovered it held vanilla ice cream studded with small, sugar-dusted gummy fish.

Not quite his favorite dessert, but close.

He looked up at Pepper, whose own bowl contained vanilla with hot fudge sauce, to judge by the spoonful she was lifting to her lips. "Thanks," he said.

Pepper smiled at him around the stem of the spoon. Sighing contentedly, Tony dug in.

The ice cream was long gone, and Tony was working his way through the forensic accounting manual, when Pepper closed her laptop and stretched absently. Tony didn't turn his head, but he did pay attention; Pepper at full extension was worth observing.

She let her arms fall and sighed. "I'm going to call it a night, Tony. I'll find you some sheets and a pillow, and you know where the bathroom is."

"Okay." Tony closed the book and stood, picking up his bowl and taking hers from her hand. "I'll take care of these."

She shrugged. "All right."
It was a moment's work to put the bowls and spoons in the dishwasher. Tony returned to the living room to find two sheets, a blanket, and two towels folded neatly on the couch, a pillow in its case leaning against the stack. "Hey, no good-night kiss?" he called in the direction of the hallway.

"Don't push your luck," was the answer, and Tony snickered and set about making up his bed for the night.

When he hadn't heard anything from Pepper's bedroom for thirty minutes, Tony closed his book again and got up to rummage in the box for the equivalent to pajamas. Normally he slept in the buff when he slept in a bed, but obviously that wouldn't work at the moment, so he pulled out an old sleeveless tee and a pair of boxers, and went to investigate Pepper's bathroom in greater depth.

It too was tidy--of course--and scrupulously clean, though it carried a hint of her perfume. The walls and tub were white, but there were touches of lavender everywhere, and two huge ferns in ceramic pots on the shelf over the toilet. Tony found space for his kit and undressed for a shower.

Pulling back the shower curtain, he found a neat array of bottles and a sponge, but not the razor he expected. A safety mat hung on a bar at the far end, and he dropped it into the tub, pressing it down with his feet. It felt odd to be so deeply in Pepper's personal space, and he was absorbing every detail, hungry for information.

Turning on the water, he soaked himself for a moment under the spray, and then couldn't resist investigating those bottles. One was shampoo; one was something called "creme rinse", and carried the same faintly peachy fragrance he associated with her hair.

The third was soap of some kind, and when Tony flipped open the cap the delicate vanilla scent wound straight into his nervous system. He breathed deep, suddenly and vividly imagining Pepper in this very space, long limbs and slender body bare and sleek and wet, smoothing suds over her pearly skin.

And then he was there as well, reaching around her to take the sponge and handle the job himself, and she leaned back against him and gave him all the access he wanted--

_Fuck._ A singularly appropriate epithet. Tony looked down at his eager body, and sighed. "You have two choices, Stark," he murmured under the rush of water. "Deal with this now, or..."

...Or try to explain to Pepper that he'd had a wet dream all over her couch. It wasn't really a choice.

Well, he already had the bottle open. And a vision ready to hand, as it were...

Afterwards, he washed up quickly with his own soap, putting everything back exactly where he'd found it and rehanging the mat as soon as he stepped out of the tub. Pepper had even left him space on the towel racks, and Tony brushed his teeth and hung up the damp towels and padded back to the living room, ruefully aware that he wasn't sleepy at all.

The remaining books held little appeal, and Tony didn't want to watch a DVD and risk disturbing Pepper. Half-heartedly he opened her laptop, back in its place on the desk, and then remembered the music she'd been listening to. _Why the hell doesn't she run it through her stereo?_

Three hours later he'd adjusted her stereo system to pick up a wireless broadcast from her laptop, and between the junk he had in his pockets and the toolkit he found in the front closet, Tony figured he had a pretty good start on doing the same with her TV. And he was starting to wonder how hard it would be to rig up a better security system--remote locks, maybe--and if he wasn't trying so hard to get her to move in with him he could copy Jarvis and set her up with her own AI.
"Tony, what are you **doing**?"

He looked up, startled. The room was lighter than he remembered, and Pepper was standing behind the couch, looking adorably tousled and sleepy...and baffled. Tony looked back down at the screwdriver in his hand. "Uh...upgrading."

"Upgrading **what**?" Pepper walked around the couch and approached him; she was wrapped in a very worn flannel robe that hung almost to her toes, and from his seat on the floor Tony realized that he really wanted to lean over and slip his hands into the gap near her ankles, and run his hands up those long, long legs hiding beneath the prosaic fabric.

"Right now? Your laptop."

Pepper blinked down at the computer in his lap. Half of its innards were distributed across her coffee table, and the hard drive was next to his right foot. Tony could see various responses flickering behind Pepper's eyes, but he had a point in his favor--he knew all her data was backed up nightly to a private server, because he'd set it up for her himself.

Nonetheless, her lips parted in what looked like dismay, and he smirked up at her. "What's the matter, Potts, don't you trust me?"

Her nose wrinkled, and then she laughed, suddenly cheerful. "Demonstrably. Did you sleep at **all**?"

"Nope," he replied, equally cheerful.

She shook her head. "I'm going to go make breakfast. Please tell me you didn't 'upgrade' my coffee machine too."

"Not yet." At her arched brow, Tony looked hurriedly back down to his project. "I'll just...put this back together, okay?"

"You do that." The hand that tousled his hair was unexpected, sending a thrill through him as she walked away. Grinning to himself, Tony began the reassembly.
Chapter 6

Tony rested his chin on his fist and stared at his computer screen. Despite the light coming over his shoulders from his office windows, he was tired, and that made it hard to concentrate.

It had been a long week. He'd had not one but two missions, heavy ones, though without much physical injury; a minor crisis with the teletonics division and a sudden spasm of worrywarting on the board had sent him into endless meetings that had made his strained muscles ache more despite his ability to slump in almost any chair.

Even without the bruises and bumps, flying the suit for a great length of time still left him stiff all down his spine.

It was an inherent flaw in the human form, he had eventually decided. We just aren't designed to fly. The most aerodynamic position for flight was belly-down, but to see where he was going without installing a helmet-cam meant Tony had to keep his head tilted back, which eventually threw everything out of whack from the base of his skull down.

Of course, he could let Jarvis handle things, and on occasion he did lower his head and relax for a bit, but it went against the grain...

It was a good thing, he thought wearily, that he had a massage scheduled for the evening. Tim had hands half again as large as Tony's own with equal fineness of touch, and charged an obscene rate, and Tony would have paid him triple that without blinking because the man could untie knots that Tony didn't know he even had.

And, used to working for eccentric celebrities, Tim never questioned why he was only allowed to enter the room when Tony was already lying on the table, nor why he never worked on Tony's front. Tony sometimes got the feeling that he personally was a lot less difficult to work with than some of Tim's other clients, despite those eccentricities.

But even a good massage couldn't take away all his fatigue. Tony knew he was stressed, and Friday or not, he was just about done in.

Sighing, he closed the files he was staring at and sat back. Right now he didn't know what he wanted more—a nap, a drink, or that backrub.

Or quality time with my fiancée. And not the kind of time most would suspect. He'd barely seen Pepper all week, and he missed her.

As if summoned—or maybe it was just her perfect sense of timing—a brisk rap on the door heralded Pepper's entrance. She held a demitasse and a thick folder.

"My hero," Tony said, eyes fixed on the cup. "You brought me caffeine."

"And memos," Pepper agreed, halting just to the left of his chair and handing him the cup. The folder she placed on his desk, opening it so that the first page confronted him. "Sign them all now and I have a surprise for you."

Tony paused in his absorption of blissedly hot espresso and raised his brows. "Is it the dirty kind of surprise? Because I saw you with that lingerie catalog last week..."

Pepper gave him her trademark haughty look. "No, and sign first."
Tossing back the last of the coffee, Tony took the pen she was holding out and obeyed. Most of it was mindless, the sort of bureaucratic paperwork that required no thought, but he paid attention anyway because Pepper wasn't above slapping his hand if she thought he was skipping something he should actually read.

Pepper remained, leaning back against the edge of his desk, and since she'd left his door open partways Tony let his left hand wander up to her outer hip, just resting there in a touch more familiar than intimate.

When he'd finished signing, he tossed down the pen, flipped the folder shut, and looked up at her. "Done. Gimme."

She smiled down at him. "I've moved Tim's appointment up to 3 p.m., and the yacht is scheduled to leave at 6. The estimated return time is Sunday evening."

"Sweet!" Tony sat up, energized. "Pack your bikini, Potts." The idea of having Pepper mostly to himself for plus-two days was very alluring.

Pepper hesitated. "I was planning on meeting you tomorrow, actually--"

"Absolutely not," Tony said firmly. "You've been working just as hard as me--harder, really. You need a break too." He took her hand in his, fingers finding the engagement band in a silent signal. It was loose now, but Pepper was scrupulous, and never took it off in public.

"Well--all right, I think I can move things around." Pepper bit her lip, then nodded absently.

"Good. Bikini. Don't forget." Tony lifted her hand palm outward so that he could brush a kiss over her fingertips.

Her hand quivered in his before she pulled it deftly away. "I don't own one. Don't forget to stock up on sunscreen, or I'll have to stay in the cabin all weekend."

Pepper scooped up the folder and the demitasse and slipped gracefully away, leaving Tony to rock back in his chair and grin. "I can solve that problem, Pepper, what color would you like?"

She didn't deign to answer, merely closing the door behind her. Tony sighed, pleased, and wondered if she would actually wear one if he got it for her.

Five hours later they were chasing the sunset out on the open water, the sea breeze washing away Tony's fatigue and whipping color into Pepper's cheeks. The *Y Not?* was small and required only a crew of three, but it was nonetheless the last word in luxury, if not quite technology.

Tony leaned against the rail and watched the wind tangling Pepper's hair as she looked dreamily out to sea. She would never admit it, but Pepper loved the ocean as much as he did, which was one of the things he loved about her.

He stroked his hand along the glossy rail, remembering again. He owned a much larger yacht; the *Epsilon Indi III* was a successor to the one his parents had sailed for many years. And the bigger boat had seen much more use in recent years, its many staterooms and numerous staff making it much better suited for the sort of parties he'd been in the habit of throwing.

But the *Y Not?* had been a gift from Tony's parents, which was why he hadn't traded it in on a newer model. And it was perfect for a weekend getaway.
"Hungry?" he asked finally, and Pepper turned to look at him, her mussed hair a charming contrast to her business suit. Her eyes were sparkling.

"Getting there," she said cheerfully. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yep." The massage had eased his kinked muscles, and while Tony still felt tired, he was much more relaxed. "Do you want to eat on board, or wait until we get to Avalon?"

"Oh, let's have a snack now." Pepper stepped back from the rail and turned towards the low table and chairs set out on the deck. "I'll ask Jacques."

Tony watched her go to find the steward, and stretched, yawning a little. Her gait seemed a bit off, but that was because she had already removed her shoes and stockings, and that told him that she felt herself to be off the clock, at least mostly. One of the effects that being on the water seemed to have on Pepper was to make her want to go barefoot.

Not that Tony minded. As much as he loved the way her heels shaped Pepper's stance and walk, the sight of her bare feet always did something pleasurable to his middle, something that partook equally of lust and protectiveness.

He went to take a seat, stretching out his legs and enjoying the view. *I haven't done this in too long.* It was hard to make time for relaxing, these days, and his newfound conscience wouldn't let him ignore as many duties as he once had. But Pepper could hardly have picked a better day to start their mini-vacation, and Tony deliberately shoved away the thought of duty. Knowing Pepper, she had informed Stark Industries that they were to be contacted only in case of emergency.

Pepper returned within moments, taking a chair next to his with a sigh that spoke of the same relaxation. Soon after, Jacques appeared with a champagne bucket and two glasses. Judging from Pepper's blink, she hadn't ordered the aperitif, but Tony nodded in approval, and the steward opened the bottle deftly. After pouring, he disappeared again, returning with a tray of crudites and other nibbles, which he slid onto the table.

Tony sipped his champagne and watched Pepper select something to munch. Jacques, Captain Petrov, and the cook Honey were all long-time employees, and appeared to be glad to have something to do again. "Tell Honey we'll be eating on shore tonight, but we'll need at least breakfast and lunch tomorrow," Tony instructed the steward, who nodded and left.

"What do you have in mind for tomorrow?" Pepper asked.

Tony shrugged, and leaned forward to capture a shrimp puff. "You said you wanted to go snorkeling. Or if the weather's not right for that, we can go find someplace to surf."

She shook her head, smiling. "Tony, this break is supposed to be for you."

"For us," he corrected, catching her eyes. "Like I said, you've been working too hard too. You deserve the time, Pepper."

Unexpectedly she pinkened, and looked away. Tony ate his puff, not sure what this change in their dynamic meant. Normally she would brush him off with some statement of how he wasn't paying her to take a vacation, but that sort of riposte had disappeared during the last six months.

He thought her blush was a hopeful sign, but he wasn't sure.

"We'll see," she said finally, and drank more champagne. Tony had to wonder if it was his attention specifically that troubled her, or just if after so many years spent taking care of him practically
twenty-four-seven she was out of the habit of letting herself be cared for in turn.

*Be fair. It's not something you've done a lot of.*

Well, he was willing to put in the practice, if only she would let him.

Pepper set down her glass. "I'll be right back," she murmured, and stood.

Tony finished his champagne, put his glass next to hers, and stared at the sunset, waiting for her to return. The colors made his eyes ache, so he closed them.

"Tony..."

The voice was low and laughing, but he didn't want to wake. Tony held still, grumpily hoping it would go away, but a hand shook his shoulder.

"Rise and shine, Mr. Stark. We're here."

Groaning, he summoned speech. "Go away, Potts, I'm asleep." In fact, he was actually quite cozy, wrapped in something warm.

"No, you're hungry. I could let you sleep out on deck all night but you wouldn't thank me in the morning."

Tony pried one eye open. Pepper stood over him, lit more by artificial light than the last streaks of color in the sky, and now dressed in slacks and a curve-hugging sweater. Her hair was brushed smooth and lay on her shoulders in a glossy fall, and her eyes were alive with mirth.

"I could just stay here," he suggested. "And you could feed me. You know, grapes and stuff."

She shook her head. "You're hard enough to deal with now, Mr. Stark. I'd rather not let you get a cold." She bent down, and then ripped his blanket away with a flourish. "Come on. Dinnertime."

The chill was acute. Tony grabbed for the blanket, missed, and pushed to his feet, grumbling. "I need to piss."

Apparently unfazed by his bad mood, Pepper merely stepped back, folding the blanket neatly. "Just don't do it over the side."

Relieving his bladder helped Tony's state of mind slightly, but he grimaced at himself in the mirror as he washed his hands. The light in the yacht's head never showed anyone to the best advantage, but at the moment he felt old as well as tired, his head aching a little. He rinsed out his mouth and told himself it was just the fact that he hadn't eaten, on top of the weariness, but he wasn't sure he believed it.

But the way Pepper smiled when she saw him come out chased away some of the drag. She held out a hand. "Shall we?"

Dinner turned out to be great. Tony made Pepper choose the restaurant, so they had local seafood at a place known more for its menu than its ambience. If anyone recognized Tony, they had the grace to keep it to themselves, though the low light and the back table probably helped, and Tony stuffed himself on fresh fish and watched Pepper delicately pick apart a lobster.

It was good to just share a meal with her, far away from the pressure of their lives, he realized, sipping from his wineglass and laughing at the story Pepper was telling about a comedy of errors at
her first job. Tony reached across the table and took her hand in his; not interrupting her story, just holding on. The ring was cool and textured under his thumb, and he listened and smiled and pretended that it was all real.

We have two days. I'm going to make the most of them.

The next day was sunny and warm and perfect for snorkeling. Tony woke feeling much more relaxed than he had in weeks, and found Pepper already up on deck, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt and a huge, silly, floppy hat. "Honey's making breakfast," she said when he emerged. "Did you sleep well?"

He nodded and sat down next to her. Their engagement ruse had required a bit of subterfuge, but they had sent the crew ashore the night before to sleep on land and Pepper had taken the guest cabin next to the master cabin, leaving enough of her possessions in his room to make it look as though they were sharing it. The guest cabin was to remain locked whenever the crew was on board, with the excuse that Tony had brought along a project that needed to remain secret. Petrov and the others, used to his eccentricities, hadn't even blinked.

"I thought you were on vacation," he said mildly, nodding towards the laptop she was holding.

Pepper shrugged. "Just sorting e-mail." She closed the computer and set it aside as Jacques appeared with the coffeepot.

As the steward poured, the yacht's engine started up. "Captain Petrov says we should reach our destination in about twenty minutes," Jacques said, straightening.

Tony considered, then shook his head. "Tell him to take the long way. It's a nice day, we might as well enjoy it."

Jacques nodded and left, and as the yacht pulled away from the dock Tony sipped his coffee, looking forward to the morning.

Pepper yawned and stretched, a process that fascinated Tony; her clothes were modest, but the way she arched her arms and back pulled the cloth taut and displayed her assets nicely. Tony sighed to himself, and smiled into his cup, because just about any other woman would have done it on purpose. Pepper, he suspected, just didn't consider the effect she might be having on him.

He wasn't sure whether to be insulted, or flattered that she trusted him that much.

Jacques came back with breakfast and set it out on the low table, omelets and toast and fresh fruit, delicious smells mixing with the breeze as the Y Not? cleared the dock area and headed towards more open water. Pepper thanked him with a smile, and Jacques gave her his tiny bow and disappeared again.

Tony leaned forward to fill his plate, watching Pepper do the same. It felt good, this leisurely time; peaceful. They ate in easy silence, taking their time, and Tony couldn't help imagining it as a habit rather than a single event—a common way to spend the weekend when they got too overwhelmed, taking the time to just be together, far from distraction and work.

"Too bad we can't stay out here forever," he commented as he finished his omelet.

Pepper smirked, sipping coffee. "You'd be bored silly in three days."

She was right, but he didn't have to admit it. "I beg to differ, Ms. Potts. I'm already silly." When she
glanced over at him, he crossed his eyes and wiggled his ears, scrunching up his mouth. She sputtered into her cup, and he relaxed and grinned.

"I didn't know you could do that." Pepper wiped her mouth with her napkin. "With your ears, I mean."

Tony shrugged. "I'm just naturally talented." He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't known how; even when small he'd realized it was a good way to impress people, particularly girls.

She grinned. "Yeah, but can you kiss your elbow?"

Tony scoffed. "That's a myth, Potts, nobody can do that."

"I beg to differ," she mocked, and...did. Tony's eyes widened as Pepper lifted her left arm and bent it at an impossible angle, letting her lips touch the delicate point of her elbow.

Half of his mind was screaming that she'd broken her arm, and the other half was absolutely boggled. "That is one of the weirdest things I've ever seen," he marveled. "And the coolest. How did you do that?"

Pepper straightened her arm and shrugged. "I'm double-jointed. Though I can only do it on that side." Her smile was teasing. "My grandmother used to tell me that it was a sign of fairy blood."

"I could see that," Tony said, regarding her. Pepper's beauty wasn't what he'd call unearthly, but she'd definitely enchanted him.

Pepper's ears pinkened, and she poured him more coffee. "I'm going to go change clothes."

She stood, leaving her hat on the chair, and Tony sipped from his cup and watched her go, smirking at the thought of the three bikinis he'd left on her bed. Black, white, and green. Plenty to choose from.

Much to his disappointment, when he returned to the stateroom to change, Pepper had chosen none of them, and was instead dressed in a simple navy one-piece maillot--not the most modest suit he'd ever seen, but still too practical for his tastes. Tony pulled his shirt off over his head, and Pepper paused with her hand on the door handle. "What are you going to do about that?" she asked, nodding towards his arc implant. "It'll show through a wet shirt."

Tony raised a brow. "Ye of little faith, Potts." Opening a drawer, he took out a circle of metal no wider than his palm. "Observe."

He snapped it into place over the reactor, blocking the glow neatly. Tony opened his hands, inviting comment, and Pepper smiled.

"Very clever. Is it watertight?"

"Not really." Tony tapped it. "But that doesn't matter, the reactor seal is."

Her lips twisted a little. "The implant will still be visible when you get out of the water."

He shrugged, resigned. "There's nothing I can do about that, but we should be pretty private where we're going. It's not like anyone will be able to tell what the lump under my shirt is, anyway."

"True." Pepper's expression still seemed slightly sad, but she pulled down the handle. "I'll meet you on deck."
Tony spun so his back was to the door, just in case Jacques was in the passageway; when he heard the latch close, he rummaged for his swim shorts and a loose black t-shirt.

Pepper was rubbing sunscreen onto her arms when he made it back on deck, and Tony grinned at the sight, coming up behind her to pluck the tube from her grip. "Here, let me help you with that."

"Tony--" She glanced back at him, surprised, and he winked and squirted a generous amount of the cream into his palm.

"Hold still." Applying sunscreen to a woman's skin was a familiar task, and Tony had often made it foreplay; but this time he kept it light, massaging the lotion into the exposed skin of Pepper's back and neck, feeling the wings of her shoulderblades under his palms but not lingering. It was fun to slide the tips of his fingers just under the edge of her suit and feel her skin pebble up, and when he was finished with her back Tony went to one knee behind her to cover the backs of her legs as well.

"I can do that myself," Pepper protested as he stroked his hands down the length of her thighs, and Tony snickered.

"And deprive me of my fun? No way." He'd yearned for years to explore Pepper's legs, and while this wasn't quite what he'd envisioned, it was still an opportunity to be savored. Her skin was sleek and cool, and the gentle curve of her bottom so close tempted him to lean in and nibble, but Tony behaved himself--even if the image of her jump and squeal of outrage was nearly irresistible.

He did permit himself a quick kiss on the nape of her neck when he rose, though. "All done."

Pepper turned and raised a brow. "Your turn then."

"Sure." He handed her the tube and stood waiting. Pepper's lips tightened, but she took the silent challenge, and to his pleasure she squeezed out a dollop and started with his arms. First one, then the other was stroked by her strong hands, and Tony realized he might have made a slight miscalculation as his body took a very eager interest. But he didn't move, letting Pepper finish.

She circled behind him and did his legs as well, rubbing vigorously, and Tony held still and tried to regulate his breathing. When she came back around, Pepper smeared a generous streak across his cheekbones. "Rub that in," she told him, and capped the tube.

He complied. Pepper went to the rail as the Y Not? slowed to a stop in a quiet cove just off the island. Tony didn't snorkel often, but he knew it for an excellent spot, one not known to many tourists.

They spent a glorious morning in the water. There was plenty to see and enjoy, and they took their time, cruising along the surface and taking in whatever came their way. It didn't surprise him when they quickly devised their own system of hand signals, most of which meant "look at this"; and even though he couldn't see her smiling Tony could tell Pepper was enjoying herself. She was an alluring sight underwater, her lithe form outlined with light and her hair floating around her head, and Tony thought he could see where the old ideas of mermaids came from--unearthly beauty from the depths of the ocean.

Lunch was ready when they climbed back on board the yacht, and they ate on deck in the sunshine, letting the breeze dry them. Pepper looked wonderful above water too, her face a little pink despite the sunscreen and her lips slightly swollen from the snorkel, but her eyes bright.

It was after lunch, when she was finishing her lemonade, that he saw the little launch approaching. The flash of sun on glass alerted Tony to the camera pointed in their direction--one large enough to have a telephoto lens.
"Press off the port bow, Potts," he murmured, taking the glass from her hand and setting it aside before rolling over onto her chaise. Captain Petrov would soon chase them off, he knew, but in the meantime-- "We need to make this look good."

Her swimsuit was cool and still a bit slick under his fingers as Tony spread his hand over her side and slid it up towards her breast. Pepper inhaled, but before she could say anything he covered her mouth with his, letting no more than a squeak escape.

He could kiss her forever, that was always the first thing that came to mind beyond the sheer bliss of her skin. Kissing Pepper made him feel as though there was nothing else in the universe of any importance, and this time was no different as her lips parted for him and her body, half-pinned beneath his, arched a little against him.

One small part of Tony's mind hoped that the paparazzi were getting some good shots, but that was about all the rational thought he was managing, because Pepper's heat and softness were soaking into him and his brain was rapidly shutting down. Her mouth tasted of lemonade and her own special flavor, sweet and indescribable, and he let himself go. Her breast filled his hand perfectly, and the gasp she made against his lips made his blood run hot.

He was vaguely aware of Petrov's bellow, of the roar of a motor fading, but it was far more important to take in all he could of the woman pressed against him. Her eager mouth, her hand cupping the back of his neck made him all the hungrier; greedy, bordering on desperate, Tony felt her nipple stiffen against his palm, and pressed closer still, sliding one leg between hers. Pepper was his only conscious thought as her scent filled his nose, Pepper, finally--

Then her hand fell away, and suddenly he was rocking back, startled and off-balance from her shove. Pepper squirmed out from under him, eyes wild.

"Pepper?" he said stupidly, still dazed, but she didn't look at him. Instead she slid to the edge of the chaise and sat up.

He reached for her, but she stood quickly, glancing back at him. "No," she hissed quietly, and fled with quick steps into the cabin. Tony was about to push to his feet and pursue when he heard Jacques greet Pepper, and he sat back abruptly. Chasing her would only draw the attention of the crew, and while he supposed a lover's spat wasn't out of the question, the ensuing argument was not something he wanted anyone to overhear.

Instinct screamed at him to run after her, but Tony stayed where he was, dizzy and angry and, he realized, hurt. He clenched his fists, trying to calm his overeager body and his flaring temper. What the hell was that?

It wasn't as though he'd been forcing her. She'd been startled at first, sure, but then more than compliant--she'd been kissing him back with a great deal of enthusiasm. And while Tony's brain acknowledged that it was a woman's right to say no at any point, his body and his pride were harder to convince.

If she had been anyone else--if he'd been the man he was before Afghanistan--he would have stormed away, written her off as a tease, had a good sulk and then gone looking for the next lovely lady. But she wasn't, and he wasn't. And Pepper was neither malicious nor capricious.

Letting out a sharp breath, Tony lay down again, tucking an arm under his head and trying to relax. She had to have a reason to act like that. And he would go find out what it was in a few minutes, when he could walk past the crew in his swim shorts without embarrassing anyone.
Ten minutes later Tony was standing outside the connecting door in the master suite, which was firmly closed. He knocked, hard. "Pepper?"

"I'm working, Mr. Stark." Her voice was cold and only slightly muffled by the door. Tony's mouth tightened, and he sighed, and punched the override code into the door.

Pepper wasn't working; she was huddled up on her bunk, arms around her knees and her eyes widening in outrage as the door swung open. Tony held up a hand. "I'm not coming in. But we need to talk."

"There's nothing to say." Her face closed down into the set blank he usually only saw when she was furious or deeply upset.

"The hell there isn't. Why did you run away, Pepper?" He folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe, hoping it would be enough; he wasn't going to enter the room without her permission, but it would be harder to force her to talk from a distance.

"I didn't run away. I went to my cabin." Her lifted chin defied him, and Tony sighed again.

"Semantics, Ms. Potts. I expected better from you."

"Better than what? Than letting my boss grope me in public?" Her cheeks, which had flushed at his touches, were white now.

"We agreed--" Tony started, but she cut him off.

"We agreed to public displays of affection, but that went far beyond what was necessary. You didn't..."

Pepper trailed off. "Stop?" Tony supplied softly. "I didn't want to, and neither did you."

She opened her mouth, but he shook his head. "Don't bother, Pepper." He rubbed his fingers against his palm, revisiting the memory. "I could feel you. And smell you. You wanted that just as much as I did."

He kept his voice even, not wanting her to think he was taunting her. In fact, the knowledge was exhilarating.

Pepper's face went scarlet, the color spreading up from her throat a startling contrast to the paleness of moments before, and the expression in her eyes...Tony felt a wave of cold break over him as he put a name to it.

Shame.

"You don't have to rub my nose in it," she said, almost inaudible.

Tony gaped at her. "I'm not. Pepper, I--"

She shook her head. "This is turning into a farce. Let it go, Mr. Stark. You'll be free to return to your old habits soon enough, but in the meantime I won't be a...a substitute."

She was so wrong, about so many things, that Tony couldn't find the words to start explaining. As he struggled, Pepper unfolded herself and stood up, half-running towards the little head on the far side of the room.
“Pepper--Pepper, wait, let me--” But he was too late. The door closed firmly behind her, and the words clotted on his tongue.

And because he'd promised, he couldn't set foot across the threshold.

Pepper didn't come out for dinner, merely calling up to inform Honey politely that she wasn't feeling well. Tony ate alone, or tried to; his appetite was minimal. His stomach was a tangled knot of anger, frustration, and guilt.

*Doesn't she trust me? I haven't touched another woman since I got back.* He'd been telling Pepper for months that she was the only woman he wanted, but apparently he hadn't been explicit enough.

His conscience pointed out mercilessly that a few months of attention wasn't much to stack up against his years of promiscuity. He'd flirted with Pepper all that time, too, and it wasn't as though he hadn't *wanted* her; but both of them had known, without saying a word, that he needed her more as an assistant than a one-night stand. And so they'd never stepped outside the boundaries.

She'd never *let* him, really. Which was just one of the reasons he loved her, that prudence that balanced his own impulsiveness.

Tony left most of his dinner on his plate and retreated to the night-shadowed deck with the whiskey decanter and a glass, to stare up at the stars and wait for Pepper to come out as Petrov sailed them back to port. But the crew left for shore before she emerged, and sleep got the better of Tony.

He woke late in the morning with a dry mouth, and a thick blanket weighing him down on the chaise. And when he went looking for Pepper, Jacques told him regretfully that Ms. Potts had left early that morning, chartering a helicopter flight back to the mainland. Something about a sudden crisis at Stark Industries, so sorry, Mr. Stark...

Tony wondered what the hell Pepper thought she was doing. *She has to face me eventually.* He considered going right after her, but the day was already half gone, and with a cool resolve mixed with faint anger, Tony decided to wait.

*Let her run. It just gives me more time to plan.*
He dressed with especial care on Monday morning, retrieving his father's watch from his dresser and slipping it into his vest pocket. Cleaned and refurbished, it gleamed richly at the end of the heavy chain, a satisfying weight in his hand and then against his torso. Tony shrugged into a coat and set his cuffs, and went out to find coffee and wait for his fiancée.

She was, of course, early, and Tony watched her step out of her car via the window screen in the living room. Pepper too was impeccably dressed, and he wondered idly if her clothes felt like armor to her.

He shut off the screen and waited by the window as she came in. Pepper's expression as she caught sight of him across the room was cool, professionally calm, but the way she raised her chin told Tony that she was nervous, and that gave him an odd little thrill of hope.

She came to a halt in the middle of the room, close enough that she didn't have to raise her voice, and folded her hands in front of her. "Do you want my resignation?"

Tony started. He'd expected anger, embarrassment, maybe a genuine effort to ignore what had happened, but not that. "Hell no. Bite your tongue, Potts, you know I can't survive without you."

Her tense fingers relaxed a fraction, but her expression didn't change. "Then I suppose we need to talk."

She was still wearing the ring, he noticed with a rush of relief. He'd been afraid that she might decide to give up on the whole thing, but the wide band was still in place on her third finger. "Yeah, we do."

He stepped forward, gesturing her towards the couch. "Sit down, Pepper, please. Do you want some coffee?"

Pepper shook her head politely and seated herself on the edge of the cushions, feet tucked neatly together as if she were ready to stand up again at any moment. Tony scowled at her in genuine exasperation. "Will you relax? Did you think I was going to fire you or something?"

Her mouth crimped, possibly in equal exasperation. "I don't know what to think, Mr. Stark."

He closed his eyes briefly, blowing out a breath. "Don't call me that, Pepper." Forgetting formal, he sat down next to her, not missing her twitch but choosing to ignore it, and reached over to take her left hand and run his thumb over the band. "I'm glad you didn't take this off."

"I probably should," she said, her voice low. "But not without preparing a press release first."

Tony folded his fingers around hers. "No."

Pepper stirred restlessly. "Tony...you know as well as I do that this isn't working."

"You mean it's working too well." He didn't let her hand go when she tugged. "Saturday--"

"It was a mistake." Her voice was tight, and she turned her head away. "I'm sorry that--"

"Don't apologize." Tony squeezed her hand, probably too hard, but he really didn't want to hear the rest of her sentence. In fact, what he wanted to do was kiss her again, but he knew he had to
straighten out a few things first.

Pepper turned back to stare at him, her eyes wide. "But--"

He covered her mouth with his free hand, which made her jerk back in shock. "You don't have a damned thing to apologize for. I suppose I should be apologizing, except I meant what I said."

Her skin, what he could see of it, paled, and she reached up to pull his hand down. "So did I."

Her voice was cold, and Tony sighed, twisting his wrist so that he held both her hands now. "Yeah, but you're making the wrong assumption here." Her pulse was running high under his fingers, and he met her eyes. "I don't want to go back to my old habits, and frankly I think you should have figured that out already."

Pepper frowned, and Tony swallowed and went on. "I want to make this real, Pepper. I want to marry you. For real."

Her lips parted, and her fingers tightened, but then she looked away. "Tony--"

"I'm serious," he insisted, trying to find the right words. "You're what I want, and--"

"Stop." She shook free of his grip and stood in one swift motion, walking a few steps away. "Just-- give me a minute."

Her back was rigid, and Tony almost followed her over, but he made himself stay still. Even though he had the feeling he wasn't going to like the next words that came out of her mouth.

Finally Pepper turned, her expression carefully calm. "Tony. I'm very flattered, but I really don't think actually getting married is a good idea."

That hurt, much more than he was expecting, but Tony matched her calm. "Why not?" He already had a number of arguments lined up, but he wanted to shoot hers down first.

"You don't do long-term relationships." Pepper folded her arms.

"There's a first time for everything." He stood up to meet her eyes on a level. "I'm not pretending it'll be easy, but I'm a pretty determined guy when I want something."

Her cheeks pinkened slightly, and again that small rush of hope made itself felt. "Why me? There's any number of more suitable women out there. Ones who would have no qualms about marrying a superhero."

"I don't trust them. I trust you." It was the truth, but for some reason it made Pepper flinch. "Tony--" She unfolded her arms, and stepped forward to lay one on his chest, right over his arc implant. "I'm convenient. I know you already, and yes, you trust me. But if you didn't have this, would you even be considering getting married, let alone to me?"

The thought hadn't even crossed his mind, because it simply didn't apply. Tony blinked, trying to marshal an answer, but Pepper kept going. "I understand that you...are attracted to me." Her blush deepened slightly. "But that's not enough to build a marriage on. This happened by accident, and it sounds like a good idea to you, but what if someone else comes along who's more than just convenient?"

She let her hand fall. Tony stood very still, because he wanted to refute her arguments, wanted to
point out that he loved her, and when did that happen? his brain asked quietly, but her reasoning was
damnably logical.

Because the idea of marriage hadn't really entered his head until it had been put there by a ring a
fraction too small. Even his ideas about a long-term relationship had been hazy; he hadn't thought
much beyond the bliss of finally becoming Pepper's lover, of--hopefully--discovering that she felt the
same way about him.

"I can't imagine wanting anyone but you," he said at last, barely audible, and Pepper shrugged sadly.

"A year ago, could you have imagined any of this?" The wave of her hand took in all the impossible
changes. When he didn't reply, she smiled, small and equally sad. "Think about it, Tony. Be honest
with yourself."

She turned to walk away, and he caught her arm. "What if I do?" he said roughly. "What if I do and
I still want you?"

Pepper looked back at him, but she'd tucked her emotions away and he couldn't tell what she was
feeling. "If you do, then we'll talk again."

It was clear that she didn't think he would, and that hurt too. And made him angry again, but Tony
tightened his jaw and kept himself calm. "All right."

Pepper nodded once, and slipped the ring from her finger with the same ease with which he'd put it
on. "Do you want this back? I could say it was in for cleaning."

She held it out to him, and Tony let her arm go and took it, but only to pick up her left hand and put
it back on. "Keep it. We can decide...anything else...later."

"Very well." Her beringed hand closed in a fist, and her lips quirked. "I have a busy day. I'd better
get to work."

He watched her head back towards the front hall, but just before she would vanish from view he
spoke. "Pepper."

She turned halfway, listening, and Tony folded his arms. "What happened on the boat...I would
never, ever take you that lightly."

It was true. He had always made it clear to his past lovers that he wanted no more than a night, or a
week; some of them thought they could change his mind, but that was another issue. One of the
reasons he'd never pushed past flirting with Pepper, ever, was because he had always known that
with her, it would have to be more.

She blinked, he could see the flicker of her eyelid in profile, and then dipped her chin in austere
acknowledgment. And then she was gone.

Tony waited until he heard the door close behind her, and then peeled off his jacket and half-ran
downstairs.

The day was long, and as promised Tony spent a large part of it thinking--sometimes in silence,
sometimes straining the speakers with heavy metal. He tinkered and fiddled, letting his hands occupy
themselves while his brain wrestled with the problem Pepper had handed him.

First he thought about the device in the middle of his chest. Implicit in Pepper's questions had been--
was he choosing her because she already knew about his arc implant? Because he wouldn't have to trust his secret to anyone else?

The idea irritated him, but Tony had to admit that she had the right to know whether she was really his choice, or just the one fate had presented to him.

But I've wanted her for a long time, before this. He tapped the reactor thoughtfully, pondering. I just wasn't--ready.

And in retrospect, Tony was grateful that Pepper had never given into his flirting, because sex would have meant the end of their relationship, professional or otherwise. And he would be lost without her.

Of course, if she had, she wouldn't be Pepper...

When did I fall for her?

He did love her. That was not in question. Tony knew it as deeply as he knew he was doing the right thing in becoming Iron Man; the knowledge came from the same place inside him, an unshakeable certainty.

The real question, genius, is does she love you?

He'd been trying to woo her for weeks now, but obviously with much less success than he'd thought. Or perhaps she'd just taken it all as part of their masquerade, as false a front as their public kisses. Tony frowned at the tiny servomotor he was adjusting, and sighed. I didn't think this would be easy...but...

Setting the device down, he leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. The memories rose in his mind's eye--opening the plain package to find a gentle tease beneath, still glowing blue. The sight of Pepper nerving herself up to put her hand into his chest. The blurry remembrance of her doing the same as he lay helpless in a hospital bed...

...The weight of a blanket tucked carefully around him when he woke to a sea morning.

In that moment, he knew. Rhodey had found him, but Pepper had saved him--three times and counting. By her reddened eyes, by a sentimental gift, by her furious, terrified efficiency in the aftermath of Stane's death, she had given herself away.

By the simple care of a warm cover to keep him from the cold.

She does love me.

It was a very humbling thought. Humbling and exalting both. Tony shivered, letting the strange delightful feeling sink in, and smiled in wonder.

And then frowned.

So why the hell is she arguing?

It hadn't escaped his notice that Pepper had never once said that she didn't want to marry him. Her doubt still angered him, but Tony was starting to wonder if it was herself Pepper doubted, not just his fidelity. Her statement about convenience left a bad taste in his mouth; it implied thoughtlessness on his part and unworthiness on hers.
That just made him angrier, because while he'd dated more beautiful women, few of them could match her in intelligence, acumen, or ability. *Or patience, or humor for that matter...*

*And it's not like she's not quite the package herself.* Tony closed her eyes to indulge in a minute of appreciative lust, feeling his body stir at the thought. Her endless legs, her slim form, that lower lip he was falling in love with all by itself, the wide-spaced eyes that he ached to see darken with equal lust when he kissed her...

*I want her. I want all of her--brains, body...heart.*

Tony knew he could trust Pepper. He knew he could depend on her. All he had to do was convince her that she could do the same when it came to him.

*Okay. How?*

He didn't know. But that in itself gave him an idea.

Slowly, Tony smiled.

It wasn't even hard to arrange. Tony had Jarvis call Pepper and politely request her time after the workday was over, just as if it were an ordinary Monday and he had need of her, and she acquiesced with equal politeness. Tony sent Happy to pick her up, and spent the waiting time taking a shower and putting on clean clothes; he'd gotten fairly greasy over the course of the day.

He went for semi-formal again--not because he felt he needed the armor, but because Pepper deserved no less. He dug up a bottle of the pinot grigio she liked and took it and two glasses out to the patio overlooking the ocean, and waited, watching the sun sink and trying to quell the flutter in his stomach.

Because he knew the truth, but he also knew that it might not be enough.

Jarvis' voice coming from the living room let him know that Pepper had arrived; the AI was directing her to Tony, and she appeared at the sliding door, composed and unruffled and completely closed.

That alone told him that she was nervous, and Tony bit back a smile and waved. "Hey Potts, come on out."

Pepper stepped through the door and made her way to the low wall where he sat, the same one where Vralia had posed them. Tony poured the wine and offered her a glass, and she hesitated but took it.

"You were right," he started, and Pepper went pale. *Oops.* He hurried on. "I did need to think about this."

She swallowed, and her fingers clenched on the stem of the glass; then she set it down and reached for the ring still on her finger. Tony tightened his lips and grabbed her hand.

"Will you *stop* that? And let me finish?"

Her eyes narrowed, the first sign of temper he'd seen since Saturday and something of a relief. "Then *finish,* Tony."

He kept her hand, turning it over in his and rubbing his thumb across her palm. "I spent the day thinking, and you made some good points, but my mind's made up. I want to marry you. I want it all,
Pepper closed her eyes briefly, taking a deep breath and clearly reaching for control. "Tony...I'm not..."

"Not what? Not everything I want? Everything I need? In love with me?" That made her flinch, but Tony moved closer, narrowing the gap between them. "I know you are, Pepper, and while I'd love to know how long it's been, that can wait."

The pulse in her throat was beating madly; he wanted to taste it. But Pepper shook her head, pulling her hand free of his grip. "Tony, don't. I can't do this, I can't be this impulsive. What you say may be true--"

He raised a brow. "Try is."

She swallowed again and went on. "--But I think you can do better than marrying your personal assistant just because an accident put the idea into your head."

"Bullshit." She winced, and Tony inhaled, frustrated at her stubbornness but ready to play his ace. "I know what I want, Pepper, and I've wanted it for a long time now. You just weren't ready to hear it."

He took another step forward, crowding her, and Pepper moved back. "Here's the question I want an answer for. What do I have to do to convince you that I want you?"

He watched as she jerked in reaction, her cheeks pinkening. Pepper opened her mouth, but then closed it, apparently at a loss for words, and Tony grinned. "I guessed right."

"Exactly. There isn't anything, is there?" He edged her back towards the wall of the house. "I think I'm insulted."

Pepper's chin firmed. "You haven't exactly been a model of fidelity, Tony." The asperity in her voice was at odds with the way her eyes wouldn't quite meet his. "Maybe--" Her voice wobbled. "Maybe I do love you, but can you blame me for not wanting to risk my heart any more than I already have?"

"You know, before the day's over I intend to get you to say that without the qualifier," Tony said thoughtfully, taking one more step forward so that Pepper bumped into the brick behind her. It was easy to plant his hands on either side of her, so that she was caged between the house and his body. Tony leaned in, feeling her rapid breath rush over his face.

"I want you. I love you," he said softly, holding her gaze with his own. "I want that ring to stay on your finger, and I want yours on mine, so everybody can see it. I trust you, and maybe that's why I can love you, but either way I need you to believe me, because it's true. It has been for a long time and it's not changing."

Pepper was absolutely still, tension humming through her, and Tony kept going. Speaking the truth was unexpectedly terrifying, but he knew that sometimes to win you had to risk it all. "If you really don't want to marry me, that's another thing, but Pepper, I think you do."

And he stopped, out of words. The moment seemed endless, poised on the edge of something unnameable, waiting on the woman he held captive. Those lovely eyes were wide, and they searched his with an intensity he rarely saw in her, a need that was as deep as his own. Tony didn't flinch; for the first time that he could remember, he let someone--Pepper--look into him without reservation.

It was almost as frightening as telling her the truth. His heart seemed to squeeze, tightness sharpening towards pain as he waited for her word. But whatever she was searching for she seemed to find,
because she sighed.

And closed the gap between them, meeting his lips with hers.

He'd kissed Pepper often enough by now to know her taste, but this time was different, because he didn't have to hold back anything. Tony pulled her to him, reveling in the way her mouth opened to him, the way her hands were sliding under his jacket to clutch at the fabric of his shirt. *Yes, yes, yes* was all he could think, stunned triumph mixing with relief and the indescribable bliss of Pepper, *willing*, in his arms.

It felt right, it felt *perfect*--Tony felt as though he'd been hungry for this forever, and his heart beat hard, the pain subsumed by joy as that hunger was finally fed. *Pepper--*

She was shaking, but then so was he, and Tony pressed her back against the wall, aligning them more closely. He wanted close--he wanted no more doubt, no more pretending. Nothing but the two of them, as they *should* be.

Pepper pulled away enough to suck in a breath, and Tony switched to the elegant line of her jaw and throat, finally able to press his lips to her thrumming pulse. "So?" he muttered in between kisses. "*Yes or no?*"

She laughed, and one of her hands tangled in his hair, tugging until he lifted his head. "*Tony--*"

He met her eyes again, and her lips curled up in that marvelous smile. "All right. Yes," she said faintly.

Tony blinked, almost unable to take in her words, an unstoppable grin stretching his mouth. "Really?"

Pepper laughed again, her hand slipping down to his shoulder. "*Yes--*"

He cut off her next words with another kiss, long and sweet and this time definitely possessive. They were both out of breath when it was over, and he kept grinning. "Really truly? Forever and a day? Till death do us part?"

She sobered a bit at that, and reached up to touch his lips with two fingers. "Yes."

Tony freed one hand to press hers to his mouth. "*Good,*" he said against her skin, delighted as she shivered. He kissed her fingertips and then wrapped her hand in his. "And believe me, it *will* be, Potts, there's no way I'm letting you go. Now will you move the hell in?"

Pepper blinked, and Tony lifted her arm a little to kiss her wrist pulse too. "You can have your own room, I don't want to push you, Pepper--hell, you can have a whole wing if you want, but please don't go *away* any more--"

The words tumbled out as if her acquiescence had unlocked him, and he realized he sounded a bit desperate, but-- *Fuck it. I am desperate.*

Pepper leaned in and kissed him, stopping his babble, and Tony hummed happily and let her hand go to gather her close again. He'd suspected she would be a perfect fit long before he'd danced with her, and he'd been right.

When she had him dizzy, Pepper broke the kiss and met his gaze again. "I'll move in eventually, Tony, but not right this minute." She shook her head, looking a little dizzy herself. "You...I...I need time to process this."
He wanted to know how much time, but Tony knew better than to ask. Instead he swung her away from the wall, then around again in two more turns, half-dancing for sheer joy before collapsing onto one of the chaises and pulling her down on top of him. Pepper squeaked, eyes wide, but before she could argue Tony wrapped his arms around her again and settled her against him. "Can we just stay like this for a little while? The next decade maybe?"

He meant the words to be lighthearted, but they came out a little more serious than he was intending. Pepper gave him another long look, then leaned forward to press a gentler kiss on his lips. "Sure."

Tony was half-afraid she was humoring him, but the sigh she gave as she let her head rest on his shoulder told him otherwise. She was warm and light and soft, and he swallowed hard, the elation of a moment before distilling into something quieter but no less intense. He couldn't remember ever feeling like this with any woman, wanting to just hold her close as if to make sure she was still there, but this wasn't just any woman. It was Pepper, and she was so far beyond his past conquests as to be in a different category entirely.

So he pressed his nose into her hair and let his muscles unwind, savoring the weight of her and the knowledge that she really did want him—with all his flaws and quirks. And realizing that while she might have given him the gift of her love, he had to keep it.

One of the reasons he'd avoided relationships was that they were work, and he always had more important things to do. But he'd reworked his priorities after Afghanistan, and this one fit right in next to removing his weapons from the wrong hands.

He didn't just want a lover, or a wife, he wanted a partner. Lucky for me, I already have one. And she's just agreed to be all three.

"You know, Jimmy's going to laugh at us," Pepper said eventually, sounding amused and equally relaxed. Tony smirked, and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head.

"Let him. Platypus is probably jealous."

"Mmm." She squirmed, and reluctantly Tony loosened his arms, afraid that she wanted to leave him. But instead Pepper sat up a little, turning to face him, and kissed him with slow, delicious care.

It was a little odd, he thought under a haze of bliss, to just share kisses with a woman with no other immediate goal in mind. In the past, he would have been bored within moments, wanting either to be hurrying towards sex or to be up and doing. But it was enough, more than enough, to do just this, leisurely tasting and caressing, twining his fingers in Pepper's hair and feeling her hand cup gently over his arc implant through his shirt.

She wasn't a diversion. She was his center. She was what he needed.

Tony didn't know if Pepper needed him, not the same way. But as their breaths mingled and he heard her purr of pleasure, he vowed silently that if ever she did, he would meet that need.

Eventually, his stomach interrupted them, growling loudly. Tony grinned ruefully at Pepper's chuckle, and she sat up slowly, her hair in lovely disarray and her face a little pink where his beard had scraped her. Tony made a mental note to dig up the conditioner he'd stopped using in recent months, and stretched.

"Dinner's on me, Potts--go out or stay in?"

She stood, and held out a hand. "Stay in, definitely."
He took it and let her pull him up. "Your wish is my command. Let me check the freezer."

Pepper looked surprised. "You're not going to order in?"

He wanted to kiss her again, but if he started that they'd be distracted for another half-hour at least, and he was hungry. "On rare occasions I do cook. Mostly to win bets with Rhodey."

That made her laugh out loud, and she tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and waved him towards the sliding door. "This I have to see."

They ended up using the big grill on the patio, barbecuing chicken and vegetables on skewers, and Tony refused to let Pepper help with anything but slicing some of the vegetables. It felt very domestic when they sat down at the table in the luminous evening, Pepper delicately pulling her skewer apart but getting sauce on her mouth anyway, and Tony only spared a moment to wonder that the sensation wasn't sending him screaming away.

*I guess it's true--when you have the right person, it doesn't matter.*

After dinner, Pepper helped him clear the table, but when he opened his mouth to suggest retiring to the couch for more necking, she spoke first. "I should be getting home, I think."

Tony wiped his hands on a dishtowel and tossed it onto the counter, then stepped forward to pull her into his arms. Pepper went willingly, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders, but her expression told him she was not going to be coaxed out of her decision.

He had to try, though. "Are you sure you don't want to stay? I was serious about the room, you know. If you like I'll promise not to cross the threshold."

"I hate it when you're right," he sighed, and reached up to take her left hand and press a kiss to the ring.

Pepper's lips firmed. "Process, Tony, remember? I think you could use a little time too."

"I hate it when you're right," he sighed, and reached up to take her left hand and press a kiss to the ring.

Pepper smiled with a touch of wonder. "I didn't--" She bit her lip and stopped, and Tony raised his brows inquiringly.

"What? I promise I won't bite, Potts. Unless you want me to."

That made her dimple, and she took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you, earlier," she told him quietly. "I just--"

"Don't," Tony broke in, aching a little at the apology. "Pepper, you had every right to ask, and as you said I'm not exactly the poster boy for relationships."

Pepper's eyes shimmered with amusement and exasperation, and the dimple deepened. "Will you let me finish?" she asked sweetly.

Tony snapped his jaw shut and tried to look compliant. Pepper reached up to touch his mouth again. "As I was saying...it's sometimes hard to believe when something you want with all your heart suddenly comes true. Especially when you never thought you'd actually get it."

His own heart swelled, the sweetest pain he'd ever felt. Pepper lowered her hand and brushed his lips with her own. "I do love you," she murmured, the words whispering across his skin. "And if you
have the courage to say it, I can't do any less."

That did it. Tony lifted her off her feet, until her head was above his, and leaned up to kiss her hard, sealing the truth between them. The joy of earlier was eclipsed by this ecstasy, and he knew that whatever else happened, he had this one perfect moment.
He could hardly wait for Pepper to arrive the next morning. In fact, Tony was tempted to go and fetch her, but her words about time to process kept coming back to him, and he finally decided that pissing her off first thing was probably not a good way to start their real engagement.

So he lay in wait instead, realizing as he watched Pepper's car come up the drive that one of the first changes that had to be made was having her park in the garage instead of out front. If she's moving in, she gets her own space.

There was really no reason why she didn't have a space in the garage; the habit dated from her first weeks as his PA, before she was authorized to enter his workshop, and somehow it had never changed. Tony mentally rearranged his cars to provide space for hers, and then his mind leaped to making copies of his various key sets. Pepper liked speed almost as much as he did, and while she'd driven one or another of his treasures on occasion, Tony had every intention of making her completely free with them now. He wanted to give her that; he wanted to give her everything.

Starting with a kiss when she walked in the door. It had barely closed behind her when he strode in from the living room and wrapped her up in a welcoming hug, cutting off her "Tony!" midword with his lips.

She kissed him back after an instant of surprise, vibrating against him with what he realized was stifled laughter. He drew out the kiss anyway, not sure what she was finding so amusing but too enraptured to care.

Her eyes were sparkling when he finally let her lips go, and she smiled at him without pulling her arms from around him. "Good morning, Mr. Stark."

Her demure tone made him grin back. "Good morning, Ms. Potts. Glad to see you prompt as always."

Pepper snickered. "I'm sure." Her smile softened. "Tony..."

"Hmm?" The curve of her throat, so close, was calling him, but Tony made himself concentrate on her face.

She opened her mouth, then closed it, shaking her head minutely. "Never mind."

That got his attention. "What? Come on, you can tell me."

Pepper shook her head again, a hint of color dusting her cheeks, and started to step back, but Tony tightened his embrace. "Give, Potts, or I'll tickle it out of you."

One elegant brow shot up, and her look was amused. "I'm not ticklish."

That was a challenge if he'd ever heard one. "Oh yeah? Prove it." Tony slid his hands quickly from the small of Pepper's back to her ribs, fingers dancing over the crisp cotton of her blouse, but she didn't flinch, merely giving him a curling and superior smile. "Dammit."

"Told you." Then her hand shot forward, and Tony, startled, squirmed away from her fingers as they teased along his stomach.

"Hey! If you're going to do that...do it a little harder." He made a snatch at her hand and missed as
she pulled it back. The color was back in her cheeks, and he grinned wider.

Pepper cleared her throat, still smiling but obviously a touch embarrassed. "I...we should probably get to work."

Tony could think of better things to do, but she had a point, and while they would have to negotiate work eventually, it was probably a good idea to stick to their usual routine for the moment.

So he grabbed for her hand again and got it this time. "Fine, but you're having lunch with me so we can discuss the most important thing on the agenda."

"Oh? What's that?" Pepper's free hand quivered towards her hip, where her BlackBerry was holstered, as if preparing to take notes.

Tony lifted the one he held and kissed it. "Setting a wedding date."

Pepper blinked, and then blushed, this time a full vivid pink. "Tony--"

He pulled her hand through the curve of his elbow and started walking, heading towards her little office in the east wing. "In the meantime, though, let's get started on whatever endless list of chores you have for me--I need to see which ones I'm going to blow off."

That made her laugh, and he smirked, content.

As it turned out, lunch was late, because he got involved in programming and totally forgot about it. But eventually Tony looked up from his terminal to see Pepper coming through the door with a laden tray. "I hope you brought enough for two," he said, saving his work and swinging around in his chair.

Pepper's mouth curved up. "Are you that hungry?"

Tony snorted, and stood to take the tray as she brought it over. Despite her tease, there were two plates and two sets of silverware, and Tony cleared a place on the closest workbench and set down the food while Pepper went over to the kitchen area for drinks. "Red Bull please," he called after her, and she returned with the specified can and a Perrier for herself.

It wasn't out of the ordinary for them to eat together, though it wasn't that frequent outside of the last few months' masquerading. Tony found a chair for Pepper underneath a bird's-nest of cable, and even remembered to check it for grease and dust before wheeling it over. Pepper sat with a murmur of thanks, and Tony rounded the workbench to reclaim his own place.

One of their small unspoken habits was that they didn't discuss business during these quiet meals, unless something was particularly urgent. Pepper settled her napkin on her lap and picked up her fork. "How's it going?"

Absently Tony opened her bottle for her before starting on his own food. "Not bad. Next time I mention weather algorithms, though, just shoot me. And here I thought Jarvis was complicated."

Pepper snickered as Jarvis spoke. "I am, sir. A better descriptor for the wind patterns of the North Atlantic would be 'intricate'."

Tony rolled his eyes, which only made Pepper laugh out loud. "I'll keep the pistol handy. Why weather?"
Tony swallowed his mouthful of pasta salad. "Repurposing the Seraphim satellite design if I can. In the end we'll want an entirely new design, but with as many as we've got in storage, why waste 'em?"

Pepper nodded, chasing a cherry tomato with her fork. "What's involved?"

That gave him license to ramble a bit, so in between bites Tony did. He knew that a large part of what he was talking about was over Pepper's head, at least as far as the technical details went, but that was no reflection on her; it would be over the head of just about anyone else, too. But she could easily grasp his overall idea, and even if not she would encourage him to talk, because it helped him both focus and brainstorm.

It was yet another of the many reasons he needed her. Certainly Jarvis could perform a similar function, and often did, but the AI could not ask the unexpected question, nor see with quite as broad a view. Pepper served as sounding board and occasionally devil's advocate, and for that alone Tony thought he would have kept her around.

When he ran down, he got up to get another drink, glancing back at Pepper as he reached the kitchen area. She shook her head, so he only grabbed a can and took it back with him. "Wedding date," he said, cracking open the Red Bull and collapsing into his chair.

Pepper set down her fork and began folding her napkin, very precisely. "Do we need to do this now? I mean, there's time--"

Cold seized his gut, and Tony felt his hand tightening on the can. "Have you changed your mind?"

His words were low, but Pepper's head snapped up, her expression startled. "Oh--no! I just--Tony, we only decided this yesterday."

"Six weeks ago," Tony corrected, setting down the can, his sudden fear subsiding only slightly. Rising, he came around to her side and shoved her plate over, hitching a hip up on the workbench and taking the napkin from her hands. "Are you sure, Pepper? Because I don't think I could deal with it if you backed out later."

He tried to keep his voice calm, but it wavered just slightly on the last word. Pepper's hands wrapped around his and she looked up at him; her eyes were clear and warm, and the knot of chill eased further.

"I'm sure," she told him softly. To his utter surprise, she turned his hand in hers and pressed a kiss to his palm, a light delicate touch. "I'm sure, Tony."

Tony didn't how to name the emotion flooding through him, but whatever it was, it felt incredible. His hand closed over the imprint of Pepper's kiss as if to keep it forever, and then he was lifting her to her feet, wanting that seal on his lips as well.

"Six weeks?"

Tony blinked, trying to get his synapses back on track. "Huh? Oh." He grinned at her. "Potts, I've been taking this seriously since Day One."
Pepper's cheeks, already pink, darkened further, but her expression was bordering on angry. "You mean--but you--all that was for real?" At his nod, she frowned deeply. "Tony, why didn't you say something?"

Tony tightened his arms, not letting her step back. "Would you have listened?"

She opened her mouth, paused, and then sighed. "You're right." The anger faded, though her mouth quirked in annoyance. "I guess I'm still adjusting."

_Idiot._ Tony gave himself a mental smack. _You're pushing again._ "Hey, Pepper, don't. Take all the time you need, I can wait." He ignored the small whine inside his skull, the irrational fear that she would somehow slip away before those promises were spoken.

Pepper bit her lip, regarding him thoughtfully, then shook her head. "Three months," she said. "Unless you want something really elaborate."

For an instant ideas pinwheeled through Tony's head, extravaganzas of celebration, hundreds of guests, all the magnificent gestures he could make to glory in the fact that Pepper would be marrying him--

--And then he looked at the woman in his arms, who preferred the background to the spotlight and whose elegance was quiet, and let them go with scarcely a qualm.

"Whatever you want, I'll be happy with. Even if it is Elvis." Tony kissed her nose, which made her blink and laugh. "If it were up to me, Potts, I'd haul you off to Las Vegas tonight, but like you pointed out, no one would believe it."

Her smile was mischievous. "Don't tempt me. This will take time to set up."

Tony relaxed, and Pepper continued. "Well, as I said, we'll need something more than that to be taken seriously. But twelve weeks should be enough time, unless you want a location that needs to be booked well in advance."

"Whatever you want," Tony repeated. "Wherever you want. Do you want to hire one of those wedding planning people?"

Pepper grimaced. "Tony, a planner would take one look at your reputation, not to mention your budget, and the next thing you know we'd be having the ceremony on Mount Everest or something."

He had to laugh at that. "Not into high-altitude climbing? Okay, Pepper." Tony let her go and took her hands again. "I'm serious about this. Anything you want, and nothing you don't, as long as we come out of it married."

She shook her head again, her smile bemused. "I believe you, but it's still going to take a little time for me to get used to the idea."

"What, of us actually getting married?" Her skin was soft under his caressing thumbs.

"Not exactly...of you wanting to. Never mind." Pepper leaned in and kissed him gently.

Tony savored the press of her lips, licking his own when she ended the kiss. "Mmm...I've always wanted you, you know."

Her gaze was amused, and tender. "I know."
She tugged free of his grip and moved to stack the dishes neatly on the tray to carry back upstairs. Tony tossed the napkins on top and picked up his can, sipping as Pepper walked back to the stairwell door. As she pulled it open, she glanced back at him mischievously, one corner of her mouth tucking in. "Me too."

Tony choked on his drink, and by the time he'd cleared his airway she was halfway up the stairs, the faint sound of her laughter drifting back. Tony wiped his face with his shirt, amused that she'd got him again.

And stunned. *Eight years. She's wanted me for eight years--*

*Wow.*

---

The week was blissful. Pepper made sure the work still got done, but Tony took deep delight in making her close her computer and come eat dinner--not for show, but for real.

And after dinner, she would linger. Tony generally helped her clean up the kitchen just to speed up the process, because as soon as they were done it was necking time. Half the time the kissing devolved into just holding one another and talking, but he wasn't inclined to complain either way.

It was fascinating to learn more of Pepper, and not just physically. His life had pretty much been an open book to her for years, but Tony hadn't bothered to find out much about her in return--something he was a little ashamed of now, though he had to admit that Pepper probably wouldn't have told him much about herself prior to his recent changes anyway.

But now, between kisses, he found out she liked gardens and drawing, wanted a cat but was allergic, and couldn't tell one constellation from another. He'd known she had been raised in foster homes from the age of twelve, but not that she'd been lucky in her placements, to the point where her last set of foster parents had paid for her first year of college.

And he learned that she was as generous with her kisses as with her time and energy, moving past a slightly shy hesitancy into an enthusiasm that was as deep as his own, if quieter. Tony made an effort and let Pepper take the lead on things physical, keeping a tight check on his own libido. He knew she was aware of the effect she had on him, but aside from a few fairly tame caresses they went no further than kissing.

To Tony's surprise, he found that while his body was impatient to move things along, he himself was content to wait and take things at Pepper's pace. He'd spent so much of his life rushing, especially when he was only planning on a single night, but this he wanted to savor.

Though he knew they had to discuss the issue eventually.

But before it came up, the weekend arrived, and Pepper told him cheerfully that she wouldn't be back until Monday.

"Monday?" Tony frowned, distressed. "I thought you'd be back tomorrow. Or I could come over to your place."

Pepper smiled and shook her head. "I'd like that, Tony, but I have a project I need to handle this weekend, and I'll need all the time I can muster."

"I can help," he began, feeling a touch panicky. Normally Pepper worked at least one weekend day at his house, and the thought of two whole days without her was not something he liked.
She patted his arm. "Thank you, but no. This is something I need to do by myself."

Tony pouted at her. "Oh, come on, Pepper, don't leave me by my lonesome, you don't know what trouble I'll get into..."

Her look was admonitory as well as amused. "Actually, I do, and I'll thank you to avoid it." She leaned in and kissed him briefly. "Be good and let me get this done, and I guarantee you'll like the results."

"Hmm." Tony narrowed his eyes, intrigued. "Do I get to guess?"

"Feel free." Pepper's smile was a touch smug. "But I'm not going to tell you whether you're right."

It was a long, quiet weekend. Tony spent a couple of hours cleaning out his bedroom closet--more of a small room--in preparation for Pepper's eventual residence. He divided the space precisely down the middle, moving his suits and other items to the left side, then considered the empty side, frowning.

A few hours later he had removed half the built-in drawers on the right and replaced them with a shoe rack of his own design and Jarvis' manufacture. It occurred to him as he worked that he really didn't know how much clothing Pepper actually possessed, but he figured it was better to have too much space than too little. And anyway the closet in that apartment can't be this big.

By Sunday morning Tony was hoping for a mission just as a distraction, but despite an hour's conversation with Pepper on the phone the night before, he was forced to find his own diversions. Feeling that someone else should suffer if he was going to, he called his attorney.

"Tony, why are you calling me on a Sunday? I thought you'd given up on the wild escapades, what kind of bail money are we talking?" Josh Squire's amused voice echoed slightly over the workshop speakers, and Tony smirked at the air.

"Given the size of your retainer, Josh, I can call you any damn time I please." He tilted back in his chair, knowing that Squire was hardly as annoyed as he was trying to make himself sound.

"And you do. And I will bill you accordingly."

"You do that. In the meantime, get your ass over here, I'm ready to do the prenup you've been nagging me about."

"Oh?" Squire's tone sharpened with interest. "Good. I'll be right there."

He was as good as his word, driving in the gates a little less than forty-five minutes later, and Tony waved him into the living room. He trusted Squire a good deal, but there were only three people who were allowed down to his workshop, and the attorney wasn't one of them.

Josh Squire was tall, blond, and almost stereotypically handsome, but Tony liked the man because he possessed a sincerity that Tony didn't often see. Normally a sharp dresser, today Squire was wearing a polo shirt and shoes with no socks, presumably having been called away from whatever his Sunday usually held. He set his briefcase down on the low table in front of the long couch and raised his brows.

"Glad to see you're dealing with this at last, Tony--Ms. Potts is a lovely woman but with your assets it's always good to have this sort of thing firmly in place."
Tony dropped onto the couch and waved Squire to sit as well, reflecting with some amusement that the attorney was about to get an unwelcome surprise. "She is that, yes."

Squire opened his briefcase and pulled out a digital recorder and a thick sheaf of printout. "I brought the most recent inventory. You okay with a recording?"

"Sure." Tony watched as Squire clicked the little device on--the attorney preferred audio to note-taking--and took the printout when Squire handed it to him. "Pen?"

Squire found him one of those as well, and Tony flipped to the end of the inventory and scribbled in an addition.

"Have you got a structure in mind? There's several different ways of doing this, different divisions--"

"All of it," Tony interrupted, capping the pen and handing back the printout.

Squire blinked. "You want to exclude everything?"

"No, I want to include it." Tony sat back, anticipating trouble, and he was not disappointed.

"Tony, are you sure? I mean, Ms. Potts seems modest, but people do change--"

Tony held back his irritation at the implied slur on Pepper; Squire was, after all, doing his job of looking out for Tony's interests. "Everything, Josh. All-inclusive."

Squire's mouth twisted doubtfully. "All right. If you're sure." He paged through the inventory to Tony's note, and read aloud. "All unspecified workshop projects, to include Marks One through Three and power sources."

"Yep." Tony sat back. He'd designed the Iron Man armor to be damn near invulnerable, but there was always the chance that something would get through it, and if he were incapacitated he wanted Pepper's good sense controlling his assets, as it were.

_I trust Rhodey--but he's military, and I know him. He wouldn't be able to keep himself from turning the armor over to the Air Force. And while Tony might eventually release some of his designs to the military, he didn't want all his plans in their hands. Not now, and maybe not ever._

"I want it on record that this is against legal advice," Squire grumbled, but he put the inventory back into his briefcase. "Now, about settlements--"

They hashed that out too; the lawyer's lips tightened at the amounts Tony named, but he'd seen the futility of arguing. Tony didn't want to imagine the circumstances in which he'd actually be paying, but he had to acknowledge the possibility; it wasn't the money that worried him, but the mere idea of separation from Pepper made him slightly queasy.

It was a feeling he'd begun experiencing some time before Afghanistan, and one that had only increased with time.

_But once Pepper makes her mind up, she sticks with it._ The thought was reassuring. Tony knew he would screw up at some point, probably more than once, but Pepper wasn't the type to walk away because of it. _Hell, if she were, she'd be long gone._

"I need to update my will, too," he added when Squire had finished.

"Very good," the lawyer approved. "I brought a copy, just in case."
He extracted the sheaf of papers and handed it over. Tony took it and the pen, appreciating the man's efficiency, and scanned quickly through the document, scribbling in changes here and there before returning it.

"Nothing elaborate," he said as Squire looked it over. He'd made Pepper his main heir, both of his personal assets and his company, rather than leaving most of the latter to the board of directors and the former to various charities.

"Now this, I approve of," Squire said, relaxing somewhat. "Ms. Potts would be an excellent caretaker of your estate."

*If she's not divorcing me and trying to take me for anything she can get?* Tony didn't say. He reminded himself that Squire only knew Pepper professionally, not personally, and that her unshakeable integrity wasn't obvious to a man used to subterfuge. "Add the unspecified projects I noted on the inventory--I know it's imprecise, but I'm sure you can manage."

Squire snorted genially and put the papers away. "You'll have to decide what to do if she predeceases you."

Tony shrugged. "Revert to the old version, I guess, minus the specific bequests to Pepper herself."

Squire raised his eyes to Tony's. "And if you die at the same time?"

That...sounded good, actually. Tony wasn't sure he wanted to think about it, unless they both happened to be ninety-six and decrepit. "Ditto."

"Very good." The lawyer nodded and snapped the briefcase shut. "I'll get these written up and back to you within the week. When you've approved them, make an appointment so Ms. Potts can look the prenup over."

"Jarvis, take care of it," Tony said, waving a hand, and Squire jumped at the AI's calm "Will do, sir."

"Damn, I always forget about that thing." He shook his head and stood. "Again, congratulations, Tony--Virginia's a lucky woman."

Tony walked with him to the door. "Funny, usually people say I'm the lucky one."

---

Pepper was early the next morning; Tony was just finishing in the shower when Jarvis announced that she had arrived. Tony toweled hastily and pulled on a pair of shorts, grateful that he'd already brushed his teeth, and went to find her.

She was in the kitchen, every hair in place, leaning against the counter as she sipped from a mug of coffee. Tony barely gave her time to set the cup aside before pulling her into his arms and kissing her enthusiastically.

Her hands slid up over his chest to the nape of his neck, and Tony moaned happily into her mouth, wondering if there were some way to talk her into canceling the day and just spending it within his arms' reach.

"I'm glad to see you too," Pepper managed when he finally let her up for air. Her eyes were twinkling, and Tony grinned, not bothering to hide his body's welcome.

He'd never made a secret of his lust anyway.
"You were gone too long, Potts," he informed her. "I nearly wasted away from loneliness over the weekend."

"Yes, I can tell." Her tease was softened by the feel of her fingers rubbing the tendons of his neck, and Tony let his eyes slide shut, leaning back into the pressure.

"Uh. Don't stop."

"Do I need to schedule Tim for you again?" Her question was practical, and Tony opened his eyes again reluctantly.

"Not yet. But if you want to trade backrubs I'm totally there." He leaned forward and kissed her again. "What brings you by so early? Not that I'm not all for it--"

"I need to talk to you." Pepper stepped back a little, and Tony let her go with some reluctance.

"What about?" He picked up her mug and stole a sip from it, and Pepper rolled her eyes and took it back.

"I took you seriously when you said you wanted me to move in--"

"I hope the hell you did," Tony interrupted, giving her a slightly stern look.

Her lips twitched. "--And you may have been considering this a real engagement all along, but as far as I'm concerned we're just...starting."

She was turning a delicious shade of pink, and Tony raised his brows, waiting for her to continue. "I'm...willing to start spending some nights here. But I'm not ready to...well...sleep with you. Just yet."

Pepper's eyes were wide and unflinching, and Tony absorbed the mild blow to his ego and his libido without a wince, letting a small smile out. "Come on, Potts, you think I hadn't figured that out by now?"

Her blush deepened, and he laughed, lifting a hand to tap her nose gently. "Pepper, it's up to you to set the pace here. I can wait until you're ready." He let his finger trail down over her lips, not missing the way her breath drew in. "Though I might try to change your mind."

He made himself lower his arm, and slowly Pepper smiled back. Tony knew he could be overwhelming at times--he'd used it to his advantage occasionally--and despite the fact that just being around Pepper now made him want to carry her off to his bedroom and not come out for days, the desire for her to be comfortable was stronger still.

You've had plenty of practice being celibate lately, he reminded himself. You can manage a little while longer. Pepper's trust was more important than sex, much as he hated to wait.

Her hand on his cheek was soft. "Thank you for understanding," Pepper told him, and the look in her eyes made up for her hesitancy. "I'll take the white guest room for the moment."

She nodded at the corner of the kitchen, and Tony spotted the small suitcase there. The pulse of joy at the thought of having her staying made him grin. "We'll have a pajama party."

Pepper laughed.

Her good mood lasted until they met with Josh Squire that afternoon in his big, tastefully plush
office. The three of them sat in the comfortable chairs in front of Squire's wide desk, and the attorney handed Pepper the prenuptial agreement.

She read through the document, and raised shocked eyes to Tony's. "You can't possibly be serious."

"I assure you, he is," Squire said ruefully, but Pepper ignored him.

"Tony, this is—it's way too much. And the inclusions—" She paged back through the document. "It's insane!"

Squire was eyeing Pepper thoughtfully, but Tony wasn't interested in the man's reactions at the moment. "Josh, can you give us a moment?"

"Of course." The attorney stood, slipping past the chairs and heading out the door to the outer office. Tony didn't take his eyes from Pepper, and as soon as he heard the latch click he leaned forward.

"Pepper, it's what I want, and it's what you deserve." He reached over and took her left hand in his, the feel of the ring against his palm a subtle reassurance. "Not that I expect it ever to come into play, but still."

Her face was set in the familiar stubborn expression, though her fingers were curving against his wrist. "The point of a prenup for someone with your assets is to protect them. This gives up your power, Tony."

"So? You have power over me already." Her mouth tightened, and he tried to explain. "I don't want you to doubt me, Pepper. As for the settlements—" He shrugged. "No biggie. Remember, you said I was generous."

Pepper shook her head minutely, her lips softening towards a smile. "You really trust me to not walk off with nearly everything you own? Not to mention enough money for me to live off for twice my expected lifespan?"

Tony held her gaze. "Yes."

Her breath escaped in a small huff, and then she bit her lip, her eyes reddening. Before Tony could panic, she leaned in and kissed him, a firm touch of lips that felt like...like a promise.

And then she sat back. "No."

He blinked. "What?"

"No. Tony, I can't imagine wanting to do anything like that, and I appreciate your trust in me more than I can say, but one of my responsibilities is to make sure you don't do anything stupid—at least, that I can prevent. And this—" She tapped the papers still in her lap. "--Is stupid."

Tony drew in a breath to argue, anger rising, but she twisted her hand around to clasp his fingers. "It is exactly the generosity I'd expect from you, and I'm not rejecting it out of hand, but I'm not going to sign this as it stands."

He wanted to argue. He wanted to insist, to yell at her until she accepted what was her due, but looking at her steady eyes Tony knew he wouldn't win. And it dawned on him between one thought and the next that there was more than one way to be generous.

"Okay," he said abruptly, and saw Pepper relax a little. "But I want it on record that I'm giving in under protest, Ms. Potts."
"Noted, Mr. Stark," she said serenely, and rose to call Squire back in.

He watched her go, and considered the notion.

_Generous. Huh._

He got absorbed in a project after work, and almost forgot that Pepper was not actually going home, remembering when she brought him down dinner and he looked up to see her dressed in a soft blue cardigan over a white t-shirt and a pair of loose yoga pants. She smiled at him a bit shyly, and he straightened from his microwelding and shot her a grin. "So much for imagining that you lounge around in lingerie after hours."

"Too chilly down here," Pepper responded promptly, setting down the tray on the edge of the nearest workbench.

"I could change that. Jarvis, what's the optimal temperature for a woman dressed in nothin' much?"

"Approximately eighty-eight degrees, sir," the AI answered.

Pepper snickered. "Thank you, Jarvis, I'm perfectly capable of adjusting the thermostat myself."

Tony gave a dramatic sigh. "Damn."

Pepper smirked and found herself a stool, and Tony wiped his hands on a rag and went to collect drinks for them both.

They ate. Tony couldn't help the smile that kept returning as they talked about the day and Tony’s latest ideas for improving the arc reactor; the warm sense of wonder nestled behind his chest implant kept reminding him that Pepper would not be leaving after they finished the day, but instead would settle down in the white guest room to sleep.

And still be there in the morning.

"Is there anything you want to change?" he asked, making her blink.

"Sorry?"

"Here." Tony waved a hand. "Not _here_ here, I mean I've got the workshop pretty much like I like it, except we need to set you up a parking space down here, but the house. Do you want to redecorate, or get new furniture, or anything? It's your home too now, or it's going to be, and--"

"Tony." Pepper leaned across the workbench and laid a gentle hand on his arm, stopping his babble. "Thank you." She smiled. "I don't know yet."

"Okay." He grimaced. "Would you rather have a _new_ place? I--we could do that too, but it'd take a little time."

"What? No!" Pepper looked startled. "I'll admit that you kind of _permeate_ the house, but it's _yours_, after all. I'll find a space, don't worry."

_Ours_ was his immediate thought, but Tony didn't voice it. Time enough to adjust the legalities as they went along. He reminded himself for the _n_ th time to be patient. Just like engineering, some things had to be taken step by careful step if you didn't want them to blow up in your face.

After supper Pepper carried the dishes back upstairs, and Tony went back to his work, becoming
instantly absorbed in the intricacies of circuitry and not looking up until the door beeped open once more.

Pepper's sweater was gone, but she looked the same--slightly shorter than usual in what looked like ballet slippers. She smiled at him, a little shyly, stopping short of his workbench. "I just came down to say goodnight."

Tony blinked and glanced at the clock on the nearest terminal. "Damn, when did it get so late? I promised you a pajama party."

She snickered, her posture softening. "Save it for some other time. And remember you have a ten o'clock meeting in the morning, so don't stay up all night."

The chide was affectionate and just about useless, as they both knew. But Tony frowned, wiping his hands on his pants. "Party schmarty--I want a good-night kiss, Potts."

She pinkened slightly, but came closer, and slid her hands over his shoulders, leaning up to press her lips to his. It was odd to feel her shorter, but Tony didn't hesitate, stepping right into her and deepening the kiss, letting his hands find her spine and stroke it. Pepper's slight gasp disappeared into his mouth, but she didn't protest at all, instead standing on her tiptoes to bring them into better alignment. The move rubbed her pleasantly against him, and Tony tightened his grip and lifted her off her feet.

It wasn't the first time he'd carried a woman towards a horizontal surface without breaking his concentration on more important things, though he'd never done it in his workshop before. But Pepper acceded to his hand sliding along her thigh, and lifted her legs to wrap around his waist, bringing her head higher than his and ending the kiss.

Tony left one hand splayed on her ass, reasoning virtuously that it was the safest way to carry her, and kept going. Pepper laughed, her grip tight on his shoulders. "Tony, aren't I a little heavy for this?"

"Nope." He resisted the impulse to move his head forward an inch or two, and instead glanced up at her smiling face. "I bench-press more than you on a regular basis."

His former modus operandi would have called for him to tumble her gently to the couch and follow her down, but instead Tony turned and sat, bringing Pepper with him and settling her on his lap—not straddling, but sideways. Before she could get uncomfortable, he cupped her cheek with one hand and kissed her again.

And she relaxed against him with a soft sound that made his heart swell. Because this was the most important thing--making Pepper comfortable. Content. If she were content, she would stay, was his hazy, half-conscious reasoning, stay until she'd promised, and then she'd stay forever and he'd never be alone again....

They kissed for a long time in the cool of the workshop, slow lazy kisses, simmering with pleasure but without urgency. Tony kept rubbing her hair through his fingers, fascinated with the soft, cool-warm texture of it; Pepper's hand rested on the juncture of his neck and shoulder, her thumb stroking the hollow of his throat just above the collar of his shirt. Her other arm was tucked between them, pressed between his abdomen and her side, and eventually she pulled her mouth from his and rested her head under his chin.

Tony immediately felt the loss, but the trusting weight of her against him more than made up for it, and he cradled her close, eyes shutting at the sheer quiet bliss of it.
When the weight moved, he muttered in protest, reaching for her vanishing warmth, but was answered only by a chuckle. Hands on his shoulders guided him down to rest, and he felt a blanket settle down over him, tucked in and smoothed by those same gentle hands. A kiss brushed his cheek, and then sleep took him once more.
"Have you told Rhodey?" Pepper asked him the next day. "You should, you know."

"That you've moved in, or that our engagement's actually on?" Tony handed her back the little espresso cup, now empty, and went to pick out a tie.

"Both." Pepper was ready for the day in all details but her shoes; she was padding around in stocking feet, which Tony found an amusing change from her former morning routine.

"He's been TDY for a week. Some kind of conference in Germany, I think." Tony selected a subdued navy-with-red-stripe and slung it around his neck. "Want me to invite him for dinner or something?"

"If you like."

"We could see how long it takes him to figure it out." Tony waited until Pepper turned to look at him, then gave her his best puppy eyes. Her mouth quirked with tolerant humor, and she came over to do up his tie for him. Tony let his hands curve over her hips, and enjoyed her quick, efficient motions as she knotted the cloth with expert skill.

"Funny how you always forget how to do this on weekday mornings." Pepper jerked the knot tight and flipped down his collar, and Tony smirked.

"We could trade services. I'd be glad to help you with your pantyhose, for instance."

Pepper sniffed, opened her mouth, then shook her head minutely and closed it again, smoothing the fabric along his shoulders. "It could be fun, actually," she said as she stepped away, and it took Tony a second to figure out that she meant teasing Rhodey.

"Done," he said instantly. "I'll get Platypus over here by seven at the latest. Want to lay bets on Colonel Oblivious?"

"That would be mean," Pepper said primly. "Besides, I'd win."

"Now that's a challenge if I ever heard one." Tony grinned. "You are so on, Potts."

"We're going to be late," she returned, neither agreeing nor refusing, and slipped out of the room, still smiling. Tony grabbed his coat, whistling cheerfully to himself.

"Pepper does not own pantyhose," Jarvis said abruptly, bringing Tony to a halt near the door.

"Huh?" He wasn't surprised at the AI's form of address, but at the statement itself. "What do you mean? I saw them myself." They added a subtle shimmer to her delectable legs and he always noticed.

"You are in error," Jarvis corrected. "When she unpacked her belongings, I took note of her clothing. Pepper's hosiery is either elasticized, or requires the use of a garter belt."

The vision left him dry-mouthed. Tony suppressed a groan, and banged his forehead gently against the frame of the doorway. "Don't tell me these things at this hour of the morning," he hissed.

"What is the relevance of the time of day?" Jarvis asked curiously.
"Ngh. Never mind." Tony took a deep breath. He already had enough naughty thoughts about Pepper's lingerie without hearing the details.

"Tony? Are you coming?" Pepper's voice echoed back down the hall, and he sighed.

"Not at the moment," he muttered, and went out to face the day, and the burning question that would occupy him for all of it--

--Garter belt, or no garter belt?

---

The question was still at the back of his mind when Rhodey arrived that evening, casual in jeans and a leather jacket. "Perfect timing," Tony told him when Jarvis let him in. "The food got here five minutes ago."

"Where'd you order from?" Rhodey asked, shedding his jacket and draping it over the back of the long couch. "Oh, hey, Pepper."

Pepper, coming down the stairs, smiled at him. "Hi, Jimmy. La Miche, and yes, I got you strawberry cake."

"Excellent." Rhodes leaned down to kiss her cheek as she neared, taking in her own casual attire without a blink; Pepper had been known to change out of her work clothes for late nights at Tony's. Tony smirked to himself, wondering if he should go up and check the hamper in her room to find out what she'd been wearing.

He was also betting that Rhodey wouldn't notice the change in their dynamic at all, and was calculating the entertainment value of being able to hold it over his friend's head later.

"Speaking of, shall we?" Pepper gestured towards the kitchen, and both men followed her to where the table was already set. Tony almost never used his dining room unless he was throwing a party, or putting on a show to impress someone; it was too formal for casual meals, and Pepper seemed to agree.

They settled into their usual seats, Pepper at the end and the men on either side, and ate. Rhodey regaled them with funny stories about the conference, remembering eventually that he'd brought presents and ducking out to the living room to fetch them from his jacket pockets.

"Nothing yet," Tony said sotto voce as Rhodes disappeared. "The man is clueless."

"Maybe, maybe not." Pepper scooped up the last of her lamb, her smile small and curling.

"No fair telling him, Potts," Tony retorted, a little alarmed.

"Wasn't that the point of this?" Pepper pointed her fork at him. "And may I remind you I didn't agree to any bet?"

"Sure you did, you just didn't say so out loud. And I will. On his way out the door."

"A verbal agreement has to actually have words, Tony." Her dimples deepened. "Or at the very least a handshake."

"You just don't want to lose."
"Lose what?" Rhodey asked, coming back in with his hands full. "Tony, are you trying to get Pepper to spend the weekend at Monte Carlo again?"

"No, but that's a good idea," Tony said, shooting a glance at Pepper, who was looking innocent. "We could try to break the bank. Again."

Pepper pursed her lips. "If you'll let me off long enough to go shopping, I'll consider it."

It was the first time she'd taken his offer seriously, and Tony couldn't help grinning. "Potts, I'll give you my credit card if you'll set it up."

She blinked, and Rhodes laughed. "Here, something to distract you while you plot world financial domination." He tossed a package to Tony and slid another across the table to Pepper.

She was quick to open it, smiling over the contents--extremely high-end chocolate. "Thank you, Jimmy, you never forget."

"Maybe we should call you Pachyderm instead of Platypus," Tony said, tearing open his own package with a touch of rancor. It was stupid to be annoyed when Rhodes remembered things about Pepper that Tony tended to forget, but he couldn't help it. But the irritation vanished at the sight of what lay beneath the tissue paper. "Hey, cool!"

"I thought you'd like that," Rhodes said, leaning back with a pleased expression. The little wind-up robot was an antique, its painted tin scratched and battered, but when Tony turned the key and set it down, it marched steadily across the table. "Picked it up at a street market in Stuttgart."

Pepper, nibbling on a truffle, shook her head. "I don't know how you find these things, Jimmy."

"Long practice," he assured her, shaking his head when she proffered the box. "Every so often I just see something that screams 'Tony'."

Tony, prying the toy open with his butter knife, snorted. "The last time you did that, it was a groupie." He peered at the works, blowing gently to clear out some dust.

Pepper snickered, and Rhodes rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, her I left where I found her."

"I think this thing is actually Victorian. Thanks," Tony said absently, taking a truffle when Pepper nudged the box closer to him and popping it whole into his mouth.

"I shouldn't waste them on you," she sighed. "You treat fine chocolates with respect, Tony, not gulp them like Hershey's Kisses."

Still chewing, he refrained from sticking out his tongue at her. Pepper took the box back and selected another truffle, closing the container afterwards.

"He was probably the kind of kid who ate all his Halloween candy the first night," Rhodey offered comfortably.

Tony swallowed. "Whereas Potts was the kind who hung onto it so long it went stale, where's the fun in that?"

"The lack of a stomachache," Pepper said with dignity, rising to her feet. "Do you want your cake, Jimmy?"

"Sure." He smiled at her, and Pepper took her chocolate with her as she went over to the remaining
boxes on the counter, apparently not trusting Tony to keep from raiding it.

Tony kept dismantling his toy, spreading the gears out in front of his shoved-aside plate. As Pepper returned with the cake, Rhodey spoke again. "So how long have you two been official?"

Tony's head snapped up and he stared at his friend. "Official what?" Pepper rolled her eyes, then handed Rhodes the plate and took her seat.

"Don't give me that innocent look, Stark, I have known you way too long." Rhodey grinned at them both. "Dude, it's obvious."

"Fuck." Tony tossed down his knife. "I thought we had you going." He shot a mild glare at the snickering Pepper.

Rhodey dug into his cake, looking smug. "Yeah, well, they train us to do more than just fly planes." He put a huge forkful into his mouth.

Pepper glanced at Tony. "I guess that means I win the bet."

"What bet?" he answered instantly. "As I recall you didn't agree to anything."

Rhodey started laughing, and almost choked. Pepper leaned over to thump him on the back, and he sputtered, wheezing. "You two are so made for each other," he finally managed, eyes watering.

"I like to think so," Tony said, giving in and reaching for Pepper's hand now that the jig was up.

She laced her fingers with his, her dimples showing. "Obvious how, Jimmy?"

Rhodes wiped his eyes with his napkin. "Aside from the fact that Tin Man here looks proud enough to bust his iron britches?" Tony sneered at him, and Rhodey smirked and went on. "You two always had this barrier thing going. It's not there any more."

_Huh._ Tony blinked, and felt Pepper's hand twitch in his. _He's right._ He and Pepper had always kept that careful, slender line between them; they had both had moments of teetering on the edge of crossing it, but for one reason or another they had always pulled back.

"Plus, you're more relaxed." Rhodey jerked his chin at Pepper. "So I take it Tony's being a good boy."

Tony used his free hand to give Rhodes an extremely rude gesture, but Pepper shook her head.

"Tony is...amazing," she said, her smile soft as she glanced at Tony. "Just amazing."

The simple words made him melt. Tony wanted to pull her onto his lap and kiss her senseless, but he settled for lifting her hand to his mouth instead for a lingering touch, never taking his eyes from hers. Pepper blushed, and on the other side of the table Rhodey blew a raspberry.

"You guys really are sickening. I thought that was just for show." But his expression, when Tony finally looked over at him, was half-tease, half genuine pleasure.

Pepper sniffed. "He's actually handling the whole relationship thing better than I am, Jimmy. So give him credit where it's due."

Rhodes lifted a hand in surrender. "Okay, okay, I give. Sheesh." He stuffed another forkful of cake in his mouth, eyes twinkling, and Tony smiled and kept hold of Pepper's hand.
Unfortunately for their evening, Jarvis interrupted their after-dinner conversation with news of Stark Industries weapons in the hands of mercenaries in Chile. Pepper excused herself to make a quick call, and Rhody came along to kibbitz as the 'bots wrapped Tony in titanium and gold.

The process was almost finished before Rhody spoke. "You're doing pretty good, man."

Tony glanced over at him as much as the process would allow. "So far, anyway." At Rhodes' look of inquiry, he continued. "I'll screw up eventually. It's kinda inevitable."

Rhodey laughed briefly. "Tony, everybody screws up eventually. The trick is to keep going." He shrugged. "Or so I'm told."

Tony held still as the helmet clicked into place, not missing the sad note in his friend's voice. For all that Rhody took his relationships more seriously than Tony had, he was still alone and had been for over a year. "Yeah, well, I'll keep it in mind."

The stairwell door beeped open and Pepper came through, shoving her phone in her pocket on her way to where Tony stood. "Be careful," she said quietly as she stopped in front of him.

The armor and her lack of heels gave him at least three inches on her, and it felt decidedly odd. But her brief hard kiss held no self-consciousness, and Tony returned it in full measure. Then she was stepping back out of blast range, and he snapped the helmet shut.

The first instant of rising was always exciting, even with such grim purpose, and Tony hovered for a breath, taking in the two people most important to him and storing the memory carefully. "Love you, Potts," he said, knowing the words would reach Rhody too and not caring at all.

He was out of the tunnel within seconds and climbing into the night sky, but the text message that flowed across his HUD wasn't far behind.

Love you too.

Tony grinned fiercely, and arrowed away.

It surprised him, when he thought about it, how easily they slipped into living in the same house, but then that was Pepper--she made things easy. Tony got used to seeing her possessions here and there, her raincoat in his front closet, her ancient mixer on his kitchen counter; he offered to replace it, but she refused, saying that she and the Sunbeam understood each other.

Her car found its place at the end of his long row of gems; her hair ties multiplied and turned up in odd corners; the very scent of the house changed subtly, incorporating the new, sweeter notes of a woman among the base of polish and stone and his own faint musk.

Pepper didn't move in all at once; some nights she still went back to her apartment, citing thirsty plants or a need for space, and Tony bit his lip and tried not to argue...too much. Since she always came back with a few more possessions, he found his forbearance rewarded.

Some nights, when she'd kissed him goodnight--briefly or lingeringly, depending on what they were doing--and gone to bed, he would rouse from sleep or work past midnight and wander up to the white guest room.

Pepper had never required a promise of him, but Tony still didn't cross the threshold, instead folding
his arms and leaning against the doorframe to watch her sleep. She sprawled under the covers, not something he would have expected—limbs extended in a relaxed abandon scarcely hinted at in her waking containment. Her face was smooth and slack, almost vacant, but his gaze dwelled on it anyway, the proof that she was comfortable enough to sleep in his home.

"Do you want to move your bed here?" he asked one morning, as he ate eggs and she spooned up yogurt.

Pepper gave him a startled glance. "Eventually," she said after a moment. "I mean, I suppose I could sell it, but I'd rather just store it for the moment—it's got some sentimental value."

Tony raised a brow. "Now that's a story that needs to be told," he commented with a smirk, and Pepper rolled her eyes.

"Not that kind of sentiment, Tony. Thank you, but there's no point in setting it up here when I'll only be sleeping in it for a little while longer."

He reached across the table and caught her fingers, unable to quell his eagerness. "How much longer?"

Her blush was accompanied by a slightly helpless look. "I—I'm not sure. I don't—"

Tony made himself let her go, fighting a disappointed libido. "Okay, sure." He knew he sounded petulant, but she was a temptation, a far greater one than when she'd been off-limits, and despite a little self-adjustment he was feeling impatient.

Pepper's mouth quirked, and she looked back down at her yogurt. "Anyway. I bought that bed with my first bonus from my first job—it was the first time I'd owned anything larger than a twin."

Her voice was a bit stilted, and Tony let out a long breath and tried to master his temper. "There's plenty of storage space in the sub-basement. I'll clear you out a room if you want."

Her glance was grateful. "That would be good, thank you, Tony."

The rest of breakfast was slightly strained, but that ebbed over the course of the day, and over dinner at the same sushi place where Rhodey had found them before, Tony posed the question again. "So, you still want the honey-Moon?" He wiggled his fingers for emphasis.

Pepper almost choked on her water. "That was terrible. No, of course not, I wasn't serious."

"Good, because spacesuits would pretty much defeat the purpose," he said, smirking. "Where would you really like to go?" Tony pointed at her. "And don't say we're not having one. We're going all the way, Potts."

Pepper bit her lip, then propped an elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm. "Have you ever been to Orcas Island?"

"Orcas Island?" Tony cocked his head. "Nope, never even heard of it."

"It's one of the San Juan Islands in Washington. Not really very touristy." Pepper smiled a little, in what he assumed was reminiscence.

"That's where you want to go?" Such a place would never have occurred to Tony, but he was willing to be open-minded.
"It's lovely at this time of year...a little rural, but absolutely beautiful, and, um, isolated." Her smile held a sensuality that made Tony catch his breath. "Lots of nice bed and breakfast places."

"Orcas Island it is," he agreed at once. "I'm sure we can find something to do."

"I'm sure," Pepper mimicked gently, still smiling, and Tony smiled back, caught in visions of walking with her in woods, sailing maybe...laying her down on crisp cotton sheets in a cozy bedroom.

Yes, a honeymoon with Pepper would make anywhere wonderful, but he definitely liked her idea. Especially the isolated part.

As long as I can get her to leave the BlackBerry behind...

In the end, Pepper settled on having the ceremony actually at the house, out on the cliff at the edge of Tony's property, and started planning. The view was desperately romantic, and he thoroughly approved. So did Happy, because the security would be much easier to handle. There would be the usual offshore gawkers, Tony knew, but putting some SI security personnel into cutters would keep them at a respectful distance.

Airspace wouldn't be a problem either. Tony spent half a night in his workshop and put together a repulsor field that would keep news helicopters from encroaching. It drew a tremendous amount of power, making it impractical for daily use, but he figured it would be fine for a one-off.

In the three weeks since Pepper had agreed to marry him, she had gradually moved many of her possessions in from her apartment, most of which she put into storage, though she had hung a few photographs in the kitchen and set up a small plant stand in the white guest room.

"Are you sure you don't want to do more?" Tony asked her one Friday morning as she arrived, taking the box she was lugging towards the elevator. "The house is yours, Potts, but you've barely made any impact."

She grinned at him. "Patience, Mr. Stark. I prefer to sneak up on things. That way by the time you figure out I've redecorated the place in early chintz, it'll be too late to argue."

Tony followed her into the elevator, snickering. "You're assuming I'd care."

Her expression softened. "You would. You're very particular about your environment, Tony, and I don't want to disturb that."

He stared at her, baffled and a little frustrated. "Pepper--"

She leaned around the box and kissed him gently. "I know you want me to feel at home, and believe me, I appreciate it. I will make changes eventually, but I need to get used to the idea myself."

"All right," he sighed, and carried the box to her room as soon as the elevator doors opened. The place was different, he had to admit as he looked around; there were several prints on the walls, adding splashes of color, and her little antique desk sat under one of the windows. The blue comforter was vivid against the room's pale tones.

Tony set the box down and regarded one of the prints. "You know, you could just get the original
out of storage."

Pepper laughed again and slid her arms around him from behind, hands resting just below his arc implant. "Patience," she repeated.

He leaned back a little into her embrace and turned his head towards hers, the better to feel her breath on his cheek. "Working on it."

"That reminds me," and the words were a caress against his skin, "I intend to spend tonight at h--at my apartment."

Tony reached up and covered one of her hands with his own, squeezing gently. "If I whine, will you change your mind?"

Pepper chuckled. "No, but you're welcome to come with if you want."

He let her hand go and turned in her arms, catching her lips in a brief, intense kiss. "Oh, I want." He'd dropped her off at her apartment a couple of times, but he'd never been back up to it, and he was still curious despite spending the night once before. "Can't disappoint the press, after all."

That made her laugh outright, and she stepped smoothly from his arms, straightening her jacket with a quick tug. "Of course not. Now go get dressed in something a little more formal, and we can start the day."

Tony glanced down at his sweatpants and sleeveless t-shirt. "What will you give me if I do?"

Pepper was already halfway out of the room. "A briefing, instead of a scolding," came trailing back, and Tony sighed and followed.

The first thing he noticed when she opened her door that evening was the bare walls. Tony followed Pepper in, taking in the changes--the missing desk, boxes stacked against one living room wall, two more in the middle of the floor half-full of objects wrapped in paper. Much of the coziness was gone, but the place still smelled like her, and Tony took comfort in that.

Pepper headed straight for the kitchen and Tony followed, watching as she dumped her purse on one counter. "Need any help packing? I could hire you a moving service, no problem."

She shook her head. "No, thank you--I have it under control. I made a good start two weekends ago and I can finish up as I go." Pepper shut off her BlackBerry with a deliberate motion.

The sight made his brows go up. "Whoa, Potts, I didn't even know that thing had an off switch."

She shot him a dry glance, her cheeks a little pink for some reason as she shrugged out of her suit jacket. "Tony, I need you to do something for me."

"Is it dirty?" he asked hopefully, smirking, and her lips quirked.

"Go back to the living room and tell me what's missing."

"O-kay..." Puzzled but not unwilling, Tony reversed direction and studied the big room. The desk's gone, it's back in her room...TV? No, that's on the floor there...pictures...oh. He felt a little stupid for not noticing at once that the couch was no longer in its place.
And then he felt a tide of heat rising from the soles of his feet straight upwards to his scalp, locking his focus in on the woman in the other room.

No. Couch.

Which meant they were sharing a bed tonight.

Tony pivoted and was back in the kitchen in five strides. Pepper was still there, bent over awkwardly as she worked the buckle on her right stiletto; her hair was in her face and her backside in the air, and all he saw was grace.

"No," he said, his voice rough, and Pepper glanced up in surprise. "That's mine."

He could hardly get the words out. Pepper straightened, and almost before he realized it Tony had lifted her off her feet, a bride's carry for his bride-to-be.

Pepper lifted a hand to his cheek and kissed him, and Tony sank into her mouth, feeling his heart pounding behind his implant. His feet carried him forward, and though he'd only been to her bedroom once, they seemed to know the way.

She didn't let him go until halfway down the hall, and he didn't want to speak, but it was necessary. "I hope you have condoms, Potts, because I only have one and that's not going to be enough."

Her smile was slow and promising. "I'm on the Pill. You won't need them at all."

His arms tightened, and Tony walked faster.

Her bedroom seemed much as he remembered it, but he wasn't paying attention to much besides the bed. It had a green coverlet this time, matching the leaves wound over its frame, and he set Pepper down on it carefully. Her hands tried to draw him down after her, but instead he knelt by the bed.

The buckles on her shoes were tiny, but his fingers were expert at small things. Tony pulled off the heels and set them aside, rubbing his thumbs along her arches for a moment just to see her toes curl, and then stood.

Pepper reached up and slid his jacket from his shoulders. Tony let it fall and leaned in to kiss her again, drowning in her, feeling her tug on his tie to urge him closer. His hands landed on the comforter on either side of her hips, and he resisted her pull only because he wanted to do this right.

He had slept with more women than he could count, but this was Pepper, and God willing she would be the only one ever again. So Tony pulled back and took her wrists gently, placing a lingering kiss in the cup of each hand before reaching for the hem of her blouse.

He undressed her slowly, exploring each revealed inch of skin with all the concentration of a man discovering beauty for the first time. Pepper flushed beneath his touches, smiling and a little shy, and coaxed him out of his own clothing whenever he could spare the attention. Her hands were cool and soft, stroking the scars around his arc implant with a tenderness that put a lump in his throat and made him kiss her all the harder, and she laughed and pulled him closer.

From the delicate flesh inside her double-jointed elbow to the high arch of her foot, to the span of her waist and all the way up her spine, he learned her with every sense, trading murmurs and sighs and tiny teases. Mine was the only thought that formed, reverent and only half-believing, mine, mine, the awed, exulting joy of winning this final trust, of glorying in the welcome of her body. He turned her moans to gasps and her gasps to cries, and fed his own desperate hunger in satiating hers. And in the end, when his control failed and everything whited out but the feel of Pepper holding him hard, Tony
knew.

There would never be anyone else.

He remembered pure boneless contentment afterwards, slow dizzy kisses, but not drifting off. Waking was just about as peculiar as the dream he'd been having, but it was good, almost miraculous—surfacing to the warm curl of Pepper around him and the sweet, sweet knowledge that he belonged to her as much as she to him. When he opened his eyes, it was to her smile, soft and quietly delighted. "Hey."

He hadn't been asleep long, and Pepper still looked thoroughly loved, her hair tangled and her lips a little swollen. Tony gave her a wry smile, too relaxed to be truly abashed. "Believe me, I don't usually fall asleep like that."

She chuckled, and brushed a kiss over his mouth, one he returned eagerly. "I'll take it as a compliment."

She did know him, Tony had to admit; only trust would let him nod off next to any lover, and he couldn't remember ever doing so before. Stretching a little, he nodded at the plant-laced framework overhead. "You know, Potts, a four-poster gives a man ideas."

"Which is exactly why I bought it," Pepper deadpanned, and rose up on one elbow, touching his lips with one long finger when he would have answered. "Later, maybe."

That definitely gave him all sorts of interesting ideas, but they fled as she moved to straddle him, and Tony gave himself up to her without hesitation.

They spent all of the weekend at Pepper's apartment, but when they left on Sunday evening they took two suitcases with them, and Tony had the feeling that she wouldn't be coming back to do more than finish emptying the place. Pepper settled into the seat next to him with a relaxed sigh, and he permitted himself a smirk as he backed the roadster out of its parking slot, grateful that they'd brought a car that possessed at least a little trunk space.

"You happy?" he asked eventually, somewhere on the highway, and glanced over in time to see her smile.

"Yes."

He sighed himself, contented, and drove on.

When they reached the house, Tony insisted on taking the suitcases upstairs and into what he was determined would be their bedroom. Pepper followed him, looking bemused. "Tony--"

He put the cases down near the big bed and reached out to pull her into his arms. "No. We're not sleeping apart any more, Pepper."

The corner of her mouth tucked in, and Tony felt her hands working into the back pockets of his jeans. "Agreed. But those are full of stuff I was going to put in storage. Sweaters and things."

"Ah. No need to do that." Tony let her go and opened the closet door with a flourish. "Plenty of room in here."
Pepper stepped up to look in, and blinked at the neat rows of her own clothing, taken from the white guest room and hung up properly. There was still quite enough space left over, Tony noted. Pepper's brow creased. "How did you--"

"Dummy," Tony explained, feeling smug, and put his arms around her from behind. "I called Jarvis on Saturday."

He could feel her laugh vibrate through her sternum, and she leaned back against him easily. "I'll have to thank them both."

"What about me?" Tony teased, nosing her ear, and Pepper hummed, turning her head enough to kiss him lingeringly. When she let him go, he grinned. "Yeah, that'll do."

Pepper stepped out of his grip and into the closet, and laughed again. "Dummy's programming might need a little adjustment." She pointed at her shoes, which were arranged by color and... "He's got all the lefts on one side and the rights on the other."

Tony looked down at the array, which, when he thought about it, held a certain logic. "Makes sense to me."

"I hope his feelings aren't hurt when I rearrange them," Pepper said dryly.

She turned back, cupped his face in her hands, and kissed him once more, slow and sweet. "Thank you for making me feel welcome," she whispered.

Tony pulled her close, his hunger for her touch not lessened by their busy weekend, and it was with mingled pleasure and vulnerability that he realized that it probably never would be. "I love you," he muttered roughly, unable to articulate anything more, but the willing press of her body against his, the warmth of her hug, told him she understood.

A long while later Pepper pulled back. "I don't know about you, Mr. Stark, but I need to get some sleep before the week starts."

"If you insist," Tony mock-grumbled, letting her go with some reluctance. "Does this mean we get to shower together?" Despite his fantasy, the tub in her apartment was not large enough for two, even standing.

"If you want," Pepper said, pinkening, and surprising him. "But showering only, Tony. I'm a little, um, sore."

He let the grin take over. "No problem."

Within ten minutes, the spacious bathroom off the master bedroom was filling with steam, and Tony was already naked, slipping Pepper's robe from her shoulders with eager care and the scent of vanilla on his mind.

Pepper with water streaming over her skin far surpassed his imagination, and his huge shower had plenty of room. Tony lathered up the net sponge slowly, unable to take his eyes from her.

Pepper blushed a little, wiping her water-darkened hair out of her eyes. "Tony..."

He smiled, slow and utterly, utterly pleased. "Come here."

It was better than his fantasy. She let him bathe her, and he did her back first, covering the territory he'd skimmed with sunscreen but this time laying a kiss on every vertebra and kneeling to take that
nibble he'd wanted for so long. And instead of a squeak he won a gasp that made him proud.

"Shower only," Pepper repeated when he rose from sliding the sponge down those sleek legs. But there was little conviction in her voice.

"Relax," Tony said as he stepped up behind her, reaching around to start at her collarbone. "Trust me."

She leaned back against him with a sigh, and when he had to turn her to finish the job, she didn't protest; when he dropped to his knees once more and coaxed her legs apart, she moaned.

And gave him all the access he wanted.

Making love with Pepper had been a revelation, but so was settling into bed with her, in the space he meant to become theirs, without ceremony or fuss. She wore a long sleepshirt over nothing at all, and her hair smelled clean, still warm from the dryer as she snuggled into Tony's arms. He slid a leg over hers and sighed, feeling his eyes closing almost despite himself. "You're better than a sleeping pill, Potts," he mumbled against her forehead.

She snickered, poked him gently, and relaxed. And he smiled, and let himself go.
Chapter 10

The party was about what he expected--another working event, after a fashion. Jack Roberts' fiftieth birthday was ostensibly a celebration, but it was also a venue for informal deals, schmoozing, and gossip, and Tony slid into it easily, conscious of the bright pride of having his fiancée on his arm--for real this time.

Pepper looked especially lovely in a silk concoction almost the same shade as the ice-blue satin she'd worn months before at the firefighters' benefit. This time, however, the back was not quite as low, and Tony had had the privilege of putting on Pepper's stockings for her, rolling them slowly up her legs and fastening the garters with unashamed pleasure.

He'd insisted.

Their host and celebrant was quick to find them when they entered the big Roberts mansion--twice the size of Tony's home and much more traditional. The tall silver-haired man beamed at the sight of them. "Tony, Virginia, glad you could make it!"

He leaned over to press a kiss to Pepper's cheek, which she accepted with calm demureness, and shook Tony's hand. "Happy birthday, Jack," Tony said cordially. "There's life in the old dog yet, huh?"

Roberts regarded him with acid humor, the glint in his eye recognizing their eternal rivalry. "Plenty of it. Virginia, my dear, are you sure you don't want to put your talents to better use? It's a crime to let your intelligence go to waste on such a less than fulfilling position...and whatever Tony pays you, I assure you I can do better."

Tony stiffened at the blatant insult; Roberts was usually much subtler, and Tony realized that on some level the man must be pissed off at their engagement. But before he could speak, Pepper's hand tightened on his arm.

"It's a generous offer, Jack, but actually I think I'd be bored," she said sweetly, delicately conveying both knowledge of the affront and unconcern at the attempt. "Let me wish you many happy returns of the day, though."

Before Roberts could answer, she guided Tony away, and glancing back over his shoulder, Tony saw Roberts' attention drawn by other new arrivals. "Nice," he told Pepper in a low voice.

She sighed. "I think he's had too much champagne. Usually he's a lot more subtle."

"Still, I'll have to kick his ass later at squash or something," Tony said, still stung. "That's just wrong."

Pepper laughed. "Tony, you hate squash."

"Yeah, but I'm good at it." He grinned, his mood softening. She is mine, Jacky. Choke on it. "Hand-eye coordination and all that jazz."

His fiancée sniffed in gentle disdain. "Some other time, Mr. Stark. It's considered rude to challenge your host to single combat."

"Even to defend my lady's honor?" Tony snagged two flutes of champagne from a passing waiter and handed her one with a flourish.
Pepper dimpled. "Actually, I think it was your honor he was impugning. Let it go, Tony."

"Only if you promise to dance with me later. Lots." He watched her over the rim of his glass. This was the first party they had attended since the discovery of their "engagement", and Tony figured Pepper's excuse of appearances no longer applied—if it ever really had.

And he wanted to dance. In public. Showing her off. It was atavistic, he knew, but that didn't change his desire to display.

Pepper smiled. "It's a party. I think that's what you do."

"Good." Tony tucked her free arm through his, content. "And nobody gets to cut in, either, on pain of my extreme displeasure."

She snickered, and they moved deeper into the house, heading for the big ballroom that held most of the party.

Tony had to admit that it was a pretty good shindig, despite Roberts' overindulgence; the atmosphere was great, the food was amazing, and the music, once it began, was definitely high-quality. And you can't exactly throw stones, he reminded himself; Tony couldn't actually remember throwing a party that didn't end—or start—with him in some state of intoxication.

Roberts seemed to steady as the evening continued, from what Tony could see, and anyway Pepper managed to keep them apart with her usual subtle skill. They nibbled finger food and drank more champagne, and talked and laughed and bantered; when Tony stopped to discuss new patents in medical devices with the head of Johnson & Johnson, Pepper hovered quietly at his elbow, almost as invisible as if she had been dressed in one of her business suits, but ready to take notes.

She did garner one or two uncertain looks, but not enough for Tony to take issue with, and he realized slowly that they made an even better team now that the one barrier between them had been eliminated.

They didn't stay together the whole time, of course; they both knew many of the guests, and Pepper often drifted off a ways to talk with someone. Tony would sip champagne and watch her out of the corner of his eye, little restoring glances of her beauty in the blue silk—laughing with another woman, smiling patiently at a perspiring little man, gesturing animatedly as she spoke with a group of three or four people.

It wasn't possessiveness, exactly; it was enjoyment, pleasure replacing the slow-growing longing that had taken so long to penetrate his careless consciousness. Tony talked to friends, bantered with peers, even flirted lightly with various women—nothing serious, just the casual charm he used with females he wasn't specifically targeting—but a portion of his attention was always on Pepper.

Sometime after the nibbles, when they'd just finished a long conversation with a U.S. senator, Pepper squeezed Tony's hand. "I need to visit the ladies' room," she said in a low voice.

He was feeling too mellow to make a crude joke, so Tony just nodded. "Tell you what, I'll meet you on the terrace." He pointed with his chin towards the double doors across the ballroom. "I could use a little fresh air."

Pepper smiled and left him, and Tony found more champagne and drifted across to the open doors. The wide porch beyond was empty at the moment, dim with night; what little light there was came from the doors and windows looking out. Tony was a little surprised that no one else was out enjoying the evening, but he didn't mind. He crossed to the waist-height wall to look out over the
admittedly magnificent ocean view, where the moon made a path across the water.

_Mine's better, though._

It was the perfect environment for a cigar, but he'd given up the occasional habit because they reminded him too much of Obadiah. Just the fleeting memory made him wince, and he lifted a hand to his chest where the implant lay hidden beneath undershirt and shirt and tie.

"Tony?"

The voice was low and rich and unmistakably female, and not Pepper. Tony turned, his gaze automatically finding the figure standing between him and the doors. Color was hard to make out in the twilight, but her hair was light and her dress dark--red, he thought.

The woman stepped forward into the moonlight, and he could see that she was smiling. "It is you. What are you doing out here alone?"

Tony squinted at her, and then memory stirred. Julia Beyer was a socialite and a wealthy woman, and very enthusiastic in bed, and they'd shared a wild week before he'd gotten bored. "Julia. Nice to see you again."

He kept his tone flat and unencouraging. Even before Afghanistan, he had never done repeats, and Julia had taken a while to accept that. But then she'd jetted off to the Far East for rejuvenation or some such, and disappeared from his radar.

And then _he'd_ been gone.

"Why, thank you, Tony. You're looking very well, I must say." Her tone was throaty and seductive, and she kept walking, coming right up to him. "Rumor had it that you'd gone off the deep end."

Tony looked down at her--and it _was_ down despite her heels; Julia barely topped five-foot-two. Her hair was a fashionable honey blonde and her makeup perfect, and her long smoky eyes were gazing up at him with an expression that made his spine crinkle with obscure uneasiness. He spun his flute in his fingers. "Oh, I've always been crazy. But you know what they say--I'm rich enough to afford it."

Julia laughed, a sound as cultivated as the rest of her, and placed a confiding hand on his arm. "Crazy in all the right ways, I'd say." When Tony didn't reply, she raised a brow. "I promise you, I've been denying the rumors whenever I hear them."

"Thank you," Tony said, trying to sound bored. The truth was, he had no desire to talk to Julia, let alone flirt with her, but the responsibility that he'd accepted on coming out as Iron Man required a fair bit of PR, and he could no longer be quite as rude as he had been in the past.

Julia laughed again and plucked the flute from his fingers, sipping from it and watching him over the rim. It was supposed to be seductive, but he only found it annoying.

"Well," she said, lowering the glass. "It's a pity to waste this moonlight." She stepped even closer, until her body was mere inches from his. "Care to do something about that, darling?"

Looking down at her, Tony realized two things--one, the memory that Julia was one of the few women among his conquests that Pepper had had difficulty in removing from his home, and two, that he was in real trouble.

Letting his gaze go cold, Tony stepped back a deliberate pace. "I'm engaged, Julia. In case you
hadn't heard."

She laughed again, and set the flute on the wall. "Oh, I heard. You can't think anyone takes it seriously, do you? Tony Stark and commitment don't go in the same sentence." Her smile was wicked. "I'm sure whatever arrangement you have with your fianceé will accommodate me just fine."

She moved fast, and he wasn't fast enough. Tony found himself with his arms full of Julia, her hand dragging his head down to her and her mouth landing squarely on his.

It was by no means the first time he'd been jumped, as it were, but this time Tony felt no desire, only a quick hot anger. He reached for her wrists, raising his head enough to break the kiss, and movement beyond Julia caught his eye.

And rage crumbled into ash at the sight of Pepper standing a few feet away, staring at them both.

Tony almost choked on the sudden rush of horror and shame. Pepper's eyes were huge, and she was standing very, very still, and he had absolutely no idea how to explain how he came to be kissing an old lover the minute Pepper had turned her back.

After a second, Julia turned too. Tony couldn't see her expression, but the possessive hand on his midriff and the triumph in her voice were plenty in themselves. "Oh, hello, Ms. Potts. So sorry, but Tony's a little busy at the moment. Could he get back to--"

Her last word was cut off as Tony shoved her away. He took two stumbling steps forward and stopped, frozen at the vision of all his newfound happiness collapsing into scorn and ruin. "Pepper--it's not--I--"

But words failed him. He stared at Pepper helplessly, waiting for the anger, the contempt, the hurt.

She was ice-pale and her lips were tight, but she didn't scream at him, or burst into tears. Instead she swept forward and took Julia's arm in a grip that made the shorter woman wince.

"Mr. Stark is no longer available," she said in a voice terrible in its gentleness, steering Julia towards the doors to the ballroom. "And that includes in any capacity you can think of."

She looked like an angel, Tony thought through the fog of terror--tall, eerily beautiful, and definitely avenging. Julia sputtered, but Pepper was inexorable, and as she reached the doors whatever she said into Julia's ear seemed to strip the smaller woman of defiance. Pepper bundled her briskly out, and shut the doors firmly behind her.

Tony found that he couldn't meet Pepper's eyes as she turned back. He let his gaze fall to her feet, watching as they approached, and when they stopped in front of him Tony felt his knees give way.

He sank down until the stone terrace was cold against his shins, and only then did he force his head to tilt back, making his gaze travel up and up to her face, looking down at him.

"I didn't, Pepper," he whispered. "She--I didn't."

He didn't know how to explain. How could he repair that fragile, precious trust? Pepper knew him, she knew practically every intimate detail of his life, and her words about fidelity came back to sear through his brain.

*Why the hell should she even listen to you?*
One cool hand cupped his chin, and he searched her face for judgment, but her expression was as serene and remote as the moon, and his heart seemed to fail.

And then she knelt too, in a graceful billow of skirts. "Stop it," she told him, quiet and just a little chiding. "I believe you."

His pulse hiccuped. "You do?"

Her smile was soft and rueful, and her thumb crossed his lips in a gentle caress. "Of course I do. I trust you."

The simple faith in her statement robbed him of breath, bringing a flood of hope and relief. He blinked stinging eyes and leaned into her hand. "I don't see how."

She breathed a laugh, and her thumb returned, wiping away what he presumed was lipstick. "Tony, you told me you loved me. You may not always keep your promises, but you never, ever betray the people you love. I know you that well."

His throat swelled, the tears still threatening. "I don't deserve you."

"Maybe not, but you're working on it." Her lips replaced her thumb, scouring away the memory of Julia's mouth.

Her kiss was as gentle as her words, and as healing. Tony didn't move; he just let his eyes close and accepted her gratefully, humbled by her trust.

_I will be damned if I ever betray it._

It wasn't a vow; it was a fact.

Then Pepper's hands were in his and she was drawing him to his feet. "Come on, Mr. Stark. I believe I owe you a dance."

He resisted her tug back towards the ballroom. "Can we just go home?"

She swung back around, startled, and Tony met her eyes. What he really wanted to do was take her back to the house and make love to her all night, to drown both of them in touch and sensation until all his doubts and fears were gone.

Pepper's mouth curved, and Tony knew that she understood what he wanted, even if she didn't know what drove the desire. But she tucked his arm through hers and shook her head. "Not yet. We have something to prove."

Tony sighed, knowing she was right. If anyone had seen him with Julia, disappearing would give rise to some nasty rumors. Better to go in and be publicly together, and in accord. He let her lead him back into the house. "All right. One dance."

That made her laugh. "I thought you wanted lots."

As the musicians started a new number, Tony smirked and took her into his arms, reveling in her easy acquiescence. "Yeah, well, I'm not thinking exactly vertical at the moment."

Perhaps fortunately, no one tried to cut in. They moved slowly across the dance floor, one couple in many, enclosed in the dance's illusory bubble of privacy, and Tony let himself enjoy it. He knew there were eyes on them, seeking proof of their relationship, but that was a small matter compared to
the litheness of Pepper as she matched his steps, the happy smile she wore--quite the contrast to their last dance. Another time he might have teased her, bantered to make her blush or huff at him, but now Tony was too caught up in sheer enjoyment.

He spotted Jack Roberts during one of their slow circles, chatting with two other men, and caught the glitter of Roberts' eyes as he glanced their way, but Roberts looked back at his guests before Tony could so much as raise a brow.

Of Julia Beyer, he saw nothing.

One dance turned into three, punctuated by a conversation or two, but finally they took their leave among a small group of other guests. Technically, Tony supposed, it was rude to leave without bidding farewell to their host; but Roberts was nowhere in sight and Tony didn't feel like trying to hunt him up.

"I'll send him a note tomorrow," Pepper murmured as they descended the front steps and bid farewell to the other guests. Tony had chosen to drive them, rather than use the limousine, so they had to wait for the valet to bring the little car around.

Tony helped Pepper into her seat, waiting until she had her dress tucked safely inside, then closed the door and went around to the driver's seat, absently handing the valet a tip. As the woman thanked him, the car's roof folded back and away, and Pepper smiled up at him.

"It's a lovely night," she said, reaching for her seat belt. "Let's enjoy it."

The drive wasn't long, but despite his growing arousal Tony was in no hurry to finish it. He took the coastal road, and the lowering moon spilled down silver on them and gleamed up from the sea, frosting Pepper's hair as it rippled in the wind. Cool fresh air poured over them, and while Pepper wouldn't let him take a hand off the wheel, her own rested on his thigh, not so much a tease as a promise.

In a way, he wanted it to last forever.

When he pulled the car into its space in the garage and cut the engine, the silence was a little startling. Tony let out a breath, searching for words; he knew Pepper didn't blame him for Julia, but he still felt guilty.

But before he could think of what to say, Pepper leaned over and kissed him, and guilt was overwhelmed by lust. Tony dragged her as close as the gear shift would allow, until she broke away laughing. "I don't mind car sex, Tony, but it really requires a little more space."

He couldn't stop staring at her, enchanted with her flushed skin and her tumbled hair, and the gleam of love and excitement in her eyes. "What do you want, Pepper? Tell me."

She bit her lip, glancing around, then pointed. "There."

"Excellent choice." Tony lifted himself up out of the car, not bothering to open the door, but Pepper was on her feet before he could get around to her side.

They managed to lose half their clothing between the car and the couch, too busy with kisses and caresses to walk quickly. When they finally reached the battered sofa, Tony let himself fall backwards down onto it, pulling Pepper laughing with him, and kissed her dizzy.

"I wouldn't cheat on you," he mumbled against her mouth, needing to say it. "Not ever."
She laid a chain of tiny kisses from his lips down to the sensitive spot in front of his ear, raising more than just goosebumps. "I know," Pepper whispered, her breath tickling delightfully.

Tony captured her head in both hands, tugging her up so he could see her eyes. "Tell me."

As he expected—craved—she knew what he meant. "I love you," she told him, and he could feel the truth of it, absorbing into his skin like a healing elixir.

Tony's throat closed, and he couldn't speak. But there was more than one way to answer her, and he did.

All night long.

Tony was the first to admit that he knew nothing about wedding planning besides how to throw a really amazing bachelor party, and when he offered his help to Pepper she merely kissed him and told him she had it all under control.

But the third night in one week that she was still working on her laptop when he came up to go to bed—past midnight—and then was up before him in the morning, made Tony decide that a little executive action was in order. So when they arrived at Stark Industries that morning, he bided his time until Pepper left for a lunch meeting on another floor, and then leaned out through his office door.

"Yo. Cedric." He pointed one finger at Pepper's assistant. "Come here."

The slender man's eyes widened, but he rose quickly and followed Tony into his office, closing the doors behind himself at Tony's gesture. Tony wandered to the window, hands in his pockets, and looked out at the view. "Cedric, do I pay you enough?"

He heard Cedric swallow before he spoke. "Yes, Mr. Stark."

Tony turned. Cedric, who was no taller than Tony and bony rather than muscular, looked slightly alarmed, but Tony ignored that. He had, in fact, looked up Cedric's salary that morning, and knew that the man was well-paid, but then that was true for all of Stark Industries' employees—one of the factors that contributed to the company's success, Howard Stark had always claimed. Tony cocked his head.

"Good. Here's the thing. I'm about to pay you half again as much—a permanent raise—because I'm going to assign you some temporary duties. We clear so far?"

Cedric looked even more alarmed, but he straightened, his chin going up in a gesture that reminded Tony of Pepper. "Yes, Mr. Stark."

Tony gave him an assessing look. "I'm sure you're aware that Ms. Potts' time is at a premium these days. And I'm sure you do what you can to make things easier for her."

Cedric's expression eased slightly, and he nodded. Tony went on. "Good. But I need you to do better. I need you to take over as much of her work here as you can, and--here's the hard part--do it without her catching on. If that means staying late or coming in early, then that's what you do. If it means working through lunch and dinner, or giving up your weekend, then you do that too. Pepper's a perceptive woman, but--" He raised a brow. "--if there's one thing I've noticed about personal assistants, it's that the best ones are experts at getting around their bosses."
Cedric's mouth curved, a small and confident expression, and Tony knew he had the man. "Yes, sir, we are."

Tony nodded. "Thought so. So--are we good?"

Pepper's assistant let out a breath. "Yes, Mr. Stark." His eyes were gleaming, and Tony held back a grin--here too was someone who thrived on overwork. With Cedric's help and a little luck, Pepper's burden would be eased and she might start getting enough sleep at night. Tony figured Pepper would catch on eventually, but either way they would all be better off.

"Excellent." Tony stuck out a hand, and after a second's hesitation Cedric shook it, his grip light but dry. His nervousness was all but gone, and he met Tony's eyes without flinching. Tony gave him an austere smile. "You start now."

Cedric nodded once more, turned, and was gone with his usual unobtrusive speed. Tony smirked, and poured himself a celebratory drink.

One thing Tony hadn't anticipated when he'd asked Pepper to move in was the difficulty in keeping anything secret from her. She handled his schedule and Happy's, and she was already prone to wandering into his space at random moments, either to tell him something, get him to sign something...or just to kiss him, which latter item he favored deeply.

It did complicate things slightly, though. Jarvis was far faster than even Tony's reflexes, so Pepper coming up behind him didn't actually see anything, but he knew she suspected him of something. The first time Jarvis had blanked his screen, Pepper had blushed, then stammered through half a speech of how she didn't mind if Tony still looked at porn before he'd gathered wits enough to yank her off her feet and explain, deeply and repeatedly, that he didn't any longer.

He might have done so eventually, out of habit if nothing else, but it had been clear even to him that Pepper had been lying through her teeth.

It would have been easier to tell her that he was working on something private, but--

*What fun is a surprise you know is coming?*

Finally Tony gave up, and told Pepper to schedule him a day for him to stay home and work on the suit. And asked--not *ordered*--her to attend a budget meeting for him.

And as soon as Happy reported she was safely at Stark Industries, Tony climbed into his Audi and took off.

Frascatti's had several things to recommend it. It was extremely high-end, *very* discreet, and carried gorgeous pieces. And its diamonds were certified as conflict-free by the meticulous owner--a distinction that Tony had recently come to appreciate in a very personal way.

The main floor of the jeweler's was open to anyone with enough money to dare to step inside, but the upstairs showrooms were by appointment only. Tony parked in the little gated garage and slipped up the back stairs, grateful for the privacy. Normally he wouldn't care if the press got wind of his visit--but he didn't want Pepper to know.

Yet.
The owner met Tony at the head of the stairs. Ashima Venkatiasian was calm, elegant, and about fifteen years Tony's elder, and barely came to his chin even in heels. But her aura of serene authority had nothing to do with her height. Tony enfolded her tiny hand gently in his, returning her smile. "Hello, Ashima. It's good to see you."

"And you, Tony. It's been quite some time." She drew him into the plush-carpeted room, and one of her assistants swung the door closed behind him. The heavy click spoke of security.

"Yeah, I've had a lot on my mind." He'd been in the habit of dropping by Frascatti's to purchase a bauble or two for his latest paramour, but it had been almost a year now since he'd had a need for jewelry.

"Indeed." Ashima led him to a pair of plush chairs arranged next to a small table, and gestured him into one. She evinced no curiosity about Tony's changes, and while he would expect the courtesy from her anyway, he got the feeling that she really didn't care. Ashima's focus was gems, and the exquisite presentation thereof. "What are you looking for today?"

Tony leaned back a little, and let the grin take over. "Everything."

Ashima's cool smile warmed. "As you should be for so lovely a bride."

He nodded. "She's allergic to silver."

"And will require delicacy, elegance--heavy pieces would overwhelm." Ashima nodded back and gestured to the discreetly hovering assistant, a tall slender young man. He bent, and she spoke quietly to him before waving him off.

Tony wasn't surprised that Ashima remembered Pepper so precisely. Not only had his PA accompanied him on more than one visit, she had sometimes come alone at his request to select something for one of his paramours or pick up a piece. Plus, there were those earrings two years ago. Usually Tony told Pepper to pick out her own Christmas gift, but the diamond studs had caught his eye.

Of course, he'd only seen her wear them once, but he had to admit they weren't everyday jewelry.

As the assistant busied himself at the long display cases at the back of the small room, another one wheeled forward a cart. "Tea?" Ashima inquired politely.

Tony accepted, as he always did, knowing she would only make him drink one cup. It was part of the ritual, and he could appreciate that; the fragile vessel she handed him was always filled with something that smelled sweet and tasted smoky, and he had never been able to place the flavor.

"What does Ms. Potts wear on special occasions?" Ashima asked.

Tony frowned in thought; in the past, he hadn't paid attention to such details, too taken up by the overall package. "To tell you the truth, I'm not really sure." He swirled the tea gently. "Never anything flashy, though."

And that was one of the reasons he'd come to Frascatti's instead of going through his mother's jewels. Maria Stark's strong coloring and vivid features had lent themselves to bolder pieces than Pepper could wear; and she had favored garnets and rubies, which would not suit his fianceé at all.

The jeweler nodded again. "So we will start with the ring. An heirloom, I understand?"

Pepper had released details of the ring to the press early on, knowing how the game was played, and
according to Jarvis had started a minor run on opals. "It belonged to my great-grandmother, but it could be older. I haven't looked up the provenance."

"Late Victorian at least. Very good." Ashima set her own cup aside as the assistant brought over another cart, this one laden with velvet boxes.

"That reminds me, I need to look into wedding rings too." His parents' rings still sat in the safe deposit box, but somehow they didn't feel appropriate to Tony. *I want...I want something that's ours alone.*

Ashima raised an elegant brow. "A word to the wise, Tony--such decisions are best made by consensus."

He smiled into his cup. "I'll keep that in mind."

They settled to business. The assistant handed box after box to Ashima, who would open it, consider the contents, and either close it and hand it back or remove the jewelry and lay it out on the little table for Tony to examine. Earrings, bracelets, necklaces, rings, a few watches and hair ornaments--there was even a tiara, delicate curlicues of gold accented with tiny diamonds, but as much as he admired it Tony couldn't think of a plausible way to get Pepper to actually wear the thing. He passed it up with a sigh, tucking the notion away for later possibilities.

In the end, he restrained himself. No rings--though it occurred to him that it would be fun to bring Pepper in and let her choose something for herself--but a slender golden thread of an anklet that raised his pulse at just the imagining of it encircling her leg; two bracelets, one with diamonds and sapphires and one with diamonds alone; and a whimsical hairpin done in emeralds that, when one looked closely, took the form of a bell pepper.

He took more time over the necklaces. A diamond and sapphire solitaire on a thin chain, a black-opal pendant in vivid blue-green, a twisted rope of white and yellow gold. Earrings to match. And the most magnificent piece of all, clearly chosen to compliment Pepper's ring--a heavy pendant of malachite and misty opal, wrapped round in fluid gold.

"Yes," Tony stated when he saw it, enchanted with the vision of it glowing against Pepper's skin. "Perfect."

Ashima's smile was demurely proud. "I thought so."

Tony left Frascatti's with a discreet bag, weighted with gold and velvet, and was halfway home before he smacked the steering wheel with one frustrated hand. "Fuck," he said out loud.

*I always forget to ask. Just who the hell is Frascatti?*

He could hardly wait for Pepper to get home. Tony laid out the boxes on the low table in the living room, opening them so the sunlight could flash and gleam on the contents, and tried to contain his impatience. Her words about generosity kept running through his head, and Tony imagined her face lighting at the sight of the jewels. Pepper appreciated things of good taste, and gems from Frascatti's were *always* in the best of taste.

So when she came in the door, he was waiting to meet her, and she laughed at his enthusiastic kiss. "I'm glad to see you too, Tony."
"Come here." He tugged her towards the living room, and Pepper followed.

"What is it? Did you order lunch or--"

Her words squeaked off at the sight of the boxes, and she faltered. Tony steered her to the table and gestured proudly. "I went shopping today."

Pepper stared, apparently without words, and Tony sat down on the couch, pulling her down to sit next to him. When she still didn't say anything, he picked up the nearest box impatiently and handed it to her. It happened to be the black opal pendant.

Her fingers closed around the box slowly, and she looked down at it, eyes wide. Finally she swallowed, and reached to touch the opal with the tip of one finger.

Tony sat back, pleased. She looked absolutely stunned.

Pepper licked her lips, straightened, and lifted her head. "Tony, I--I can't accept these."

His stomach lurched in shock. "What? Why the hell not?"

She blinked rapidly, her cheeks pale. "It--it's too much. These are--they're too much, Tony, they're way too--"

"Don't say it," he interrupted sharply. Bewildered hurt was welling up like poison in his chest, and it was making him feel sick. "Cost doesn't matter, Pepper, you--"

"No--" She snapped the box shut and returned it hastily to the table, as if afraid to touch it. "I can't."

Anger joined the pain, a nauseating mix that seemed to make his skin pull taut. "Why not? You're going to be my wife, Pepper. Can't I give my wife jewelry?"

Pepper pressed her hands to her lips, eyes still huge, and spoke around her fingers, her voice trembling. "It's not appropriate, Tony. It's--"

"'Appropriate' is whatever the fuck we decide it is." The anger pushed Tony to his feet. "You know what? If you don't want 'em, fine. Whatever. Do what you like."

Unable to bear another instant of her rejection, he spun and strode to the workshop stairs, half-running down them and leaving the whole mess behind.
Chapter 11

His fury cooled slowly, but more hurt rose to take its place, and Tony slumped in a chair in his shop, unable to do more than brood. Pepper's refusal felt like a blow, like someone had punched him from behind; Tony had expected delight, not dismay, and he tried to figure out what he'd done wrong.

But he couldn't. *She's my fianceé*, he thought stubbornly. *She's going to be my wife. Why shouldn't I give her things?*

Part of him wished he'd never had the idea. But he'd given her gifts before, many times, though mostly he'd just told her to pick something she wanted.

Maybe she didn't *like* the jewelry; but that didn't fit either, because she'd barely looked at the pieces. Tony rubbed irritably at his forehead, where a stubborn ache sat. None of it made any sense, and the worst of it was the creeping fear that he'd ruined things somehow, that he would go back upstairs and find her packing to leave--

And yet, he couldn't move. Pride stood between him and the stairs, barring the way.

He sat for a long time, cycling through fear to anger and back again, wondering if everything was ruined now. *She forgave me for what happened at the party, but--*

The thought of Pepper *gone* made him feel sicker. The house would be far too empty without her, echoing and hollow.

Logic told him to go upstairs, to find Pepper and cajole her, coax her until she laughed and the whole thing was behind them. Tony knew he had charm enough to do it, to overwhelm whatever objections Pepper had and make her see things his way.

But he didn't. It didn't feel right, though what *right* was he didn't know. Turning on the charm was his old habit, a way to slide out of consequences, but it smacked of dishonesty and he didn't want that.

And of giving in, and he couldn't do that either.

Pride kept him from turning, hours later, when the door beeped open and heels tapped across the concrete. They halted behind him, and Tony half-expected Pepper to just give him some work-related statement in the cool voice she used when she was pissed with him.

But instead the steps started up again, circling around his chair. Tony looked up as Pepper came into view.

She was still dressed in her work suit, but it was wrinkled; her eyes were swollen and her nose pink, as if she'd been weeping. Part of Tony wanted to jump up and grab her, but the anger and fear held him still and silent.

Pepper was holding one of the velvet boxes, and she cleared her throat before speaking. "I'm sorry."

That made him blink. Pepper went on, her voice low and a little hoarse. "I was wrong, Tony. You...you have every right to give me whatever you want. I just..." She hesitated. "I guess I'm still not used to the idea. I'm still thinking like I'm just your PA."

Her words left him speechless with surprise. Tony stared up at her for a breathless moment, and then
his stomach unknotted with a flood of agonized relief. He reached up and pulled Pepper down onto his lap, hugging her tightly.

"Apology accepted," he managed, pressing his face into Pepper's hair as her arms went around his neck. She burrowed into him hard, and Tony could feel her trembling.

His throat swelled, and he pulled her closer still, rocking a little. She was scared too. The realization was humbling, and yet it gave him a strange shamed elation to think that Pepper wasn't as confident as she seemed--that she too feared to lose what they were building between them.

They held each other for a long time, slowly relaxing. Tony rubbed Pepper's spine with languid strokes, breathing in the scent of her and savoring the feel of her weight against him. When she spoke, half-muffled against his collarbone, she sounded almost dreamy.

"I didn't want to believe it, you know."

Tony made an inquiring noise, too drugged with relief to bother with actual words. Pepper let one hand slide down to rest on his chest, next to his implant, and went on. "I suspected that you...that it was more than just playacting for the media, but I couldn't quite believe it. I couldn't take the chance."

The low admission gave him another pulse of hurt, but only a small one, because now Tony could see how afraid Pepper must have been. He let himself smile.

"I'm starting to think we owe Wells Fargo a thank-you note." He slid his hand into Pepper's hair and coaxed her head up; her eyes were still red-rimmed, but her smile was back, wry and sweet. Tony leaned forward to brush his lips over hers. "If it's confession time, Potts, I really didn't think as far ahead as marriage until the ring got stuck on your finger. All I knew was that I wanted more from you than I ever had from any other woman."

Pepper nodded. "That was part of the problem, I think." She returned the kiss, a soft clinging touch. "Impulse works for you a lot of the time, Tony, but not so much for me. I need to have a framework of some kind, and when it came to a relationship with you, there wasn't one."

Her sigh was soft against his skin. "This...it's all seemed like some incredible dream, and I kept waiting to wake up. Part of me didn't think it was real, and that's why..."

Pepper trailed off, her voice hoarsening, and Tony felt her shiver. He tightened his hold, understanding what she was trying to say--that his gift had been too much for the disbelieving part of her. But she's here now.

Tony let his head rest against hers, so that his lips skimmed her cheek when he spoke. "Does this mean I can't give you any more surprises?"

He wasn't really serious, and Pepper laughed a little. "No...no." She sat up a little. "It really is too much, but that's you, Tony, I can learn to live with it."

She reached up behind his head, bringing back the box. "They're gorgeous, and I love them, and I'm so sorry I spoiled everything...."

Tony kissed her again to stop her words. "Not spoiled," he mumbled after a long sweet moment. "Not if you really want them."

Pepper's other hand was rubbing the back of his neck, in just the right spot to make him want to melt all over her. "I do," she said against his chin, and Tony reached for the box.
There wasn't a lot of room between them, but he managed to fumble it open and reveal the black opal pendant on its sparkling chain. Tony plucked it out, tossing the box carelessly aside, and squinted at the tiny clasp before shrugging. "Hell with it," he said, and slipped the whole thing over Pepper's head.

She reached up to pull her hair free of the chain. The pendant was as stunning on her as he'd imagined, a darkly glowing contrast to the gold-speckled cream of her skin, and Tony quickly undid another button on her blouse so he could get a better view.

Pepper laughed again, and took his face in her hands, and kissed him, slow and deep. "Thank you," she murmured when she let him up for air.

"I almost bought you a tiara," Tony told her, a little dazed, and Pepper clucked.

"Where would I wear something like that?" Before he could grab her, she slid lithely from his lap and held out her hands, eyes lit. "Come on."

Obedient, he let her pull him to his feet. "Where are we going?"

Pepper led him towards the elevator. "There's this phenomenon called make-up sex--maybe you've heard of it?"

*Oh yeah.* Tony tugged on her hand, trying to get her to slow down. "What's wrong with the couch down here?"

Pepper glanced back. Her smile was the private, sensual, promising one that always did very good things to him--and meant very good things *for* him. "I want room, Tony. Upstairs."

Well, he could hardly argue with *that.*

She took him up to their bedroom and undressed him slowly, brushing aside his attempts to help, and all Tony could do was give in and let her do as she pleased.

And, he found, being laid out on their bed and being made love to by a Pepper wearing only her engagement ring and the opal pendant was something he would never, ever forget.

"So what *are* we doing?" Tony asked on Saturday morning, sitting down next to Pepper on the couch. She had her computer on her lap and an apple in one hand, and Tony appropriated the fruit, taking a huge bite before she grabbed it back.

"You're going to have to be more specific," she said, her glance amused rather than annoyed.

He pointed at the laptop screen, which was displaying a catering Website, and made an inquiring noise around his mouthful.

Pepper's face went puckish. "I thought you didn't want to know, Tony."

Tony swallowed, grabbed the laptop and slid it to the table, and tackled her. The apple soared out of sight and Pepper squealed, laughing, as he did his best to test her assertion that she wasn't ticklish. Whether she was or not, her squirming attempts to escape were very pleasant, and Tony finally pinned her wrists to the cushions, looming over her and smirking in triumph. "I said I'd do whatever you wanted, Potts, not that I didn't want to *know.*"
Her grin was infectious. "Will you still wear a bunny suit if you know about it ahead of time?"

"Depends on what you're wearing." Tony arched a brow. "Is this your deep dark secret? You're a furry? And does that mean you love to dress up as a Playboy bunny?"

Pepper rolled her eyes. "It's scary that you actually know what a furry is."

"Actually, it's scarier that you know." Tony regarded her thoughtfully. "What other hidden predilections are you concealing from me? And what do I have to do to you to find out?"

It felt so good, this teasing; not just the lovely softness of her body beneath his, but the fact that there were no barriers on their flirting any longer, no dangerous edge to veer away from. Their banter had lost none of its piquancy; instead, it had gained a satisfaction that had been lacking before, a comfort underlying the back and forth that seemed to feed him rather than leaving him hungry. Pepper's smile widened. "You'll just have to wait and see, Mr. Stark."

For that, he bent his head and blew a raspberry against her throat, and Pepper shrieked and bucked, tumbling them both to the floor. Fortunately she landed on top of him, and Tony whooped with laughter, grabbing her when she tried to roll off him in alarm. "Damn, I love you."

"Gah." Pepper braced her hands on either side of his arc reactor and peered down at him. "Are you okay?"

For answer he slid a hand up to the back of her head and tugged her down for a kiss, which didn't work very well because he was still laughing, but she relaxed and returned the kiss, covering him like a warm and very enticing blanket. When it was over, she raised her head, eyes crinkling with humor and affection. "You're going to have a bruise on your backside, you know."

"You'll just have to kiss it and make it better." Tony ran his hands down her spine to her own backside, just enjoying the freedom to touch and caress. Pepper laughed.

"Later. To answer your nonverbal question, and it's about time you asked--" She paused to drop a swift kiss on his nose. "--A very simple ceremony here, with just a few guests, and then a party afterwards. I'd like to keep the guest list under a hundred people if possible."

It actually sounded good to him. Tony had thrown any number of elaborate parties in his time, many of them orchestrated and managed by Pepper herself, but in this case the most important thing would be the vows, and he suddenly realized that he didn't want that to get lost in the shuffle. Still, there were certain considerations. "What about the press?"

Pepper hesitated, her smile fading into thoughtfulness. "That's a complicated question. I don't want a horde of photographers, but we can hardly keep them all out..."

Tony considered for a moment. "Tell you what. Let's get Vralia in to take photos, and she can release some of them to the press directly afterwards. Then we can do a scheduled appearance later, during the party maybe. It won't keep 'em from hanging around the front gate, but it'll stop the howling."

Her expression eased. "That's a good idea, yes. I understand that we owe them a certain amount of access, but--"

She didn't finish the sentence, but Tony knew what she meant--some things were private. And while he'd spent his entire life in the public eye, often seeking the attention, there were times when the glare was just too much. "We'll make it work. So, party?"
"Definitely." Pepper's smile returned. "If we have the ceremony in the early afternoon, we'll have the rest of the day with our guests."

Tony shook his head. "Uh-uh. It has to be the morning, Potts. We'll have a honeymoon to get to, remember?" He let his grip tighten gently on her ass. "Even with a private plane it's going to take a little time."

He half-expected to have to argue with her, but Pepper merely blinked. "You have a point," she said thoughtfully. "All right, I'll shift things forward." Her mild expression was belied by the way she pushed back against his hands, and Tony squeezed a little harder, delighted.

"Traditionally the groom handles the honeymoon, right? Have you done anything yet?"

Pepper shook her head, and Tony pursed his lips. "Good, I'll take care of it." At her skeptical look, he pretended hurt. "What? I'm not completely helpless, Potts."

She snickered, and kissed him again, soft and swift. "No, you're not. All right, I will leave it in your hands." Before he could stop her, she pressed her palms to the carpet and levered herself off him; he grabbed, but was too slow.

"Hey, come back here, things were just getting interesting." Tony propped himself up on his elbows. Pepper climbed to her feet, grinning. "Later," she repeated, ignoring his pout. Gathering up her laptop, she strode out of the room, pausing only to scoop up the apple from where it lay near the fireplace. Tony let himself back down and sighed, contemplating later.

And honeymoons. When Pepper was out of earshot, he spoke softly to the air. "Jarvis, get me information about Orcas Island."

"By your command," Jarvis replied, and Tony laid an arm over his eyes.

"I never should have let you watch that. Put it on Terminal One downstairs, and while you're at it, pull up stuff about honeymoons in general." He lowered his arm and rolled to his feet. "We're going to do this right."

This time, they went in through the front door of Frascatti's. Discretion wasn't an issue, and besides, Tony felt like showing off. Pepper walked beside him, and while her attire was her usual workday suit, she wore the diamond bracelet, an elegant and fitting accent clasped around her slender wrist. He really liked the look of it, and the way her other hand would occasionally play with it, as if she liked the feel of it slipping through her fingers.

He already knew that he could spend a ridiculously large amount of his life making Pepper happy, if only she would let him. So far, so good...

There were two people browsing in the main part of the shop, but at the sight of Tony and Pepper the salesman nearest the door came forward instantly, smiling a welcome, warm without being smarmy. He bowed slightly over Pepper's hand and just bowed to Tony, gesturing at the carpeted stairs at the back of the room. "Ashima is waiting for you."

Tony glanced over at Pepper. "You called ahead, didn't you?"

Her smile was small but genuine. "Of course."
Tony grinned, and let the salesman escort them upstairs.

Ashima was indeed waiting, and greeted them both with a grace that simply didn't care that Pepper's status was moving from employee to wife. Pepper, for her part, smiled warmly at the little woman and let Tony pull out a chair for her at the tea table. The tea was already waiting.

They each had a cup, chatting lightly about the weather and pearl fishing, and when the paraphernalia was cleared away one of the silent attendants brought two wide velvet trays to lay on the table. One held men's rings, and the other women's; they ranged from gold to what Tony trusted was platinum rather than silver, from the narrowest of undecorated bands to wide, elaborately chased rings.

As the second tray was slid into place, Ashima rose. "Excuse me for a moment, there is something I must attend to. If you have any questions, please, ask." She gave them both a regal smile and walked away.

Pepper bent over the nearest tray. "It's going to be hard to choose," she murmured.

Tony hitched his chair a little closer to hers and reached for her left hand. "Want to get something to match?"

She looked down at the opal ring, startled. "I don't think they're going to have the same pattern, Tony."

"If you want it, I'll bet they could make it," Tony pointed out, intrigued by the idea.

Pepper nibbled on her lower lip, then looked back to the trays. "Let's see what they have first."

They pored over the bands for a while, but Tony had to admit he really did like the concept of matching Pepper's engagement ring. He himself only wore one, his MIT class ring, and when they tried on various kinds he found he liked the wider bands. Though because they were more comfortable, or just more visible, was a toss-up.

After all, he'd meant it when he'd told Pepper he wanted to wear her ring. He wanted it clear that they were both taken.

Ashima rematerialized after about fifteen minutes, listening quietly to their discussions before speaking. "Will you wear this ring on your left hand or your right?" she asked, gesturing at Pepper's engagement ring. Pepper turned up her other hand.

"It depends on what we choose, I suppose. These are all lovely, really, but none of them seem to quite work somehow..." 

Ashima looked over at Tony. "And what do you think?"

He shrugged. "Whatever Pepper wants is fine with me."

Pepper glanced over at him herself, her lips turning up. "That's not the question, Tony." She laid her hand on his leg beneath the table, a reassuring touch. "This is a long-term decision. What do you want?"

He was tempted to repeat himself, but it was a fair question. Tony let out a breath. "Frankly, I think we should match the band," he admitted.

Ashima smiled, and Pepper nodded. "Let's do that," she said, pulling off the ring and holding it out
to Ashima.

The jeweler took it and handed it to her assistant, who carried it away to the back of the room. "Now, tell me what width you would like," Ashima said to Pepper.

In the end, the two women settled on a medium-sized band, as broad as her engagement ring. Tony chose a ring that was a width he liked as a guide, and Ashima promised them results in about a week. The assistant returned Pepper's ring, and Tony felt a tiny pulse of pleasure as he watched her slide it back on. Mine.

And the thought wasn't pure possession; it was wonder and gratitude and love as well, all tangled together in a sweet confusion.

This is gonna be good.

As they left the shop, Pepper looked down at the ring and laughed. "They cleaned it," she commented before slipping her hand into Tony's. He wrapped his fingers around hers and squeezed gently.

"It's a full-service establishment. Want some lunch?"

Pepper nodded. "Let's get something to go--we need to talk and I'd like to do it somewhere private."

Tony wondered if he should be alarmed, but her expression was serene, so he simply helped her into the limo and directed Happy to find the nearest Burger King.

They ended up on one of the scenic overlooks on the coast, sitting under a tree next to the little parking lot and eating while Happy leaned on the hood of the limo and smoked one of his half-guilty cigars. Tony polished off his salad before tackling his cheeseburgers, and Pepper was still sipping at her milkshake when he crumpled the wrappers into one ball and stuffed it in the bag. "Okay, Potts, why so ominous?"

Pepper raised her brows, took one more tug, and set the cup down. "There's nothing wrong, I just didn't want to have this discussion in front of Frascatti's. I think we need to lay out some ground rules about my job, that's all."

"Huh?" Tony stole one of her French fries. "What about it?"

Pepper flicked another to an austerely hopeful gull waiting nearby. "I like my job, we already established that, and I'm going to keep doing it after we get married, at least most of it--correct?"

Tony blinked. He hadn't really thought about it, actually, not in any detail, but he certainly hadn't imagined Pepper doing anything else. "Right..."

She nodded. "Good. But I don't want you to pay me for it."

He sat up straight, startled. "What? Pepper, you--"

She held up a hand. "Hear me out, Tony. Even with the adjusted prenup, you insisted on giving me equal shares in more assets than I could ever possibly need. Paying me a salary on top of that is just ridiculous."

"Yeah, but it's work, Pepper. You work damn hard, don't think I don't know it--why should you do it for free?" He scooted forward a little, taking her hand. Her proposal sounded massively unfair and he didn't like it.
"Because I like to do it." She smiled at him, her thumb rubbing his knuckles. "Because you need me. Because making your life easier means good things happening for other people--weapons removed, new inventions, employees working, a company turning out innovations. I know my value."

"Pepper..." Tony wanted to kiss her. He also wanted to argue, because it still didn't sound right.

She wrapped her free arm around her knees, still smiling. "I intend to make a few changes, maybe--add a couple of staff at SI and delegate some of the workload--because I want more time to spend with you that's not work. But I want to do it because I love you, and because it needs doing, not because you're paying me." Pepper shrugged. "Also, it will look better, but that's not my primary consideration."

Tony barely heard her last sentence, because the one before it had turned his insides to mush. Giving in to desire, he reached out and gathered her up, pulling her onto his lap and resting his cheek on her head. Pepper sighed happily and worked an arm around his waist.

"Tell you what," he said after a long moment. "I'll deposit your salary, bonuses and all, directly into an investment account. You don't have to touch it if you don't want to, but you'll have it in case you ever need it."

Pepper hummed thoughtfully. "It's a thought, but seriously, I already have a pretty fat nest egg. If I'm not spending that--"

Tony set his jaw stubbornly, and lowered his voice. "Pepper. Please. I need to give you something."

He didn't know how to articulate that need. Pepper gave him so much, did so much, was so absolutely essential to his soul--the money seemed such a small thing in comparison, but he had to do it.

She tensed slightly in his arms, but then sighed again, this time resigned. "How about this--half into an account, half to the charity of my choice."

"Done," Tony said instantly. He might not like it entirely, but he had learned compromise in the boardroom; and, he was realizing, it applied elsewhere as well. "Just let me know which one."

Pepper chuckled, leaning back to straighten and meet his eyes. "You don't trust me to do it myself?"

"Nope." Tony gave her a slightly stern look. "Don't think I've forgotten what you did with last year's bonus."

"That was totally unnecessary, Tony, and besides--" But she was blushing, and he cut her off with a kiss, caressing her protest to silence. It wasn't that he didn't approve of charitable giving--Pepper might have set up Stark Industries' matching contribution program, but it had been his idea--but the bonus had been intended for her, for putting up with all the difficulties of the newly minted Iron Man. Having her deposit it whole with the Bernice Seth Memorial Animal Rescue had been a bit deflating.

Pepper rocked slightly when he let her mouth go, and slowly opened dazed eyes. "You may have a point," she murmured after a moment.

"Damn straight." Tony kissed her nose too for good measure. "And as much as I'd love to sit here and neck, it looks like it's going to rain."

She glanced up at the sky, where clouds were curdling, moving fast in the sea wind. "Yes it does.
Okay--"

As she scrambled up out of his lap, Tony smirked. "I wouldn't mind getting you wet if you want to stay, Potts, particularly in that blouse."

Pepper, who was wearing a white cotton top, gave him a dry look and stood. "Equal time, Tony, and your reactor would show through." She held out a hand. "Let's go."

"You serious?" Tony let her pull him up.

She turned and headed for the limo. "No," came the saucy reply, and when he reached for her she sprinted out of reach, laughing. Tony growled in mock anger, and chased her to the car.

"I'm going to go shopping tomorrow," Pepper said one Friday evening as they cleared the dinner dishes. "You have nothing scheduled for the day, so I plan to take my time."

Tony stuck a handful of silverware in the dishwasher basket. "Shopping for what? Does it involve power sources in any way?"

Pepper laughed. "Sorry, just clothes."

He gave her a hopeful look. "Lingerie? I could help with that. A second opinion is always good, isn't it?"

She ruffled his hair. "Lingerie might be a part of it, actually, but no. I need a dress for the wedding, and tradition holds that the groom doesn't get to see it before the ceremony."

"Spoilsport." Tony pouted at her. "Promise me one thing."

Her glance was comically suspicious. "What's that?"

"No butt bows." At her gape, Tony tried to explain, gesturing. "You know, those big bows right above the ass--"

Pepper collapsed into the nearest chair, laughing so hard she had to bend over. Tony stopped, a little baffled, but her amusement was contagious and he grinned. "You're not into them either, huh?"

She waved one hand weakly, her face bright red. "Butt bows," she gasped at last. "It's such a...male...thing to say."

"But it's true," Tony pointed out cheerfully. "That's exactly what they are. Big bows right on top of the bride's butt."

That set her off again, and Tony leaned against the counter, fascinated as usual. It wasn't often that he could reduce Pepper to hystericis, and it always gave him a strong sense of satisfaction--not least because he could so rarely predict what would make her lose it.

"They make 'em look like packages," he said thoughtfully, egging Pepper on. "It always makes me wonder what would happen if somebody pulled on it, like would the whole skirt drop off, or what?"

She was wheezing now, tears running down her face. Tony yanked at an imaginary bow, and grinned as she whooped. "Seriously, why not just go all the way and put bells on there too?"
Finally Pepper started to cough, and he had to pat her gently on the back and get her a glass of water before she calmed.

"Butt bows," she murmured, still flushed and snickering. "I'm not going to be able to look at one of those with a straight face, now."

"Good." Tony grabbed a chair and turned it around so he could sit backwards, leaning his arms on the back. "If I see one of those on your butt, Potts, I might refuse to go through with the ceremony."

Pepper took that as seriously as he meant it, sipping again at the water. "I'll keep that in mind." She set the glass on the table. "I wasn't really planning on a traditional dress anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Tony frowned. "What do you mean, not traditional?"

She smoothed her hair, ruffled from the force of her laughter. "I was just thinking of getting something fancy, that I could wear again later," she explained. "Since we're not having a big wedding, or a formal one, I don't have to look like a marshmallow confection."

"Oh." Tony looked away, surprised by disappointment. The event he'd been picturing for months now had always centered around a vision of Pepper in something white and floating—nothing too specific, but definitely bride-like.

The touch of her hand on his arm made him look back to her. "What is it?" she asked, serious now.

Tony shrugged, trying to be casual. *It's her choice,* he reminded himself. *You told her, whatever she wanted to do.* "Nothing."

The lift of her brow told him she wasn't buying it. Tony sighed, pushing up and off the chair. "It's nothing, Pepper."

He reached for the last plate on the table, but Pepper's arms surrounded him from behind, locking together just under his arc implant. "Tony, I need to ask you something very important," came her voice over his shoulder.

He looked down at her hands and saw the opal ring gleaming at him, symbol of all that he wanted so much. "Okay."

A kiss landed on the nape of his neck. "Do you trust me?"

That startled him, and Tony turned in the circle of Pepper's arms, feeling a tiny pulse of anger at the question. "Fuck *yes.* More than anybody." Despite the emotion, his hands settled on her hips without his conscious thought.

Pepper's gaze was calm and without doubt. "Then *trust* me. Tell me what's bothering you."

The anger crumbled into ash, and that warm ache took its place. Tony sighed again and leaned his forehead against hers.

"I...I have this picture in my head," he said slowly. "Of the wedding, I mean. I'm wearing a tux, and you're in a wedding dress. A white one."

He gave her a tiny smile, trying to make light of it. "It's nothing, Pepper, it's just what I imagine and it doesn't matter..."
The last word came out muffled as Pepper laid her fingers on his lips. Her smile was soft. "If that's what you want, then that's what I'll do."

Tony immediately felt guilty. "But--"

Pepper replaced her fingers with her lips, and his half-formed argument disintegrated under the caress. When she let him go, her hand lingered on his cheek, and Tony leaned into the touch. "This is a mutual thing," she murmured. "We're allowed to compromise."

"Okay," he said, too entranced to protest any longer. Pepper dimpled.

"Besides," and the laughter was back in her voice, "it's not like I mind. We may not admit it any more, but lots of women still have fantasies about their weddings, including what they'd like to wear. I was just trying to be practical."

"Forget practical," Tony said immediately, squeezing her. "'Practical' is a dirty word around here, Potts."

She snickered. "I'm still not going to do the marshmallow thing, though."

"Fine by me." He lowered his voice to a dire note. "Just one thing."

Pepper's smirk was a challenge. "What's that?"

Tony leaned in so he could whisper directly in her ear. "No. Butt. Bows."

She laughed so hard he had to carry her out of the kitchen.
Chapter 12

The render was taking a while, and Tony tapped idly on his workbench, feeling boredom breathing down his neck. It was way past midnight, and while he had plenty of ideas, none of them could be acted on until he saw how the latest design turned out.

Casting about for something to distract himself, he sighed. "Jarvis? What's the latest in Pepper's media file?"

"Nothing of interest," Jarvis said dismissively. "Stark Industries is, as always, mentioned in the stock trackers, but the only articles more personal are in what Pepper refers to as 'supermarket trash'."

The AI fell silent, and Tony waited for a moment before prompting him. "And?"

"And what, sir?"

Tony narrowed his eyes, suspicious. "What does the trash say, Jarvis?"

"Nothing of moment," the AI replied, sounding just a touch too unconcerned.

Tony thought for a second. "Did Pepper tell you to divert me?" he asked at last, annoyed.

"She did not...she merely implied she would prefer you were not made aware of those particular articles." There was no apology in Jarvis' tone. "Since the file and the original instructions are under her name, I--"

"That's enough," Tony snapped. "Pull them up, and shut up."

As the screen in front of him displayed tabloid pages, he made a mental note to adjust Jarvis' programming slightly, and leaned forward. What he read took him from irritation straight into anger, though not at his AI.

Normally Tony paid as much attention to the gossip rags as he did to the paper wads that didn't make it into his wastebasket--he cheered the great shots and ignored the rest, leaving them to someone else to clean up. But, he thought through the fury, Pepper couldn't clean this up, because it was about her.

The three most popular daily titles were all running variations on the same theme--that Pepper was a manipulative gold-digger who had somehow maneuvered Tony into their engagement, with sex, blackmail, and brainwashing all offered up as theories as to how. One of the magazines mentioned her stint in foster care, and added insult to injury by claiming that she was a social climber as well, desperate to escape a sordid, working-class past.

The smears made him want to put his fist through the monitor, or better yet a repulsor blast. They had no right to say such things about her, none at all, and when he got through with--

Tony took a deep breath, reminding himself that he could not go hunt up the editors in full armor, as satisfying as it might be. "Jarvis," he said, deliberately keeping his voice level. "Find out what it would take to buy up the publishers."

"Regrettably, that is not feasible," Jarvis said, and Tony thought there was a hint of anger in the artificial voice. "You have already reached the legal limit on ownership of media outlets."

Tony grimaced. "Can we get around that?"
"Not without changes in the current anti-monopoly laws, or sale of your existing holdings. The latter is not a wise course, however."

"Yeah, yeah." Tony waved it off, abandoning his fantasy of being able to fire the entire staff of each tabloid. "What do you suggest?"

The images on the screen disappeared. "I believe the saying is 'fight fire with fire'," the AI replied. "A statement to the press extolling Pepper's virtues might well counteract any ill feeling generated by the aforementioned articles."

"Huh." Tony pondered the idea. It didn't ease his anger, but it did make sense. "All right. Whip something up and give it to me in the morning. I'll have Cedric send it out." It was no good asking Pepper for a statement, he knew that already. If she'd tried to keep it from him--

"What did she say?" he asked abruptly. "Was she upset?"

"Pepper seemed more annoyed than hurt," Jarvis said judiciously. "I believe she was more concerned for your feelings than her own."

And that was Pepper through and through, Tony thought, his chest aching. She was guard as well as guide, caring for his heart as well as his life, and the knowledge hurt with the same sweet pain that had struck when he'd first realized he loved her. He rose from his chair, swallowing hard. He would go upstairs to their bed and hold her tightly, and apologize for everything he put her through, whether she woke or not--

But when he turned, he was startled to see her asleep on the old couch, endless legs stretched out over the cushions and one arm tucked underneath her head. Her hair was in her face, and she looked wholly adorable.

"When did she get here?" Tony hissed to Jarvis, belatedly whispering.

"Approximately two hours ago. You were working on the simulation at the time, and she chose to not distract you."

The ache was worse now. *She wanted to be close to me.*

It was still a new concept, and Tony bit his lip as he walked over to the couch. Pepper was so deeply asleep that she didn't move when he gathered her up, limp and warm; Tony cradled her close and walked to the elevator, his anger supplanted by a tenderness that felt unfamiliar and right.

He didn't sleep much that night; just holding Pepper was enough.

Jarvis' press release was as honest and positive as Tony could wish. He picked it up out of the printer while Pepper was in the bathroom doing her makeup, and scanned it quickly. It mentioned Pepper's graduation with honors, her MBA, the articles written about her, and her charitable contributions, which were many. It also listed the innovations she'd implemented at Stark Industries, including the high school internship program and the improvements in the company's healthcare benefits. Tony nodded, fished a pen from his breast pocket, and rewrote a sentence to remove the fact that the benefits changes had been his idea before folding up the paper and putting it away with the pen. *We came up with it together, anyway.*

When they got to SI headquarters, Tony waited until Pepper had given him the day's schedule and...
disappeared into her office before summoning Cedric. Pepper's assistant looked more tired than the last time Tony had spoken to him, but some of his frozen formality had eased, and he met Tony's gaze without flinching.

"Put this out through the usual channels." Tony handed him the press release. "And don't mention it to Pepper."

Cedric unfolded the sheet and read it over, frowning a little. Tony lifted a brow. "Problem?"

"Not with this." Cedric shook his head. "But she'll notice."

"And when she does, I'll take the hit." Tony leaned back in his chair. "You doing okay?"

Cedric looked startled, but nodded. "I'm fine, sir."

"Good." Tony looked him over, and mentally added his name to the wedding invitation list. If nothing else, after handling Pepper's extra work, he would deserve some party time. "You're doing a good job, Cedric. Keep it up."

The man actually smiled, if only barely, and flushed. Tony nodded at the paper. "Get that out over the wires before she gets up for her coffee break, and I'll double your bonus at Christmas."

Cedric's eyes widened, and he took himself out of Tony's office with admirable haste. Tony held in the snicker until the door closed, mindful of Pepper's injunction to be kind, and looked over his schedule. I wonder if I can convince her to take a long lunch in here with me. Though lunch wasn't quite what he had in mind.

"Pepper?" Tony poked his head into her office that afternoon, but her chair was empty. That wasn't unusual, but he frowned; Pepper had specifically told him that she was going to be working on orders all afternoon, replenishing the supplies he needed to keep the armor in repair as well as for his other projects.

But when he went over to look at her computer, it was hibernating. Tony squinted at it, puzzled, and then strode to the door to the outer office and opened it. "Cedric?"

There was no one at Cedric's desk either, but a head popped up from further down. "They're at the party."

Sophie was the receptionist, but not the one Tony expected to see. "What party? And why are you here?"

Sophie, who was small and round and cheerful, dimpled at him. "I agreed to cover for Mei-Lin this afternoon so she could go too." Given that Stark Industries as a whole was a twenty-four-seven enterprise, Headquarters actually had four receptionists so that the main desk was never unattended, but Sophie handled the graveyard shift ordinarily. Tony rarely laid eyes on her.

He put his hands on his hips, feeling a definite edge of rancor. "What party? Did I authorize a party?"

Sophie blinked at him. "The shower, of course. Didn't you know about it? I thought Ceddie gave you a memo."

Memo? Tony tried to remember anything informing him of what he now presumed was a bridal
shower, but nothing rang any bells. That didn't mean there wasn't one, however, buried somewhere in a stack of paper that Tony hadn't bothered to go through. "Oh. Right," he prevaricated. "That memo. Is everybody from the front office there?" It looked like Sophie was the only one on duty.

"No, Ted's on a smoke break, but everyone else, sure." Sophie seemed to believe him, at least. "Plus some of her friends from Accounting, and Ms. Fukushima, and I think they got her college roommate too."

The inclusion of the board member made Tony's brows go up, but he didn't comment. "Quite the guest list. Okay." He thought a moment, and suddenly remembered. Not a memo, because Pepper would see it, but a sticky note informing him of the surprise party and dinner to follow. "Do you know where they're going for dinner?"

"Heart of California, I think. The one downtown."

Tony nodded. "Call them up, and put the tab on my personal account."

Sophie smiled again, eyes twinkling. "Yes, sir." She turned smoothly away as her phone chimed discreetly.

Tony took himself back to his office as she answered it, and closed the door behind him, hitching one hip on his desk to look out the window at the panorama below.

It wasn't that he begrudged Pepper a party, particularly a surprise one, but it felt a little deflating to be left out. Leaning over to pick up his own phone, he hit the speed dial without looking at the screen and lifted it to his ear.

It took a ring and a half for a voice to answer. "Hey, man, what's up?"

"Is that any way to greet a captain of industry?" Tony said, contemplating the view and wondering vaguely why his father had chosen his office to overlook that particular angle. *It may show off the campus, but it's damned dreary.*

"Is that the hat you're wearing, instead of the 'I'm bored, so I'm going to bug my best friend' topper?" Rhodey answered easily.

"Excuse me, in this case I believe it's technically a 'chapeau'," Tony said, mentally repainting several SI roofs to spell out rude words.

"Maybe a propeller beanie."

"We have achieved liftoff," Tony intoned, and calculated how low a plane would have to fly to read the words.

Rhodey snickered. "Seriously, what do you need? Please tell me it's not that whole tank tread thing again."

Tony sighed exaggeratedly. "They didn't *sink*, they just got a little...bogged down."

"Yeah, and you practically had to take 'em apart to get 'em out again."

"Details." The idea had been one of Tony's few flat failures; he'd hoped to expand the idea to construction equipment if successful, but the physics of mud had defeated him, at least temporarily. "I just took it back to the drawing board, that's all."
"Leave it there," Rhodey advised, with an emphasis that made Tony smile.

"Yeah, sure. Want to grab a drink or something?"

He could almost hear Rhodey's eyes narrowing. "Did you two have a fight?"

Torn between amusement and irritation, Tony went with the latter. "Pepper's at some kind of wedding shower. Do you want to get together or not?"

"Only if it involves food. 'Scuse me." Tony heard a rustle, and then Rhodes' voice speaking some distance from the phone, telling a lieutenant to put the file in his box. "I meetinged through lunch."

"Hot wings and beer?" Tony offered. "Scalia's?"

"Hooters has better wings."

"Yeah, but their Scotch is crap." Tony loosened his tie, wondering if he should change clothes to add a layer of anonymity.

"All right, Scalia's. Last one there buys the first round."

"You're on, platypus." Tony snapped the phone off, and abandoned stealth in favor of speed. *We'll bring Happy along and he can keep the fans off.*

Forty minutes later, he was seated at the bar in the wood-and-leather haven of Scalia's, with Rhodey next to him and Happy perched at the little table behind them. The dim lighting would make it harder for someone to ID Tony, and while Happy was nursing a beer, he would switch to soda when it was gone. The waiter, however, was on strict orders to keep the French fries coming.

Tony licked hot sauce off his thumb and sighed happily. "We should do this more often."

Rhodey sipped his beer. "That's what you always say."

"And I'm always right." Tony took a swallow of his own drink, the same Dos Equis that Rhodey was drinking; Scotch didn't go so well with wings, so he was saving that for later.

"So what's up with Pepper?" Rhodey asked. "Bridal shower, did I hear that right?"

Tony shrugged comfortably. "All of SI is apparently throwing my PA a party, yep. Groom specifically not invited." He'd even remembered to send her a text message letting her know that he was meeting Rhodey for dinner. "I thought about crashing it, but I don't think that would work too well."

"Probably not," Rhodey agreed, reaching for another wing. "I've been meaning to ask--what the hell are you two doing, anyway?"

"She wants simple, so it's simple," Tony said. "We're going to have the ceremony on the back lawn, and then a party afterwards. Nothing fancy."

Rhodey munched for a moment. "How many groomsmen is she making you pick?"

His voice was so neutral that Tony blinked. "Uh...none."

Rhodey looked confused. "None? She's not having any bridesmaids?"

"No, simple, I told you." Tony stared at him, and then the light dawned, and he shoved his best
friend's shoulder. "You dumbass, did you think I wasn't going to pick you or something?"

Rhodey coughed, and a flush darkened his cheekbones. "Well...I thought maybe you were pissed at me."

Tony rolled his eyes. "You're a shithead."

"And you're whipped." They exchanged genial sneers. "So that's it? Promise and then party?"

Tony shrugged again. "That's what she wants." He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and took a sip of beer. "I thought about throwing a huge bash, but I have to admit that she might be onto something."

"Yeah? Like what?"

Tony smirked. "We'll get to the honeymoon part faster."

It was Rhodey's turn to roll his eyes. Another platter of hot wings was placed in front of them, and it was a few moments before Rhodes spoke again. "I guess that means it's up to me."

"What's up to you?" Tony asked around a mouthful of chicken.

Rhodey raised his bottle portentously. "As your non-best-man, it is my duty to throw your bachelor party."

Tony froze, French fry halfway to his mouth. "Uh."

Rhodey's slow smile was definitely evil. "Yep. Better get ready, Stark--this is gonna be epic."

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He was working on a new design for the suit filters when Pepper got home from the party. She surprised him, walking down the garage ramp in stocking feet, her shoes dangling from one hand and a huge shopping bag in the other, and Tony put down his screwdriver and came out from behind the workbench to meet her. "Pepper? What's wrong--did your car break down?"

She was flushed and her hair was ruffled, but the smile on her face bespoke pleasure rather than annoyance--until she spotted him. "You. Stark." She pointed at him with the shoes. "How could you?"

Her frown baffled him, but not as much as her missing Audi. Tony took the shopping bag from her--it was heavy--and leaned in to kiss her. "How could I what? Why didn't you call?"

Pepper ducked away, leaving him kissless. "I took a cab because I had lots of champagne. We all did." She set her hands on her hips and glared at him. "And I was having a great time until Mei-Lin happened to mention your little press release."

Oops. Tony realized that while he'd fully intended to take the blame for his idea, he hadn't actually thought about how to deal with it. "Oh. Right."

"Tony, there's a reason I handle these things for you! You really have no grasp of discretion!" She swayed minutely, straightened, and widened her stance, and he realized with a mix of guilt and amusement that she was, if not outright drunk, at least tipsy.

"I know," he said meekly. "But nobody would have believed it if you'd done it, Pepper."
She huffed, and he gave her his best grin. "I did run it by Cedric first, does that make a difference?"

Pepper actually growled. "Oh, give me that." She snatched the bag out of his hand and set it on the nearest table with a thump, dropping her shoes next to it. "He had the sense to talk to PR."

She began unpacking the bag, which was full of boxes, mostly white; shower gifts, Tony realized. A clot of ribbons landed on top of one flat container, and idly he brushed it away and picked up the box. "Look, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I had to do something and Jarvis wouldn't let me buy out the tabloids."

He raised the lid of the box, blinked at the lacy and extremely scant contents, and whistled. "Wow. Okay, I totally approve of wedding showers now."

"Tabloids?" When Tony looked up, Pepper was squinting at him. "What are you talking--oh." She glared. "Jarvis!"

"I received a direct order," the AI said without a hint of apology.

Pepper threw up her hands and went back to her bag, and Tony put down the box he was holding and reached for another one. Without even looking, she slapped at his fingers. "Ow. Okay, just tipsy then.

Sighing, Tony pressed up behind Pepper, trapping her between himself and the table, and wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling his way through her hair to her neck. "Come on," he coaxed, feeling her shiver as his mustache tickled. "I'll apologize if you want, but you know I'm right, Pepper..."

Her hands closed over his wrists, and she sighed. "I still have to deal with the aftermath, Tony."

"I know," he soothed, giving into the temptation that was her bottom pressed up against his groin. "Can I make it up to you?"

Her sour snicker was less heartening than her slow relaxation. "How about some warning next time? I can't do my job effectively if I'm not on top of developments."

"I promise," Tony said solemnly, and freed one hand to tug the collar of her blouse down, baring more skin to his lips. "How about being on top of me? You could model whatever that is in that box."

Pepper sighed again. "That's for later. Tony--"

She was clearly still annoyed, and Tony loosened his arms enough to let her turn to face him. Her hands came to rest on his chest on either side of his arc, and he covered them with his own, rubbing her wrists with his thumbs. "I couldn't let it go by, Pepper," he told her quietly. "You're my assistant, yes, but you're also my fiancée, and that means I get to defend you."

He kissed her nose. "Come on, haven't you always wanted a knight in shining armor?"

That made her giggle, and Tony smirked. "I suppose I could even come up with a sword if necessary."

"Oh no." Pepper shook her head vigorously. "You don't need another pointy object around here."

"You sure?" Tony leaned in and whispered something very vulgar concerning pointy objects, watching with delight as she turned a charming shade of pink. But before she could reply, Jarvis spoke.
"I am sorry to interrupt, but I have just discovered the whereabouts of Invoice 46-28832-B. Immediate action is recommended."

Damn. The news didn't kill his lust, but it did power it down, as it were. Pepper straightened in his grasp, her face grave, and Tony let her go. "Prep the suit, Jarvis."

By the time he had his pants off Pepper had retrieved a clean coverall and was waiting to hand it to him, both her tipsiness and her annoyance no longer in evidence. He wiggled into it quickly as Jarvis unfolded the platform and readied the armor, a strange metal embrace waiting for him to step into it.

Pepper held a low-voiced conversation with Jarvis while Tony let the 'bots encase him, but as soon as he was ready she was back, giving him the kiss that had become a pre-mission tradition. "Be careful," she told him, as she always did, and Tony could hear what underlay the caution--fear and love and longing all mixed. He smiled at her, not his cocky smirk but the one he kept just for her, an acknowledgment of what neither of them said out loud.

And then it was time to go.

As he stood in the shadow of a broken wall, the part of Tony's mind not occupied with angles and infrared reflected that usually most of a mission was taken up with getting to and from it. Flight time generally outstripped fight time by a wide margin.

Not today, though. He held still as an explosion sounded behind him and a little distance away--enough to make the ground tremble under his feet, but no more than that. The mercenaries who bore his weapons had scattered as soon as he'd landed in their midst, rather than trying to take him, and he had to give them points for tactics, because they seemed to be concentrating on wiping him out at a distance rather than directly. Not bad. Minimize their casualties, exhaust my resources--it's a pretty decent plan.

Except that it wasn't going to work. Tony's abilities in the suit were limited more by his own physical endurance than anything else, given his updated power supply; and nothing short of a matching power suit or vehicle-mounted heavy weaponry was going to have a prayer of getting through his armor. And while his opponents could run, they couldn't hide for long enough.

Still, it was tedious, draining work, hunting them down one by one. Tony had gotten into the habit of occasionally letting some poor bastard go if he--it was almost always a he--dropped the weapons and surrendered on sight; melting the stuff down with a repulsor blast was less damaging to his soul than killing someone who was babbling and begging in terror. But this group wasn't trying for surrender, and anyway he wasn't about to grant any mercy today, given what they'd done to the village they'd taken over.

"Jarvis?" he queried softly, habit keeping his voice low even though no one could hear him without the external speaker switched on. "What have we got?"

The HUD spun, using thermography to show four figures bracketing his hiding place from behind. "Three of them are carrying submachine guns; two have what appear to be rocket launchers. According to the heat signatures, one possesses a flamethrower."

Tony whistled at that last. "Seriously? I don't remember seeing any of those on the manifests."

"It is not a Stark Industries product; I believe it is of Russian manufacture."
"Huh." Tony scanned the area ahead of him, but the three figures who had been concealed behind various rockpiles had melted away. He was about to mention it to Jarvis when the wall behind him blew up.

The suit's internal repulsors cut in to cushion the blast, of course, and by the time he'd reached the apex of his curve Tony had control of himself and snapped into flight position. The four behind him were withdrawing, and he grinned coldly inside the helmet and dove after them.

Two went down quick and clean. "How long have we been at this, Jarvis?" Tony asked, hovering as he tried to get a bead on the other two.

"Two-point-seven hours, sir. There are still at least thirteen mercenaries remaining."

"That many? Damn. I must be slipping." There they were, a pair of scuttling figures moving in near-opposite directions. Tony let himself drop through the air, far faster than they could run.

"I do not think you are, sir," Jarvis said with a hint of concern. "The engagement pattern this group is displaying is highly sophisticated, and--"

"Hold that thought," Tony said, and let bullets rattle off him like so many raindrops before sending his targets to their presumptive rewards. "You were saying?"

"Analysis indicates that whoever is leading the individuals has a goal in mind," Jarvis went on.

"I'm sure he does." Tony lifted upwards about thirty feet for a good look around, re-engaging his thermographic sensors to see through the debris scattered across the landscape. Scattered spots of light, a cluster off to his right-- "He's just going to have to do it without my weapons."

The cluster shifted uneasily, more blurry than usual, and Tony figured that they were behind something, probably hidden to normal sight. Time for a little surprise. He snapped into a shallow-angled dive, putting on some speed. In the three seconds it took to reach his target, he heard Jarvis say "Sir, I don't think--"

--And realized as he blew into the old hut that what huddled within it was not human, but ovine. With perfect timing, the rockets came arcing in from all directions, and the platform beneath the sheep gave way in a roll of flame, taking them and Iron Man down into the pit beneath.

It took him another ten seconds to fight his way clear of what was left of the poor creatures, and the burning wood--just in time to see the gray tide break through the roof and come down from above like the end of the world. "Jarvis, what the hell--"

As the cement closed over his head, Tony snarled.
Chapter 13

A roaring tumble of thoughts avalanched through Tony's brain. Fury, fear, a flash of admiration for the idea, and a bizarre frustration at the possibility of dying now. It seemed doubly unfair, when he hadn't even managed to marry Pepper yet. Or finish revamping the big arc reactor, or follow up all the invoices, or--

"Sir," Jarvis said urgently, "you have less than ninety seconds before loss of oxygen begins to affect your function."

Tony didn't bother replying. Despite Jarvis' habitual sarcasm, his suit wasn't designed to isolate him from the atmosphere; air intake was filtered, but Tony breathed the same basic O2 as anyone around him. Adding air tanks was something he'd considered for possible future modifications--far future--but they would have added too much weight and bulk to the current design and weren't actually necessary anyway.

Usually.

He had to trust that Jarvis had managed to snap the vents closed before the cement had slid inside. Tony couldn't see anything; the gray sludge surrounded him, a gluey weight that held his arms half-raised over his head. Part of his brain was already counting down the seconds before what air he had inside the armor would be gone.

He activated his foot repulsors; the roar was muffled, and while he lurched upward a fraction, the motion was far too slow. Fuck, how much of this shit did they use?

There wasn't any time. Tony slipped into a state he'd experienced many times before, where conscious decision-making was sidestepped in favor of rapid intuition. Clawing frantically at the cement above him, like swimming through the thickest of quicksand, Tony managed to bend slightly at the waist. He didn't bother calculating angles; either this would work or it wouldn't, and if it didn't-

"Divert power to chest RT," he ordered, sucking in a stale breath and hoping it would be enough.

The thrust that blasted from his arc was huge, even more impressive in close quarters than it had been during his tests. Tony felt himself flung upward, a backwards hurtle in the dark; something slammed into him from behind in a stunning blow, and then light seeped in and he was pinwheeling through the air.

The roar ceased as Jarvis cut the power, and then Iron Man fell out of the sky as quickly as he'd fallen into it, smacking into the ground with a force that knocked Tony's remaining breath from him despite the internal repulsors.

"Open the damn helmet," he croaked as soon as he could muster speech. The lock clicked, and sunlight and hot dusty air poured in, dazzling him.

Tony just lay still for a moment, simply breathing and appreciating. He'd come close to death more than once recently, some of the possibilities very ugly, but this one had been worse than most. I wonder if they would have chiseled me out after a week or so...

His back throbbed viciously where he'd hit something on the way out; even the repulsors couldn't protect him from everything. "Report," he muttered, his mouth dry with the aftermath of adrenaline.
There are no hostiles in the immediate vicinity," Jarvis told him. "Suit damage is still being calculated; I strongly suggest you remove what cement you can before it hardens, particularly from the helmet and what vents you can reach."

"Right." Tony pulled in one more blessed, acrid breath and pushed up to a sitting position. His armor was a mess; the cement didn't coat it completely, but most of the metal was hidden beneath smears and globs of gray muck. Tony flicked away what he could from the joints and visor, shaking it off his hands and letting it spatter to the ground. It wasn't going to harden immediately, but given the low humidity, the faster he could clean the better off he would be.

It was hard to stand, given the way his back ached, but Tony managed it. "What's the status on the bad guys?" he asked as he stamped his feet to knock off more cement.

"They appear to be retreating at high speed," Jarvis said. "It would seem that your escape has confounded them."

"Terrific." Tony scowled at his suit and went on scraping. "Hey, Jarvis, give me minimal power on the right here."

His idea worked fairly well; firing his palm repulsor at the lowest possible setting more or less vaporized the cement, though it also marred the finish of the suit beneath. Tony couldn't bring himself to care, really.

Unfortunately, he couldn't reach the back of the suit without removing it first, and while that was possible, he had no way to put it back on again afterwards without the 'bots or a couple of friends, none of which were to hand. "You done scanning? What have we got?"

His visor slid back down, and an image of his armor spun in the HUD, highlighted in far too many places. "Structural damage to the lower back, of which you are probably aware," Jarvis said austerely. "All posterior vents are still covered with cement, as are many of the flaps. Pressurization may be a problem due to the structural issues. Most importantly, radio is no longer functioning; cause undetermined."

Tony growled a bad word. Without the satellite radio, Jarvis was cut off from himself back at home base, and Tony was cut off from any possible help, up to and including Pepper and Rhodey. "Make a note, Jarvis, we need to come up with an alternate form of communication."

"As you wish."

Tony continued to scour away stray traces of cement, bending one leg and then the other to work the stuff out of his knee joints. "Did you manage to update Pepper?"

"Regrettably, no." Jarvis raised the visor again, and Tony glared at the scrubby landscape. To a degree, that was a good thing; losing contact right after hearing he was trapped in cement was not something Pepper needed to experience. On the other hand, he'd just dropped off the radar, as it were, and she would worry.

Fuck. Well, there's nothing I can do about it right now.

"Wait until this stuff is about half-dried before you work the flaps," he instructed Jarvis. Too wet, and it would ooze inside; too dry, and the flaps might be sealed. "As for the vents...can we get enough air in the front?"

"Yes," Jarvis said, then added, "As long as you are not involved in strenuous activity."
Tony grimaced. "I'll do my best." Though the escaping mercenaries still bothered him. It went against the grain to leave the situation unresolved, and they would be much harder to find the second time. "Can we take off?"

"With caution. Please remember that your stability is reduced."

"Yeah, yeah." Tony settled his hands into flight position and rose carefully off the ground. There wasn't as much cement left on him, but he could feel the weight difference all the same, a subtle imbalance. "Scan for the rest of 'em."

As if to make up for his humiliation, Fortune was smiling on him; the remaining mercenaries, or at least most of them, were clearing out of the area as fast as their repurposed army truck would let them. Tony soared up and then down, and solved the problem with a small missile into the engine; he'd managed to clean off his arm locker before the cement glued that shut too.

He turned his back on the fireball and headed for home.

It was a long and weary journey. Without pressurization, he could fly neither high nor fast, and there was no way to let Pepper know what was taking him so long, short of landing and actually making a phone call. Tony might have been tempted, except he wasn't entirely sure that he could get back into the air afterwards; and as versatile as the armor might be, it simply wasn't designed for long-distance walking.

*Not to mention, I'd look like an idiot.*

No, in the end the best choice was just to keep going, and get there as soon as he could. Tony did consider phoning and asking for a pick-up, but then he would have to sit and wait, and that didn't appeal either. His pride wouldn't allow Iron Man to ben turned into a battered, gray-smeared spectacle at the side of the road.

By the time home came into view, he was exhausted and beyond thirsty, and the sun had already set. He'd been gone almost twenty-four hours and he could feel every minute.

Pepper wasn't in the workshop when he landed, which was disappointing. "Where is she?" he croaked as soon as the 'bots had the helmet off.

"Ms. Potts is upstairs speaking on the phone with Colonel Rhodes," Jarvis informed him from the house speakers. Tony knew that the AI was already communicating with his uploaded self in the suit, now that the pieces were within his grasp. "She has been quite concerned."

But Jarvis had apparently let her know that Tony had arrived, because within seconds she came flying down the stairs, so quickly that she actually ran up against the glass door before punching in the code. Tony's lower half was still encased in metal, but he stepped away from the assembly arms and into her frantic hug, squeezing her hard and feeling his relief returned.

"I stink," he mumbled after a moment, his voice hardly making it past his dry throat.

"Yes, you do," Pepper said in his ear. "And right now I don't really care."

Her voice was trembling a little, and Tony tightened his grip, feeling the tremble in her muscles as well. He absolutely *hated* frightening her this way, but unfortunately it was sometimes unavoidable, and he tried not to let the dichotomy eat at him. Pepper had eventually accepted his need to redeem
himself, and he did his level best to be worthy of her trust.

"Does this mean you're not still pissed at me?" he finally whispered, trying to lighten things a little, but she made a small impatient noise.

"You're not that lucky, Tony Stark." Pepper pulled back enough to cup his face in her hand and look at him sternly. "But it can wait until later."

Before he knew it she was out of his arms again, hurrying over to the kitchen area. Tony let the 'bots remove the rest of his armor, stepping free as she returned with a bottle of water in each hand. Tucking one under her arm, she opened the other and handed it to him. "Slowly," she cautioned.

It was an effort to keep from gulping the liquid, but Tony managed, taking slow swallows and giving the water a chance to wash over the sticky tissues of his mouth. As he drank, Pepper began to herd him across the floor—not, as he expected, to the shower, but instead towards the stairs.

"Where are we going?" he asked, exhaustion making it hard to think now that he was safe home. "I really need to—"

"I know," Pepper soothed, switching bottles with him as they came to a halt in front of the elevator door. "Upstairs."

He was too tired to argue even if he’d been inclined. Tony found himself leaning on Pepper as the car rose upward, mindful of his own reek but figuring muzzily that if she hadn’t pulled away by then she couldn’t be too grossed out. "I would have, you know. Called," he tried to explain, unable to summon the right words. "If I could have."

"I know," she repeated, and slipped an arm around his waist, guiding him through the master suite and into the bathroom. Taking away the second empty bottle, she peeled him free of the neoprene liner, making the small distressed noises she used when she was totting up his injuries, then pushed him gently into the shower and turned the water on full.

The hard streams were a blessing, and Tony braced his hands against the wall and let them course over him, closing his eyes and trying to muster the energy to reach for the soap. Before he found it, though, the net sponge slid across his shoulders in a slippery caress, and he heard Pepper's voice over the rush of water. "Do I want to know how you got this bruise?"

"Probably not," Tony admitted, tilting his head enough to catch a mouthful of water and swallow it; two bottles had barely taken the edge off his dehydration.

She tsked, and went on bathing him, slicking soap carefully over the cuts and bruises. It was a new thing for her; while they occasionally shared a shower, her post-mission care of him was usually limited to patching up whatever injuries he came home with, and making him eat. Tony decided he liked the extra attention, though he hoped that next time wouldn’t require such an extreme mission length.

Pepper made him turn, and he leaned back against the wall, drinking more water and too tired to even make a suggestive remark as she moved down his front. The warm water was easing some of the aches, but he was going to need a horizontal surface very soon.

"Here." Pepper reached up and worked shampoo through his hair, and Tony groaned faintly with the bliss of her fingers on his scalp. He’d never realized how purely nice it felt to have someone rub his head until he’d gotten engaged, and there were times when he sat down at Pepper's feet and hoped at her until she laughed and complied, but shampoo was better. Somehow the strong caress of her
hands unknotted tangles he couldn't reach otherwise, either in his nerves or his mind, and this was no different despite his weariness.

All too soon, though, she had finished and was nudging him back into the nearest spray to rinse off before slipping out. Tony cracked one eye to watch her dry herself hastily with a towel before she reached for the robe that awaited her, ignoring the small pile of clothes next to his discarded liner. Then she grabbed a fresh towel, snapping it open and holding it out. "Come on, Tony."

Patted gently dry, he was led to the haven of their bed; apparently Pepper had decided that none of his damage required further attention. Tony sat blindly down on the mattress, and Pepper smiled and stroked the wet hair back from his forehead. "If I bring you a sports drink, will you take it?"

The mere idea of the sweetness made his stomach clench, and Tony shook his head; at this level of exhaustion, his body simply couldn't tolerate anything more than water. Pepper sighed, and brought him a third bottle from the little wet bar in the corner, along with a couple of analgesics.

He drank them down and let Pepper pluck the empty container from his fingers. "You're staying, right?" he mumbled.

"Until you're asleep, at least," she agreed, sitting down next to him as he sank back onto the mattress. "I need to give Jimmy an update and clean up the bathroom."

"Uh-huh." Tony decided he didn't care, and rolled over to press his face against the outside of her leg, sliding one arm across her knees.

She sighed again, but this time it sounded contented. The last thing he was aware of was her fingers stroking his aching temple.

The room was flaming with sunset when he woke. Tony stretched gingerly, grunting at the various aches and then yelping when the bruise on his back pulled, but he was starving, thirsty, and ready to piss the bed, so he worked his way to the edge of the mattress and forced his creaking muscles to pull him upright.

His back hurt, but he'd learned to tell the difference between dangerous damage and the merely inconveniencing; the bruise felt deep, but no more than a bruise. Tony stood up slowly and limped into the bathroom, managing to get there without having to hold on to anything along the way.

The first order of business was to relieve his strained bladder. Tony was not entirely surprised to see blood in his urine, given the location of the bruise, but there wasn't much and he decided to wait on developments rather than mention anything to Pepper just yet.

As good as he knew the hot water would feel, he didn't think he was quite capable of a shower yet. Tony washed his hands and found a clean pair of shorts in the bathroom closet, and just as he was making his way back to the bed, a familiar figure appeared in the doorway.

"Where's Pepper?" Tony asked, sitting down on the bed a little faster than he'd have liked.

"Nice to see you too, Stark," Rhodey said amiably, and handed him the glass of orange juice he'd brought. "She's in the kitchen. Said she'd bring you dinner if you promised to stay in bed."

Tony passed up replying in favor of absorbing the juice, and Rhodey went over to the little table next to the window and brought it back to the bed, fetching its matching chairs next.
"Are we having a party?" Tony asked dryly as he set the glass down, and Rhodey shot him an amused look.

"Yeah, to celebrate you hauling your sorry ass home. You really ought to let us track you, man, or at least tell us where you're going."

"If I wanted the military on my tail I'd send up a flare," Tony shot back; it was an old argument, but one that might hold more merit than he'd previously thought. *Eh, file it for later.* He was really too hungry to consider it now.

Rhodey sprawled into one of the chairs in a posture at odds with his undress uniform. "You doing okay, Tony? The doc said you'd wake up pretty sore."

Tony, piling pillows against the headboard, shot a startled glare at Rhodes. "What doctor?"

"Dr. Phair, of course," Pepper said from the doorway, slipping smoothly through it despite the large tray she carried. "I had her stop by while you were asleep. You didn't even twitch," she added when Tony turned the glare on her.

"I'm not that banged up," Tony grumbled as Pepper slid the tray deftly onto the table. "We'll discuss this later, Potts."

"After you eat," she agreed, and Tony narrowed his eyes, but the smells coming from the various dishes were making his mouth water and he set that argument aside as well in favor of food.

Despite the almost-vanished sun it was really breakfast, cinnamon toast and scrambled eggs and slices of juicy melon, and Pepper even let him have coffee. That last made Tony suspect it was decaffeinated, but Rhodey was drinking it too so he couldn't quite tell. The food shifted his mood from irritation to a soothed tiredness, and he accepted the analgesics Pepper handed him without protest.

Rhodey sighed, and laid his napkin neatly by his plate, glancing at Pepper, who was picking at her melon rind. "So what the hell happened, Tony? I don't mind saying you freaked us out."

Tony shrugged, and winced. "I got ambushed, and my radio got knocked out. Jarvis, how did that happen?"

"The communications subsection was damaged when you struck the wall," the AI replied. "Incapacitation of both radio and telephony systems was not expected; further design changes may be required."

"You're telling *me,"* Tony grumbled, leaning back gingerly against the pillows. "Maybe it's time to split that into two separate sections."

"I shall make a note of it," Jarvis said coolly, and Rhodey snorted.

"Back on track, Tony. What do you mean, ambushed?"

Tony sighed, and explained. He kept it brief, not touching on the sudden terror and fury he'd felt or how close he'd come to not getting free at all, but judging from the set of Pepper's mouth and the tightening of Rhodey's jaw, they both guessed.

"Did you get them all?" Rhodey asked when Tony had finished. His voice was hard, and Tony knew he was speaking not as an Air Force officer but as someone who'd seen the depredations wreaked by similar groups--someone who'd walked through the ruined villages and counted bodies.
Tony rubbed his throbbing head. "I think so. Most of 'em anyway."

Rhodey nodded, and let it go. It went against the grain, Tony thought bitterly, to leave the situation so unresolved, but there was little he could do about it. Any survivors were long gone, and if he'd stayed to hunt them, he might never have made it home at all.

Once upon a time, he might not have cared so much, but now--

Now, he wasn't the only one who mattered any more.

Pepper pushed back her chair and rose, stacking the plates neatly on the tray. "Jimmy, I hate to kick you out, but--"

Rhodes stood as well. "No, no--I should get going anyway. Tony, you rest up, I'll come by tomorrow." He leaned down to kiss Pepper's cheek, and picked up the tray. "I'll drop this off on my way out."

Tony wanted to argue that he wasn't an invalid, but exhaustion was creeping up on him, and his back hurt from sitting. Rhodey paused at the door to glance back, and if his grin was a little forced, the gleam in his eyes was genuine. "Heal up fast--we've got a party next week, you know."

Pepper pointed meaningfully at the hall, and Rhodey chuckled and was gone.

Tony half-expected Pepper to ask about the party, but she was silent, pushing the chairs in under the table and then kicking off the soft slippers she was wearing. He watched as she shimmied out of her sweatshirt, revealing a camisole, and approved on general principles, but then she gestured at him. "On your tummy, Tony. I need to look at that bruise."

He complied, carefully stretching out on the mattress. "Phair's orders?" he asked in an even voice, still irritated that she'd brought in the doctor while he was asleep.

Her fingers were cool and gentle as she touched various spots, too lightly to make him flinch. "We tried to wake you, but then she said you didn't need a hospital and to let you sleep." Pepper's voice was as even as his own, but the hot splash that landed on his spine startled him. "She gave you a shot and you didn't even move--"

Tony craned his head around to look at her, biting back the grunt. The tears running down her cheeks hurt almost as much as his back, but in a much different way.

Wordless, he held out a hand. Pepper wiped her face with the hem of her camisole and climbed onto the bed next to him, lying back against the pillows. Tony shifted carefully until he could lay his head on her chest, wrapping an arm around her waist and feeling her embrace him in turn, her hands avoiding his deeper bruises.

There was nothing he could say, no promise he could give. Tony let his fingers caress the soft skin of Pepper's hip, just above the waistband of her yoga pants, and felt her slowly relax, giving and returning comfort. Her breath stirred the hair on the top of his head, and he was grateful even for the dulling ache in his back, all the sensations reminders that he was alive.

"You're not going to make me brush my teeth?" he asked eventually, on the edge of sleep.

Her chuckle followed him into dream.
Chapter 14

It was three days before he could move easily, helped along by the little sauna near the pool and another visit from Tim, but Tony put the time to good use, tearing the suit plans apart and putting them back together in an effort to separate his dual communications array. It would require more wiring and changes to Jarvis' programming, but he had time—for one thing, Jarvis also had to machine all-new parts for the back of the armor. The 'bots were put to work cleaning up the salvageable parts and polishing them, and fortunately for Tony's peace of mind, Jarvis found him no new missions that week.

_I might be willing to go after mercenaries at less than a hundred percent, but not until the armor's back in shape._ There was taking risks and there was being stupid, and Tony liked to think he knew the difference.

Pepper looked after him as usual, rescheduling meetings and calls and coming down to pry him out of the workshop to go to bed. It was normality, except that she would join him, which made leaving the suit plans much more enticing even when he was still too sore to do anything but fall asleep wrapped around her.

On the fourth day he caught her rubbing her neck, and hauled her bodily over to the nearest chair. "Damn, you're all knots," Tony scolded, digging his fingers into the hard muscles of her shoulders and grinning over Pepper's head as she moaned. "Tonight you get in the sauna with me."

Pepper pressed back against his circling thumbs. "Umm. It's just wedding stuff, I'll be fine after next week."

Tony moved his efforts up her neck, enjoying the sounds she made. "Should I hire you any extra help?"

It took her a moment to reply, and he made a note to do this more often; Pepper was, he judged, just short of drooling. "No, I've...oh...got it under control."

"If you're sure." He took his time working out her kinks. "I'd offer to let you have Tim for a session, but I don't think I want you moaning like that for another man."

He couldn't see her face, but Tony had the definite impression that she was smiling. "Remind me never to take you along to my stylist, then."

When Pepper was limp and purring, Tony let her go, kissing the nape of her neck as she sighed. "You have amazing hands," she managed, stretching luxuriously.

"One of the many reasons you love me." He stroked her hair back from her face, letting it slip through his fingers. "Just think, by this time next week you'll be Mrs. Stark."

Pepper snickered, one of her hands reaching back to reciprocate along the outside of his leg. "I could still change my mind."

About her last name, Tony trusted, not the wedding. Pepper had hesitated originally, and while Tony could understand the desire to keep her last name, he'd persuaded her to take his anyway. Atavistic, he knew, but—_Call it male pride, but I don't want any doubts._ Wedding rings aside, _Virginia Stark_ carried an unmistakable weight, a notice served to all who heard it that she was _not_ available.

"You know you want to be a Stark," he said, enjoying the way her fingers were curling around his
"Stark raving," Pepper mumbled as Tony bent to nibble the rim of her ear.

"Stark naked," he suggested into it. "We could work on that right now."

The way her breathing deepened told him she liked the idea, but Pepper hesitated. "Are you sure you're healed enough?"

Tony laughed, and planted a kiss right over her pulse point. "Pepper...I'm a genius, and you're brilliant. I'm sure between us we can come up with something."

As it turned out, he was right.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Tony asked. Pepper looked up from the buckle on her shoe and sighed.

"Tony, it's traditional, and people expect it. Besides, I trust you." She straightened and came over to give him a kiss. "Now remember, Josh is number four on your speed dial in case something happens, not that I expect it to, and you can call me but I might not hear my phone."

Tony looped his arms around her waist and held on when she would have stepped away. "Isn't that one of the signs of the Apocalypse?" Pepper snickered, and he grinned. "I could come along..."

She reached up to stroke his mustache. "The whole point of this sort of thing is to do it separately. Besides, you'll disappoint Jimmy if you cancel on him at the last minute."

"That's true." Tony aimed a kiss at her fingers. "I'd say don't do anything I wouldn't do, but where's the fun in that?"

That made her laugh out loud. "It's a party. We'll dance, we'll drink a little, we might even sing karaoke, but that's about it." She seemed about to say more, but Jarvis broke in.

"Your friends have arrived, Ms. Potts. They are pulling up to the front door now."

"Great!" Pepper ducked out of his grip and grabbed her shoulder bag. "Have fun, and no strippers in the limo, no matter how much Jimmy begs." She kissed him once more and hurried to the door.

Tony followed. The minivan outside looked somewhat incongruous in the setting of his front driveway, but the women leaning out didn't care, greeting Pepper with shouted hellos and what seemed to Tony to be a lot of feminine giggling. He recognized Mei-Lin in the front passenger seat, but none of the ladies in the back were familiar as they helped Pepper inside. He waved and smiled at their greetings, wondering just what the hell they were planning on doing with his fiancée.

Pepper threw him a last grin as the door slid shut, and then the van was pulling away, passing the stretch limo making its way up towards the house. Tony sighed, and went to fetch his jacket.

"I still don't get why you can't tell me where we're going," Tony grumbled a few minutes later. The limo's windows were tinted to impenetrability, and it wasn't Happy driving; Rhodey had hired the vehicle and arranged for the two Stark Industries security men sitting opposite them in the car. Or rather, Tony suspected, Pepper had handled the latter. He'd wondered if she would be displeased at the thought of a Stark-style bachelor party, but she'd taken it in stride, as if it were just another event
on his schedule.

"Why spoil the surprise? Be patient, Tony, for once in your life." Rhodey smirked at him and fiddled with his bow tie. He looked good in a tux, but never seemed comfortable wearing one.

"I'm very patient. If it's Las Vegas, you'd better have stocked this thing," Tony retorted, reaching to investigate the bar. Rhodey rolled his eyes.

"That's a four-hour drive, give me a break. We're not even leaving the city."

Tony poured them both vodka and sat back. The destination didn't really worry him; he just couldn't stop thinking about Pepper's party. He didn't know much about bachelorette parties, but if they were anything like the guy side of things, drinking a little didn't quite cover it. The idea of a tipsy Pepper surrounded by inebriated friends and men on the make made him...itch.

_I trust her_, he told himself. _It's everybody else who's the problem._

"Quit worrying. She'll be fine," Rhodey said, and Tony stared at him. His friend snorted. "Oh, stop with the bug eyes. You think I can't tell what you're thinking?"

Tony took refuge in his glass. "I'm not worried."

"Sure you're not. Here." Rhodey poured him another inch of alcohol. "Pepper can take care of herself. You, my friend, need to shape up and consider the freedom you're losing."

Tony took a fresh swallow, starting to smile despite himself. "I'd pay attention if you actually sounded like you were serious."

"Who says I'm not?" But the twinkle in Rhodey's eyes belied his words.

The building that the limo halted in front of had no neon, just a discreetly lit sign proclaiming it the Malibu Gentlemen's Club. Tony whistled as they got out of the limo. "I haven't been here in ages." And the last time had been for business, if he remembered correctly; his tastes in strip clubs usually ran to establishments equally high-end but flashier.

"Yeah, well, I figured you should go out with a bang, huh?" Rhodey clapped him on the shoulder. "But something with taste."

Tony smiled slowly, and adjusted his cuffs with care. It was the perfect venue for the last wild Stark party. "Let's go have fun."

Three hours later, the dim and expensive refuge of the club was a swirl of beautiful, near-naked women and tipsy men, and Tony reflected idly that it was a good thing that Rhodey had booked the entire establishment, because it would have been leave or join in for the other patrons and Tony didn't like party-crashers unless they were him. From where he sat he could see at least three SI board members, various college friends, the VP of marketing, and Happy. The board members had a lady each, except for the third who was flirting with the bartender; Happy was ensconced in an armchair equal to his proportions, with a surprisingly smug look on his face and one stripper on each chair arm; and Rhodey was leading many of the rest of the guests in a conga line around the room, singing not quite in-key with the music blaring over the speakers. Several of the other strippers and waitresses had formed their own line and were dancing in the opposite direction.

Tony made a note to tell his friend later that the electric blue feather boa Rhodey was wearing would go well with his dress uniform, and adjusted the black-and-white one looped around his own neck. His tie had vanished long ago, along with his tuxedo jacket--the place was kept warm for the comfort
of its ladies—but the undershirt he was wearing would, he trusted, keep the reactor's glow from showing through.

"Another Scotch, Mr. Stark?" asked the brunette lovely by his side, and Tony smiled at her and took the glass she held out.

"Thanks. Hey, can you see if there are any more of those little quichy things still lying around?"

She smiled back and sauntered off, giving him an excellent view of her backside and what little covered it. Tony sipped his drink and eyed her with detached appreciation; her curves were lush and well-toned, her skin smooth and tanned, and Tony suspected that a discreet whisper in her ear would gain him her phone number and the date of her next night off.

It had happened before, more times than he could count.

The blonde on his other side—short and slim and dressed mostly in very long, very red boots—leaned in close. "Are you sure you don't want to dance?" she breathed, every line of her body an invitation.

"You're the birthday boy—exceptions can be made."

To the house rule of no touching the performers, Tony surmised. Her hand played with the feather boa, and on impulse he ducked out of it and wrapped it around her neck, taking care to keep his fingers at least a centimeter from her skin.

"Not yet," he told her. "But if you want to dance, don't let me stop you."

With a smile that would have done Mae West proud, the blonde—he'd already forgotten her stage name—straightened away from his chair and began dancing, performing an impromptu tease with the boa. Tony watched, absorbed, and barely noticed when the brunette returned with a full plate of nibbles. She settled down on the footstool of his chair without visible annoyance, carefully ornamental, and Tony popped a pastry into his mouth and munched, wondering vaguely what Pepper would say if he bought her a half-dozen boas.

_Probably make me wear them myself_, he admitted, and had to breathe a little deeper at the image of himself wound in feathers and nothing else, Pepper teasing him laughingly just out of reach...

It was when he was in the restroom taking a piss that the fly appeared in the ointment. The appearance of Jack Roberts had to be planned, Tony decided with annoyance; the timing was just too good.

"I thought this was a private party," Tony told the other man when Roberts stepped up to the next urinal. "Did you come in the back way?"

Roberts, who came from generations of money, only smirked at the insult. "Actually, I was invited. Your flyboy friend talked me into it."

_Lie_, Tony thought. He might have forgotten to mention to Rhodey that he didn't consider Roberts a friend any longer, but if he knew Rhodey, the colonel had sent out a mass e-mail and probably not even asked for RSVPs. "Consider yourself uninvited, then." Tony finished, zipped himself up, and flushed, brushing past Roberts to the sinks. "I don't like you, and I definitely don't like the way you treat Pepper."

Roberts chuckled. "The divine Ms. Potts? She deserves better than you, Stark."

Tony washed up, watching Roberts in the mirror. "That may be true, but I'm the one she picked. Despite your many offers."
The smile dropped from Roberts' face. "How do you think she'd react to video of your little party, Tony? The head of Stark Industries, Iron Man, on the verge of his wedding, immersed in sordid entertainment. That girl dancing for you..." Roberts shook his head exaggeratingly, and stepped away from the urinal. "If Virginia thinks you've changed, she's sadly mistaken."

Video? Oh, come on. Tony snorted and dried his hands. "Again, it's a private party. I can have Security frisk you at the door for anything capable of recording."

Roberts sneered. "You didn't do your research, Stark. I've invested heavily in this club. One word, and they'll give me anything I want." He finished and swung around to face Tony. "Including all the surveillance footage."

Tony stared at Roberts, mind racing. The man wanted Pepper; that had always been his goal. Which meant he wasn't bluffing. Roberts would do exactly what he said, if it would break their engagement and make Tony lose; even if it didn't gain him what he wanted, he would have the pleasure of knowing that Tony didn't have her either.

But a moonlit terrace rose in Tony's mind's eye, and he began to laugh, genuine malicious amusement filling the room and making Roberts' expression shift from threat to confusion.

"Go ahead," Tony told him as soon as he could speak. "Release whatever you've got to the press, I don't care. Stark Industries will sue you into the ground."

"That won't do you any good without your assistant," Roberts hissed, discomfited but apparently not ready to give up.

Tony waved a hand dismissively, still grinning. "Jacky, there's one thing you haven't taken into account." He sobered, and stepped closer, summoning the force that had made him one of the top CEOs in the world long before he'd started designing his own armor. "Pepper. Trusts. Me. And since I've done nothing to betray that trust, she'll laugh you off like the pitiful annoyance you are."

His will was strengthened by the surety that he spoke the truth. Pepper knew exactly where he was and what he was doing, and she trusted him to be faithful to her, and that knowledge made doing so easy. Roberts could threaten, he could do his worst, but he couldn't take Pepper away.

Tony realized he'd backed Roberts into the wall. The taller man was glaring down at him. "Stark--"

"Save it." Tony turned away and walked out the door, ignoring Roberts as beneath his notice.

One of the SI security men was standing outside, waiting for him as unobtrusively as someone of that size could manage. Tony beckoned him closer. "I want Mr. Roberts removed from the premises immediately," he said in a low voice. "Discreetly, please. And then find me."

The man nodded and spoke into his earpiece to summon his compatriot. Tony moved back to the party, where the conga lines had broken up and turned into what appeared to be impromptu lessons in pole dancing, and pulled out his phone.

"Yes, sir?" came Jarvis' voice the moment the connection went through. Tony watched Rhodey and Simon from Microfluidics attempt a basic pole-dance move, and smirked.

"Do you know where Pepper's party is?"

"I do, sir, but I have been--"

"I don't want to know," Tony interrupted. "I'm going to have Security call you, and I want you to tell
"Understood," Jarvis replied.

"Good." Tony snapped his phone shut, and reversed it to get a good shot of the two men. You know, Jacky, you're right. You never know when blackmail material may come in handy.

Less than five minutes later the Security man loomed up on Tony's left. "Mr. Roberts has been removed," he murmured.

"Good. You've earned your bonus tonight." Tony beckoned him a bit closer. "Call up Frances and--hmm--Doreen, and have them call my house line for a location. I want eyes on Ms. Potts as soon as possible." The two women were also SI security, and he figured they would be a little less obvious hanging around the edge of a bachelorette party than a couple of guys.

The man nodded, and faded back to the perimeter of the party. Tony grinned, stuck his camera back in his pocket, and vaulted up on stage to show the other two how it was done.

By the time the limo rolled up the driveway, Tony was pleasantly drunk. He'd dropped Rhodey home first and let a very unsteady Happy out at his little cottage at the gate, and the driver, clearly used to this sort of assignment, had neither blinked nor flinched at their less-than-tuneful rendition of "The Wanderer", though Tony suspected the man had let out a discreet sigh when the noise level had fallen to silence.

Somewhat to his surprise, the minivan was back. Curious, Tony tipped the limo driver and went inside, stripping off his jacket as he went. "Pepper?"

"In here!" Her call trailed off into giggles, and he followed the sound into the living room.

Pepper was sprawled on the couch, flanked by two women he didn't recognize, all three of them with the silly smiles that bespoke some level of intoxication. The projection window showed a scene from Real Genius, apparently paused when he'd come in.

"Did you have a good time?" Pepper chirped, tilting her head back to look at him, and Tony laughed.

"About as good as you did, it looks like." He unwound his feather boa and draped it over the end of the couch, along with his coat. "Ladies."

"Oh." Pepper sat up, wobbling slightly. "This is Cherie, and this is Sarah." She gestured at each woman in turn. "This is Tony."

They both giggled at the obvious statement, and Tony grinned. "Nice to meet you both."

The woman on Pepper's left--Cherie--sighed, casting a regretful glance at the window projection. "That's our cue, I think." She leaned over to tug Pepper, then rose, waiting until Sarah had finished a similar embrace to tug her to her feet.

"Thank you for the party," Pepper said, sounding like a cheerful five-year-old but not moving to stand. Sarah staggered slightly, but then regained her balance, giggling anew.

"You should get married every week," Cherie said merrily, and all three of them laughed, as if at a
private joke. The two women made their way around the end of the couch, heading for the door, but as they came abreast of Tony Sarah stopped, put both hands heavily on his shoulders, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Hottie," she declared, wafting tequila fumes in his direction. Tony was too surprised to react as she stepped unsteadily back.

"Um," he began, only to have Cherie repeat the exercise on his other cheek, her lips lingering a fraction of a second longer.

"Nerd," she added, though her tone sounded approving. Then she released him and strode forward to hook her arm through Sarah's. "Goodnight, all."

"Niiight," Pepper caroled from the couch, and Tony turned to look at her, still bemused; she was waving one long hand, and looked not at all put out by their kisses.

"Uh, should she be driving?" Tony asked, pointing at the disappearing duo. Pepper's farewell turned into a wave of dismissal.

"Oh sure. Cherie doesn't drrrink."

He wheeled around to look after the women, but they were gone; the sound of the front door closing reached his ears. "Are you sure? She sounded like she was high on something."

Pepper craned her head around to look at him. "Sugar," she said. "Lots and lots of sugar."

That made Tony chuckle. The world wasn't spinning, exactly, but it had the warm wavery edges that a good buzz produced. Pepper, however, was a good deal beyond buzzed, if he was any judge. It was fascinating, really; he couldn't recall ever seeing her more than tipsy before.

Gathering up the feather boa, he draped it gently around her neck, then leaned over the sofa to scoop her up into his arms. "You're not going to be sick, are you?"

Pepper managed to snuggle and look indignant at the same time. "I feel fine."

Tony laughed again. "I'm sure you do." He headed for their bedroom, placing his feet carefully, so as not to drop his treasure. "Mind if I take advantage of you in your intoxicated state?"

Pepper smiled against his neck. "I was hoping you would," she purred, and Tony tightened his grip and walked faster.

When he woke, it was because something was nagging at him. Tony lay still for a while, eyes still closed, trying to recall what was bothering him, but his mouth was fuzzy and his brain tired, and he couldn't quite bring it within reach. It was nicer to remember the night before; Pepper was a sweet drunk, and while their lovemaking hadn't been earthshattering, Tony had enjoyed it thoroughly. *She's so adorable when she giggles. And a lot louder when she's sauced.*

At least there had been no question that she had enjoyed it too...

*That reminds me.* Tony cracked one eye, but the space next to him was empty, the head that had lain cradled on his arm gone. Tony opened the other eye, wondering how badly Pepper was hung over.
"Good morning." She didn't sound hung over. Tony looked around to see Pepper coming out of the bathroom in a robe, hair wet and tangled over her shoulders and a glass in her hand. She smiled at him cheerfully. "Do you need some ibuprofen?"

He blinked at her, then sat up. "Nah, I wasn't nearly blitzed enough last night." He took the glass she extended gratefully, however. "Um, what about you?"

"I'm fine." Pepper's grin was innocent, and Tony drank down the juice and gave her a suspicious look.

"Suuure you are. Pepper, you hardly ever drink more than a couple glasses of wine--how the hell are you not hung over?"

She snickered. "Water and B12. And experience. I went through a party phase in college." She sat down on the bed and pulled a comb from her robe pocket, beginning to work out the snarls in her hair.

Tony set the glass aside and took the comb, scooting up behind her and taking over the job. "Really, Ms. Potts? You have a hidden past as a bad girl? I've often suspected as much, but--"

He could practically hear her roll her eyes. "Yes, Mr. Stark, for all of three months. Then I got bored. But--" She sighed happily as he gently teased out a knot. "--I learned a lot, like how to minimize the aftereffects."

Tony had to laugh. Only Pepper would come up with the most efficient way to deal with the consequences. He smoothed back the last strands, and remembered.

"Damn. Okay, in the department of letting you know about developments, something happened last night." Pepper's shoulders stiffened, and Tony cupped them in his palms, gripping reassuringly. "Jack Roberts turned up."

Pepper turned her head to look back at him. "What did he want?"

"To threaten me." Tony grimaced. "Said he had video from the club last night. I don't know if he was planning on slapping it up online or just releasing it to the press, but--"

He recognized the set of Pepper's jaw; it meant cold, implacable anger, and on instinct he dropped his hands. "He wants you, Pepper. He thinks he can make you walk away from me."

Pepper rose in one fluid motion. "Excuse me," she said politely, scooped her cellphone off the dresser, and stalked out of the room, every inch a queen despite the terrycloth and bare feet.

Tony lay back on the bed, gave her twenty seconds to get out of earshot and dial, and spoke quietly. "Jarvis, give me audio on Pepper's phone."

Her voice was sudden in the big room, though Jarvis kept it low. "--care if he's asleep," Pepper was saying icily. "I need to talk to him right now. Yes, give him my name."

There was almost a minute's wait, and Tony closed his eyes and imagined Jack Roberts roused from sleep by a harried secretary or assistant, frowning and trying to focus on the phone held out to him, on the person waiting on the other end.

"Hello?" Roberts' voice was rough with sleep, but he sounded alert enough.

"Mr. Roberts," Pepper said, clear and crisp. "If you so much as think about threatening either Mr.
Stark or myself again, in any way, I will see to it that you will never do business again."

An indrawn breath. "Virginia--I don't know what--"

"Don't bother." No hint of temper, just the implacable certainty. "You cheat, Mr. Roberts, and you try to take what doesn't belong to you. Reputation is a very fragile thing and it would take very little to shatter yours."

Tony could sense the outrage on Roberts' end of things, and the growing fear. "Are you threatening me? Because--"

"I am not," Pepper said, cutting him off. "I am simply telling you what will happen if you persist. Obsession can be a dangerous thing, Mr. Roberts. Be sensible."

If it had been him, Tony would have hung up on the man, but Pepper waited. Tony listened to three heavy breaths, and then--

"All right."

It was grudging and furious, but it was capitulation. Tony smiled slowly at the ceiling, eyes still shut. Daaaaaamn. Pepper, there is a reason you're the highest-paid PA on the West Coast, and it's not just for putting up with me.

"Very good." Pepper's voice was sweet and cool. "Take care, Mr. Roberts."

She didn't wait for his reply; there was a click, and then silence. Tony rolled off the bed, grabbing his boxers on the way, and went to find her.

Pepper was standing at the end of the hall, staring at the phone still clenched in her hand. Her color was high, which meant she was over the first dangerous fury, and as he approached she blew out a breath and relaxed a trifle.

Tony didn't hesitate to pull her into a hug. "Have I told you lately that you're absolutely amazing?"

Her sigh gusted along his cheek. "I can't believe he'd actually try that."

"You're worth it," Tony told her; she hadn't returned his embrace, but she leaned against him without hesitation. He smirked into her hair. "Does that mean you belong to me?"

She sniffed. "Not the way you're thinking." One hand crept up to touch his implant, tracing its shape with a forefinger. "He tried to steal what we have, Tony. Our trust. I couldn't let him do that."

She looked up, her eyes wide and so open he felt like he could step inside her. "You're not the only one who can defend."

Tony breathed out, and pressed his forehead against hers. "I have never felt so safe in my life," he told her, utterly sincere.

Her curling smile was sweet against his lips.
"I've hardly seen you all day," Tony complained. It was true; Pepper had been in high gear, moving so quickly that he figured he was lucky to have gotten a good-morning kiss.

Pepper didn't look away from the clothes she was hunting through, but from his spot in the big closet's doorway Tony could see her smile. "I know, Mr. Stark, but I'm trying to tie up all the loose ends here so that we'll have the next two weeks free."

"I still think it should be a month," he grumbled, but he could understand why Pepper wanted to keep their honeymoon to half that. Life went on, and so did companies, and as she'd pointed out he would be itching to get back to his workshop by then anyway. But Tony figured he was entitled to a little sulking.

As for his missions, well, he meant to have transportation on standby, just in case. But he found himself hoping that anyone using his weapons illicitly would take it easy for a little while, and give him some time with his bride...

"Maybe next August," Pepper suggested, surprising him. "If it's a working vacation."

"Deal." Tony pushed off the doorframe and went to wrap his arms around her, clasping his hands over her belly. "Now about this separation thing..."

Pepper laughed, covering his fingers with her own. "It's only for one night."

"Yeah, but I still don't get why. It's not like we don't already live together."

Her thumb stroked his wrist. "Call it part of the mystery. Trust me--it'll be more special if the first time we see each other tomorrow is when the ceremony begins."

"If you say so." Tony rested his chin on her shoulder, savoring the feel of Pepper pressed against him. It was familiar, by now, but never boring. "But I can't keep an eye on you and make you go to bed, instead of staying up half the night working on those loose ends."

"Would I get any more sleep with you?" she asked dryly, though he could see her grin out of the corner of his eye.

"Ohh yes," he purred, deliberately brushing his mustache along the tender skin beneath her ear and feeling a pulse of pleasure as she inhaled. "Because you won't be getting much sleep tomorrow night, Mrs. Stark-T-minus-one, and I want you in top shape for that."

The tiny moan that escaped her was extremely satisfying. "Tell you what," Pepper managed. "I'll leave my laptop here."

Tony considered. She could still do plenty with her phone, but without it he couldn't get in touch with her. "And you'll be in bed by eleven."

"Twelve." She turned in his arms and gave him a kiss, long and lingering. "And you'll do the same."

"I should put you on the damn board." Tony let one hand wander down to her backside. "Wanna get a head start?"

"Tempting, but you're scheduled to leave for that last budget meeting in five minutes." Pepper
pushed a wayward lock of hair out of his eyes.

"I can be a little late." He squeezed gently, and watched her eyes slide shut.

"You're already going to be late, you're not dressed." Pepper leaned forward to whisper in his ear.
"Patience. You know what they say about those who wait."

"I've always been more of a go-get-'em guy myself." But Tony relented; the meeting was important,
and it behooved him to make nice with Finance if he was going to leave them to their own devices
for two weeks. He loosened his grip. "Okay, but we're still having dinner together, right?"

"Mm-hmm, as long as you don't get hung up with the satellite section." Pepper kissed him once more
and shoved him gently back a step. "Pick a suit, Stark, and get dressed--the smoother today goes, the
better tomorrow will be."

"I'm holding you to that," Tony promised, and obeyed.

The messenger arrived just as the budget meeting was letting out, and Tony beckoned the man into
his office and took the package. Opening the outer box, he lifted the inner lid and sighed in
appreciation.

"Just as advertised. Very good." He examined the contents carefully, removing the two smaller
objects, then closed both boxes and gave the package back to the messenger. "Take it on to the
second address--you may have to wait a couple of hours, I'm not sure anyone's there yet."

The hefty tip he handed the man brought him an obedient nod. The messenger passed Pepper on the
way out, as she was coming into the office, and she turned to watch him go. "What was that?"

"Frascatti's," Tony said, holding out his hand palm-up to display the little midnight-blue velvet cases.
"They sent the rings."

Pepper's eyes lit, and she came over to take one. The wide band within was wrapped in the repeating
pattern of her engagement ring, delicate ivy leaves and smooth black enamel, intricate and lovely. "I
think this one's yours."

Tony opened the other, and nodded. "Yep. You like?"

"Very much." She peered over at the smaller band in his box, then pulled the one she held from its
velvet cradle for a closer look. "They did a wonderful job."

"Should we try them on, make sure they fit?" Tony ran his thumb over the one in his palm, enjoying
the texture.

"They're from Frascatti's, Tony. They'll fit perfectly." Pepper slid the ring back in and closed the box
carefully, raising a brow at him. Tony smiled.

"Give it back to me tomorrow."

The house was far too quiet that night, even when Tony had the heavy metal cranked as high as the
speakers would go. It was the first time he'd been alone all night since Pepper had moved in, and
even though that had been less than twelve weeks before, he missed her.

Bored and restless, he fell back on tradition and started pulling apart one of his cars for a tune-up. There was no way he was going to finish it that evening, but it wouldn't hurt it to sit, and it could wait until they got back.

_I wonder what she's doing_, he thought as he unscrewed and dismantled. Pepper was spending the night at Cherie's, having packed a small valise that morning and pulled it from the limo after dinner and a kiss goodbye. He tried to picture her in a house he'd never seen, chatting with her friend and Cherie's husband, brushing her teeth, settling down in a guest room bed and closing her eyes.

_Can she sleep without me?_ It was a lonely thought, but Tony told himself to get over it. _It's just one night, dumbass. You'll see her in a few hours, and after that..._

After that, there would never be an excuse to sleep apart again.

_I won't ever be alone._

Intellectually, Tony knew there were any number of reasons why they might separate at some point, up to and including him making some terrible mistake. But he refused to think about it just then. In the morning, Pepper would come back to him.

To stay.

Gradually Tony relaxed, becoming absorbed in the engine he was tearing apart. When the music's volume dropped enough to let Jarvis be heard, Tony almost started.

"Sir, it is now midnight."

"Right." Tony looked down at himself; his sleeveless shirt was black, but even that couldn't hide the grease smears, and his hands were worse. Straightening from his crouch and grunting at stiff muscles, he went to scrub his hands at the sink, then wandered back, absently wiping the last moisture off on his pants.

The ceremony was scheduled for ten a.m., and the various suppliers were due starting at seven, but Tony knew that Happy could handle letting them in. "Jarvis," he said out loud, "if I'm not up by seven, wake me."

"By your command," Jarvis repeated, and Tony snorted and threw himself down on the workshop couch. _This way I won't get grease all over the sheets_, he reasoned virtuously, and if there was another reason he wasn't going to think about it or he'd never get to sleep.

As it was, he didn't notice when Jarvis let the music fade away.

The feeling in the pit of his stomach was akin to the sensation he got when flying—excitement and joy and a sense of possibilities, all mixed. Tony fixed his cuffs with care, and looked at himself in the mirror.

He looked good; well, he usually did. But Tony had taken especial care this morning, and he felt it showed. His tux was perfectly pressed, he'd trimmed his goatee, and he'd picked the cologne Pepper seemed to like best. There was one final thing he wanted to add, but as he reached for his father's pocket watch on the dresser a hum made him look up.
Dummy was rolling into the room, a small package in his gripper, silvery ribbon spilling over one claw. He held it out to Tony, who took it, bemused and wondering if even the 'bots were getting into the wedding thing.

But Dummy reversed course without waiting for comment, and Tony looked down at the little box. There was a card tucked under the ribbon, and he pulled it out; the three words were in Pepper's graceful clear script.

*All my love.*

Tony felt the corner of his mouth curl up, and he pulled the bow loose with gentle fingers, as if too hasty a move might damage the gift. Inside the box, resting on a bed of the fluffy stuff used by jewelers for padding, was an object he couldn't immediately identify.

Tony plucked it out. It was heavy, gleaming gold, angular and geometric, with a short chain and clip on one end. He recognized the design as Art Deco, and the patina indicated it was old, but other than that--

"Jarvis? What is this?" He rubbed his thumb over the cool surface, liking the feel already.

"It is an antique watch fob, sir, circa 1929. Do you wish to know the provenance?"

Tony shook his head, unable to find words. It was the perfect gift, simple and exactly right, and Pepper all over. He set the box and card aside, and carefully hooked the fob onto the end of the watch chain.

Then he turned the watch over and pried open the back, managing it without Pepper's fingernails this time. The picture of his mother was gone, removed some time before and placed into a tiny frame that now sat on his workbench in the garage; in its place was a little photograph of Pepper in profile, smooth hair falling across her cheek and a small soft smile on her lips.

*Yes.*

Snapping the watch shut, he tucked it into his pocket next to the ring, and went to get things started.

Actually, they had started without him. The back lawn held neat rows of chairs, set off with tall vases spilling over with flowers; a pavilion-style tent had been set up nearby, and savory smells were beginning to waft out of it. The repulsor field that Tony had set up was on—he could hear the faint vibration if he concentrated—and he could see a couple of motorboats far out on the water, Stark Industries security in place to keep off any gawkers coming from that direction. A baby grand piano sat on a platform constructed for it; the lid was open, and a man in a suit was bent over its guts wielding a tuning wrench.

Even without Pepper's actual presence, in fact, everything was going smoothly. Tony wandered over to inspect the refreshments, only to get chased back out again by the busy caterers, and moved his attention to the bar area next to it, where champagne was chilling on ice and rows of glasses glittered in the sun. He nodded to the bartender, who was waiting silently behind the long table, a neat bow tie adorning his...arm.

"Looking good," Tony told Butterfingers, who chirped at him.

"There you are." Tony turned to see Rhodey loping over, this time looking more comfortable in a suit.

"I don't rate dress blues?" Tony joshed, grinning, and Rhodey rolled his eyes.
"It's your own damn fault for having this outside. If I wear the uniform I gotta keep the cover on all
day."

"Blame Pepper," Tony said immediately.

"Yeah, I'll get right on that. Hey, I know I'm technically not your best man, but you have the ring?"
Tony patted his watch pocket. "Right here. Did you seriously think I'd forget?"

Rhodey shrugged. "Stranger things have happened."

Tony decided not to take offense, and the two of them were silent a moment, looking over the sunlit
lawn. Then Tony sighed and stretched a little. "It's what, about eight-thirty? Let's go in and get
something to drink before everybody else gets here."

"Um." Rhodey crossed his arms. "I've been specifically detailed to keep you out of the house while
the bride gets ready."

"Pepper's here?" Tony swung around to face the mansion as if drawn by a magnet, but Rhodey
moved to block him.

"Yep, and you're not supposed to see her yet, Stark, so stand down."

Tony considered trying to dodge around his friend, and then considered how pissed Pepper would be
if he managed it. "The workshop, then. There's stuff in the fridge."

Rhodey squinted at him. "I dunno, man..."

Tony held up a hand. "I won't go upstairs. Word of honor." He raised both brows. "If you're
worried, you can have Jarvis lock the door."

Rhodey snickered. "Yeah, okay."

It took them a few minutes to walk around to the garage entrance, but once inside they pulled sodas
from the minifridge and settled down to watch ESPN. Tony was amused when Rhodey did tell
Jarvis to lock the door, because he had at least three ways to circumvent that in under ninety seconds,
but since he had no intention of going upstairs it didn't matter. Tempting Pepper's wrath was too big
a risk.

Jarvis let them know when the first car cleared the gates, and Tony tossed his can into the recycle bin
and stood, feeling that excitement rise. "Time to get the party started."

There weren't many guests, all told; as Pepper had wanted. Old friends, a few elderly couples who'd
known Tony's parents; board members and a handful of SI employees. But there were no relations in
the little crowd, and Tony reflected in between shaking hands and offering greetings that both he and
Pepper had spoken a truth. In many ways, they had only each other.

"Felicitations, Tony." Vralia's gravelly voice broke into his distraction, and he focused on her
roguish grin. "Nice to see her making an honest man of you."

Tony smirked, and accepted her kiss on his cheek. "I've always been an honest man, Vee."

She chuckled. One camera hung on a strap around her neck and she was holding another. "Let's not
even go there. I've got some nice shots so far but I want to set up a tripod near the front."

"Go ahead." Tony looked past her. "Where's Jen?"
Vralia glanced at her watch. "Should be here any minute. Let me tell you, sugar, that home computer of yours is developing a real eye for a picture."

"Jarvis? Really?" Tony blinked.

"Yeah, he showed me some of his stills from the video feeds. Not bad for something with technically no imagination." Vralia hefted the camera she held. "You know the drill, pretend I'm not here."

With that she loped off towards the chairs, where people were beginning to arrange themselves. Tony shook his head, reminded himself to take a look at Jarvis' code, and moved on to the next person.

It didn't take long for everyone to get settled. Tony found Jen sitting in one of the back chairs, fanning herself; she looked, in his uneducated opinion, about ready to pop, but he figured that if Vralia wasn't worried he didn't need to be. A plump woman with curly blonde hair, she beamed up at him and pulled him down for a kiss. "You've done well, Tony," she told him.

"Better believe it," he shot back, grinning. "Should I have an ambulance on standby?"

Jen snickered, and rested a hand on her belly. "About two more weeks, they tell me. Though I have fun gasping and clutching just to watch people panic."

Tony sighed. "You haven't changed." He caught Rhodey waving at him, and patted her shoulder. "Gotta go."

He made his way to the front of the seating area. "What's up?"

Rhodey nodded at the little crowd. "They're getting a bit restless."

Tony set his cuffs. "So am I. Is Judge Fremont here?"

"Front and center." Rhodey tilted his head at the first row of chairs. Tony saw the long lean form of the judge occupying the middle of the row.

"All we're missing is the bride, then." Tony straightened. "Go grab your seat."

Rhodey clapped him on the shoulder and went to sit at the end of the front row, next to a short woman with brown hair in intricate braids who smiled at him. Tony looked out at the little crowd, noting the pleased anticipation most of them were displaying. "Well. You're here for the free booze, right?"

A wave of laughter rose, and Tony looked them over, smiling a little. Improvising was one of the things he did best. "I'm glad you all could make it. I know there's been a lot of speculation about this wedding, but fortunately for all of us Pepper's in charge of it, which means no belly dancers or AC/DC."

More laughter, and he let it wash around him, anticipation building under his arc implant. "In fact, I might be worried if I didn't know she is always--"

And he saw her suddenly, standing at the end of the aisle between the chairs as if waiting for him to notice her. She was wearing something white and filmy, just like he'd imagined, and the tiara he'd sent over the day before glittered through the curls of her piled-up hair; but really, all he could see was her smile.

"--Punctual," he finished after a moment, and realized he was holding out a hand. "And there she is."
There was no music, and no escort, but the guests still rose as Pepper walked up the aisle to him. Tony couldn't look away, not that he wanted to; joy was rising in him like a tide, joy and an exulting certainty that this was what should happen.

Pepper's fingers laced with his, tight and trembling, and Tony raised her hand to his mouth for a kiss, unable to resist. She laughed a little, cheeks pink, and there was a spattering of applause from the guests.

Judge Fremont, tall and dark, rose to step forward, her wrinkled face stern. She wore a dress in a deep navy blue instead of her robes, but there was no doubt of her authority. Clearing her throat, she raised her hands. "Shall we begin?"

The exchange of vows was brief and simple, but Tony felt the weight of each word that passed his lips, the solemn promises he was making. These I will keep. He kept his eyes on Pepper's, and she looked back, gaze clear and unafraid and so loving he ached with it. She spoke her promises in a quiet voice, and he wanted to catch each phrase and keep it, proof of how she loved him.

Mine, was his thought as he slipped the ring onto her finger; and Hers was the satisfying counterpart as she eased his over his knuckle. The gold warmed against his skin but the weight remained, and he welcomed it.

The judge, official sternness fading, gave them an austere smile, and pronounced them married, and Tony took his wife—his wife—into his arms and kissed her, scarcely hearing the applause. Pepper's lips were warm and she held him tightly, and the joy crested and spilled over, and Tony laughed, drowning happily in her smile.

It was a good party. Tony expected no less; Stark parties were always good. The champagne flowed as Butterfingers poured without spilling a drop or a bubble, and soft piano music came from the fingers of the musician at the baby grand. The guests mingled easily, chatting and munching on the little savories and sweets that the caterers brought forth, and Tony and Pepper wandered along, accepting congratulations. He had to let her go each time someone wanted to embrace her, but as soon as the hug was over his hand found hers again, wrapping around her fingers as if the touch were essential to him.

Well, it is.

Finally, in a lull, he tugged her around a stand of bushes into relative privacy. Pepper swung easily into his arms, laughing, and Tony kissed her hard and long, reveling in the fact that they belonged completely to one another now. As long as we both shall live. It hardly seemed long enough, but he would take what he could get--

"Tony--" Her smile reappeared as soon as he let her lips go, and he grinned back, exhilarated.

"How're you doing, Mrs. Stark? Ready to ditch this crowd and fly off into the sunset with me?"

Pepper reached up and stroked his mustache. "Orcas Island is north, Mr. Stark, it's a good thing you have Jarvis handling the directions." She evaded his retaliatory nip at her fingers. "And I think we'd better stay at least until after the cake."

"It's a little west. But you're right, cake is good." Tony ran his hands down her back to her hips. "You look spectacular, by the way."
Her dress was silky and comprised of several layers, as far as he could tell, lacy and extravagant without getting in the way. Pepper pinkened again. "So do you." She kissed his nose, and Tony laughed.

"You may not look like a marshmallow, but I still want to nibble on you," he murmured in her ear, taking the opportunity to start with her neck. "Only question is, where are the buttons on this thing?"

He let his hand wander suggestively up her spine.

Pepper squeaked. "It's a zipper, and I'm not telling." She squirmed until he raised his head. "Patience, Tony."

Tony smirked at her. "Judging from the whiff I got, I'm not the only one who needs patience right now."

Pepper flushed red, but her smile didn't disappear. "Just for that..." She leaned in to whisper. "Remember that box from the shower?"

"He could hardly forget. "Gah. You're wearing that under there?"

"Those," Pepper corrected sweetly, took his hand, and pulled him back into the public eye while he was still trying to find words.

They held the promised press conference, which was more like a photo opportunity despite the shots Vralia had released--standing outside the front gates and letting the photographers go crazy, while answering the usual banal questions. The SI security people had strict instructions to keep it to no more than four minutes, but Tony was pleased to note that Pepper didn't seem stressed by it all. She'd given statements to the press before, of course, and taken questions, but rarely had it been so personal. But she stood calmly within the circle of his arm, front and center instead of background, and Tony caught the soft smiles on several faces as they watched her. His arm tightened in possession and pride.

"Yeah. She can handle you.

Pepper had described the cake to him, so Tony knew what to expect when the caterers brought it out. But Pepper's mouth fell open at the sight of the elegant tower, twined with icing flowers, and Tony burst into laughter--because the little Iron Man figurine on top, carefully placed next to a ceramic chili pepper, was not part of the design scheme.

"Jimmy!" Pepper looked as if she didn't know whether to be angry or amused. Rhodey, at the forefront of the little crowd, snickered.

"What can I say, it needed that final touch."

Pepper rolled her eyes, but she was grinning. Tony managed to calm his laughter, and shoved Rhodes on one shoulder. "I better not find any shaving cream on the Audi, after this."

"Don't give him ideas." Pepper took the knife the caterer was holding out.

She had been inclined to skip the cake-cutting ritual, but Tony had voted for it. He wasn't sure why, except it was part of his mental landscape for a wedding, something like the bride's dress; and Pepper had agreed. Wrapping his hand around hers for the first cut felt a bit silly but at the same time totally right, and when the rich odor of the confection hit his nose Tony's mouth started to water. Pepper had given him dire warnings of what she would do to him if he smashed the cake into her face instead of feeding it to her, but when he lifted the piece he wasn't even tempted; ruining that smile would be a crime.

She took a neat bite, eyes twinkling, and fed him a piece in turn to the applause of the guests,
dimpling when he indulged himself and licked a bit of frosting from her thumb. Tony hoped that Vralia was getting a good shot.

"Do we get to open the presents now?" he asked Pepper a little later, when the cake had been sliced and distributed.

She glanced over at the impromptu pile on one table. The invitations had specifically asked for none, but some people had ignored the stipulation. "No...they'll have to wait until we get back."

Tony pouted, and forked up another bite of cake. "That's no fun."

Pepper snickered. "You could have Happy box them up and send them to us," she suggested impishly.

"I just might." It seemed unfair, to not be able to find out what was in the packages until later. And he'd asked much weirder things of Happy before.

Tony looked around at the little crowd. Everyone seemed to be getting along, even the board members; Judge Fremont was chatting with Cedric of all people, gesturing animatedly as Pepper's assistant nodded in agreement, while Happy and his date sat talking quietly in a corner. Tony blinked.

"Did you know Happy had a girlfriend?" he asked Pepper in a low voice, nodding at the pair, who were holding hands.

"Yep," Pepper replied, sipping from her champagne glass. "Her name's Lou, she's very nice."

He glanced at her, suspicious, and saw the corner of her mouth twitching. "Hah. You only met her today, didn't you?"

She gave in and laughed. "Yes, all right. She came in to freshen up before the ceremony. But she is nice."

Tony contemplated his chauffeur, who was looking more, well, open than he'd ever seen the man before. "Huh. Well, good for him, at least he's got taste."

Pepper sniffed, and thumped him gently. "That may be so, but don't say that to him, Tony, or he won't stop blushing for a month."

"Yeah, yeah." Tony pulled out his pocket watch and opened it to check the time, enjoying the little ritual of it. "We're scheduled to leave in about twenty minutes, and before you start with the snark, this is one flight I intend to be on time for, Mrs. Stark."

"I'm not arguing," she said serenely. "Our bags are in the limo; the only thing left is signing the license."

"I love your efficiency, have I mentioned that lately?" Tony replaced the watch. "Let's go corner the judge."

The conversation had shifted by the time they reached the pair; Cedric was actually chattering, which Tony hadn't quite believed possible of the man. The topic was apparently Cajun cooking, but when Pepper and Tony arrived, Cedric flushed a deep pink and closed his mouth.

"Sorry to interrupt," Tony said amiably. "But we have a license to sign."
"Ah, yes," the judge said, "of course. Mr. Toffle, don't go away, I still have to convince you of the benefits of a good Tabasco."

Pepper smiled at her assistant. "Come along, Cedric, you can be a witness."

"Yeah, we need two, don't we?" Tony looked around until he spotted Rhodey, chatting with Ms. Fukushima, and gave a sharp whistle.

Rhodey glanced up, excused himself, and loped over. "What's up?"

"Time to sign the license, we need your eyeballs." Tony stepped over to the nearest table and pushed the plates aside.

It only took a few moments. Tony signed with his usual flourish, watching smugly as Pepper wrote her new last name for the first time in her own elegant script. Rhodey and Cedric both added their signatures, and Rhodey took the opportunity to lay another congratulatory kiss on Pepper's cheek, twin to the one he'd given her right after the ceremony. Then he held out a hand to Tony. "You done good."


"You know, out of the two of us, I never would have expected you to be the first to get married."

Tony shrugged. "Me either." Random chance had done him a favor, though, and he'd never been slow to follow up on the chances Fortune tossed his way.

"Just...take care, okay?" Rhodey's gaze was sober, and Tony knew what he was trying to say. There were so many ways he could screw things up, so many things that could smash their happiness with one blow; but Tony was determined not to let any of them happen.

"I will," he told his old friend firmly. As much a promise to himself as to Rhodey.

Rhodey nodded, awkward and acknowledging. "Good."

His bride was talking quietly with Cedric--giving instructions, to judge by Cedric's listening expression--and Tony took a moment to just admire her. The afternoon sunlight lit her hair almost as brightly as it did the diamonds on the tiara, and to Tony's eyes she seemed to glow, white skin and white dress and the soft smile that kept reappearing. The ring on her left hand caught the sun as she gestured, and Tony didn't bother to keep in his own grin. He stepped up behind her and slid an arm around her waist, conscious of Rhodey's smirk at the sight. "Ready to go?"

Pepper leaned into him, her hand coming to rest on his. "Absolutely."

It didn't take long for Happy to bring the limo around. Normally Tony would have driven them himself and left the luggage to Hogan, but he didn't want to deal with the crowd still lingering outside the gate, and Happy was an old hand at sliding a vehicle through a mob. Tony was a little surprised when Rhodey absented himself from the last round of farewells, but that mystery was solved when he returned with both Butterfingers and Dummy in tow, carrying baskets.

"Do you know what that's about?" Tony asked Pepper sotto voce.

She took one look, and her eyes widened at the sight of the 'bots distributing little bags. "Yes--" she said. "Run!"

But it was too late. As they dashed for the limousine, the air filled with laughter and rose petals, and
they arrived at the car in a cloud of hoots and whistles and flower pieces, Happy standing stolidly in
the midst of it all and ignoring the pink and white snow covering his shoulders.

Tony slid in after Pepper, shaking off petals and sputtering with amused outrage. "Roses? Roses? Is
he reading Martha Stewart now?" He rolled down the window and stuck his head out as the engine
purred to life. "Hey, Platypus, I didn't know you were such a romant--"

A handful of petals hit him square in the face, and Tony spit out rose bits as Rhodey whooped. The
limo was halfway down the drive by the time Tony got his mouth clear, and he collapsed back onto
the seat, prepared to grumble--until he saw Pepper sprawled out on the opposite bench, helpless with
laughter.

Tony grinned, shook off the vegetable matter, and slid over to start picking petals off of Pepper,
wondering how long he could keep her laughing.

The flight to Washington didn't take long. To his annoyance, Tony spent almost half of it accepting
congratulatory calls from various senators and other dignitaries--people Pepper wouldn't let him put
off--while she curled up in one of the chairs, reading, her toes peeking out from the froth of skirt and
her hair loosened. The visual almost made up for the tedium of making nice over the phone,
especially when he wandered past and managed to inch her skirt up almost to her knee before she
noticed. The silvery stockings she was wearing disappeared as she shook her dress back down and
gave him an admonitory glance, but they were enough to make his pulse run faster.

They didn't fly directly to Orcas Island; instead, they landed at SeaTac International and picked up
the roadster, which Tony had sent up earlier in the week. The ferry ride was, to Tony's perception,
ridiculously slow, but speed clearly wasn't the point, and he had to admit that it was nice to watch the
sunset from the side of the boat, arms around Pepper to keep her from the chilly air.

The little bed and breakfast was actually a collection of tiny cottages, surrounded by pines and
perfect for privacy. One of the inn's staff was waiting for them in the dusk, sitting on the cottage's
little front porch; the tall man handed over the key, told them to sleep well, and vanished into the
woods almost before Tony could thank him.

"Huh." Tony watched him go, a little baffled, and then turned back to get their bags.

Pepper took her smaller bag from him, which he permitted only because there were three and he only
had two hands. "At least he didn't make a fuss."

"True." Tony set the bags down by the door and unlocked it, expecting a dark room, but instead a
warm glow spilled out, firelight and lamplight and a wave of savory scents.

The cottage was mostly one large room, with a fireplace and seating area, a miniature kitchen, and a
huge bed against the back wall. The table in the breakfast nook was set with a meal, and the whole
place had a feeling of luxury without overstatement. Tony approved.

He set the bags down near the door and turned back to block Pepper's entrance. "Ah-ah. You forgot
something."

She blinked at him, smiling. "Are you charging a toll?"

"Good idea, but no." He took her bag and put it down too, then stepped back over the threshold.
"The bride's supposed to get carried in, remember?"
"Oh, that's--" Her protest squeaked off as Tony scooped her up, one arm behind her back and the other under her knees.

"Watch your head," he instructed cheerfully, and carried her inside--a matter of two strides, but then he found he didn't want to put her down. Pepper, giggling, cupped his chin in one hand and kissed him, as generous a toll as anyone could wish, and Tony moved blindly towards the bed, barely remembering to kick the door shut behind him.

The quilt was soft, and smelled like fresh air as Tony lowered Pepper onto it. She pulled him down after her into a laughing tumble of kisses and caresses. Somehow they managed to lose their shoes, and Pepper peeled him out of his jacket--the tie was still on the plane somewhere. Tony ducked out of the suit's suspenders, reaching for her. "So where is the zipper?" he asked, sliding his hands around her ribs towards her spine.

She laughed, and showed him, and they took their time undressing one another, with an appreciation not lessened by familiarity. Tony whimpered at the full sight of Pepper in the contents of that box, sheer silver silk that managed to be both bridal and devastatingly sexy at the same time. "You're gorgeous," he sighed, kneeling next to her in something like awe. "Pepper..."

"Is this a good time to tell you I'm really glad the ring got stuck?" She smiled at him, lips trembling a little, and Tony took up the invitation of her open arms, hissing with pleasure at the feel of silk and skin against him.

"If I had to do it over, I'd remake the damn thing a size smaller, just to make sure." He grinned as she laughed. "Hey, Pepper, we left something out of the vows."

She blinked, sitting up a little. "We did? What?"

Tony kissed her, pressing her gently back down, his focus pulling in until he was concentrated solely on her. Pepper moaned, her hands skimming the muscles of his back, and he finally let her mouth go, intent on tasting as much of her as he could. "With my body, I thee worship," he murmured.

And did.

Tony was a little surprised to find that the next days didn't bore him. He wasn't much of a nature buff, but long walks on the trails with Pepper turned out to be interesting if not exciting, especially when she invented a bird-spotting game where the points were kisses.

They rented a sailboat and went out on the water, sailing around the little islands that dotted the water near Orcas and coming back with appetites that were nicely fulfilled by the various restaurants available. They also rented a moped, and after about fifteen minutes on it Tony bought a set of tools and juiced it up, to the point where he actually collected a speeding ticket. But he didn't mind; for one thing, it was fun to feel Pepper's grip on his waist tighten when he peeled away from a stoplight...

They bought fresh fruit from a farm and took an air tour in a biplane that predated the Depression, and Tony spent almost three hours discussing engines with the owner afterwards. And every night and sometimes during the day they would retreat to the big bed and make the most of leisure, privacy, and no deadlines.

Pepper in her working clothes was deliciously professional, he knew that already. Pepper in her sleep shirt, or the lace-edged lingerie she preferred, was delectable. But Pepper in nothing at all, standing
in the flood of moonlight coming in their window and beckoning him closer, was absolutely mind-
blowing; and Pepper sweaty and sated, drowsy in the glow of his arc, was a memory Tony treasured, 
even if he had every intention of recreating it as often as possible.

Pepper sobbing that she loved him as she came apart under his touch...for that, there were no words.

On the eighth day they woke to rain, steady and gray. Tony dressed first and stood looking out the 
window towards the water, which was only barely visible, and realized with a pang that despite the 
joy of spending time with Pepper, he was going to have a bad case of cabin fever by the end of the 
day.

"Any sign of it letting up?" Pepper asked, and he turned to see her enveloped in one of the luxurious 
terrycloth robes provided by the inn, leaning against the counter of the kitchenette and sipping coffee. 

Tony shook his head, and walked over, trying to hide his disappointment with the weather. She set 
down her mug and kissed him, arms sliding around his waist, and he leaned into her, savoring the 
unique flavor that was Pepper. His bad mood shifted, and he was starting to think of ways to coax 
her back to bed, when she pulled back with a happy sigh. "Do you still want to try to break the bank 
at Monte Carlo?"

He gaped at her. "What?"

Her smile was teasing. "Our passports are on the plane. We could be there by tomorrow morning."

In that moment, Tony realized again that Pepper knew him in every way...and that was just fine with 
him. Laughing, he hugged her hard. "You know I love you, right?"

For answer, she kissed him again.
Epilogue

The limousine rolled up to stop in front of the mansion, and the driver got out, opening the car door and helping out the frail little man before removing the big package from the trunk. The flat, white-wrapped object barely fit under the driver's arm, but it left his other hand free to help the old man up the steps and into the house.

Once there, the driver trailed patiently behind as the old man went from room to room to peer at the walls and mutter to himself. Finally the old man settled on the spot where the staircase began its upward climb from the living room, where light filled the curve of the wall.

The driver made no protest; he set the package down carefully and took away the pedestal and bust that occupied the space, returning with a stepladder and the required tools.

As the driver worked on the wall, the old man unwrapped the package tenderly, smiling as the painting came into view. When the wall was ready, he handed the canvas up to the driver, watching as it was hung in place and adjusted to his specifications.

Finally, he nodded, satisfied. The driver stepped down and put the equipment away before returning to escort the old man out.

In the empty house, a camera turned to examine the painting. Vivid blues and greens filled the canvas, background to the woman who sat smiling serenely at the viewer. Red-gold hair, blue eyes, white blouse, green skirt, the ocean behind; the impression was of a mermaid perched for a moment on land, beautiful and mysterious.

As if satisfied, the camera pivoted back to its original position. The light stayed on, waiting for the house's occupants to return.

End.

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