American Punchline

by jlstreck

Summary

Immediately follows the break up between Sean and TJ what we see in the flashback in Political Animals episode four. Occurs pre-Winter Soldier for Captain America.

An hour after Sean's exit from TJ's apartment, TJ has finished a bottle of Jack Daniels and is ready to find something harder to ease the pain. Instead he manages to collide rather unceremoniously with Steve Rogers. Will Cap let him go on his way, or will he insist on staging a rescue.

Notes

In case you need a refresher on the break up scene, here's the quick synopsis.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

One hour. One hour ago Sean disappeared out the door after telling TJ everything they’d had was a lie and making it abundantly clear that TJ was nothing but a waste of space. A pathetic American punchline.

The empty bottle of Jack Daniels stared back at him from the counter top. It’s slow burn had long since stopped being enough. For the first time in months, TJ needed something stronger. All those months of being high on love and all that other bullshit happy people spouted, and he was more than ready to forget it all in exchange for a line or two of coke.

Shoving himself off the couch, he only stumbled slightly in the effort to grab his jacket. Deciding that meant he was sober enough, or perhaps too sober, TJ headed for the door and the nearest club where one of his acquaintances might help him solve his current situation.

Striding through the apartment lobby, he didn’t bother looking before stepping onto the sidewalk. Hitting a small patch of ice, TJ closed his eyes and waited for impact knowing he was far too gone to make any useful attempt at recovery. Instead of cold, hard concrete, TJ’s body connected with what felt like very warm, hard muscles.

“Are you okay?” TJ groaned as he recognized the voice. You’d have to live under a rock not to recognize the voice of Captain America after all the press he’d received from being thawed out and promptly rescuing New York and the rest of the world.

“M fine.” TJ mumbled, daring to pry his eyes open as he felt himself being righted and steadied by those same strong arms and hands. “Ice.” He added in explanation. When he finally dared to look up, he was met with eyes that appeared far more blue in person than they ever had on television.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” The super hero stared at him, expression full of concern. “I don’t mean to pry, but you really don’t look okay.” The blond shook his head. “Shit, that didn’t sound so bad before it came out of my mouth. I don’t mean you look bad, I just mean you look like you’re upset. I … I …”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fine. There’s no need for you to get yourself all worked up. Feel free to go about your evening without giving me another thought.”

“Trust me, I’ve got a ways to go before they classify me as all worked up. Seriously though, given that I just sent you almost crashing into the sidewalk, and you really do look like you’re having a bad day, would you at least agree to stop and have a cup of coffee with me? I’d feel better knowing you really are okay.” He pointed toward the Starbucks just down the sidewalk.

“You didn’t send me crashing into the sidewalk.” TJ was feeling far more sober than he had been moments before. “I’m pretty sure you fulfilled your heroic duty by rescuing me from a wayward patch of ice. Seriously. You can go. Captain America is bound to have better things to do than waste his time on some pathetic American punchline.” Sean’s words stung just as much coming out of his own mouth.

He watched as the heroes jaw tightened, eyes darkening as he stared down at TJ. “No.”

“No?” TJ’s voice trembled at the dangerous tone the other man’s voice had taken. He wasn’t sure what button he’d just pushed, but there was zero chance of him coming out on top if he’d just managed to piss off a super soldier.
“No, I don’t have better things to do. No, taking time to have a cup of coffee with you isn’t wasting my time. And no, you aren’t a pathetic American punchline. If you’re up for sharing, I’d love to know what asshole fed you that line of bullshit so I can go explain just how wrong they are.”

TJ stared at him, mouth gaping open. Not even his own family sounded that pissed when people insulted him. Hell, half the time they were the ones doing the insulting. “Do you even know who I am?”

“TJ Hammond. Hard to live in this town and not know who you are.” Captain America shrugged. “I’ve been trying to get caught up. I’m Steve, by the way. I prefer to avoid the title when I’m not working. You want to feel like a walking American punchline, try joining the Army thinking you’re going to make a difference with the war and ending up on stage in tights like a glorified chorus girl. I know all about being the punchline in all my red, white, and blue glory.”

This time TJ felt his lips twitch into a hint of a smile, and was surprised to see a much fuller smile on the face of his rescuer.

“Pretty sure people have mostly forgotten about your time as a chorus girl. You’ve done too much good since then.”

Steve shrugged. “I think people have mostly forgotten there’s an actual person beneath the costume and shield, but that’s neither here nor there. It’s you I’m worried about.”

TJ felt an unexpected twinge at Steve’s words. Watching the other man’s expression he saw the same loneliness he so often saw in his own. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to have a cup of coffee. Steve seemed to genuinely give a shit, and if he was reading things correctly, it looked like the super hero could do with some company.

“There’s no way you’re letting me just walk away, is there?” TJ decided to concede with minimal fuss.

“Well, I’m not going to kidnap you, but I’m certainly not backing down without an argument.” Steve’s eyes brightened as TJ shrugged and started toward the coffee shop.

“Well, come on then. Coffee probably isn’t the worse decision I’ve made today.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I had several requests for a continuation, so I'm going to let these two run free and see where they lead me.

Approaching the coffee shop, Steve realized just how crowded it actually was. Glancing over at his companion, he was reasonably certain they didn’t need an audience if he was going to find out what was bothering him. With his enhanced senses, it was impossible to miss the smell of whiskey coming from TJ. Coupled with the red, puffy eyes, it didn’t take a genius to figure out he was having a rough day. Given what Steve knew of the man’s past, he could venture a guess what he’d been headed to do when they collided. His willingness to accept an alternative told Steve that TJ didn’t really want to do down that path, but probably felt like he lacked alternatives.

Steve had a growing collection of patched up punching bags at the gym to attest to his own lack of viable outlets for his emotions.

If he was being honest with himself, he wasn’t entirely sure why he felt so invested in TJ when they had just met. He just knew that he’d felt a certain kinship with the other man from when he first learned about him. Yeah, kind of resembled Bucky, but it was more. TJ seemed so out of place in the middle of a highly political family, just like Steve felt so out of place everywhere these days.

“Do you want to grab a table or would you prefer to grab drinks and go somewhere with less of an audience?” Steve asked as he held the door open for the brunet.

“We don’t have to stay if you’re worried about being seen with me.” TJ’s expression fell and Steve wanted to kick himself.

“That’s not what I meant.” He wrapped his hand around TJ’s upper arm, careful not to hurt him but forcing him to stop and look at him. “I just thought you might want to talk without worrying that every word is going to end up on someone’s blog.”

Steve stared into TJ’s eyes, hoping for once that Natasha was right about how easy it was to read him.

“Oh.” The word was more a surprised gasp than anything. “You’re probably right.” Steve smiled as the other man’s expression eased. “We could take them back to my place. No prying ears there and less likelihood of freezing. Despite growing up here, I’m not really a fan of the cold.”

“You sure? I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.” Steve hadn’t missed the flash of fear on the other man’s face a few moments before.

“Yeah. Pretty sure being alone with you is easily a few hundred times safer than where I was planning on going.”

Part of Steve wanted to ask where that was, but he checked himself. That question was better saved until they could speak freely.

“I promise, barring a freak alien invasion or other such craziness, you’re safe with me.” He tried to
lighten the mood as they waited in line.

“Something tells me even in the case of shit like that I’m still safer with you.” TJ grinned. “Speaking of shit, is that colorful vocabulary I heard back there a new thing or did they history books lie about you being the paragon of virtue and innocence?”

“I grew up in Brooklyn and was smack in the middle of the action during World War II.” Steve leaned closer to TJ’s ear. “You really think I was that fucking innocent?”

“Fair point.” Steve smiled as TJ’s shoulder shook with barely contained laughter. “Now I’m dying to know how much else they got wrong.”

They stepped forward as the line moved. Steve noticed several sets of eyes on them. He wasn’t sure which one of them they recognized, or if it was both, but as soon as they saw him watching they went back to minding their own business. He didn’t care what stories ended up being told, but he didn’t think TJ needed any extra attention at the moment.

Turning his focus back to TJ. “Maybe if you’re nice I’ll spill a few more historical inaccuracies.” He winked, watching as the other man shifted his gaze to stare at the baked goods behind the counter. “What do you recommend? I actually haven’t been in a Starbucks more than a couple of times.”

TJ pointed out a few things that looked tempting as they stepped forward to place their orders. Steve just shrugged as TJ’s eyes went wide when he ordered a half dozen different muffins and things.

“What? I have to eat a lot.” Steve could feel the heat rising across his cheeks and neck. Back in the war he’d learned to take the jokes about how much he had to eat, but it always made him a bit self-conscious around new people.

“Makes sense.” TJ gave a quick nod, moving so they could wait for their order. “I was just afraid you were going to try to stuff me full of baked goods to make me feel better.”

“Nah.” He reached out to accept the bag from the guy behind the counter. “Though I will at least give you first choice if you’d like one.” Steve’s grin widened as he watched TJ take his cup of coffee, biting his lower lip as he shook his head and turned for the door.

Almost to the exit, TJ looked over his shoulder. “Something tells me I should feel very honored to be offered such privilege.”

“You should.” Steve followed him back out the door and down the sidewalk. “Watch out of the ice. I haven’t decided yet if I’m willing to sacrifice the food to rescue you a second time.”

“Duly noted.” TJ smirked his direction before fixing his eyes on the path in front of him.

Crossing the remaining distance in easy silence, Steve was thankful he’d been to restless to sit around his apartment alone this evening.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

A few notes to set the stage for this chapter if you're so inclined to follow me down the rabbit hole of pain ...

1. If you aren't familiar with Cristina Perri's song Human I highly recommend checking out this fanvid for it. It takes all of 8 seconds of that video for me to tear up.

2. Then there's this if you need a refresher on just how raw Steve might be feeling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Turning the key in lock, TJ tried to remember if there was anything embarrassing lying around his apartment. He tended to keep things pretty tidy, but was sometimes less careful when he’d been drinking. At least he and Sean hadn’t gotten around to doing anything during his short visit, so there was no chance of carelessly discarded clothes on the floor.

He winced at the thought that he and Sean would never get around to doing anything again.

“Hey.” Steve’s voice brought him back to the present as the door came open. “You looked like you were getting a little lost in your head there.”

“I guess I was. Just remembering …” TJ’s voice faltered. Despite his behavior since they’d met not fifteen minutes ago, he highly doubted Captain America gave a shit about his failed relationship.

Thankfully Steve didn’t seem inclined to push at the moment, instead he held up the bag full of goodies. “How about we break these puppies out before I start badgering you to talk.”

TJ offered a weak smile before leading him toward the kitchen. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but as nice as this is I really don’t get why you give a shit.” He grabbed a couple of plates from the cabinet, setting them on the bar counter between them.

“Yes.” TJ crossed his arms over his chest, overwhelmed enough with the day to be honest. “The man I thought I loved. That I thought loved me just told me I’m a fucking pathetic American punchline that meant nothing to him. My own family wrote me off as a waste of space years ago. The only people that ever seem to care how I’m doing are my fucking dealers, and they’re all hoping my life’s gone to shit so they can sell me more.” He watched Steve’s expression shift through the tears stinging his eyes. “Why the hell should I believe a complete stranger, a fucking national hero no less, would give a damn about anything that happens to me.” He swallowed, biting his tongue to keep from saying more when he’d already said too much. Watching as Steve stared back at him, he waited for the blond to walk out the door.

“Well, I’ve never been good at conforming to expectations, so I see no reason to start now.” Steve bit out, hands spread flat on the counter as he leaned toward TJ. “You really want to know why I care? Because when I look at you I see me. I see somebody that’s fucking lost. Someone that is trying to be the person that everyone wants them to be while they’re dying inside.”
TJ blinked through his own tears, watching the moisture pool at the corner of Steve’s eyes as his jaw tensed.

“What did they do to you when you came out of the ice?” TJ’s voice was thick, barely audible even to himself. He’d thought before that Steve looked lonely, but this was more than that.

“They didn’t do anything to me. They made sure the serum was doing its job, caught me up on the tech and weapons I needed to know, and sent me off to fight. I may be a miracle of science, but I’m still only human. Despite what people seem to believe I’m not some perfect soldier. I may heal faster from physical injuries, but the serum did nothing to fix what I feel. But nobody cares about that. As long as I can do my job, nobody cares that I haven’t gotten a single full night of sleep since I woke up. Nobody cares that what to them is a story from the history books was my life. I came out of that ice seventy years after I went in, but to me everything that happened was still fresh. The train … losing …” Steve choked on the words

“Losing Bucky.” TJ reached for him. “To you that just happened.”

Steve nodded mutely. TJ could see he was trying to fight the sob that wanted to rip out of his chest. It was obvious he was trying to pull himself together, hands balled into tight fists against the hard marble. TJ could barely imagine how it must feel to be in his shoes.

“I’m sorry.” Steve finally spoke, eyes downcast. “I didn’t come here to unload on you. I just … You just need to know that I’m not here out of some misplaced sense of duty or something. You just look like someone that could really use a friend, and I know how that feels.” He finally looked up, meeting TJ’s eyes. “Listen, I’ll go if you’d prefer to be alone or want to avoid Captain America’s obviously impending mental breakdown.”

“Don’t do that.” TJ stepped forward, leaning against the counter opposite Steve, reaching forward to cover the balled up fists with his own long fingers.

“What?”

“Don’t hide behind the title. Don’t act like letting yourself admit that you’re not okay isn’t acceptable.” TJ let out a huff. “You were right about what you said. I do feel like I’m alone. I’m scared to death that I’m not good enough … not strong enough for all this and that I’ll end up dead on my apartment floor from a cocaine overdose.” He watched as Steve’s hands unclenched, strong fingers wrapping around his own. “I don’t want to die, but that seems like what people expect. So since you’ve decided to pop into my life and try to change all that, don’t you dare think that it isn’t going to work both ways.”

TJ watched as Steve’s eyes finally rose from their hands, meeting his.

“I thought we were supposed to have muffins before the talking got serious.” The small grin gave TJ hope that this new and unexpected lifeline wasn’t going to disappear before he had a chance to really grab onto it.

Plucking one of the muffins off the plate, TJ took a bite and swallowed. “There. I’m eating.” He pushed the plate closer to Steve. “I won’t make you eat all of them before we talk, but one wouldn’t hurt.”

The grin spread, and TJ relaxed a fraction more as Steve grabbed a muffin of his own.
Everybody still hanging in there? I'm gonna go cry for a little while and contemplate just how painful this conversation is going to get before I let Steve actually meet Sean.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

One note - while I am a Stucky shipper it doesn't fit with this story so you won't see it here.

Nibbling around the edge of his muffin, TJ watched as Steve’s eyes wandered around the room. TJ couldn’t get a feel for what he was thinking, but the silence was starting to make him nervous.

“Promise you won’t get upset if I ask you a question?” The brunet spoke before he could think better of it, watching as Steve’s attention refocused squarely on him.

“I promise.” Steve’s head cocked to the side with evident curiosity. “Ask away. I’ll answer honestly unless it’s something I’m restricted from sharing, and then I’ll tell you as much.”

TJ grinned. “Good to know. That’ll make a first.” His grin faded as he watched Steve’s entire body go rigid, eyes darkening in anger. “I’m …”

“That makes me want to go throw my fucking shield at everyone that ever lied to you.” Steve’s biting words cut him off. For once the interruption actually made him feel better rather than worse.

It takes him a few seconds to figure out how to respond, but decides to try to settle some of Cap’s simmering rage. “As tempting as that is, I think even Captain America would get arrested for assaulting a former president.”

“Fair enough, but I’m not convinced it wouldn’t be worth it.” Steve smiles at him, posture relaxing a bit under TJ’s own smile. “Anyway, I assume you had a question other than if I would get upset if you asked a question.”

TJ nodded, still a bit worried about the question, but faced with Steve’s open and curious expression unable to make himself keep quiet. Closing his eyes, he decided it might be less embarrassing if he couldn’t see Steve’s reaction. Taking a deep breath, he forced the words out in a rush. “It doesn’t bother you to hang out with an openly and very out gay guy? I mean you know at least one person in the coffee shop will have recognized both of us and tweeted or something. Probably with a picture. I’d say by now an untold number of people will believe we’re dating.”

TJ was rambling and he knew it, but couldn’t make himself stop until the realized Steve was laughing. He hadn’t really given much though to what the other man’s reaction might be, other than the obvious choice of fleeing out the door. Laughter hadn’t occurred to him.

“TJ, look at me.” Steve choked out, pausing until TJ complied warily. “No. It doesn’t bother me at all. As long as it doesn’t bother you that you’re hanging around a with a man that’s roughly three times your age and is a very unwillingly closeted bisexual.”

“What?”

“I think that falls under the category of gross historical inaccuracies about me.” Steve’s brows quirked as he shrugged.
“So, bisexual. Does that mean Bucky and Peggy …”

Steve blushed under TJ’s scrutiny this time and TJ immediately regreted bringing them up.

“Buck was my first kiss, but never more. I loved him. Still do, but not like that. He felt the same way. You actually remind me of him a little bit. You’re very different from him, but your eyes remind me of his.” Steve sounded wistful speaking of his long dead best friend.

“I’m sorry.” TJ wasn’t even sure which of the myriad of potential things he was apologizing for. “I didn’t mean to make you think about them again. Especially not when you already said how much it still hurt.”

Steve shook his head. “Don’t apologize for that. Honestly, you’re the first person that has actually brought him up in conversation. Everyone else changes the subject as soon as I so much as mention his name. I’m not stupid. I know talking about him won’t bring him back, but …” TJ watched as he swiped at the lone tear spilling from his eye.

“But trying to pretend he never existed hurts.” He offered. “I’m not saying it’s anywhere near the same thing, but I kinda get it. After I was outed, my parents shipped me off to therapist sworn to secrecy and then tried to pretend nothing happened. Sure they said all the right things when it came up in public, but it was always the elephant in the room at home. It might not have been fun to talk about it, but it hurt worse to have the entire experience locked away like it never happened.”

TJ didn’t realize he’d started crying, his vision blurring through the tears, until he felt Steve’s arms wrap around his shoulders, pulling him into the broad chest.

“But it did happen, and it hurt like hell.” TJ wasn’t sure if Steve was talking about his past, Bucky, or both. Steve held him in silence for a few minutes before easing his grip and stepping back. “Not that I don’t love the idea of telling stories about Buck, I don’t want to bore you to death, and I still want to know what drove you out to brave the icy DC sidewalks after polishing off what was left of that bottle of Jack.” Both their eyes shifted to the empty bottle still on the counter.

“I’ll tell you, but I want you to promise me something first.” TJ watched the heroes expression, saw the hint of worry. “Promise me you’ll tell me all about Bucky. Maybe even the Howling Commandos and Peggy too. Those were some of my favorite stories to read when I was younger, and I can only imagine the actual truth of most of them is far better that what made it into the history books.”

Steve stared at him, a look of pure astonishment on his face. “You really want to know? You aren’t just saying that because I keep falling apart?”

“Yeah, I really want to know, and you deserve the chance to sit around, eat pizza, relax, and rehash the good times with someone that isn’t being paid to analyze every word out of your mouth.” TJ elbowed him in the side as he moved to grab the remainder of his muffin.

“That may very well be the best invitation I’ve received since coming out of the ice.” Steve met TJ’s eyes, giving him the brightest smile he’d yet to see on the Avenger’s face.

Yeah, telling Captain America all about his rather embarrassing foray into love with Sean Reeves was going to suck, but he was beginning to feel like it might be just what he needed.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thanks to real life throwing me a bit of a curve ball this took a bit longer than I expected to finish. Alas, it's here :) Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Grabbing the remainder of his coffee, TJ turned toward the living area. “Not that my tiny kitchen isn’t cozy and all, but I have a big leather couch that’s actually pretty comfortable.”

Steve took the hint, grabbing his drink and the plate with the remaining muffins. “It’s your place. I’m happy to sit where ever you decide to put me.” He watched as TJ lowered himself onto the couch with a certain easy grace. Back tucked into the corner, Steve watched as long legs folded up forming a protective barrier in front of TJ.

Taking in the remaining seating, Steve opted for the other side of the couch. Close enough for TJ to be reminded of his presence, but not so close to crowd him. Sitting at an angle, he positioned himself in the most open and non-threatening manner he could. The last thing he wanted was for the other man to feel like he was being interrogated.

“How much do you want to know?” TJ looked up at him, chin resting on his knees.

“As much as you’re comfortable and willing to share,” Steve didn’t hesitate with his answer.

The other man sighed before he let out a rushed flurry of words. “When you caught me, quite literally, I was going to find one of my old dealers for the first time in six months.” TJ paused for a moment, staring up at Steve.

“Am I right in assuming that the person that called you a pathetic American punchline might have been the catalyst to that decision?” Steve still couldn’t get the look on TJ’s face when he’d first said those words out of his head.

The brunet didn’t speak, but gave a small nod instead, eyes fixed on Cap’s knee.

“I gather from what you said earlier that your day involved a pretty ugly breakup.” Steve inquired.

“Yeah. I spent six months thinking we were happy. Thinking there might be a future. I love him. I thought he loved me, but it turns out I was just a convenient piece of ass on the side. Apparently not even an overly enjoyable one at that. He talked a good game for the last few months, but as soon as someone decided to play dirty politics and threaten to out him, he high tailed it back to his wife. Made it pretty damned clear I was just one big waste of space and time on his way out the door. I know dating a married guy was a really stupid move to begin with, but everything seemed so right.”

Steve waited a few seconds to see if TJ would say more before speaking. “I’d wager a guess that whatever he said to put you down was a ridiculous effort to assuage his guilt. Yeah, getting involved with a married man wasn’t a smart move on your part.” Steve wasn’t going to try and placate his knew friend with lies. “But that doesn’t excuse his behavior. It is never okay to tear someone else down just to make yourself feel better.”
“Well, I don’t think Sean ever got that message.” TJ shrugged, gaze still fixed on Steve’s knee.

“Reeves?” Steve knew the answer as soon as TJ’s eyes jerked up to meet his.

“Yeah. How’d you guess?”

“I watch the news. I’ve heard his name come up.” Steve remembered seeing a video of him recently. At least he’d be easy to spot if he ever ran into him. The asshole deserved a lesson in manners.

“Guess that makes sense.” TJ groaned. “I guess mom was right. I was stupid to tie my sobriety to him. As soon as he ran out the door I was ready to throw it all down the drain.”

“You were, but you also took the first life line offered and didn’t. That counts for something. You almost screwed up. Instead you decided to have coffee and muffins with Captain America.” Steve offered a wry grin when he said it.

“And here I thought I was having coffee and muffins with Steve Rogers.” TJ countered. “He seems like a lot more fun than that straight laced guy in the red, white, and blue.”

This time they both laughed. Steve could see TJ was in no real mood to rehash every detail of his disastrous breakup, and he didn’t blame him. It was all too fresh, and reliving all the nasty things Sean said would do nothing for TJ’s peace of mind. Part of him hoped he would be around if and when TJ decided he wanted to talk more about it.

“True. So what’s on your agenda for the rest of the evening? Getting bored with entertaining elderly World War II veterans yet?” Steve really didn’t want to leave, but given that they’d only just met it seemed presumptuous settle in for too long without giving TJ an easy way to send him off.

“Not even close. I’m thinking getting Chinese delivered for a late dinner and finding a movie that can make me laugh. If that doesn’t sound too boring for a super hero, I will happily order three of everything on the menu so you don’t go hungry.”

Steve could hear the warring hope and expectation of disappointment in the other man’s voice. “Doesn’t sound boring at all. My fun filled evening plans involved walking around the city in the freezing cold to avoid staring at the walls in my apartment or tearing up any more punching bags for the day.” He gave a small shrug as TJ’s eyes widened. “Anyway, I wouldn’t order three of everything unless you plan on rolling me back to my apartment later. I eat more than most, but not quite that much.”

“I think I’ve got a menu around here somewhere.” Steve watched as TJ unfolded himself from the couch and went in search of the menu. A few seconds later, he was smiling and waving a large folded paper in front of him. “Found it! So what’re your preferences? Chicken, pork, beef?”

“Anything. Just get things that you like, and order extra of them. That way if there are leftovers you’ll at least eat them. Though if they have the pork pot stickers, I’ve discovered I have a total weakness for those.”

“A man after my own heart. I could live off those things.” TJ picked up a remote from beside the television, pushing a few buttons before tossing it to Steve. “Why don’t you see if there’s anything that strikes your interest while I order dinner. Just remember …”

“Something funny.” Steve winked at the other man. “Nothing serious, overly romantic, or depressing.”

“Right.” TJ nodded.
“I’ll see what I can find.” Steve started flipping through the selections as TJ stepped toward the kitchen to order their dinner.

A few minutes later, the brunet was back carrying two bottles of water. “Thought you might be thirsty. Emotional outbursts always leave me dehydrated.”

Steve took the offered bottle. “Yeah. Always a good idea to rehydrate.” As TJ sat, the blond gestured toward the screen. “I found a couple possibilities, but you’re welcome to pick something else if you’d like.”

“Evolution? Really? You want to watch a movie about aliens after the shit that went down in New York.” TJ’s head fell back against the sofa as he laughed.

“What? It supposed to be funny.” Steve replied. “You can pick something else if you don’t like it.”

“I actually haven’t seen it. I just thought it was an odd choice. Let’s watch the trailer and then we can decide.”

Steve offered him the remote, fully on board with the suggestion. Two minutes later, the pair were both cracking up.

“Yes. We definitely need to watch this.” TJ pushed the button, turned up the volume a bit, and tossed the remote onto the coffee table. As the movie queued up, he turned to Steve. “Thanks for sticking around. As cheesy as it sounds, this is making my really shitty day a lot less shitty.”

“Thanks for letting me stay. It’s doing wonders to improve mine too.”

The pair fell silent as the movie opened, content to enjoy an easy evening with a new friend.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and feedback are always appreciated!
Chapter 6

“That was far funnier than my last experience with aliens.” Steve chuckled as the end credits rolled.

“I imagine so. From the footage I saw, you looked pretty wiped by the end of it. Though you were still rockin’ the star spangled tights.” TJ blushed as he teased.

“Not sure why we ever thought that was a good idea. Tights are great for prancing around stage, but less than practical in combat situations.”

“Does that mean you’re trading them in for a more practical uniform?”

“Yeah. Something with more pockets and less spandex.” Steve smiled.

“And yet I still bet it'll show off your ass.” TJ smirked. “After all, your ass is damn near a national treasure.”

Steve flushed deep red at the other man’s words. TJ wasn’t the first person to comment on his backside, but there was a heat beneath the teasing that made the blond squirm, his gaze falling to the floor.

“I’m sorry.” TJ’s voice was quiet. “You’re probably so sick of people objectifying you, and here I am talking about your ass.”

“Hey no. You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just …” Steve bit his lower lip, completely unsure what to say. “Just don’t worry about it. I’m not upset that you think I have a nice ass.” He raised his eyes, meeting TJ’s as he gave a small smile.

The brunet yawned, and Steve noticed just how tired he looked.

“I think it might be time to call it a night. You look like you’re about to drop, and I should sleep before I report for my mission tomorrow.”

“Mission?” TJ’s eyes sparked with concern.

“Nothing crazy. Just a routine op with a team. I should be back in two days at most.” Steve assured him. “Listen, I know we just met today, but I enjoyed the evening and it’d be nice to have a friend to talk to that isn’t on SHIELD’s payroll. Would it be presumptuous to ask for your number? Maybe we could have another movie night when I get back.”

“Not presumptuous at all.” TJ reached his hands out gesturing for Steve to hand over his phone. Reaching in his pocket, he unlocked it before handing it over. A few seconds later, he heard TJ’s phone buzz. “There. You have mine, and I sent myself a text so I’ll have yours.”

“Perfect.” Steve grinned, accepting his phone back. “Don’t be afraid to use it. I can’t always answer immediately, but you can leave a message or a text and I’ll respond as soon as I can.”

“Yeah, probably hard to talk or text while taking out bad guys.” TJ nodded.

“It’s a good way to end up with a broken phone or a few more bruises than are strictly necessary.” Steve grabbed his coat as they shifted toward the door. “Listen, I’m not kidding about calling. You need to talk or think you’re going to do something you know you’ll regret, you call. No matter what time.” Steve’s hand held tight to TJ’s shoulder, as if he could make the words sink in better through
physical contact.

“Thank you.” TJ covered Steve’s hand with his own, giving a small squeeze. “Same goes for you, you know? Don’t be afraid to use my number instead of destroying innocent punching bags.”

They both laughed this time.

“I’ll let you know when I’m back.” Steve offered as he stepped through the door.

“You better.”

“I will. I’ll see you soon.” Steve nodded, turning to go. He’d only taken a couple of steps when he turned back. “Hey TJ. Do me a favor while I’m gone.”

“What?” TJ’s face belied his curiosity.

“Think about what you want to do now. Not what you think your family wants to you do. Not what you think people expect you to do. Think about what you want to do.” Steve knew it wouldn’t be easy, but he suspected that much like nobody ever bothered to ask him that question, they hadn’t asked TJ either.

“Only if you promise me you’ll do the same when you aren’t actually busy keeping yourself from getting killed.” TJ retorted.

“Fair enough.” Steve grinned before turning to leave. Waiting for the elevator, he looked back, offering a small wave just before TJ shut his door.

Stepping into the elevator, Steve leaned his head back against the wall. The evening had gone nothing like what he’d expected when he left his apartment earlier. Instead of a cold, lonely evening lost in his thoughts while wandering the streets of DC, he’d enjoyed an emotional, but fun few hours. For the first time since waking up in a new century, he felt something akin to hope.

****American Punchline****

Leaning back on the closed door, TJ stared at his apartment. It was hard to reconcile the room that held so much heart break thanks to Sean’s biting words with the room that held so much laughter during the last couple hours.

“Well shit.” Part of him wanted to call Doug, and tease his brother that he’d been the one to meet Doug’s childhood idol. He debated it for a brief second before decided this was something he wanted just for him, at least for now. Steve was offering friendship with no expectation in return other than the same. It was a far cry from the usual terms people seemed to apply with him. They were willing to tolerate him and all his faults in exchange for something. A quick fuck with a president’s son, the prestige of being associated with the Hammond name, even if only with it’s resident failure, juicy gossip to spread. The list of reasons people wanted to spend time with TJ seemed to be a mile long, but until Steve none of them seemed to have anything to do with TJ just being TJ.

Decision made, TJ plugged his phone into the charger on the counter, and headed toward his bedroom. A shower and a good night’s sleep were in order. Tomorrow he’d start considering Steve’s question. Stripping down for his shower, he could easily list off the things he didn’t want to do.

He didn’t want to turn back to drugs. It was convenient, and easy in so many ways, but he was smart enough to know it wouldn’t end well.
He didn’t want anything to do with politics or politicians. He had no choice where his family was concerned, but he didn’t want to be an active participant in the machinations.

He didn’t ever want to ever hear the words “pathetic American punchline” directed at him, and feel like they were right.

He wanted to do something that mattered with his life. He just didn’t have the first clue what that was.

Bracing his hands against the cold tile of his shower wall, he let the hot water run over his shoulders and back. He wouldn’t figure it out tonight or even tomorrow, but he would think about it. Steve didn’t tell him to have it all figured out before he got back, he just said to think about it.
Sometimes I think these two are trying to kill me. ;)

Sipping on his coffee, TJ stared down at the notebook in front of him. It was the third morning since Steve had left his apartment. In the last two days he hadn’t left his apartment. He hadn’t had a single drop of alcohol. He hadn’t called any of his so called friends, acquaintances, or dealers. He hadn’t even talked to his family more than the obligatory ‘I’m still alive’ call with Doug.

Instead, he’d had groceries delivered. He’d eaten at least two decent meals each day. He’d slept. He’d watched a few too many cheesy movies. But most importantly, he’d worked on the list that was now staring back at him.

He knew he’d have to deal with the real world, with his family, sooner or later, but until Steve returned from the mission, he’d given himself permission to hide and think. To do what Steve had asked of him.

The list wasn’t necessarily impressive. Some of the things on it were ones most other people would probably find pretty ridiculous, but it was his list.

Starting down at the paper, it took him a few seconds to register that his phone was playing the ring he’d assigned to Steve. As cheesy as it felt, he’d assigned him a unique song so he wouldn’t ignore his call like he was all the others.

“You make it home?” He skipped the pleasantries when he answered.

“I am.” Steve’s reassuring voice filled his ear. “Were you worried?” TJ could hear the concern in the other man’s voice.

“Just a bit. I know you said it was a routine mission, but I imagine even your routine mission is more danger than I’m used to people I know being in.”

“Fair point, but it really was an easy one. They probably could have done it without me, but it might have taken a bit longer. Sometimes I think they just bring me along to keep me occupied and let them get home faster. At least it gives me something to feel useful.”

TJ’s fingers traced the words written in the notebook. “Speaking of useful …” He paused, a small part of him afraid of being laughed at if he gave voice to what he wanted.

“You did what I asked?” Steve prodded, sounding pleased and interested.

“I did.” TJ admitted.

“You don’t have to tell me what you came up with if you don’t want to.” Steve seemed to understand his nervousness.

“I do though. Want to tell you that is. It’s just, you’ve done so much with your life, and it’s going to
make me sound ridiculous.” TJ closed his eyes, trying hard not to let the fear of seeming like a walking joke override his desire to actually do something.

“TJ, we’ve led far different lives. Just because I run around fighting bad guys for a living doesn’t mean I’m somehow more valuable as a person than you are and that the things I want should be more important. You deserve a chance to lead the life you want to live. It’s not my place, or any one else’s, to judge you for that.” TJ could hear the hint of Captain America authority lacing Steve’s voice.

“I know …”

“How about this, if you don’t have plans for the day, I’ll grab some bagels or something for breakfast and come over. We can eat and you can tell me what you came up with.”

“No plans here. I’ve actually been in hiding since you left. Decided I deserved the time to myself to do some thinking.” TJ waited for the recrimination for his behavior. After all, in that one conversation with Doug, his own brother had told him to stop being a diva and get on with his life. Not that Doug had half a clue what had happened.

“And you did. You do. I don’t have to come over if you want more time.” Steve replied, sounding sincere in his approval.

“I want you to. I know it’s probably stupid, but I came up with a list of things I want to do. I want you to be the first to know about them.” TJ admitted, voice falling quiet with the last statement.

“I’d like that. And it’s not stupid. I came up with a few things of my own while I was gone. Scribbled them down in my little notebook. So, bagels and lists. Sounds like a good way to spend the day.”

“Actually, you can skip the bagels. Just bring your list. I’ll take care of breakfast.” TJ heard Steve moving around on the other end of the line.

“Roger that. I’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be here.” TJ grinned at his phone as he set it down. Glancing down at his clothes, he decided his sleep pants and t-shirt were probably a bit too casual for company.

Ducking into the bedroom, TJ grabbed a pair of dark jeans and his favorite light blue sweater. The thing was so soft, he couldn’t resist brushing it across his cheek before settling in to get changed.

A few minutes later, he was back in the main room, pulling a carton of eggs and other ingredients for omelets out of the fridge. It wouldn’t be anything fancy, but omelets and toast were something he could manage and would be more filling for Steve than bagels.

His phone phone rang, lighting up with his brother’s picture as he chopped the veggies. Pushing the button, he answered it on speaker.

“Calling for proof of life?” He teased. Despite their differences, TJ knew Doug loved him.

“Do you blame me? You’ve been hiding for the last couple of days. Mom told me you guys had a fight about Sean.”

“Well, that’s not something either of you need to worry about any more. It seems I was mistaken in his opinion of me.” TJ admitted with more calm than he felt.
“Oh TJ. I’m sorry. It was stupid to get tangled up with a married man in the first place, but I’m still sorry he hurt you.”

“Thanks, Dougie. I know it was, but means a lot to know you care.”

“Of course I care. Hey you sure you should be alone right now?” TJ rolled his eyes at the question. Not that he really blamed his brother for the concern given his track record.

“Honestly, a couple of days alone has been good for me, but I’m not going to be alone today. I have company coming over.”

“TJ …” Doug’s voice was laced with warning and worry.

“Relax. He’s just a friend, and I guarantee it is a friend you would approve of if you knew his name.” TJ wasn’t quite ready for the Hammond family to descend on his newly forming friendship. Not yet.

“Oh.” TJ tried not to laugh at his brother’s obvious confusion. “So he’s not just a …” This time TJ did laugh because he knew just what his brother was trying so hard not to say.

“No. He’s not.” TJ replied just before he heard a knock at the door. “He is here though, so I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you later.

TJ was still laughing when he pulled the door open to see Steve’s smiling face, one brow arched in silent question.

“Doug.” TJ choked out between laughs. Taking a few deep breaths he managed to stop laughing.

“And what did Doug say that has you so tickled?” Steve asked as he stepped through the door.

“He was trying to find a delicate way to ask if I was having Captain America over for a booty call without actually knowing it was you.” TJ felt the color rise in his cheeks as he said it.

Steve’s eyes went wide, mouth falling open as he stared back at TJ. “Well you did say my ass should be a national treasure.” The blond laughed once he recovered. “Though I’d prefer to think I’d be more than a booty call should things ever come to that.”

This time it was TJ with his mouth hanging open, staring at the devilish grin on Steve’s face. “How the hell did the history books ever make you out to be so sweet and innocent.”

Chapter End Notes

And yes there is more to come. If the gentlemen in question will cooperate we might actually get to see a bit of their lists in the next chapter. Not that their cooperation is ever guaranteed.
“Make yourself at home.” TJ waved his hand toward the interior of the apartment. “I was just getting ready to put the omelets on when Doug called.”

“Sounds good.” Steve toed his shoes off onto the small rug by the door before peeling out of his coat and putting it in the closet. Grabbing the small bag he brought with him, he headed toward TJ. “Anything I can help with?”

“How are you with a toaster?”

“I’ve been known to operate one successfully a time or twenty.” Steve teased. “Believe it or not, I have learned to cook a few things since coming out of the ice. I used to do a fair amount of the cooking when it was just me and Buck too, but back then we just boiled everything.”

“Well I’m not exactly one to talk when it comes to cooking. I’ve mastered a few basics. Enough that I haven’t starved in the last few days, but I need to learn more. That’s actually on my list.”

Steve’s looked in the direction TJ pointed and was surprised to see a notebook open with what appeared to be a neatly written list covering the majority of the page.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you came up with a list.” The super soldier grinned at TJ. “It’s a start. I know I’ll think of more things, but it’s more than I’ve ever taken the time to do before.” Busy at the stove, TJ glanced over his shoulder to look at Steve. “Thank you for that by the way.”

“You made the list. There’s nothing you need to thank me for.” Steve waved him off as he pulled slices of bread out to start the toast.

“But there is. If I hadn’t run into you, if you hadn’t asked me to actually think about what I wanted to do with my life, I’d probably be pumped so full of coke right now that I wouldn’t know which way was up. Instead, I haven’t touched any drugs since I saw you. Not even a drop of alcohol. I spent the time thinking about what I want for my life. That’s something no one else bothers to ask me. They’re too busy telling me what they want me to do.”

Starting the toaster, Steve came around the counter so he stood next to TJ. “In that case, you’re welcome. I always want you to tell me what you want - from life, from a given moment, from me, from anything. Whether I have explicitly asked at that time or not, I want to know.”

TJ swallowed. “I still don’t get why you give a damn about someone you’ve known for less than 72 hours.” His eyes dropped to the stove, focusing on his cooking.

“Well, maybe if I stick around long enough, you’ll start figuring it out.” TJ could see Steve leaning his hip against the counter from his peripheral vision. “We both need a friend. Someone we can actually be ourselves with. Unless I’ve misread things, we seem to get along pretty well. I don’t see why I need more reason than that to care.”

“I suppose you don’t.” TJ slid the omelet onto a plate. “But hearing that and knowing it should be true still doesn’t mean it’s easy to convince myself it is true.”

TJ handed the plate to Steve, but kept his eyes lowered, somewhat embarrassed by the admission.

“That’s okay.” Steve set the plate on the counter beside him before reaching up to pull TJ’s chin up.
When their eyes met, he dropped his hand to continue. “It’s okay to need time to trust me, to trust our
friendship. I at least remember what it was like with Buck. I know what it means to have someone
that cares about every part of your life. But I’m still a fish out of water with so much these days.
Maybe I can help you figure out the former while you help me figure out the latter.”

“I’d like that.” TJ felt his mouth tugging into a small smile. “I’d also like it if you ate your omelet
before it got cold.” He grabbed the plate back off the counter, handing it to the blond again.

“I can do that.” Steve took the plate, reaching around to grab one of the pieces of toast before sitting
at the bar counter. “So what else is on your list?”

“Tell me something on yours first.” TJ retorted, curious to know what Steve came up with.

“Skydiving.” Steve shrugged when TJ whirled around to look at him.

“I remember reading about you jumping out of a plane back in the 40s. Doesn’t that count as
skydiving?”

“Oh, I’ve jumped out of several planes. Sometimes I even had a parachute. Doesn’t mean I actually
got to enjoy the view.” TJ was sure he was doing his best impression of a goldfish, mouth opening
and closing with nothing coming out. “It’d be nice to do it in daylight without the threat of someone
shooting at me.”

“I’ll admit, I kinda see the appeal. Though I’m also kinda terrified of the idea of jumping out of a
perfectly good plane.”

“I always enjoyed that part.” Steve admitted before shoving a bit of egg in his mouth.

“How come I’m not surprised that you’re an adrenaline junkie?” TJ shook his head, flipping his
omelet over and grabbing his toast to put on the plate.

“Maybe something to do with letting myself become a lab rat for the Army. Buck always swore I
had no sense of self-preservation.” Steve grinned, but TJ could see the flash of sadness in the other
man’s eyes the latest mention of his best friend.

“I wish I could have met him. I’m sure the history books got a lot about him wrong too, but he
always seemed like such an incredible guy.” TJ slid his omelet onto his plate, and rounded the
counter to sit next to Steve. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to talk about him, but I really
would love to hear more about him. I bet you’ve got all kinds of fun stories from when you two were
young.” TJ knew the war stories were what most people would focus on, but he wanted to hear
about Bucky and Steve getting up to their antics in Brooklyn. “Plus, I want to hear about the younger
you and what things were like.”

“Just promise you won’t keep count of how many times Bucky had to save my ass from a fight.”

“I’ll promise not to bring it up if I do.” TJ winked at him.
“So where do you want to start with the lists?” Steve asked, reaching down to put his plate in the dishwasher. They’d refrained from delving further into them as they ate, settling for catching up on the last couple of days. He couldn’t give TJ all mission specifics, but talking about Natasha and Clint’s antics en route kept him entertained.

“Might as well just read ‘em and see what jumps out.” TJ shrugged, grabbing his list and heading toward the couch. Steve followed behind, grabbing his bag where he’d left it. He could see TJ was a bit on edge still. For all that they’d fallen back into the same easy conversation they’d shared before, the other man had already admitted he wasn’t used to talking about what he wanted.

“Do you want to start with mine?” The super soldier offered, hoping it might make it less stressful.

“You don’t mind?” TJ curled himself into the corner of the couch again, though Steve smiled when one long leg stretched out instead of forming that same barrier as before.

“Nope. Just try not to laugh too hard.” Steve dug the small notebook from his bag. Flipping it to the right page, he offered it to TJ.

TJ let out an undignified giggle the second his eyes hit the page. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t supposed to laugh.” His eyes were wide and panicked when he looked up at Steve.

“I said try not to laugh too hard. I didn’t say you couldn’t laugh.” Steve bit his lower lip, trying not to smile too wide at TJ’s laughter. “I’ve no doubt we both have things on our lists that we wouldn’t necessarily want to admit to a wider audience. Doesn’t mean they aren’t still things we want to do.”

“So … karaoke? Pretty sure if you’d asked me to come up with a list of things Captain America would do with his free time, karaoke would not have made the top fifty.” TJ’s brow arched as he looked at Steve. “I assume the not with Tony notation is an effort at keeping your karaoke debut from becoming a full scale Broadway production.”

“You assume correctly.” Steve grinned. “Not that I want to do it alone, I just know it’ll end up being way more than I bargained for if he’s involved. The guy’s great. Don’t get me wrong. I’m just not sure he knows how to do anything like normal people do.”

“Normal? Like the son of one former and possibly one future President of the United States is any better?”

Steve shook his head, stretching his leg out to poke at TJ’s knee with his sock covered foot. “You’re perfectly normal in my book. Not that the opinion of a walking science experiment carries much weight in that regard.”

“Fair point. So in our potentially skewed opinions, we’re both within an acceptable definition of
being normal people. It’s nice to be normal for once.”

Steve watched the amused smirk on TJ’s face as the brunet looked back at his notebook.

“Shit. You went from fun to likely to send portions of your adoring public into an apoplectic fit. Are you sure about this?” TJ’s eyes were fixed on Steve’s, full of surprise but also assessing.

“Yes. I know I’ve joked that they got a lot about me wrong, but this is one that bothers me. I’m not the poster child for the uber-conservative. I had to hide it before the ice because it would have gotten me thrown out of the military or likely killed. There’s no such reason now.”

“But to do it publicly … even if you don’t make a big production of it. I’ve been there before. It will be the talk of every fucking news outlet and most of the internet. Are you sure you want that kind of attention?”

Steve leaned forward, elbows on his legs. “No. I don’t want that kind of attention, but if I don’t do it now I’m going to regret it. For one, what better way to encourage others that are closeted that they shouldn’t be ashamed than for fucking Captain America let the world know he’s bisexual.”

TJ continued to stare at him, surprise shifting to awe. “True. Not sure how much difference it would have made in my case, but I bet to a lot of normal kids it would have.”

“Exactly, but that’s not the only reason I want to get it over with. The other might be a bit more selfish though.”

“Not saying you aren’t capable of being selfish, but unless you’re hoping a public announcement will lead to all kinds of offers for sex … which it probably will … I have a hard time imagining your reasoning being selfish.”

Steve laughed, not just a chuckle but a full, loud laugh. “Well that’s not the reason. Alarmingly enough I get more offers for that than I’m comfortable with already.”

“So what’s this supposedly selfish reason?” TJ prodded.

“Someday, not right now, but eventually …” Steve bit his lip, suddenly not sure how to get the words out. Several seconds passed in silence before TJ reached across the couch, wrapping long fingers around his arm.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me.”

Steve took a deep breath, letting himself focus on the warmth of TJ’s hand. Exhaling, he rushed the words out. “I don’t want the person I’m with to get blamed for corrupting me. If I’m already out, it can’t be blamed on them.” He took another breath, feeling the heat rise across his neck and cheeks. Killing bad guys was a piece of cake compared to insinuating he might some day be in a relationship. Especially when some part of him recognized some future possibility of something more with TJ.

“And you consider this to be a selfish reason? Protecting the person you might some day be dating? I’d give a limb or two to date someone that selfish.” TJ stared back at Steve. “That’s actually an incredibly insightful reason. And for the record, I think anyone would be pretty damned lucky to catch you.”

“I don’t know about that. My life’s pretty jacked up thanks to the whole saving the world gig. Unpredictable hours, constant threat of injury, over protective coworkers that can actually kill someone, the whole public persona thing. Not to mention the whole PTSD thing from fighting in a war, getting frozen, and waking up to fight aliens.” Steve shook his head. “Fuck. I should come with
a fucking warning label.”

“Well it wouldn’t be fair if you looked like a Greek god and had a simple life too.” TJ slid across the couch so his thigh was pressed against Steve’s shin where his leg was bent in front of him.

“Seriously though, yes that’s a lot to handle, but if someone can’t deal with that to have a chance with the guy underneath it all then they aren’t worth it.”

“Thanks,” Steve slipped his leg off the couch, shifting so his side aligned with TJ’s, letting himself rest against the other man.

“So I’m gonna guess that all that ties into the next item on your list.” TJ held the notebook open on his lap, glancing sideways at Steve.

“Yeah. I know things are better now than they were. At least they offered up someone to talk to when I came out of the ice, even if they were on SHIELD’s payroll. But I’ve done a bunch of reading and even joined a few on-line forums without giving up who I actually am. There are still too many people that are either afraid to admit they need help because of what it might do to their careers or the rest of their lives. They’ve all sacrificed enough to serve, they don’t deserve to live under a shadow like that.”

“And if Steve Rogers … Captain America … can admit that he’s got PTSD and needs help dealing with it than maybe some of them will start to think it’s okay for them to need it too.”

“Pretty much. Hell, maybe I’m assuming I matter more than I do. It’ll probably be like the fucking USO tour. They booed me off stage. Made me get the chorus girls back out. Why the hell should they care what a fucking relic has to say.”

“Because that relic saved thousands of lives serving in the middle of a war, had his entire life flipped upside down, and is still saving lives. Not saying that everyone serving loves you, but I’d say you’ve got a much bigger fan base than you did when you were prancing around in tights.”

“I didn’t prance.” Steve throws a playful glare at TJ.

“Fine, when you manfully strode around in tights.” TJ snickered. “Still, speaking as a member of the generation that is serving now. We grew up learning about you, learning and believing that you and the other Howling Commandos were heroes. It’s gonna mean something to people for you to say it’s okay to need help.”

“Still no clue how I’m gonna do it.” Steve admitted.

“You’re the Star Spangled Man With a Plan. I’m sure you’ll figure it out, and I’ll help however I can. But that’s a battle to fight another day. For today, we’re just seeing what kind of madness we’ve come up with.”

“Fair point.” Steve threw TJ’s earlier response back at him.

“Exactly. So the next two seem easy enough. See the Grand Canyon and vacation somewhere with a warm beach. Hm, a 5 course meal, huh? That sounds a lot more complicated than boiling things.”

“No doubt. It’s stupid since I really don’t have people to feed a five course meal too, but that’s something Buck and I could never imagine doing when we were younger. Too much of an extravagance. I remember reading about the rich people and their fancy dinner parties. It just seems like it would be fun to be able to prepare a meal like that and see people enjoy it.”

TJ nodded his head. “It’s a worthy goal. Coincides with my attempts to learn how to cook more. If
you’re open to it, maybe we can collaborate and achieve both goals.”

“That sounds like a plan I can get behind.”

“Well, if it’s got Cap’s seal of approval we have to make it happen.” TJ winked.

“Three more to go.” TJ checked the list again. “Start drawing again. I actually know a nice little art store not too far away if you want somewhere to get the stuff you’ll need. It’s right next to the place I get my sheet music. They’re both little mom and pop shops.”

“That sounds perfect.” Steve agreed without hesitation.

“We can wander over this afternoon if you want. I could do with some new sheet music.” Steve nodded before TJ consulted the list again. “Learn to dance.”

Steve felt his brow crease as his smile faltered.

“You don’t have to tell me the story behind the parenthetical not on that one.” TJ’s voice was just above a whisper, seeing how Steve’s expression had changed when he read that one.

“Peggy was going to teach me after the war. It was the last thing we talked about when the plane was going down. Always said I was waiting for the right partner. All that got me was never getting the chance to learn.”

“I’m sorry.”

“S’not your fault. It was hard to imagine that there wouldn’t always be another day to take that chance until all of a sudden there wasn’t.”

“Well there is now.” TJ squeezed Steve’s arm again. “And while I make no claims at being the right partner, I did have to learn all the formal dancing stuff growing up like I did. I’m sure you’ve got other options to learn, but I’d be happy to teach you.”

“Really?” Steve looked surprised.

“Yes.” TJ elbowed him playfully in the side. “I bet you’ll be better at it than you expect. And I’m pretty sure there’s not a gay man on the planet that would pass up the chance to lead your ass across a dance floor. Even if it is just in my apartment.”

“Had to make it about my ass, didn’t you?” Steve teased.

“Some day I’m going to find out how to have it declared a national treasure. I will.” The pair erupted in laughter.

“I’m going to develop a complex about my ass if you keep this up.” Steve teased through the laughter.

“As if you didn’t already have one after all that time in spandex. Seriously, how many times did someone try to cop a feel when you were manfully striding around in that get up?”

Steve’s cheeks blazed crimson even as he laughed harder. “Lost count after the third show.”

“I never knew the 40s were so scandalous. To think all those people were trying to violate the image of innocence and virtue. Did you at least manage to violate a few back?” TJ’s head was thrown back against the sofa cushion as he tried to calm his laughter.
“My job was to raise money to put bullets in their best guy’s gun, not to raise a fuss.” Steve shrugged with a wry grin, all laughter dying. “That’s all they seemed to think I was good for, so I was determined to do the best I could. After all, Buck was over there. Couldn’t have lived with myself if I did anything less than everything I could if it gave him a better shot at getting home safe.”

TJ threw an arm around him, pulling the hero over so his head rested on TJ’s shoulder. “Do you want to take a break?”

“Nah. Only one thing left on my list. Might as well finish it. Then maybe a break before we tackle yours.” Steve reached for the notebook where it rested, almost forgotten on TJ’s lap. He flipped it back open before TJ’s graceful hands tugged it away.

“Decorate your apartment.” TJ turned to look at him. “Do you have an idea of what you want?”

“Something other than bare walls and an Army issued blanket.”

TJ let out a dramatic gasp. “Please tell me that’s not what you’re currently living with.”

Steve arched a brow at him, remaining notably silent.

“Oh fuck me.” TJ shook his head. “Do you want help?”

This time Steve nodded.

“Okay. I recommend on-line shopping for the selection, but first we have to actually go somewhere and let you manhandle a bunch of fabrics. You won’t know what you really want to sleep on until you feel ‘em up.”

“I’ll put myself in your hands for this one. I just know I’m tired of the apartment feeling like a temporary and very barren place to sleep. If I’m gonna make a life in this century, I’ve got to make a place for me in it.”

~*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*~

For curious minds, here is Steve’s list as written.

**To Do**

*Karaoke (NOT WITH TONY!!!!)*

*Come out as bi (not a big production, but quit hiding)*

*Go skydiving*

*Find a way to help vets with PTSD get help without the stigma*

*See the Grand Canyon*

*Vacation somewhere warm with a beach*

*Learn to prepare a full 5 course meal*

*Start drawing again*
Learn to dance (better late than never)

Decorate my apartment (make it feel like home)
Chapter 10

Setting his now empty soup mug on the coffee table, TJ grabbed his notebook. “I probably should have put these in some sort of more logical order. They’re kinda all over the place.” He held it close to his chest as he leaned back into the couch.

“Yes, because mine was so well organized. Obviously singing karaoke and coming out of the closet belong next to each other.” Steve shook his head, reaching a hand out expectantly toward the notebook. “This isn’t about a presentation ready display of our plans. It’s about letting ourselves acknowledge that there are things we want to do regardless of the box others may put us inside.”

“Do you write these little pep talks down so you have them ready if you ever need them, or are you really just that damned good.” TJ watches as the blush creeps up Steve’s neck, coloring his chiseled jawline.

“Um …”

“Well if you ever decide to get out of the business of saving the world, you have a future as an inspirational speaker.” TJ grins at him, handing over the notebook as some sort of peace offering for embarrassing Steve again. “Come to think of it, that might come in handy with some of your list.”

“I suppose it might.” Steve a smile before his eyes fall to the pages in front of him. “Well we already covered the first one. Number two is good.” Steve looked back up, meeting TJ’s eyes. “It’s important to want it for you, not because others want you to stay clean.”

TJ notes the lack of accusation in the blond’s voice. It’s an observation. A statement. It is on TJ’s list; therefore, Steve accepts it has something TJ wants. He can’t help the way the smile spreads across his face, how he relaxes further into the couch. Steve seems to note the shift, and TJ finds he wants to make him understand.

“Do you have any idea to have someone accept what I say at face value and not assume there’s some ulterior motive behind it or that I’m saying it only because that’s what they might want to hear?” TJ watched as Steve grimaced at his words, but couldn’t miss the way his eyes softened at the same time.

“Something tells me I have less experience with that than you do. Though I do sometimes think people assume I’m just parroting the words that SHIELD or some other government group want me to. It’s like they assume that when they pumped me full of serum and stuffed me in a spangly outfit that I lost my ability to think for myself.”

“Clearly those people haven’t spent enough time around you.” TJ grinned. “Surely they’d know better if they listened to you for more than five minutes.”

“You’d fucking think so,” Steve smirked before glancing at the notebook again. “Running? Ummm …” TJ watched as Steve bit his lower lip in an effort to stop speaking.

“What? Why is running weird?”

“It’s not. I recommend it. I just … I guess … I …”

“You what?” TJ sat up, turning so his entire body faced Steve, curious just what had him so flustered. “Assumed I was too delicate to do something that physical?”
“NO!” Steve’s response was immediate and adamant. “Not that. I swear, it’s nothing bad about you. I’m just an idiot.”

“Well I’d really rather you tell me than leave me guessing, because everything I’m going to come up with is going to be less than flattering to me.” TJ held Steve’s eyes, silently willing him to speak.

“With a body like yours I just assumed you already did stuff like that.” TJ stared at Steve for several seconds, trying to parse the rush of syllables into logical words.

“Oh.” His eyes dropped, suddenly very interested in the small piece of lint on the wrist of his sweater. “Not what I expected.”

“I’m sorry.” The whisper threw TJ, making him look up again.

“Why are you sorry? I’m pretty sure there was a lovely compliment buried in that assumption.”

“But I made it awkward. I don’t want to make it awkward.” Steve closed his eyes. “Shit. I should just go. I’ll leave you alone.”

TJ’s hand shot out of its own accord, grabbing at Steve’s forearm before he could actually move from the couch. “No. Stay. You didn’t make anything awkward. We’re fine.” TJ’s fingers tightened as he spoke, a silent plea to back up his words. “Please. I want you to stay.”

Steve nodded as his body leaned back into the sofa. “You’re sure.”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure being told by someone as physically fucking perfect as you that you thought I worked out already ranks as one of the nicest assumptions anyone has ever made about me. But I really don’t do as much as I should, so I would like to start running. I just need to figure out what I’m doing.”

“We could run together sometimes if you’d like.”

“Somehow I feel like my definition of run and your definition of run are going to be several minutes per mile off from each other.”

Steve laughed, making TJ smile.

“Probably true, but I don’t always run at full speed, and it gets kinda lonely running by myself all the time. I’d run with you, and then squeeze in a few miles at my usual pace. It’s not like my schedule is so packed usually that I’m in a rush to finish my runs. Though I do tend to run really early to avoid times when there are more people out.”

“Not saying I’m a morning person, but I’m on board with the idea of avoiding crowds.”

“Well, I run almost every morning, so you tell me what day you want to join me. You definitely don’t want to go overboard starting out. Probably don’t want to go more than 3 days a week.”

“If we add running shoes to this afternoon’s errand list, then I say we start tomorrow.”

“Done.” Steve nodded. “So what’s next. Oh.” His grin broadened as he read. “Do you have any particular ideas around this one? Do you want to learn to ride alone, or just hope on a bike with someone and go for a ride?”

“Probably the latter to start with. Not saying I won’t decide I want to do the former some day, but I’ve never been on one so starting as a passenger seems smart. I’d just prefer not to end up dead in
“the process.”

“You know I ride, right?”

“I might have read that in the history books somewhere.”

“They did get that right, and it wasn’t just in the books. I still ride. Have a rather lovely custom Harley that Stark outfitted for me. I’m quite certain it could seat two comfortably, and I’m reasonably confident I can take you out without causing any injury, much less death. Though we might want to wait until it warms up a bit. Hard to enjoy the ride as much when you’re trying not to get frost bite.”

“Fair enough.” TJ agreed. “Once the weather breaks in the spring, you tell me when you think it’s right, and we’ll go.”

“It’s a da … plan.” Steve nodded, immediately rushing to the next item on TJ’s list. “Make a difference. Have you thought about what you’d like to do?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I’m just the son of a couple of politicians that has done a brilliant job of fucking up my life. I’m not even sure I can make a difference.”

TJ stared as Steve watched him appraisingly. It was almost like he could see the wheels turning in his head. “What if you use that? You didn’t actually use anything the other day, so you’re still 6 months clean. For the immediate future, focus on the other parts of your list. On staying clean and rebuilding your life as as you want it. Then use that experience to help other people. I bet there are plenty of people out there feeling just like you did at your lowest moments. You’re already one of the strongest people I know, and I have no doubt you’re only going to prove that more as time progresses.”

“And is that vote of confidence from Steve Rogers or Captain America?” TJ teased, needing to break the seriousness of the moment.

“Both. Definitely both.” Steve nodded sharply.

“Well in that case, I’d be an idiot not to take the advice. Gives me time to figure out the specifics anyway.”

“That it does.” Steve grabbed his water, taking a deep swallow as he read the next item. “Any thoughts on this next one? Is this a new idea or one you’ve thought about before?”

“The thought has crossed my mind before. Hard not to consider things like that with Secret Service crawling all over the place. Not they would have let me defend myself, but it always made me wonder what would happen when they weren’t there anymore. But honestly I don’t have the first clue where I’d go for it. I have a feeling I might be less than graceful in that arena, and don’t particularly look forward to having my humiliation broadcast in front of a large audience.”

They both chuckled a bit at the sad reality of that possibility. Any type of public classes that TJ attended were likely to get out pretty quickly.

“Hell, even taking private lessons somewhere will probably get out. Though at least it might stay quiet longer. Then I’ll get to deal with Mom freakin’ out over the entire thing.”

“I could teach you a few things if you wanted, but I actually know someone that could put me to shame with the self-defense stuff. I’ve learned all kinds of tricks since the serum, but I tend to rely on the enhancements a lot which makes a good bit less than practical.”

TJ nodded along as Steve spoke. “Yeah, since I’m not likely to get my hands on any serum, I
probably need to learn things that normal humans can do.”

“Well, not sure I’d ever call Natasha normal, but she isn’t enhanced. To tell you the truth, she could probably kick my ass if I ever provoked her.”

TJ let his words sink in, considering what he knew of the Avengers. “You mean the woman you fought with in New York?” His mouth gaped open. He’d seen clips. She was equal parts terrifying and amazing. “Doesn’t she have better things to do?”

“Oh yeah, she’s one of the ones on babysit Captain America duty. At least this would let her have some fun when she’s on that particular duty. She tends to get bored when I start tearing into the punching bags.”

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and assume I would come out of that training with a reasonable level of proficiency at not getting myself killed or abducted by random bad guys.”

“Reasonable proficiency?” Steve choked out a laugh. “You survive Widow and I’d say your average idiot will be a walk in the park. Even your above average threat will be more of a nuisance than anything.”

“Sweet. Do you really think she’ll go for it?”

“Well, she already wants to meet you.” Steve admitted a bit sheepish.

“She knows about me?”

“We were on the mission together, and my poker face is sorely lacking. I didn’t tell her everything, but it was either tell her something or I was pretty sure she’d find out anyway and scare the shit out of you in a misguided effort to protect me.”

“Well that’s comforting.” TJ could only imagine the ‘what the fuck is going on with my life’ expression he was giving Steve.

“We’re supposed to train together tomorrow. Lemme call her and see if she’s up for some fun.” The blond grabbed his phone, tapping at the screen for a brief second before holding it to his ear. “No, I’m not in need of extraction. Relax.” Steve laughed. “I am not sitting alone in my apartment, thank you very much. I’m with TJ.” He paused, but while TJ could hear a murmur through the phone he couldn’t hear Natasha’s words. “Well in that case you should be happy. I was calling to see if you’d mind spending part of our gym time teaching him some self-defense.” Another pause. “Yes, it means you actually get to meet him, but only if you promise to play nicely and not hurt him.” More laughter. “No please. Not yet. Maybe next time if this goes well. Don’t want to overwhelm him.” Another pause. “Thanks, ‘Tasha. We’ll see you then.” Steve tossed the phone on the table.

“Do I even want to know what’s being held until next time?” TJ stared at him, eyes wide.

“Clint.” Steve grinned as if that explained everything, leaving TJ confused. “Either of them alone is enough for a first meeting. The two of them combined … well I’m not sure how to describe it. They’re just a force to be reckoned with.”

“So I get to ease into that. Lucky me.”
So TJ’s list is taking a bit longer than Steve’s did, so I’m splitting it into 2 parts.

For curious minds, here is the first part of TJ’s list as written.

**Things I WANT to Do**

*Learn to cook (really cook not just heat stuff up)*

*Stay clean (no drugs; only appropriate amounts of alcohol in social settings)*

*Start running*

*Ride on a motorcycle (without getting myself killed)*

*Make a difference (how?????)*

*Learn to fight (self-defense)*
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

So this one took a bit longer than usual. Life got a little busy, but the muse decided to be a bit of a punk and demand that I work on a couple of chapters that will be coming down the road. Rather than fight with the muse and get no where, I conceded and allowed the tangent.

Hopefully you're all still enjoying the story!

TJ stared at the phone on the table. The phone Steve had so casually used to setup training with a freakin’ Avenger. Not that he wasn’t already lounging around his apartment with an Avenger, but somehow in this setting it was easier to forget that Steve was Captain America. He imagined it was going to be a whole lot harder to forget when they were with Natasha … Ms. Romanov his mind corrected. He wasn’t about to piss off a woman that could keep up with the likes of Captain America and Thor by addressing her so casually.

“TJ.” Steve nudged him with an elbow. “Are you sure you’re up for Natasha tomorrow? You’re looking a little … I don’t know, freaked out?”

The laughter that bubbled out of him was far less hysterical than he’d feared. “What? No. I’m fine. I want to do it.”

“She’s not going to hurt you. I wouldn’t let her even if she tried, and I’m positive she won’t.” Steve reassured.

“I know.” TJ smiled at Steve, hoping that would be enough to end the conversation.

“Okay. I’m guessing you don’t want to tell me what has you keyed up, and I’m not going for force you. Just remember that training tomorrow is up to you. You decide you’d rather wait or find an completely different option, you tell me. I won’t force you to go through with it.”

“But you said she’d …”

Steve’s hand slipped over, squeezing TJ’s forearm gently. “You let me worry about Nat. You just decide what you want to do, okay?”

“Okay.” TJ shoved the notebook that had somehow ended up on his lap back into Steve’s hands. “Let’s keep going.”

“Yes, sir.” Steve winked before glancing back down at the paper. “Travel. Any particular destinations in mind?”

“Grand Canyons seems like as good a place to start as any.” TJ grinned. “That is if you don’t mind company.”

“I don’t mind company at all. At least not good company.” Steve nodded thoughtfully, but TJ was happy to see he seemed pleased with the idea.
“Cool. I’ve traveled all over the world with my parents, but it was always for political reasons. Always full of stuffy state dinners and formal affairs. I just want a chance to see some places without having to be on for the cameras, press, and foreign dignitaries the entire time.”

“I second that notion. Of course, if we travel together we may end up attracting some attention, but I don’t care if you’re in a suit and tie or ratty jeans and a t-shirt. Though a suit and tie might be an unfortunate choice when visiting the Grand Canyon.”

Both men laughed at the image, making TJ relax again.

“Fair point. Anyway, on with the list. We better get through this if we’re going to run our errands.”

“True. So what kind of job are you hoping to find or have you even had a chance to think about it? Despite your notation, I imagine there are a great many things you would be good at.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” TJ confessed.

“Think about all the things you’ve had to learn dealing with politics and your family. I’ve seen videos and interviews. You can handle the press, know how to deal with people from all over the place, know the ins and outs of social media, all kinds of things.” Steve paused, and TJ could guess he was starting to look a bit frazzled at the idea of having a career doing those things. “I’m not saying you do something that requires you do deal with all of that stuff in your life, but maybe you channel that skill into helping other people navigate that stuff. It’s just something to think about. I know Tony has people that help with a lot of stuff like that. I bet others do to. Tony or Pepper could probably tell us more.”

“I’ll think about it.” TJ had to admit he was a bit intrigued by that prospect when Steve framed it that way. He could be the handler instead of the handled. “You’re right, it might not be so bad that way and it is what I know.”

“See, told you there was plenty you were good at.” Before TJ could argue, Steve was back to the list. “Keep a journal. Always a good idea. I’ve kept one for years, though I’m not entirely sure where my old ones are these days. Probably ended up in a trash heap.”

“Probably not. Maybe the people that are putting together the Smithsonian exhibit would know.”

Steve’s shoulders sagged at that mention. “Maybe. I’m still having a hard time with the idea that someone thinks people actually want to come see an exhibit about me.”

TJ tried to stifle his laugh, but failed. “ Seriously? Even if you hadn’t come out of the ice, they could have pulled it off and drawn crowds. Now that you have though, there’s a huge resurgence in interest. Captain America isn’t all you are, but that part of you is important to people.”

“I guess. It’s just hard to look in the mirror and see that. Anyway, we’re getting off topic.” Steve shifted, and TJ could tell he was a bit uncomfortable with the topic, so he let it go for now. He had an inkling that Steve might start getting a better idea of how much he mattered as he started putting himself out there more. “Any fun plans for the intended long weekend with Doug?”

“Not yet, and honestly I think that and a couple of others will be a bit further down the road. That one and the one with Dad might be enough to push me over the edge if I’m not in the right frame of mind, but they need to happen.” TJ shrugged, trying to act casual about how difficult those might be, but also how important they were.

“Family’s important. I know yours has hurt you in a multitude of ways, but it’s good to know you don’t want to shut them out forever.” Steve smiled at him. “But you’re also smart to know you need
time before you’re ready for those.”

“I thought so.” TJ felt his grin grow wider, enjoying the feeling of someone agreeing with his choices for once.

“Should we add the next one to our afternoon outing, or do you want more time?”

“I think there’s a place not far from where we’re already heading, so we can do it today. I’ve already cleared out most of the contacts I need to steer clear of, but they still have my number so going a step further seemed smart. Doug actually suggested it a while ago, but I wasn’t ready.”

Steve nodded, understanding that TJ needed to do things on his timetable, not his brother’s. “I’m sure he’ll be proud of you when he hears you’ve done it.”

“Yeah, guess there won’t be any hiding that change since I’ll have to give the family my new info. Dougie tries to call me and gets an out of service message, he’ll lose his shit.” He couldn’t help a small snicker at that idea, but he couldn’t do that to his twin.

“He might.” Steve looked at the list again. “Almost done. We covered the next one, so only two left.” Steve’s head fell back as he laughed, harder than he probably meant to, at the next item on the list. “Sorry. Not laughing at what you want to do, laughing about the bear comment.”

“Well, in all seriousness, if I’m going to attempt actual camping, not the whole staying a resort or a fancy cabin, for the first time in my life, I’d prefer to do it without ending up as dinner for Smokey the Bear.” Despite his effort to stay serious, TJ was laughing by the time he finished talking.

“It’s a good goal to have.” Steve choked out, still laughing.

“I thought so.” TJ playfully jabbed the hero with an elbow. “Probably need to wait until it warms up, and I have no idea where I’d go or what the heck I’m doing, but I’ve got time to research.”

“Well, I have a fair bit of experience in surviving in less than ideal situations. Not sure evading Nazis is the same as evading bears, but it seems like I could apply some of the same skills.” Falling silent, Steve’s expression shifted. “Not saying I expect you to want me to join you for camping. That probably wasn’t what you intended, and I should really stop assuming I’m …”

“Steve.” TJ covered the blond’s mouth with his hand, forcing him to stop. “It’s okay. It’s not like I have any other friends to do this stuff with, and camping alone sounds both very lonely and highly dangerous. I’d love to have you with me.”

“Oh.” The pair stared at each other in a silence that could have been awkward, but wasn’t. Part of TJ wondered what that meant, but shot it down. Despite their ease with each other, and Steve’s occasional flirting, he needed to not let his mind go there. There was nothing but trouble down that path.

Grabbing the notebook from Steve’s lap, TJ looked at the last thing he’d written. “Might need your help figuring out the last one too. I want to do something nice, but not some ridiculously over the top thing like stuff always turns out with our family. She’s not perfect, and there’s times I wish things were different with her, but aside from Doug, Nana’s been the one person I’ve been closest to in the last several years.”

Steve leaned back into the corner of the couch, long arms sprawled along the arm and back. “Well what kind of things does she like?”

TJ chuckled. “Booze and music. Sometimes I play for her when she sings. I think she just likes to
relive the good old days sometimes. You know you were a big deal when she was a kid. I remember when we first found out you were still alive, I don’t think I’d ever seen her so giddy over something. I can’t believe I’m gonna say this, but I think you might have been her first crush back in the day.”

At those words, Steve’s face went Scarlett. “I’m … uh … um…” he stuttered over the words before taking a deep breath. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“How to tell ya, but I think you were probably the first crush for every girl and possibly some boys in that day. I’d say the same will be true of a fair number of people these days too. With an ass like yours, what do you expect?”

The red crept further down Steve’s neck, disappearing beneath his shirt under TJ’s scrutiny.

“You had to make it about my ass again, didn’t you?”

“Yes. The world would be a much nicer place to live if more things involved your ass.” TJ teased as he jumped off the couch, grabbing their empty cups as he went. A few steps from the couch, he paused and turned. “Does it bother you? I’ll stop if it does. I don’t mean it …”

“TJ, relax. It’s fine. Surprisingly, it doesn’t bother me from you. You’re not creepy about it.” Steve shrugged, leaning forward to shove his notebook into his bag. “So what now?”

“Now I find socks and shoes, and we make our way into the wilds of DC.” He grinned before ducking toward his bedroom, relief coursing through him that Steve really wasn’t bothered by the teasing.

~*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*~

For curious minds, here is the second part of TJ’s list as written.

Things I WANT to Do

* Travel (start with the US)
* Find a job (figure out what I can actually do)
* Move out of DC (long-term, not yet)
* Keep a journal
* Take a trip with Doug (2-3 nights MAX)
* Change my phone # & get rid of all my “old” contacts
* Take a writing class
* Go fishing with Dad (I’ve gotta start somewhere)
* Go camping (NOT with Dad; don’t get eaten by a bear)
* Do something nice for Nana
“And here we are.” TJ pulled parallel parked with an ease that made it evident he was well practiced. “Garrison’s is where I get all my music, have for years. It’s a small store, but they’re always willing to order anything I want that they don’t have. I could probably find it all online these days, but there’s just something about coming here.”

Steve followed him toward the row of shops. “I get it. Despite what people think, I’ve picked up the tech pretty quick in this day and age, but little stores like this are still what’s familiar to me. I grew up with small corner markets where the owners knew your name.”

TJ paused in front of one door, glancing up to make sure it was right before tugging on the door.

“Welcome to Thompson’s.” A woman in her mid-thirties glanced up from behind the counter where she was helping another customer. “I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

Steve and TJ both nodded, turning down one of the small aisles to browse the shop. It was easy to see from the decor that the store was family owned and run. Every chunk of wall not occupied by products was covered with pictures. Steve’s breath caught as his eyes landed on one very old looking black and white photo taken during the war.

“Is that you?” TJ asked from beside him, staring at a picture of Captain America, Bucky Barnes, and a couple of soldiers that were looking a bit worse for the wear, but visibly thrilled to be where they stood.

“Yes.” His reply was barely more than a gasp of air.

“What can we do for you gentlemen?” Both men startled as the woman came up behind them.

TJ turned to face her, giving Steve a moment to process what he was seeing. “My friend is looking to replace his sketching supplies. Lost all his old ones some time ago.”

“Well then, you’ve come to the right …” The woman froze, mouth gaping open as Steve turned to face her. “Your …”

“I am. The man in that picture, you know him?” Steve pointed behind him, watching as her eyes went even wider.

“Yes. Yes. That’s my grandfather, Brian Thompson. And you’re … you. It’s really you, standing in the middle of our shop?”

TJ wasn’t sure if Steve or the nameless woman was more shocked at the circumstances.

“I’m sorry. I’m being rude. I’m Stephanie Thompson.” She offered a hand to Steve, and the blond accepted it without hesitation.

“Steve Rogers. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” His smile widened. “I just … I’ve never met the family of someone we helped during the war. It’s just a bit surreal.”

“You’re telling me, I grew up with Papa telling us the story of Captain America and Bucky Barnes
saving his ass at least once a month. He’s slowed down these days, but he still loves to tell it on his
good days.”

“He’s still alive?” Steve and TJ both sounded shocked.

“Still living upstairs. My dad stays with him since mom passed away a few years ago. He doesn’t
make it down to the shop often. The stairs are hard, but he doesn’t want to deal with a nursing home.
Not while he’s still in good health for his age. He’s gonna flip when he hears you came in today.
Would it be terribly bad of me to ask to take a picture? It’d make his week.”

“Actually, if it’s not to much of an imposition, I’d love to see him. Unless you think it would be too
much.” Steve countered. “I’m happy to let you take a picture if you think that’s better.”

Stephanie gawked at him, clearly having a hard time coming to terms with the war hero she’d grown
up hearing stories about standing in her store and asking to see her grandfather.

“I’m sure he’d love that. Let me just call up and check with Dad to make sure everyone’s decent.”

“Of course.” Steve nodded, watching as she pulled a phone out of her pocket. A few seconds later
he heard someone answer. “Dad, how’s Papa doing? … Great. Do you think he’d be up for a visitor
or two? I’ve got someone down here that wants to talk to him, and I really think he’ll be excited to
see them. … Okay, we’ll be right up.”

Steve looked over to TJ, “I’m …”

TJ shook his head. “Don’t even think of apologizing for a deviation in plans. We’re going to go up
there, you two are going to spend as much time as you want rehashing the good old days, and I’m
going to sit there and soak it all up like the history nerd I can sometimes be.”

Stephanie smiled, motioning for the pair to follow her. ‘Don’t think I don’t recognize you too, Mr.
Hammond. Papa’ll probably be excited to see you too. He’s still ticked about how you got treated
when your Dad was in the White House.”

“Oh.” TJ wasn’t sure what to say.

The three headed up the stairs, Stephanie bouncing along ahead of them with obvious excitement.
“Papa, I brought you a couple of visitors. They came in looking for some new sketching stuff, but
couldn’t pass up the chance to meet you.”

Steve’s eyes took in the room, there were two men on the couch. The older had a blanket wrapped
snuggly around his legs, thick glasses perched on his face. The other appeared to be in his sixties,
and bore a striking resemblance to Stephanie.

“I don’t know what’s so exciting about me that a couple of young bucks would be excited to see
me.” The older man shook his head, but Steve could feel his son’s eyes boring into the two of them.

“Stephanie, tell me I’m not imagining this. Is that really …”

“Yeah, Dad. It is. He spotted the picture downstairs.” She answered in way of explanation.

“Steven James Thompson.” The man jumped up, extending it a hand to Steve. “It’s an absolute
honor, Captain.”

“Steven James …” Steve accepted the man’s hand, finding it hard not to choke over his words. The
man in front of him was named … No it had to be a coincidence.
“Dad named me for you and Sergeant Barnes. Always said it was the least he could do for the men that saved him since he got to come home and have a family while they didn’t.” The man continued to stare at Steve. “Please come sit where Dad can see you better.” He motioned Steve to the seat he’d vacated, kneeling in front of his father. “Dad, it’s Captain America.”

“My God,” an old wrinkled hand reached shakily for Steve. Still overcome with the emotion of this unexpected reunion, Steve wrapped his own hand around the other man’s. “I can’t believe it’s really you. I heard they found you, saw you on the news fighting those aliens, but I never imagined I’d actually see you in person again.”

“Had I known about you, I would have come sooner sir. As it happens, it’s just lucky that TJ suggested we come here to pick up a few things for me.”

“Please, none of that sir nonsense. Just call me Brian. You may not look it, but you’re older than I am, and you outrank me.” Everyone laughed as the other settled into their seats.

Two hours and a couple rounds of Cokes later, TJ and Steve followed Stephanie back down the stairs.

“Now how about we help you find those sketching supplies.” She led them to the appropriate area of the store and Steve made quick work of selecting what he wanted. Carrying them to the front, she began bagging them without ringing anything up.

“Don’t you need to …” Steve began to question.

“Not a chance, Captain. Your money’s no good here. If it weren’t for you and Sergeant Barnes, there wouldn’t be a Thompson Art Supply to begin with.”

“I can’t let you do that.” Steve argued.

“Oh you can, and you will. And I expect to see you back in here any time you need more. I wouldn’t have let you pay even if you’d refused a picture earlier, but for the pair of you to spend half your afternoon up there with him. You’ve just made his year. You could have humored him for a few minutes, made your excuses, and left. But you didn’t. Neither of you so much as glanced at a watch the entire time.”

TJ grinned at her. “It was no trouble at all. I believe we enjoyed the afternoon every bit as much as he did. I do hope you won’t mind if we stop in again sometime.”

“You two are welcome to stop in any time.” She grabbed a business card off the table, scribbling something on the back. “That’s the shop info, but I added my cell to the back. You ever need anything, or just want to come by outside of store hours, you just give me a buzz.”

Steve accepted the card, and the shopping bag full of supplies. “Thank you.”

By the time the pair finished their errands and made it back to TJ’s place, it was dinner time and they were both starving. The afternoon had not gone as planned, but the unexpected twist had left them both feeling happier than anticipated.
Hopefully you guys are still enjoying the story. I have a path to where I expect it to end, but if interest is waning I can cut some of the middle. Just let me know.
“You ready?” TJ barely had the door open before Steve asked.

“Ready to humiliate myself trying to run with a super soldier? Not at all, but I’m doing it anyway.” He swept his hand down his body, indicating layers of things designed to keep him from freezing while running in the winter. “At least the temperature had the good grace to hit the 40s this morning.”

“We can always reward ourselves with coffee after. There’s a little diner I go to sometimes if I want to grab something after my run. Never very crowded and they don’t seem to mind.”

Patting his pockets to make sure he had his ID and cash, TJ locked the door behind them.

“Can’t imagine why. I wouldn’t complain if I had you sitting around to look at all the time either.” TJ felt the heat racing across his cheeks as his brain registered what he said. “Can you just pretend that was my lack of coffee talking?”

“If that’s what you really want, but given all the fuss you’ve made over my ass since we met, you can’t really think that a comment like that is going to bug me. Can you?”

TJ mumbled something vague, not really wanting to admit that he was always capable of thinking people would be upset about what he said. After all, he had years of evidence piled up to prove it.

“So remind me again why we’re driving to go run?”

“Well usually I don’t, but I didn’t figure you wanted to do a 5 mile warm up before we even got there.” Steve shrugged as they climbed into TJ’s car.

“Fair enough.” He fired up the car and they headed out. “Promise me that you won’t laugh at how slow I am, and that if you need to stretch your legs you will do it and not worry that you’re bothering me in the process.”

Steve nodded. “Agreed.”

By the time they parked near the National Mall, TJ was ready to admit that running with a super soldier might not have been the smartest idea to get started.

“Are you sure you want to do this? There’s no way you’re going to get a real workout if you stay with me.”

Steve stared at him over the top of the car. “I’ll be fine, TJ. I already promised I would run a lap or two at my usual pace if I need to, but I really am okay going at your pace. I tend to get a little lost in my head when I’m running sometimes, so the company will be good for me.”

TJ nodded, following Steve toward their intended running route. The pair started off slowly, an easy jog to warm their muscles. After a few minutes, they pushed the pace a bit. Of course, TJ was starting to breathe a bit heavier, but Steve seemed completely unaffected.

“On your left,” an unfamiliar voice called out, interrupting Steve telling TJ another story of his time
with the Commandos. The man passed the, before slowing, turning toward them, and running backward in front of them. “You know, I’ve been dying to say that for the last two weeks as you ran by me over and over again.”

Steve laughed. “Oh really. Well why’d you wait ‘til today? You’ve had plenty of chances.”

“Yes. Sure I have. This is the first time I’ve seen you running at a piece that we mere mortals have a chance of keeping up with, much less passing.” The man shrugged. “Sam Wilson.”

Steve nodded at him, “Steve Rogers, but I gather you put that together already.”

“I did. And if I’m not mistaken, you’re TJ Hammond.” Sam looked to him. “I should be thanking you for giving me the chance to pass this lunatic.”

“You’re welcome.” TJ smiled, finding himself surprisingly at ease with this new person. He noticed Sam had a decidedly military look to him. “Care to join us?”

“I’d love too. Gets boring running alone all the time.” Sam fell in next to TJ.

“So which branch were you in?” TJ was curious if he was right.


“You just have that look about you.” TJ shrugged.

“Guilty as charged. I’m out now. Work down at the VA now. So how’d Captain America here convince you to come running with him?”

Steve snickered. “It was his idea. Or at least the running was. I offered to do it with him since I know how hard it can be to stick with it alone.”

“Too true. Though seriously, we both at least look like we’re working out. You look like you’re just out for a leisurely stroll. Run along and give us a lap or two a full speed.” Sam waved Steve off.

TJ couldn’t help his smile as Steve looked to him, seeming to gauge his reaction to the idea of him running off and leaving TJ with a man they’d just met.

“Go. I have a hard time imagining a former pararescueman is going to do anything to get me hurt. We’ll be fine.” TJ repeated Sam’s gesture, waving Steve forward.

“Okay. I’ll be back.” Steve grinned before taking off.

Sam and TJ held their pace as Steve sprinted away from them.

“The upside of getting passed by Captain America is watching that ass.” Sam gave TJ a sideways glance, laughing as he spoke.

TJ laughed so hard he had to slow down before he fell over. “Shit! I’m glad I’m not the only one. He probably thinks I’m completely obsessed with his ass as often as I’ve mentioned it.”

“Well there are worse things to be obsessed with. I take it you to have been friends for a while.” Sam picked up the pace again as TJ caught his breath.

“Less than a week actually. We quite literally ran into each other when we were both having a rough day. Seems like we’re both a little short on real friends … you probably don’t want to listen to me bitch about my life though.”
“I’m actually a surprisingly good listener. Kind of a requirement in my line of work, but you don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.” The jogged along in silence for a few minutes. “So are you planning on making a thing of running with him?”

“At least a few days a week. I feel bad holding him back if he tries to stay with me, but he was pretty insistent.”

“On your left.” Steve’s voice rang out behind them.

“Jack ass.” Sam called after the blond as he disappeared off in front of them again.

“Well, I’m here getting lapped by him most days, so if you don’t mind the intrusion, I’d be happy to run with you while the maniac shows off.”

“Really?” TJ looked at Sam, eyes full of surprise. “That’d be nice. I know I’ll end up slacking off if I go alone, but I really hate the idea of him not getting a good enough workout given what he does for a living.”

“Something tells me he could sit on his perfectly sculpted ass all day and still be in peak fighting shape when the need arose. I want to hate him for it, but given everything he’s been through in his life, I can’t.”

“I’m back!” Steve’s voice interrupted the conversation as he slowed down, falling in step beside TJ again. “You two have fun?”

“Yes. Sam’s going to join us when I’m with you so you can still get your speed work in and I still have someone to run with.”

“Awesome!” Steve seemed genuinely pleased by this revelation. “We’re almost done, you want to hit up the diner?”

“Sure.” TJ readily agreed, giving Steve a questioning look as he tilted his head slightly toward Sam. Steve gave him a quick smile and nod, so he turned to their new friend. “Care to join us if you don’t have any place you need to be? He promised me warm things if I survived the run.”

“Sounds like a plan. Saves me the cleanup if I fix breakfast myself.” Sam offered a genuine smile, eyes lighting up. TJ could imagine just how exciting it was for someone like Sam to get a chance to actually hang out with Steve, and from what he’d picked up from their time together he was very much the time to understand that Steve Rogers was more than just Captain America.

Chapter End Notes

I’m totally messing with timelines when it comes to Steve and Sam meeting, but I figured you guys might not mind :)
Still sore from the morning jog, TJ was beginning to rethink the wisdom behind attempting self-defense training, but now that they were at the gym seemed like a bad time to back out. Instead he settled for wandering around the room while Steve taped his hands up before no doubt obliterating a punching bag or two.

“I’ll admit, I expected something more high tech.” TJ commented as he took in the traditional boxing ring in the middle of the room. “Not that the atmosphere doesn’t suit you. It’s just not what I’d expect from SHIELD.”

Steve shrugged, brows furrowing as if he hadn’t really thought about that.

“It’s not.” A sharp feminine voice interrupted. “But a couple of us thought Cap here might be more comfortable training without all the high tech gadgetry. The actual SHIELD gym is a far cry from this.”

“Ms. Romanov,” TJ nodded at her, unsure if it was safe to move for handshake. “I appreciate you agreeing to help train me.”

“Please tell me the fossil here didn’t tell you to call me that.” One brow rose as she spoke, eyes flickering to Steve for a second.

“Um … no. But I wasn’t sure what you would prefer, and I always learned to go with more formal rather than less in those situations,” TJ was rambling. He was the son of a fucking US President, used to dealing with all matters of political types, and he was rambling for fear of offending an Avenger or embarrassing Steve. Not that he wasn’t already doing the latter.

“He’s adorable when he’s flustered.” TJ’s attention refocused when she spoke to Steve. “Can we keep him?”

“He’s not a pet, Nat.” Steve’s tone was all exasperated fondness. Had TJ not already heard a good bit about Steve’s relationship with Natasha, he might have been jealous. Not that he has any right to be jealous. “You’re earlier than usual. I thought I’d have time to get in a bit of a warm up before we started.”

Natasha shrugged as she began peeling out her outer layers “I know I’m supposed to be used to the cold being from Russia and all that, but I’m ready for spring.” Kicking her boots off, she was down to a simple black tank top and pants. “And there’s no reason for you to deviate from your original plan. I thought TJ and I might work on some things while you see how many of Stark’s new Cap-proof bags you can destroy.”

Steve wandered closer to TJ. “Are you okay with this? I can stick with the two of you if you’d rather …”

“It’s fine, Steve. No matter how scary she is, I doubt your friend would seriously hurt me without
reason.” TJ offered up his best reassuring smile.

“She better not.” Steve called a bit louder than necessary, glancing in Natasha’s direction.

“Relax. Both of you. I came to help prevent him from getting hurt, not to actually hurt him myself. Plus, if I hurt him I have to deal with you pouting.” Natasha elbowed Steve in the ribs. “Now go test your new toys while I teach him some tricks.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Steve ventured toward the pile obediently.

“Now, what do you say we hop up in the ring and see what you’ve got. I promise I won’t hurt you, but I want to get a feel for your natural movement, see what I’m working with.”

TJ nodded, following her through the ropes. “I have no idea what I’m doing, so you won’t be working with much.”

He’d barely stood up inside the ring when her fist came flying toward his head. TJ ducked just in time dodge the blow.

“Nonsense. You ducked instead of blocking or side stepping. Not saying I’m not going to teach you how to do both of those things, but if I know how you react and move instinctively, I can help you hone those reactions. Work with what your body wants to do naturally instead of forcing it to do something it doesn’t want to.”

They shifted around the ring, Natasha throwing punches and kicks to see what he did. As they went, she became more aggressive, knocking him to the ground several times, though he could see she was still holding back.

“So, what are you intentions with him?” Natasha whispered in his ear as she pinned him to the ground yet again.

“Um … uh … what do you mean?” TJ’s mind scrambled to process the question. Everything she’d said since they’d entered the ring had been specific to what they were doing. He was pretty sure she wasn’t questioning whether or not he intended to spar with Steve.

“Don’t try to fool me. You’re the first person outside of the Avengers and SHIELD that he’s spent any time with. I want to know what your intentions are because if you’re just in this to find out what it’s like to fuck Captain America I will take my sweet time demonstrating a great number of the considerable torture techniques I’ve learned over my lifetime.”

TJ gulped. He had no doubt she would do exactly what she said. “It’s not like that. Steve deserves better than that. I’m coming off a really shitty break up, that he is completely aware of. We’re just friends.”

“And that’s all you want?” She leaned up, watching his face as if she’d be able to tell he was lying just from a look. He was willing to bet she could.

“Right now, yes. If at some point down the road that changes, I promise you it isn’t going to be a quick fuck with Captain America. It comes to that point and it’ll be Steve Rogers I’m with, not Captain America, and you can damn sure bet it’s going to be more than some quick fuck.”

Natasha rolled back onto the balls of her feet before standing and offering him a hand up. “Good. Because in the few days since he met you, he’s seemed calmer … happier. I’ve been trying to get him to date someone, anyone, since New York to help with his perpetual loneliness, but he keeps refusing.”
TJ stared at her, wondering if she really thought dating was a cure all for him.

“It’s not like that,” she answered as if she’d read his mind. “I was just hoping if he hit it off with someone it might give him a little something normal and positive. He’s got the rest of the Avengers, but face it we’re not normal and aren’t always all that positive either.”

TJ ducked another punch, this time successfully throwing his own punch like she’d showed him a half dozen times.

“Good job.” He could have fainted at her words of praise.

“Well, for what it’s worth, and that might not be much, he’s got me now too.” TJ followed her toward the edge of the ring again, the pair of them leaning against the rope, staring at Steve’s back as she laid into what appeared to be the third bag of the bunch. Two others were tossed aside, and leaking from their ruptured shells.

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Natasha turned her head to look at him. “And don’t let your history define you. We’ve all done things we regret. Some of us worse than others.”

TJ held her gaze, more curious than ever about the Black Widow. Other than what he saw on the news from New York and the stories Steve had told him, he realized he knew very little about her. Given that little bit, he decided perhaps there first meeting wasn’t the time to pry.

Before either of them could speak again, a loud crash came from the other side of the gym as the third bag gave way, flying into the wall.

“Stark’s gonna be awful disappointed, Cap.” Natasha called as she swung herself over the ropes, landing gracefully on the floor below.

“Well, maybe he should engineer a better bag.” Steve tossed the bag with it’s two fallen cousins. “In his defense though, they did hold up a good bit longer than the normal ones, and I still have nine more to try.”

“So there might be a keeper in there yet.” Natasha grinned, already starting to put her coat back on. “As promised, I didn’t break him. Might have a left a small bruise or two, but nothing visible or debilitating.”

Winding her scarf around her neck, Natasha closed the distance between her and Steve so she could give him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll give him another few rounds before I unleash Clint on him.”

The pair both laughed as TJ watched. When Natasha stepped in front of him, he wasn’t sure what to expect.

“Remember what I said.” He nodded back, head craning around to watch her as she left.

Neither man said anything until the door closed behind her.

“She’s terrifying.” TJ admitted as soon as they were alone. “And awesome.”

“Yes. Both of those things.” Steve nodded. “She’s a very complicated woman, and one that I am eternally grateful is on our side these days.”

“Understandable. Anyway, now that I’ve gotten my ass handed to me by an Avenger, I’m thinking a shower and dinner.” TJ watched as Steve began unwrapping his hands. “Both of which I’m capable of doing alone if you have other plans or preferences for the evening.”
Steve’s eyebrows shot up, and TJ replayed his words in his head.

“Shit. I meant the dinner part. I mean I’m definitely showering alone. It was the dinner part I wasn’t sure if you would want to … Fuck. I’m just going to stop talking now, go home, and crawl under my comforter for a few days until I learn to speak again.”

TJ hid his face behind his hands, wishing he could just start over again at the point where Natasha left.

“If there was an offer to join you for dinner buried in there somewhere, I’d love to. The only thing I’ll miss out on is staring at my apartment wall or maybe catching up on some rather hideous television.” TJ felt strong fingers wrap around his wrist, gently prying his hand away from his face. “I can even cook. My place is right around the corner. If we stop there I can grab a quick shower and change, then while you shower I can hijack your kitchen to fix dinner.”

TJ searched Steve’s face, looking for some hint that he was just being nice, but found none.

“Okay. Sounds like a plan.”

Steve let go of his wrist, reaching to grab their coats. “Then let’s go do it.”
“You know I could carry one of the bags? You don’t have to walk around looking like my human pack mule.” TJ groused as they walked down the street. “If anyone recognizes us they’re going to think I’m grossly misusing those super-soldier muscles.”

“It’s two bags, TJ. Trust me, I could handle several more without a problem.” Steve continued grinning as they headed toward the apartment.

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?” Steve countered with a look that clearly stated he didn’t get it.

“There are two bags and two of us. I should be carrying one too.” TJ made a grab for the bag closest to him, but was deflected by Steve’s rather impressive bicep.

“But how would you get our coffees if you were carrying a bag?” Steve gestured toward Starbucks with his head. “I can smell it from here.”

TJ stared at him as Steve tried to stifle a laugh. “So your insistence about carrying the bags was just so I’d go get us coffee?”

“I will neither confirm nor deny that possibility.” Steve winked.

“Fine. You want the same as last time?”

“Surprise me. I trust you.” Steve leaned against the light post on the sidewalk as TJ disappeared into the coffee shop.

Waiting in line, TJ was lost in thought, paying very little attention to anything other than the movement of the line in front of him. He was sure he was still sporting a goofy grin from the experience of grocery shopping with Steve. It was fun to watch someone that hadn’t grown up with such abundant variety discover the things they could find even in a basic neighborhood market. Not that Steve hadn’t been in one since coming out of the ice, but apparently he’d taken precious little time to explore all the possibilities within.

Before long, he had their coffees in hand and was rushing for the door, anxious to rejoin Steve and find the peace of his apartment.

“TJ?” He felt his heart stutter erratically at the voice.

“Sean, what are you doing here?” More importantly, how had TJ forgotten that the senator liked to visit this particular coffee shop sometimes.

“The usual. Just reading over constituent letters.” He pointed to a small stack of letters on the table.
he’d been seated at. “What about you?” TJ could feel his appraising gaze traveling over him. “You look good.”

“Just grabbing coffee on the way back to my place.” TJ lifted one hand, pointing out the obvious.

“Oh. You must have company. Guess you didn’t waste any time.” Sean sneered at him, a harshness that made TJ’s skin crawl lacing his voice.

“I’ve gotta go.” TJ skirted around him, bolting for the door before Sean could say another word. As soon as he reached the sidewalk, his eyes searched frantically for Steve, terrified that it was all just a delusion, that he was really just drugged out of his mind and alone.

“TJ,” he heard Steve’s voice from a few feet away. “You okay?”

“Yes … No … I just …” He couldn’t find the right words.

“Do you need to sit down? Did someone say something? Do I need to go punch them?” Steve sounded so earnest that TJ couldn’t help but laugh.

“Let’s just go home before I do something stupid and say yes.” TJ started toward his building, knowing Steve would follow. “I’ll tell you, but not here.”

“Okay.” As expected Steve fell into step beside him. “The punching offer still stands though. I can just picture whomever it is as Hitler, and it’ll almost happen on reflex.”

“I appreciate that. And someday I might let you do it, but not today. It’s not worth it.” TJ argued as they stepped inside the building. He wouldn’t let Steve go back to Starbucks to punch Sean, but he would certainly appreciate the mental image of the scene. “He’s not worth it.”

“If you’re sure, but I’d still like to know what happened that upset you.” Steve pushed the button for TJ’s floor before leaning against the elevator wall, arms still holding the two grocery bags.

They remained silent as the elevator rose, TJ could feel Steve watching him. Concern radiated off the super soldier, and TJ found himself comforted rather than oppressed by it.

TJ hurried off the elevator as soon as the doors open, anxious to get inside his apartment where he could put a locked door between he and Steve and the ugly implication of Sean’s words. An implication TJ new could have been all too true if things had gone just the slightest bit different a week ago.

“Are you avoiding telling me because you think I’ll disregard your wish not to punch someone or because you just don’t want to tell me.” Steve asked as he pulled a box of manicotti shells out of the bag. “Whatever it is, I just want to know that you’re okay.”

“Maybe just a little bit of the first. Definitely not the second.” TJ admitted, watching to see if his words upset Steve.

“I promise, no matter how much I might want to do it, I won’t go against your explicit wishes.” Steve assured him as TJ stepped into the kitchen beside him to help empty the bags.

“I saw Sean on the way out of Starbucks. Or more accurately, he saw me. It was all fine until he realized I was holding too coffees and assumed the second was for whatever guy I was fucking.” TJ turned to pull a pot out, trying to avoid Steve’s eyes as that statement sunk in.

“TJ,” Steve’s voice was gentle, but had an edge of what TJ guessed was his Captain America voice
to it. “Can you please quit trying to avoid looking at me.” He turned, holding the pot in front of him.

“I would deny it, but we’d both know I was lying.” He looked at Steve’s knees as he spoke.

“What I don’t understand is why,” Steve reached out, taking the pot from his hands and setting it in the sink. “Sean’s misguided assumptions mean nothing to me. I’m not here to judge you for what you did before we met. Hell, I’m not even here to judge you for things you do now. Yeah, I’ll call you on it if I think you’re doing something that’s dangerous or stupid, but you’re an adult. No matter my opinion, you’re free to make whatever choices you want.”

TJ looked up at him, “But that’s not what I want. I’ve had plenty of meaningless fucks in my life, but I’ve been pretty damned short on actual friends.” He watched Steve’s expression, felt a tug of surprise when he didn’t see disapproval there, only relief. “Thank you.”

“Why?” Steve looked genuinely puzzled.

“For being worried about me … about what happened to upset me.” Steve started to open his mouth, but TJ held up a hand to keep him quite. “Usually when the people around me are concerned it’s because they expect me to do something reckless or stupid. They’re more concerned with my potential reaction than to whatever it is I might be reacting to. Grant it, you might have been worried about that too, but it didn’t feel like it.”

“Short of being worried that you were going to fall over when you first walked out and looked like you’d seen a ghost, no I wasn’t worried about what you were going to do. You came out of there and came straight to me as soon as I called for you. I might have been more concerned about your reaction if you’d bolted the other direction.” Steve flicked the faucet on, shifting the pan to make sure the water caught. “Now that we’ve established that Reeves is still an asshole with no sense, I’m not planning to punch anyone this evening, and you’re looking less like a ghost and more like you, what do you say we see if we can’t conquer the creation of spinach manicotti?”

TJ grabbed his tablet off the counter, propping it up as he pulled up the recipe. “I say we go for it.”

Chapter End Notes

Well that was not where this chapter was supposed to go. Reeves was supposed to have no part in it, then the stupid jerk had to surprise TJ and I both by popping up at Starbucks. Someday he and Steve will actually meet. Or maybe he and Natasha … that idea has merit.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hopefully this ends up where Chapter 15 was supposed to before the Congressman Who Shall Not Be Named so rudely interrupted. ;)

“Shit!” TJ giggled uncontrollably as Steve ripped the third shell in a row while trying to stuff it. “This is ridiculous. Why can’t they make these things sturdier?”

“Because then we wouldn’t be able to chew them. It’s pasta. Pasta isn’t supposed to be sturdy.” TJ defended the helpless shells. “Probably a good thing we got extra boxes. We might need them.”

“Yes. Good planning on your part. How’d you know this would happen?” Steve glared at the remaining empty and still intact shells.

“Comments on the recipe.” TJ grinned at him. “Why don’t you hold the shell and I’ll try to stuff. Maybe that will work better.”

TJ tried not to laugh as Steve picked up the shell, handling it as if it were a nuclear device about to blow with the slightest jarring. When he had the end open, TJ grabbed some of the filling and carefully poked it inside the shell.

“We might …” Steve’s words were interrupted by a loud knock at the door. “Were you expecting someone?”

“No.” TJ answered, looking at the door as if it might tell him who was there.

Another series of knocks were followed by Doug’s voice. “TJ! Open up! The doorman told me you’re here.”

“Fucking hell!” TJ shouted, his hand jerking at Doug’s yell, causing the fourth shell to tear. “Just use your damned key, Dougie!” He shouted at his brother, even though he could already hear the key in the lock.

“TJ! Are you okay?” Doug rushed into the room, eyes searching for his brother.

“Fighting a losing battle with manicotti shells, Dougie. Take a breath and relax.” TJ assured him, wondering how long it would take for his brother to register the presence of a third person in the room. The third person that he still didn’t know the identity of from their phone conversations.

“Damn it, TJ. I thought you were being attacked the way you yelled.” Doug rounded the corner into the kitchen, freezing as soon as he realized TJ wasn’t alone.

“Nope. No attacks. And even if there were, I’m pretty sure my present company would have had no problem handling it.” TJ smirked at his brother, curious to see how long it took Doug to regain the ability to speak. Very little left his twin speechless, but finding his childhood hero in TJ’s kitchen, hands covered in the makings of their dinner was apparently enough to do it.

“Cap … TJ … is that … I’m hallucinating right?”
“It depends. Do you see a dragon or Captain America?” TJ couldn’t pass up the chance to harass Doug.

“Seriously? This is the friend you assured me I would approve of?” TJ was impressed he formed a complete sentence that time.

“Was I wrong?” TJ grinned, raising a brow in challenge.

“No. You were right. Very right. But how?”

“I caught your brother doing battle with a particularly nasty patch of ice outside the building.” Steve interjected for the first time. “I’d offer to shake your hand, but well …” he held up his goo covered hands in explanation.

“Fair enough. So how do you go from finding TJ trying to bust his ass on a patch of ice to making whatever it is you two are making. He’s been avoiding me lately, but we’ve spoken enough that I know this isn’t the first time you’ve been here.”

Steve laughed this time, seemingly unphased by Doug’s interrogation. “I suggested we grab some coffee to make sure he was okay. Turned out we both needed someone to talk to. Your brother’s a good guy. It’s not often I run across someone that doesn’t get hung up on the shield and the uniform.”

“You’ve seen the shield?” Doug’s attention snapped back to TJ, mouth gaping open.

“Once.” TJ admitted. It had been resting on Steve’s couch when they’d gone by his apartment after their visit to the gym. “It’s heavier than you’d think.”

“You held the shield? You held Captain America’s shield?” Doug’s protective brother routine was now completely side tracked by the idea that TJ had touched the shield.

“Yes.” TJ was trying really hard not to laugh at Doug.

“I’m so jealous. How is that even fair? I was the one obsessed with Captain America growing up! You were all about Bucky Barnes.”

Steve was standing close enough to TJ, their proximity required for the stuffing of the shells, that he could feel the jerky movements of Steve’s whole body as he tried not to laugh. Knowing Steve was struggling to keep it together, TJ’s resolved faltered and he leaned over the counter, face buried in the crook of his elbow as he laughed, trying not to get manicotti stuffing everywhere.

“Shit. I just said that in front of Captain America.” Doug turned a fantastic shade of red as he realized what he’d done. “I can’t believe I just did that.”

“It’s okay. You’re not the first person to act strange meeting me, but please, call me Steve. I prefer to avoid the title unless it’s strictly required or I’m actually working.”

“Got it.” Doug nodded. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Actually, if you can dump that box of shells into the water, I’m pretty sure we’re going to need them.” Steve gestured toward the pot of boiling water and the open box beside it.

“Got it.”

TJ managed to regain his composure as Doug set to work. “Well, we almost had that last one before
Doug interrupted. Maybe we can get this one.” He reached into the bowl of pasta shells, handing another one to Steve. “No sudden movements.”

“You know, I think Annie just uses a teaspoon to drop the stuff into the shells instead of trying to cram her fingers inside them. She said they always rip if she tries that.” Doug threw the information out casually as if it was common knowledge.

“Seriously?” TJ glared at his brother. “The comments on the recipe said they were easy to tear, but not a single one mentioned using a spoon instead of fingers to stuff the shells. What the fuck?”

“Doug, would you mind grabbing a spoon for us?” Steve asked through gritted teeth. “I’d love to see if the idea works before we destroy the entire box of these fuckers.”

TJ took the spoon from Doug’s hand, cautiously filling it with filling and angling it so the glob would slide into the shell. “Tell Annie she’s a genius.”

Less than a half hour later, they had two pans of spinach manicotti in the oven. Doug sat at the bar counter watching as Steve and TJ cleaned up the mess in the kitchen.

“So other than learning to cook, what’ve you been up to?” Doug was trying not to grill TJ on what he’d been doing since things ended with Sean, but Steve and TJ could both tell he wanted to.

“Oh, you know, the usual. A few one night stands. Met up with my dealer.” TJ couldn’t help the sarcasm dripping in his voice. “Seriously, Doug. I told you I was fine. Steve and I talked a bunch the day it happened. I did some serious thinking while he went off to save the world for a few days. Since he’s been back, I went running, started learning self-defense, did some writing, and have generally carried on a very healthy and adult friendship.”

Glancing down at his shirt, TJ realized he’d managed to get some of the spinach filling on it.

“Shit. I’m gonna go deal with this before it ends up staining.” He threw a warning glare at Doug, “Be nice.”

Steve watched as TJ disappeared into his room, shutting the door behind him.

“Listen, I know you’ve got years of knowing TJ on me, and I know you’re worried about him, but you’ve got to relax. He knows you care, but I’m pretty sure all he sees when you start pushing is that you don’t trust him.” Steve knew he might be over stepping some boundaries with this, but it was impossible for him to miss the tension vibrating through TJ as Doug started questioning him.

“You’re right. I do have years of experience on you, but you’re right about the rest too. Clearly all my years of experience haven’t done much good. I never managed to stop him from doing drugs. I never managed to do anything but make him feel like he wasn’t good enough.” Doug sagged against the bar counter.

“I don’t know that that’s true either, Doug. You care about him, and he knows that. But he’s making a real effort to make some changes in his life, and if you can’t accept that he’s changing and support that, it might be better for him if you don’t try to interfere.”

Steve watched Doug, hoped that TJ’s twin could find a way to truly support TJ, and in the way the Hammond family usually did from what he’d heard.

TJ’s door reopened, effectively ending the conversation, but Doug met Steve’s eyes briefly. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.” He smiled before turning toward TJ. “So, salad?”
“Yes. Salad. I’ll try not to wear any of that.” TJ opened the fridge to pull things out. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but maybe we should invest in aprons if we’re going to keep up with this cooking thing.”

“As long as they aren’t pink and frilly, I could be on board with that.” Steve agreed.

Nearly an hour and a half later, Doug was finally headed out the door. Steve was making motions to head that way as well, but hung back when TJ caught his eye and shook his head. One minor excuse about finalizing plans for the morning, and they managed to shut the door with only the two of them left inside the apartment.

“I’m so sorry about that.” TJ shook his head, hand waving toward where Doug had just exited.

“The part where he lost it a little bit over Captain America and his shield, or the part where he was playing the protective brother?” Steve laughed.

“Both?” TJ shook his head. “Mostly the latter, because the other was really just hysterical to watch.”

“Oh come on, TJ. Doug was nothing. You can’t tell me that Natasha didn’t rake you over the coals the other day. I’m not stupid. I know why she wanted me out of the way.” Steve crossed his arms, looking all serious as he challenged TJ.

“When you put it that way, you’re right. Doug would have to do a lot worse to come near the level of threat that Natasha poses.” He shook his head. “In that case, I don’t apologize for any of it. Now go home so I can get some sleep. Even Sam will be lapping me tomorrow if I don’t sleep.”

Steve chuckled at him as he headed out the door. “Rest up. I’ll be here bright and early.”

“Aye. Aye, Captain.” TJ shut the door behind him, flipping the lock before switching off the lights. Even with a full night’s sleep he wouldn’t be able to keep up with Steve on the run, but at least he might not make a complete fool of himself.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I should probably warn you up front that it may take closer to a week to get updates for chapters at the moment (though not always). I started my new job last week, so free time is a bit more limited. Alas, I do what I can to write before and after work and during lunch. Just be patient with me ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Remind me again why I decided to start running in the middle of winter?” TJ pulled the stocking cap further down over his ears.

“You could always join a gym with treadmills.” Steve offered as they left the car. “Those are usually temperature controlled environments.”

“Yeah. Temperature controlled and boring.” TJ pouted, falling in step beside Steve. “You’ll carry me back if I get frost bite, right?”

Steve threw an arm around his shoulders, rubbing his hand along TJ’s arm. “Of course. I’ll even take you to the diner for hot chocolate to thaw you out.”

“Did I hear someone say hot chocolate?” Sam’s voice came from behind the pair. “You know I’m crashing that party, right?”

“Hard to crash something you’re invited to.” TJ teased as Sam came up beside him. “Of course, we have to survive first.”

“It’s not so bad once you get moving.” Sam reassured as they began picking up the pace. “Unless you’re him and run fast enough to create a serious wind chill.”

“Still not so bad. Not saying I don’t prefer to be warmer, but I guess after 70 years on ice a little wind doesn’t seem so bad.” Steve shrugged, but TJ noticed the shift in his expression. He’d already figured out that the ice wasn’t something Steve liked to talk about, and while it was true that cold didn’t bother him as much because of the serum, it was also true that he seemed to prefer staying warm.

“Well, what do you say we get this over as fast as possible so we can all enjoy some of that hot chocolate?” TJ urged the other two faster, pushing the pace as much as he could.

“I’m all for a shorter run today.” Sam concurred. “One lap for us, a dozen or two for him?” He teased.

“Very funny.” Steve laughed, pulling ahead of the pair as he turned to face them for a second. “Just make sure you keep moving.” He winked at TJ before spinning around and taking off.

“I really want to hate him when he does that.” Sam shook his head. “It was easier to hate him before I actually met him.”

“Really?”
“No. He was my fucking childhood hero,” Sam confessed. “My ego hated getting lapped by him, the rest of me was too in awe that I was only a few feet away from Captain America.”

Still jogging, TJ looked at same, brows knit in thought. “Mind if I ask a question?”

“Never. What’s on your mind?”

“Why do you always call him Captain America? I know you understand the difference between the public figure and Steve Rogers, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard you call him Steve.” TJ wasn’t sure why it bothered him so much, but he found it did.

“Force of habit I guess. We all referred to him as Captain America or Captain Rogers when I was serving. None of us would be so cavalier as to refer to a national hero by his first name.” TJ watched Sam, nodded at his words.

“I guess that makes sense, but you really should. Call him Steve, I mean.” He felt awkward trying to tell someone like Sam, someone that had already done so much with his life, what to do, but it felt important.

“You know, you’re right. It’s nice that you care so much. I know he’s more than his title, just like I was always more than my rank. I gather it’s something he’s bothered by …”

“If you mean the idea that people forget that Steve Rogers is the one inside the uniform and doesn’t necessarily conform to their preconceived notions of Captain America, then yes. Drives me crazy because apparently plenty of people were worried about whether or not Captain America was fit to return to duty, but nobody bothered to make sure Steve Rogers was really okay with the fact he woke up 70 years into the future and was basically on his own.” TJ fell quiet for a moment, still a bit uneasy with the conversation. “I know it’s stupid, me somehow trying to protect a fucking super hero but in the short time I’ve known him, he’s put more energy into getting to know me and really helping me than any other person I know. I just want to return the favor.”

Sam slowed their pace, allowing the chance to face TJ. “It’s not stupid. As you pointed out, it’s Steve Rogers, not just Captain America, that needs a friend. I’d say you’re doing a pretty good job on that front.”

Before either could say more, the heard the footsteps rapidly approaching from behind.

“Don’t say it!” Sam yelled.

“On your left!” Steve called at the same moment.

TJ dissolved into a fit of laughter as Steve slowed to fall in with the pair.

“What did I ever do to you to deserve such torment?” Sam glared.

“Sorry,” Steve smirked clearly unapologetic. “Guess I’m just making up for all the races I never could compete in before. Never really had a chance to enjoy the speed just for the sake of being fast before the ice.”

Sam and TJ exchanged a quick glance, a silent acknowledgment that this was one of those things that Steve Rogers than man needed.

“Well, when you put it like that, feel free to rub it in as much as you like.” Sam winked, noticing Steve seemed a bit uncomfortable with having revealed that much. “Why don’t you go give us another lap, really see if you can push that speed.”
Sam shooed him along, he and TJ both smiling as they watched him get smaller in the distance.

“Is it wrong to admit that really I just want him to get that extra lap in so we can hurry up and get back inside. I swear it’s a good ten degrees colder than it was the other day. It’s no wonder we’re the only idiots out here this morning.” Sam groused as they continued following much more slowly after Steve.

It didn’t take long at all before the blond was striding up behind them again, though it surprised them both when he didn’t call out his usual warning.

“Trying to sneak up on us?” TJ threw Steve a playful glare when he fell in step beside him.

“Nah. Just didn’t feel like saying it.” Steve shrugged, and TJ floundered to think of some way to bring back the playful version of his friend that was there before. He hated to think Steve’s head would be stuck in the past all day.

Before he could think of something, Sam interrupted the silence. “So, not to put you on the spot or anything, but do you think I could convince you to stop by one of my groups at the VA sometime?”

“As Captain America or Steve Rogers?”

“Either is fine, but I think Steve Rogers would go over a bit better in that setting. The groups are a safe place for people to talk about their experiences and admit when they aren’t really doing okay. I think Captain America might be a bit intimidating for them, might make them feel like they’re letting down a legend by not being okay.”

The three slowed to a walk, giving themselves time to cool down before they arrived at the diner.

“You don’t think they’ll be disappointed to learn that the man behind the uniform doesn’t have his shit together all the time? That I’m just as susceptible to bad days and PTSD as the rest of them?” Steve asked. Despite TJ’s assurances that Captain America voicing support for better treatment of PTSD would be a good thing, he still worried he would be considered irrelevant or end up causing more problems than anything.

“On the contrary, I think seeing someone they look up to so much admit that he needs help makes it easier for them to admit the same. I think my groups would welcome you with open arms. And I think it opens the door for a much bigger conversation around caring for our service men and women.”

TJ pulled the door to the diner open, trying to suppress a grin over how Sam was already leading Steve in a direction he knew the blond was very interested going.

“Come on in boys. Grab whatever table you want.” The waitress gave a quick greeting as she was a finishing up with another table.

The three headed for the corner window booth, TJ sliding in before Steve, Sam taking the seat across from them.

“Give me your phone.” Steve held his hand out to Sam who despite an odd look didn’t hesitate to do as he was told. A few seconds later, he handed the phone back. “Just send me the details for the meetings. You’ve got my phone and email.”

Sam stared the phone as if it was going to jump up and start dancing. TJ couldn’t help but laugh imagining his expression had been similar with the knowledge he had Steve’s information.
“I can’t decide what I want? It all sounds amazing, but there’s no way I can eat everything I want to try.” TJ huffed at the menu a moment later.

“You’ve seen me eat, TJ. I’m not above helping you finish things off if you can’t make up your mind.”

“I should just let you order and poach what I want from your plates.” TJ elbowed him in the ribs, smirking up at him.

“But what if I don’t order the things you want to try? You’ve gotta give me some direction.” Steve challenged, both men missing the knowing look in Sam’s eyes as he watched them.

Fortunately, the waitress was familiar with Steve, so when he ordered well over half the breakfast menu she simply jotted the order down without comment.

“I’ll have those hot chocolates and waters right out.” She turned away with a smile.

“Part of me wishes I had your metabolism,” Sam grinned. “The other part of me is glad I don’t have your grocery bill.”

“Yeah, thankfully SHIELD did actually consider that, so I won’t go broke. 70 years of back pay adjusted for inflation also helps.” Steve shrugged the comment off, glad he didn’t have to worry about it.

“So what are the pair of you up to for the rest of the day?”

“I’ve gotta go in for a bit, get the details on a new mission.” Steve admitted. “Should be pretty routine from what I know, but we’ll head out in about three days.”

“You still up for running while this one takes off to save the world?” Sam looked to TJ, smiling at TJ’s look of surprise. “Oh come on, don’t tell me you thought I only run when he’s here to show me up?”

“That’d be nice.” TJ admitted, honestly surprised that Sam wanted to meet up when it was just them, even though the airman had given no indication of tolerating TJ only for Steve’s sake. “Hopefully it’ll warm up some.”

“We can hope.” Sam agreed as the waitress returned with their drinks. Eager to warm up a bit, the three settled into an easy silence as they held hot cups, sipping their contents with smiles.

Despite being three very different people, they all found themselves enjoying the camaraderie they found just enjoying a relatively normal morning in each other’s company.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you that are suckers for TJ, I would also recommend checking out Liberation by gr8escap. It’s a fantastic TJ Hammond / Jack Benjamin story that also features Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes, and Sam Wilson. It’s one of my current favorite reads (translation: i stalk updates)!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This one is a wee bit shorter than some of the others, but it also wasn't a plan chapter. Steve hijacked the chapter without my permission and refused to follow direction. What a punk ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eyes flying open, Steve could feel the sweat soaked through his shirt as his pulse raced. Groaning, he rubbed his eyes, swinging his legs over the side of the bed as he looked at the clock.

2:19

Head falling into his hand, Steve sighed. Every night. Every fucking night. Physically the serum let him function fine on the three or four hours of sleep he got every night, but the emotional and mental strain was taking a serious toll.

He wanted to throw something. To hit something. Anything to make the nightmares stop. He didn’t have to look up to know his options were limited in his apartment. He could force himself to lie back down, but he knew he was to agitated to sleep. He’d only end up staring at the ceiling, waiting to feel the ice closing in around him.

Tonight it had been the ice. Last night it was the train. The night before it was some imagined mission where he’d gotten all of the Howling Commandos killed. Before that it was the battle of New York. It was like his mind store a collection of these nightmares to serve up.

The one with the ice always left him feeling cold afterward. The wool blanket that was usually more than enough to keep him warm was never enough on those nights, so he didn’t even bother trying.

Pushing to his feet, Steve grabbed the warmest sweats and hoodie he could get his hands on and dressed quickly. A few minutes later he was bundled up and slipping out his front door. Though far from completely quiet, DC didn’t have quite the same level of activity as New York at this hour of night. The streets were largely empty, so there was no one to notice or care that Captain America was wandering them unable to sleep.

He’d walked for at least twenty minutes before he pulled his phone out. TJ would be sleeping, wouldn’t see the text until morning, but it made him feel less isolated to send it. It made him feel like there might be one person that really cared that he was suffering alone in the dead of night.

Shoving the phone back in his pocket, Steve continued walking, staring off into the distance, but seeing nothing.

The vibration of the phone against his less barely registered at first, startling him when it finally did.

TJ: Come here. You shouldn’t be on the DC streets alone after a nightmare.

Steve started to text back an argument, he didn’t want to interrupt TJ’s sleep.

TJ: Don’t argue. If you don’t I’ll just be up worried. If you do, maybe we can both get a little more
Steve: Be there in five.

Without realizing it, Steve had been winding his way ever closer to TJ’s apartment. The trip to his friend’s door only took five minutes because he forced himself to slow down. Lifting his hand to knock, he was startled when the door moved away from his hand.

“Hey there.” TJ looked up at him with tired eyes, wearing the tightest white t-shirt Steve had ever seen with pajama pants slung low around his hips.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Steve asked as TJ stepped aside to let him into the apartment.

“Not sure. Just couldn’t get settled right, so I kept waking up.”

“Sorry about texting at such a ridiculous hour. I just needed to feel like I wasn’t completely alone, but I really didn’t expect you’d see them until later.” Steve peeled out of his coat and scarf, trying to ignore the fact that his body was still shivering even though he really shouldn’t have been cold. It was just the psychological after effects of the icy nightmare.

“You’re shivering!” TJ noticed before Steve had even turned back to him. “I’ve never … You don’t … Come on.” TJ grabbed him by the hand, tugging him toward his bedroom. “I promise I won’t take advantage of you.”

Steve yawned following behind him. “I trust you.” The blond let himself be shoved onto the bed, watching in shock as TJ knelt down in front of him and started untying his shoes. “I can do that.”

“No. You can sit still and let someone take care of you for a few minutes. I promise the experience won’t kill you.” TJ reprimanded, eyes fixed on Steve’s as he spoke.

Steve bit his lip, crossing his arms tight across his stomach in an effort to slow the trembling.

“Do you want me to turn the heat up?”

“No.” Steve answered quickly. “I’m not actually cold. It’s all in my head. I just … I don’t know how to make it stop.”

TJ tossed Steve’s shoes away from the bed as rose from the floor, going to turn off the light before circling around to the other side of the bed. “Just lie back.” He watched as Steve allowed himself to slide down underneath the comforter. Sliding into the bed, TJ felt the mattress shake as Steve continued to shiver. Hoping he wasn’t crossing a line he shouldn’t, the brunet shifted himself toward his friend. “Roll onto your side.”

Steve shifted so he was facing the wall, back toward the middle of the bed. Taking another deep breath, TJ pressed himself against the hero’s back, draping one arm around his waist.

“Is this okay?” He whispered against Steve’s neck, tensing when he heard a small sniff instead of an answer. “I can go back to the …”

“Please don’t.” Steve spoke so quietly TJ wouldn’t have heard him had he not been pressed up against him.

“Are you sure? Are you okay?”

Steve nodded, TJ could feel it despite the darkness. “When I was smaller and sick all the time, Bucky
would sleep like this with me to help me stay warm. Nobody has since …” He sniffed again.

TJ was at a loss for what to say. He couldn’t imagine going so long without something so simple. Not wanting to offer some meaningless platitude, TJ settled for rubbing is hand along Steve’s forearm where it was tucked against his chest. Keeping his movements slow and steady, he felt Steve’s trembling slow as his breathing became more even. Within moments, he felt the soldier’s entire body relax in sleep.

He remembered Steve saying he hadn’t had a full night’s sleep since he came out of the ice and wandered just how many night he’s spent alone trembling as his mind relived the ice. How many night’s had he picked up his phone, wanting to reach out to someone but feeling like no one would care?

TJ kept his hand moving, not wanting to risk waking Steve with a sudden stop in movement quite yet. He knew the other man was leaving in less than 18 hours for a mission, so he needed all the sleep he could get. TJ could catch up on the missing sleep later.

For tonight, he would revel in the idea that he could provide some comfort to the man that had so quickly become such an integral part of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate me for tormenting Steve.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve woke to the smell of bacon. If the aroma weren’t enough to remind him he wasn’t in his own bed, the butter soft sheets would have been. Not sure what to say to TJ after his meltdown of a few hours before, he stared at the ceiling for several minutes.

Taking stock, Steve realized he felt more well rested than he had in months. Turning his head, he found TJ’s clock read 9:30. It was just after 3am when he showed up, so hands down that was the longest spell of uninterrupted sleep he’d had since waking up from the ice.

The sound of footsteps approaching left him very unsure of what he should do. He felt like a bum for still being in bed, especially given that TJ had been awake long enough to get started on breakfast. He hoped he hadn’t chased the other man out of his own bed. Remembering the feel of TJ curled around him as he drifted off several hours before his stomach clenched at the idea that he might have done something in his sleep to upset is friend.

“Mornin’ sleepyhead.” TJ’s voice interrupted him from the door.

Steve sat straight up, ready to make a run for it as soon as TJ gave the slightest sign of being uncomfortable.

“Easy there.” TJ stepped forward, holding his hands up higher to bring Steve’s attention to the tray he carried. “I thought we might enjoy a lazy breakfast in bed, unless something changed since yesterday and you have to rush off to SHIELD.”

“Yeah … I mean no … um.” Steve could feel his cheeks flushing and was glad he still wore the hoodie that would hide just how far the red tended to go. “I mean, no my schedule hasn’t changed, and yes breakfast it bed sounds amazing. You didn’t have to cook for me after I already ruined your night.”

TJ sat down on the edge of the bed, setting the tray carefully in the middle. “You didn’t ruin anything. I wasn’t getting much sleep to begin with, and it was actually nice to needed for a change.”

“Oh.” Steve wasn’t sure what to say. “Guess I didn’t really think about that.”

“Let me guess,” TJ handed him a plate piled high with eggs, bacon, and fruit. “You woke up an started trying to figure out how to apologize even though I was the one that invited you to come and then wrapped myself around you the minute we got in bed.” TJ grinned, hoping that Steve hadn’t decided he regretted that.

“If I’m not allowed to apologize for intruding, can I at least thank you? I’ve never managed to go back to sleep after that nightmare. Don’t succeed much after any of them, but never that one. It usually takes hours for the shivering to stop.”

“You can thank me, but it isn’t necessary. You’d have done the same for me if the situation were reversed.” TJ took a bite, smiling around his fork when Steve did the same.

The pair leaned back against the headboard, eating in a relaxed silence. When the empty dishes were set to the side, TJ looked over to Steve. “So, what do you want to do today?”
“I’m game for just about anything, though if we’re going to leave the apartment we should swing by mine so I can change clothes.” Steve looked down to the sweats he still wore.

“Easy enough. Did you have somewhere in mind? We can go somewhere or we can be bums and just chill for the day. I had no plans, so I’m good either way.”

A knock on the door startled both men.

“Expecting someone?” Steve asked, guessing at the answer based on the expression TJ wore.

“I swear nobody ever comes unannounced until you’re here, and then they keep showing up.”

The pair climbed out of bed, Steve refusing to send TJ to answer the door alone in case there was an issue. At the door, TJ paused to look through the peephole and laughed, immediately stepping back to open the door. He didn’t bother to answer Steve’s curious look.

“Delivery for the fossilized insomniac.” Natasha smirked as she held up a small duffel bag. “I already have your mission gear in my car, so it’ll be waiting for you on the jet when it’s time to head out.”

“How?” Steve stared at her.

“I have my ways, and you know better than to think I’m going to reveal them.”

“You’re terrifying.” Steve shook his head as Natasha stepped inside, dropping the bag before reaching to give him a hug.

“I am, but you love me anyway.”

“Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Orange juice?” TJ offered, not quite sure what to make of the Black Widow standing in his entryway.

“Maybe next time. I wanted to make sure this one was still alive and had what he needed for the day. My work here is done, so I’m off to go beat on Clint for a while before I convince him to go try the new Thai place with me.” She grinned. “You make sure you take care of yourself while I borrow the fossil for a few days, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” TJ nodded, too terrified of Natasha to argue that he should be the one telling them to take of themselves since they were headed into a no doubt dangerous situation.

“Wheels up at twenty-one hundred hours. I’ll pick you up here an hour before.” Natasha pointed at Steve, receiving a brief nod of confirmation before slipping back out the door.

“Do I want to know how she knew where you were?” TJ asked a moment later.

“No. Honestly, I have no idea and it’s probably safer that way.” Steve shrugged, reaching down to grab the bag. “But at least now I have a change of clothes and know I don’t need to allow time to grab my stuff.”

“True. Why don’t you go grab a shower and get changed while I clean up from breakfast?” TJ suggested, already moving to go pull a fresh wash cloth and towel from the small linen closet.

“I can help you clean up first. You shouldn’t have to do that after you got up and cooked.” Steve argued.

“Nonsense. It’s just a few dishes. I’ll be done before you are.” TJ handed him the items, shooing him back into the bedroom. “You’re welcome to anything that’s in the shower. Just holler if you need
something you can’t find.”

“’K. I’ll be right back.” Steve frowned, but agreed anyway.

“Take your time. Something tells me you won’t necessarily have time for a relaxing shower out in the field, so enjoy it while you can.”

“Fair point.” Steve called as he disappeared into the bedroom.

Turning back to the kitchen and the waiting dishes, TJ couldn’t quite suppress a grin. After the way Doug reacted to Steve being in his apartment helping cook dinner, his brother might actually stroke out if he found out Steve was about to be naked and in TJ’s shower. Part of TJ couldn’t help but wish that he could join the blond. It’d be crossing all kinds of lines, but even he wasn’t delusional enough to try and convince himself that he didn’t find Steve absolutely gorgeous.

“Wishful thinking man. Don’t be stupid.” TJ muttered to himself as he settled in to wash the dishes.

As promised, he was done and sitting at the bar drinking a cup of coffee by the time Steve emerged. His hair was still damp, dark jeans hugging his hips, as his blue t-shirt looked like it was straining not to burst at the seams. Steve must have realized TJ was staring as he crossed his arms self-consciously over his chest in a futile attempt to mask the fit of the shirt.

TJ couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped. “That just makes it worse.” His hand flew over his mouth as as as the words were out. They were true. The change in position meant the material was straining harder around biceps and shoulders, but he couldn’t believe he’d said that out loud. “I’m sorry. Apparently I haven’t had enough coffee for my brain to mouth filter to actually kick in yet.”

“It’s okay. I think Natasha found the smallest shirt I owned, or possibly bought a new one just to embarrass me.” TJ watched the red deepening across Steve’s face, spreading until it disappeared beneath the neck of his shirt.

Thankfully he did manage not to actually ask Steve how far the blush spread.

“Well, I’m not going to complain about her choice. Though I will promise to try and keep all commentary to myself.”

“Thanks.” Steve finally stepped out of the bedroom door, moving to the coffee pot. TJ’s eyes followed him, taking in the view from the rear and sending a silent thank you to Natasha for the view even as he cursed her for taking pleasure in torturing him. TJ wasn’t stupid, he was well aware she knew what she was doing when she brought those clothes.

Chapter End Notes

Natasha is definitely going to have fun toying with these two even though they really aren’t ready to jump into anything yet. She’s certainly enjoying toying with me as she wasn’t even supposed to be in this chapter, but she insisted on getting a few words in and I’m not stupid enough to argue with Black Widow.
“You know you’re taking most of these with you, right?” TJ spooned another heap of chocolate chip cookie dough onto the baking sheet. “There is no way in hell you’re leaving me here with several dozen cookies.”

“I’d argue, but it would be pointless. You have to keep some of them though.” Steve pulled a sheet of fresh baked cookies out of the oven. “Maybe even share some with Doug.”

The time for Natasha to collect him for their mission was rapidly approaching, and with it a sense of foreboding Steve couldn’t shake. He kept telling himself it made no sense. He went on a mission right after they met and TJ was just fine, but something about this trip left him unsettled.

“Is that a subtle attempt to make sure I don’t hide away by myself while you’re gone this time?” TJ handed him the final batch of cookies to go into the oven. “You know Sam and I already made plans to meet to run tomorrow, right? I’ll be fine, and it’s only for a few days.”

“I hope.” Steve murmured.

“If it’ll make you feel better I’ll invite Doug over for dinner one night. He’s heading to California soon anyway, so he’ll be pestering me to see him before he goes anyway.” TJ started washing up the dishes.

“I don’t want you to do anything you don’t feel like doing.” Steve appeared at his side, leaning his hip against the counter as he watched TJ, towel in hand waiting for a dish to dry. “It’s not like my presence is required for you to live your life and be just fine.”

“Maybe not required, but definitely preferred.” TJ handed him a bowl to dry. “It’s okay if you’re worried. I am too.”

“But …”

“No buts.” TJ shook his head. “My best friend is heading off on a mission to make the world a safer place, I’m allowed to be worried that there will be bad guys trying to stop you.”

“I’ll have Natasha with me.” Steve offered as reassurance.

“And believe me, that is a large part of what will let me sleep at night.” He snickered at Steve’s affronted look. “Not saying I don’t have the utmost faith in your ability to handle them yourself, but somebody needs to have your back and she is the only one of your team I’ve met, so I’m glad it’s her. Plus, she can just glare at the bad guys and they’ll run away in terror.”
“You laugh, but I’ve seen it happen.” Steve grinned at him.

“Now that’s enough worrying for now. You’re not gone yet, so we’re both fine. You’ll only be gone for a few days, so we’ll both continue to be just fine.” TJ nodded his head, silently agreeing with himself.

“And in an unexpected positive, I’m heading into this mission having gotten more sleep than I have in what feels like years.” Finished drying dishes, Steve draped the towel carefully back where it belonged.

“You know I’m available for sleepovers whenever you want to get a good night’s sleep. You don’t even have to wait for the nightmares to wake you up and send you wandering through DC. Seriously, my bed and couch are open whenever you care to avail yourself of them.”

TJ poured two glasses of milk, fully intending to sample the fruits of their recent labor.

“You say that, but I can’t imagine having a fossilized insomniac lurking around your apartment at night is going to do any good for your sleep.”

Handing Steve a glass and a cookie, TJ rolled his eyes. “Tell Natasha she’s not allowed to assign you any more ridiculous names. And I think you over estimate the impact you have on my sleep. Despite my recent efforts, I’m not exactly known for maintaining a healthy schedule.”

Mouth full of chocolate chip cookie, Steve couldn’t immediately reply, but TJ could assume from his arched brow and frown that he wasn’t pleased with this.

“Seriously though, I can sleep just fine with you here.” TJ fell quiet, looking down at the ground. His next words came out far quieter and rushed. “I tend to feel calmer … safer when you’re here anyway.”

Steve froze for several seconds, letting TJ’s words sink in before setting his half empty glass of milk down and forcing himself to swallow the last bite of cookie. Closing the distance between him and TJ, he wrapped one hand around TJ’s upper arm.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that.” He waited to see if TJ would meet his eyes. When he didn’t, Steve continued, “Feeling better when you’re around someone you trust isn’t a sign of weakness, TJ. I was the same way around Bucky … am the same way when I’m with you. I’ve never had to be someone I’m not with either of you, and it’s very calming to know I don’t have to put on some front.”

Steve could tell he’d struck a chord by the tears pooling in TJ’s eyes. Not knowing what else to say, he simply tugged the brunet closer, wrapping his arms tight around him. TJ offered no resistance, letting his head rest on Steve’s shoulder as his arms wormed around the blond’s waist.

“I swear I don’t usually cry so much.” TJ murmured against him. “I’m just all out of whack lately.”

“You’re entitled to be out of whack sometimes. I’d be more worried if you tried to convince me that everything was sunshine and roses and you were just fine.” Steve held TJ close, soaking up his warmth and hoping that the awful sense of dread he felt was all in his head.

A few moments later, the oven timer made TJ jump, causing Steve to laugh.

“Sorry. Should have warned you it was about to go off.”

“’S okay.” TJ murmured, already turning to shut the beeping off. Steve grabbed the oven mitt,
pulling the cookie sheet out of the oven.

“There’s nothing like the smell of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies. Well, maybe fresh baked apple pie. I remember Buck and me getting so excited when we’d come home and ma had made one of them. Wasn’t something she could do often, but it was such a treat when she did. I’ve been half afraid to try making either, too afraid they wouldn’t measure up to what I remember.”

TJ leaned back against the counter, watching as Steve reminisced.

“Well how’d we do on the cookies?”

“Pretty close. Where’d you find the recipe?” Steve pointed to the recipe neatly printed in TJ’s writing.

“Nana dug up her my great grandma’s recipe. Surprisingly she didn’t even ask too many questions when I called to ask if she had one.”

“How’d you …”

“Lucky guess. You got a bit of a far away look the other day at the diner when we started talking about desserts. Seemed like the classics were the ones that got to you the most whereas you were more eager to try the newer stuff.” TJ admitted, unsure what Steve would think of his assumptions. “I just guessed you were avoiding the stuff that you were afraid would have changed too much with time.”

“Thank goodness for old family recipes.” Steve smiled at him. “Thank you. Means a lot that you thought about something like that.”

“Well, I can’t just sit around here and do nothing when you’re off plotting to save the world, and that seemed like as good a project as any.” TJ grinned up at him. “Speaking of, chatting up old recipes must have struck a chord with Nana, because I got a delivery yesterday.”

He grabbed Steve’s hand, tugging him toward the living room where the piano sat. TJ slid onto the piano bench, rifling through a stack of sheet music. Steve sat on the sofa, waiting to see just what it was TJ was so excited about.

It only took a few seconds for the blond to recognize the song and laugh. “Does this mean you told her about me?”

“Nope. This means that she was as obsessed with you as every other little girl was in her day.” TJ grinned as he continued playing the song. “I feel like you should be able to sing along to it.”

“Oh no. I didn’t sing. I just manfully strode around the stage, lifting chorus girls and punching Hitler.” Despite his efforts, Steve found his foot tapping along with the tune. “Please tell me that isn’t the only song she sent.”

“Oh no, there are plenty of others.” TJ gestured toward the stack with his head. “Feel free to peruse and make requests.”

Half an hour later, Natasha’s sharp knock on the door broke them out of their fun. TJ continued playing as Steve answered the door.

“Had I known there was going to be live entertainment I would have come earlier.” The red head smirked as she came inside. “You about ready?”
“Yes. Why don’t you help TJ package the cookies while I through my shoes on.”

“Aye. Aye, Captain.” Natasha swatted him on the shoulder as she headed toward the kitchen, winking at TJ on her way.

TJ scrambled from the piano bench, still flustered by having an Avenger in his apartment, even one that had knocked him all over a boxing ring a few days before.

“No wonder the place smells so good. You two have been busy.” Natasha stared at the cookies.

“And you two are taking most of them with you. I’ll be in a sugar coma if I try to eat all these alone.” TJ pulled a couple of containers out of a cabinet. “That should be big enough.” He handed the larger one to her as he piled about a dozen of the cookies into the smaller one for him and Doug to share.

“Is this going to become a thing?” Natasha smirked at him across the counter. “Sending us off with treats every time we have to head off for a mission?”

“Do you want it to become a thing?” TJ wasn’t sure what to think of her teasing.

“I can think of worse things to become things.” She shrugged at him. “But you know if word gets out, the rest of the team is going to start making requests.”

“As long as they’re patient with the fact that I’m still finding my way around this whole baking thing, I don’t mind requests.”

Steve joined them, the confused expression on his face giving away the fact that he hadn’t been paying attention to their conversation.

“We’re definitely keeping him.” Natasha gave TJ a quick pat on the back before sweeping passed Steve, container full of cookies still in hand.

“I’ll have my phone with me. Won’t always be able to answer, but I’ll check in when I can and you can always text me whenever you want.” Steve wrapped TJ in a bear hug.

“Beat up lots of bad guys. Don’t get shot. Take care of yourself.” TJ whispered in his ear.

“You too. Well, the last one at least.”

“Yes, sir. Now go before she comes back in here to get you. I don’t want to be on her bad side.”

Steve let go, turning toward the door. “Judging by the way she was carrying those cookies, I think you’re safely on her good side for a while.”

Chapter End Notes

Nat’s at it again. I’m kinda in love with her interactions with TJ and him not being entirely sure what to do with her.

And is anyone else in the mood for fresh baked chocolate chip cookies now?
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A different format than usual, but with Steve away on a mission I wanted to keep things moving.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~ Mission Day 1 ~
Steve: DC winters are not so bad. It’s so cold even I’m feeling it.
TJ: {Pic of hot chocolate with marshmallows} I’d share, but not sure it would be warm when it got wherever you are ;)
Steve: True. Enjoy it for me.
Steve: Time to work. Will check in tomorrow.
TJ: Be safe!

~ Mission Day 2 ~
TJ: Thompsons say hi! Sent you a new set of fancy pencils for when you get home.
TJ: I found more sheet music to entertain the fossilized insomniac ;)
TJ: I don’t care what anyone says, homemade ravioli is not easy.
Steve: Hey! Just got back where I could check my phone.
Steve: I suppose trying to talk them out of free stuff is a losing battle.
TJ: You suppose correctly. The whole “without Steve we wouldn’t be here” argument is pretty convincing.
Steve: How’d the ravioli taste? MREs have improved since my day, but still aren’t anywhere near a homecooked meal.
TJ: Don’t you guys have normal food on the jet?
Steve: Not on the jet. :( 
TJ: Oh. Safe?
Steve: Yes. No reason to worry.
TJ: Says the man in some sub zero location full of bad guys.
Steve: Promise. Natasha won’t let them hurt me ;)
TJ: That I believe.
Steve: Gotta go. Sleep well.
TJ: k

~ Mission Day 3 ~
Steve: I’m fine. Mission FUBAR. Will be a couple days longer than expected.
TJ: :( As long as you’re safe.
Steve: He is - Natasha
TJ: Why is Natasha answering.
Steve: Someone had to go play frisbee with the bad guys. - N
Steve: Relax. He’s fine. - N
Steve: I’m fine. I’m back. Sorry if she scared you.
TJ: She always scares me, but that’s okay.
Steve: Running with Sam tomorrow?
TJ: Yes. Which probably means I should sleep.
Steve: Sweet dreams.

~ Mission Day 4 ~
TJ: Sam says you better not be slacking on your runs or he’s going to make you do 2x the laps when you get home.
Steve: Tell him he should come take my place and I’d be glad to keep up with my running.
Steve: Hard to find a good place to run in the tundra.
Steve: Might be relocating today, not sure if the intel will heed my request for a warmer location with good jogging trails.
TJ: Might be a bit much to ask.
TJ: Let me know when you arrive wherever it is safe.

~ Mission Day 5 ~
Steve: Made it.
Steve: Warmer but still colder than DC.
Steve: You’re probably still sleeping. Don’t worry if I don’t respond when you finally get this. We’re safe. Getting ready for recon.
TJ: Sorry I missed you. Glad you made it and that it’s at least a little warmer.
TJ: Dinner with Doug today. Wish me luck.
Steve: Hope it went well.

~ Mission Day 6 ~
Steve: The fossil is offline today, but he’s safe. - N
TJ: Thanks.
Steve: Cookies are all gone. :( - N
TJ: I’ll make more when you’re back.
Steve: :) - N

~ Mission Day 7 ~
Steve: You guys know I’m not actually old enough to be a fossil, right?
TJ: Very aware you’re not a fossil. None of the fossils in the museum have an ass that could compete with yours. ;)
Steve: You broke Cap - N
TJ: I didn’t mean to!
Steve: Don’t apologize. I’ve never seen him turn that particular shade of red. It was awesome. - N
TJ: Still didn’t mean to. I’m sorry Steve. No more ass commentary.
Steve: I’m not mad. I was just laughing at the image of the t-rex skeleton with an ass. You’re right. It doesn’t have the same affect.

~ Mission Day 8 ~
TJ: Mom is going to drive me crazy.
TJ: Doug said she keeps hounding him about me.
TJ: Is it wrong to avoid my own mother?
Steve: You can’t do it forever, but it’s okay to want to handle her on your terms.
Steve: Go with what is best for you, not what will make them happy.
TJ: Any update on return date?
Steve: Starting to look like another week. :( 
TJ: :( 

~ Mission Day 9 ~
“Hey TJ! Can’t talk long. We’re headed into the latest hot spot. Just wanted to let you know I probably won’t be able to check in tomorrow.” Steve’s voice was hushed, obviously trying not to draw attention to himself. 
“Thanks for calling to let me know. It’s good to hear your voice.” TJ wished the mission was over already. 
“Yours too. I’m so sorry this is taking so much longer than we thought. It’s like a fucking domino affect over here. Every time we deal with one thing it leads us to another.” 
“Don’t worry about me. Just stay focused and stay safe. Tell Natasha to do the same. Or maybe just tell her to stay safe. She might hurt me if I imply she’s not always focused.” 
“I will. Gotta go.” 
“Okay.” TJ stared at the phone screen as it went dark. This mission officially sucked. 

~ Mission Day 10 ~
TJ: Doug left for CA. 
TJ: I know you said you probably couldn’t check in today, but just wanted to say hi. Was nice to actually hear your voice yesterday. 
TJ: Miss you. 
Steve: Miss you too. 
TJ: Good to know you’re still okay, but don’t reply if it’ll put you in danger. 
TJ set the phone on his nightstand, forcing himself not to continue the conversation and put Steve at risk. The mission was almost a week over what they’d originally expected, and he was hating every hour of it. It sucked to realize he’d become so accustomed to Steve’s presence so quickly, but at the same time, he wouldn’t trade it for anything. 

~ Mission Day 11 ~
TJ: Nana decided to go a getaway with some old friends. This can lead to nothing but trouble. 
TJ: Who does one call to bail their grandmother out of jail if she gets drunk and causes trouble in Vegas? 
Steve: You mean your parents don’t have someone on retainer for random stuff like that? 
TJ: Sadly they probably do. 
TJ: Probably because of me more than her. 
Steve: Don’t go there. Focus on what you’re doing now, not the stuff that happened before. 
Steve: Wish I was there. 
Steve: Are you okay? 
Steve: Do you want me to call? Might be a little bit but I can sneak away. 
TJ: No. I’m okay. You just keep yourself safe. 

~ Mission Day 12 ~
TJ: Tell Natasha there are as many cookies of whatever variety she wants in it for her if she makes this end so you can come home. 
Steve: She says she’s doing her best. 
Steve: White chocolate macadamia nut. 
TJ: I’ll bake them as soon as she brings you home. 
~ Mission Day 13 ~
Steve: I begin to think this will never end. 
Steve: Why can’t bad guys just cooperate already.
TJ: Have you tried just sending Natasha in to scare them all straight?
Steve: She keeps shooting them.
TJ: That works too.
TJ: Sorry it’s going so long.
TJ: Let me know when you’re actually heading home so I can do some baking.

Chapter End Notes

You know that bad feeling Steve had before the mission ...
It's coming ...
And for those that guess, you were wrong ...

The next chapter is ready, so I just have to decide when to post it ;)
I really wasn't expecting so much of a response to the last chapter, but since I woke up to an inbox full of comments I'm going to give you what you want (or at least what you think you want).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Curled up under four layers of blankets, TJ fumbled around his nightstand for his phone. 11:21. He’d manage to spend almost the entire morning refusing to get out of bed. He needed to get his shit together. So what that Steve said he would only be gone for 3 or 4 days and this was the morning of day 16. Missions were unpredictable sometimes, Steve had told him that repeatedly.

It’s not like TJ had any reasons to expect him to drop everything and come back just because he was in a funk. And Steve had texted or called every day. This was’t Steve lying to him and avoiding him. This was Steve trying to protect the world. He’d kept it together for a full two weeks. He’d continued jogging with Sam, learned a few new recipes, played the piano, and otherwise kept himself occupied and productive.

Day fifteen just proved to be too much. Day fifteen was when he saw the ad teasing magazine article that was releasing today. The article that promised in depth looks at the now grown children of the White House. The ad hinted at the grand accomplishments of many, and the epic failures of others. He knew where he fell.

Lost in thought, he almost dropped his phone when it went off but managed to recover and answer it.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Does this mean you’re done avoiding me?” His mother didn’t bother with pleasantries. “You can’t avoid us forever.”

TJ closed his eyes, rubbing a hand over his face as he fell back against the pillow. “I haven’t been avoiding you, Mom. I’ve just been focused on trying to take care of myself.”

“That’s what Douglas keeps telling me when I say I’m going to call, but he’s in California for a few days.” Elaine continued. TJ was both surprised she’d listened to Doug and not. She was often too busy to actually remember she had intentions of paying attention to TJ. After all, other than showing up at events when summoned, he had little practical use to her like Doug.

“I’m not going get into trouble just because Doug is out of town.” It’s not like being out of town had stopped Doug from checking in with him.

“I’d hope not, but he did mention that your new friend has been out of town for a bit too. I thought since you were alone perhaps you’d care to join your father and I for dinner tonight.” TJ both wanted to strangle Doug for mentioning Steve was gone too, and hug him for keeping his promise not to tell their parents the identity of his new friend.

“Dinner with the three of us?” TJ held the phone away from his ear, looking at it as if it might
answer the mystery of why his mother suddenly wanted to have a family dinner with just them.

“Yes. Doug says you’ve been busy, but he won’t tell us what exactly is going on. We just want to see you. Make sure you’re really doing okay.”

TJ let out a defeated sigh. He didn’t much feel like dealing with a Hammond family dinner, even less so without Doug to intervene, but he knew there was little chance of convincing his mother he wasn’t using or doing something equally stupid if he declined when she knew he was alone.

“Fine. I’ll be there at seven.”

“Good. We’ll see you then.”

TJ dropped the phone on the bed beside him with a groan. This was not what he wanted to do today. At least his mother hadn’t somehow figured out he was still in bed at almost noon.

Deciding it was too late too deal with jogging today, TJ decided he should at least get out of the bed and pretend to be productive. Its not like lying around all day would actually change anything. Steve was still off saving the world. Doug was off at some big event in San Francisco, and he was doing absolutely nothing exciting.

“Get it together, TJ. What would Steve do in this situation?” He chuckled considering that if the blond was half as frustrated as he was at the moment, he would demolish a heavy bag or six. Deciding that wasn’t his speed, he opted for fixing lunch instead.

Six hours later, TJ had cleaned his apartment, mastered the new song he was learning on the piano, written in his journal, and was now showered, dressed, and ready to face his parents. Or at least as ready as he ever could be for them.

Arriving at his parents’ home a few minutes early, he took a deep breath and steadied himself for what was coming. He’d decided to make use of the time to try and tell them about his efforts to find something productive to do with his life.

By the time they were getting ready for dessert, TJ had almost given up on telling them anything important. Conversation had been dominated by the latest political news after they’d established he was indeed still clean and showing no signs of recent drug use.

Their faith in him was astounding.

“So who is this new friend that Doug keeps mentioning?” Bud questioned. “It raises all matters of red flags that you insist he not tell us. The only thing keeping me from forcing it out of him is that he promises he does know and trusts the person not to cause you any trouble.”

“Well, it’s good to know that you trust one of us to know what’s best for me.” TJ couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice. “Anyway, I’ll introduce you when I’m ready, but for once I have a friendship that is based on something other than my political connections, and I’d like to keep it free of those for a while longer.”

He knew he’d misstepped by the sharp inhale from his mother.

“But we aren’t political connections. We’re your family.” Elaine took a drink of wine as she stared him down.

“Family that is always neck deep in politics. Mama, I love you. I do. But this is something I need.”
Bud snickered. “Like all those boys you’ve hooked up with? Is that the need this mystery man is filling?”

TJ let his head fall back, swallowing the words that threatened to spill. Inhaling deeply, he tried to collect himself before he spoke, “No Dad. He’s not filling that need. He’s just a friend.” If he said it enough he might even believe it. “He’s been helping me sort out what I want to do with myself. Helping me figure out who I am outside of the Hammond family screw up.”

“And what, pray tell, have you two of you come up with?” Bud pushed, as both parents stared intently at TJ.

“I still have to figure out the details, but I want to do something to help other people that are facing some of the same struggles I did. Help them realize it’s okay to be who they are. Help them find ways to cope.”

TJ fell silent as Bud’s barking laugh filled the room. Tears sprung to his eyes as he saw his father took his words as a joke. Blinking back the tears, TJ looked to his mother. Her expression, while better schooled than Bud’s, was full of disbelief.

“And you think an addict that can barely keep himself clean is supposed to be a role model for others? What is it you plan to teach them? How to score drugs when they need an escape?”

Elaine’s words plunged into him like a knife. He sat, mouth gaping open as he tried to find words to respond, but none came. Knowing the evening had just been irrevocably fucked, TJ pushed away from the table.

“I’m going home. Don’t bother calling.” He all be ran for the door.

“TJ, wait!” Elaine called, chasing after him.

One hand on the door, he turned to face her. “No. Whatever it is, just no. Not tonight. I came here thinking I could tell the two of you what I was trying to do. That for once in my fucked up life you might actually be proud of me. And this is what I get instead - another reminder that as far as either of you are concerned I’m a fucking waste of space. An embarrassment to the Hammond name. A pathetic American punchline.”

Without another word, he yanked the door open and fled for his car.

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna go hide at work now and see how this goes over. I might be coerced into posting the next chapter this evening. Then I may have to go into hiding before the lynch mob comes for me because even I kinda hate me for Chapter 23 ...
Chapter Notes

Due to the overwhelming response to the last chapter, I'm delivering this one as promised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Exhausted and covered in entirely too much blood, fortunately not his own, Steve headed for the quinjet. Sixteen days into what Fury promised was supposed to be a three to four day mission, and they were finally ready to head home. Home that was halfway around the world.

Reaching into one of his many pockets, he pulled out his Stark phone, ready to send TJ a text. It took a second to register that he had voice mail. Usually everyone just texted. His brows furrowed as he saw it was from TJ. TJ hadn’t called him a single time since he’d been gone. He’d sent texts, replied to every one Steve sent, and answered every time Steve called, but he had never initiated a call.

Raising the phone to his ear, his steps faltered as soon as the other man’s voice filled his ear. “I’m so sorry, Steve. I’m not strong enough. They’re all right. I’m nothing but a fucking failure.”

Steve gasped for breath, losing focus on what TJ’s message said.

“Cap? You okay?” Natasha’s voice, laden with concern broke him from the fog.

“No! TJ … he’s … FUCK!!” Steve sprinted for the jet. “Get us in the air. Now!”

“On it.” Natasha ran for the cockpit, knowing Steve well enough not to question his frantic demand. Steve followed her, taking the copilot’s seat, visibly shaken as he tried to reach TJ.

“He’s not answering. I’m too late. I’m on the other side of the fucking planet and he needs me there.”

“JARVIS,” Nat spoke to the AI as Steve continued to mumble. “Get Tony. We might need him to go to DC.”

Tears streaked down Steve’s face as he tried TJ’s phone again, still getting no response.

“What’s this I hear about DC?” Stark’s voice filled the cockpit.

“Not exactly sure, but from the state Cap’s in, I think TJ’s in trouble. We’re headed there, but it’s gonna take a few hours to get there from Russia.”

“Steve?” Tony addressed the Captain. “I’m on my way, but why don’t you try your new friend Sam? He’s even closer and I bet he’d be glad to help assuming that calling TJ’s family isn’t our first choice.”

“Sam?” Steve looked up, finally registering what Tony was saying. “Yeah. I’ll call him.” He fumbled with his phone for a second before looking up toward where Tony’s voice was coming from. “Tony, thank you. Please call me as soon as you know anything.”

“You got it, Capsicle.”
Steve punched the button on his phone, praying that Sam wasn’t too busy to answer.

“You finally gonna come to one of my meetings and make me look good?” Sam teased by way of opening.

“Sam …” Steve’s voice cracked.

“Shit. What’s wrong? Where are you? What do you need?” The other man launched straight into mission mode.

“I’m in the jet somewhere over Russia. TJ’s in trouble. Left me a message … he’s … I …” Steve couldn’t get the words out, voice faltering. He’d already lost Bucky and Peggy was as good as gone, he couldn’t stand to lose TJ too. Not when he finally felt like they were finding their own paths.

Steve heard a door slam and tires squealing. “I’m on my way. Who else knows?”

“Tony. ‘Tasha called Tony. He’s on the way.”

“Okay. Even with the suit I’ll beat him there. I need you to give Stark my number and tell him to call me.” Sam’s steady voice helped ground Steve.

“I can do that.”

“Good. You do that, and get your ass stateside as fast as you can. We’ll take care of your boy.”

His boy? Steve’s mind hung on those words, even as his fingers did as Sam asked and sent his number to Tony in the suit. Was TJ his boy? He wouldn’t deny he was attracted to the other man, but that didn’t mean TJ had any interest in him other than as a friend. Jokes about his ass aside, TJ had been raked over the coals by his last relationship. He didn’t need Steve staking some proprietary claim on him.

“Steve,” Natasha hand reached out, squeezing his wrist. “Wherever your mind is going, you need to stop. Tony and Sam will make sure he’s okay. Why don’t you go change into something that looks less like you just fought an entire battalion so they don’t strap you to a gurney and try to operate on you the second you step foot near a hospital.”

The super soldier looked from her, down to his uniform. He heard what she said, but his brain just wasn’t ready to process it yet.

“Hospital?”

“Steve, if I’m putting the pieces together right, he’ll be in the hospital when we get there. If he tried to kill himself, they’ll have to take him.”

“Oh. Right.” He continued staring at the blood stains. “I need to change. He can’t see me like this.” He stumbled from the seat, fingers gripping the entrance to the cockpit in an effort to stabilize himself. Taking a deep breath, he pushed away from the wall, forcing his feet to keep moving to the locker where he had fresh clothes.

A few minutes later, he sat alone in the back of the jet. No longer looking like he’d just walked off the set of a slasher flick, Steve stared at his phone. Tapping the screen, his eyes fell closed as TJ’s voice filled the air.

“’M so sorry, Steve. I’m not strong enough. They’re all right. I’m nothing but a fucking failure. I thought I could do it. Thought I could be enough, but I’m not. Had dinner with Mom and Dad. Tried
to tell them about my list. About getting my life together. Dad laughed. Didn’t even say anything. Just laughed. Mom thought the idea of a fuck up like me trying to help other people was ridiculous. I ran out. Should have stayed longer or should have gone straight home instead of deciding to go for a walk to think. Then I wouldn’t have seen Sean out with his new piece of ass. Guess the new one is good enough to have out in public. You’ll never guess the icing on the cake to this fucking prize of a day. Some upstart bitch reporter decided to make a name for herself by profiling presidential children. It came out today. Picked up a copy on my walk. All my biggest failures stacked up next to all the great things the others have done. Nothing like having proof that I’m nothing but a fucking waste of space … a pathetic American punchline in stark black and white. Anyway, I’m done. They all want me gone, out of their way, so I’m going to give them that. Just … I … I wanted you to know it wasn’t your fault. You tried. You were the only fucking one that every really did. I’m sorry, but please don’t dwell on it. Spend more time with Sam and Natasha and the others. They’ll have your back. Probably do a better job than I did anyway. I’m sorry, Steve. You’re amazing. I hope you know that.” The message ended, the options playing in the overwhelming stiff and polite voice given what he’d just heard.

How could they? How could TJ’s parents treat him like that? How could Reeves so callously do with someone else what he’d refused to do with TJ? How could a reporter have the nerve to tear him down without even knowing him? Most importantly, how could Steve be so far away, so completely and utterly useless when TJ needed him most?

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate me :(

So let's just take a moment to consider that this is probably what Steve's picturing in his head ...

I only have one more chapter after this completely written. Then I have a couple more that are well underway. So I can post 24 tomorrow (Friday) if you want it, but you will have to wait at least a couple of days for 25. Or you can just chill here for a bit and I'll post 24 later.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Since I've apparently sent you guys into a tail spin of emotional trauma with the last chapter ... 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TJ’s eyes felt heavy. Less like he was waking from a good night’s sleep, and more like he was waking from the dead. He felt himself drifting to the surface, but the sounds and smells were all wrong for his apartment. Something wasn’t right.

Trying again to open his eyes, he managed to get them open a crack and groaned at what he saw. Sterile walls, monitors, railing on the bed. The hospital. His mind raced, still foggy, trying to figure out what happened.

“TJ?” He heard the voice just as a face moved into his line of sight. “Remember me?”

“Sam?” He croaked the name.

“Yeah. You know where you are?” Sam asked as he offered a small cup of water.

TJ took a small sip, feeling the cool liquid soothe his throat. “Hospital.”

“Remember what happened?”

Staring at Sam, TJ searched for the memories of why he was in the hospital. Images flashed through his mind. His parents. Sean. The magazine. “Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.” His eyes fell shut, fighting the coming tears. “I screwed up. I screwed up so bad.”

Sam remained silent in the few seconds it took TJ to remember he was there.

“Wait. How ... why ... why are you here?” TJ looked back at Sam, jumping as another voice answered.

“We’re here because our darling Capsicle about lost his shit when he got your message.”

“My message?” TJ turned, too out of it to hide his shock at finding Tony Stark in his hospital room. “My message.” He repeated softly, vague recollection of calling Steve before everything went dark.

“Yes. Your message. He got it right as he and Widow finished the mission. Needless to say, or maybe it does need to be said, they’ll be coming here as soon as they land. Should be a couple more hours, but they’re not exactly sparing the engines on this trip.”

“He’s coming here? But I thought ...” TJ stared back and forth between the two men, not sure what to say.

Tony apparently decided to take charge, pulling a chair next to the bed and plopping into it. “You thought trying to kill yourself was going to scare him away? The man who dresses up like a freakin’ flag and runs around playing ultimate frisbee with bad guys, and you thought you’d scare him off
with this? Please tell me you know how ridiculous that sounds."

“But it’s not. He’s known me for two weeks. That’s it. He’s got no fucking reason to want to stick around for the mess that is my life. The mess I fucking created.” TJ stared at Tony, daring him to argue.

“That’s where you’re wrong, and believe me I know where you’re coming from. We should compare notes on daddy issues someday.” Tony shook his head, a wry laugh escaping. “Point is, for all that I’ve not been as much of a friend as I should be to him, Steve’s the kinda guy that will drop everything and do anything for a friend. I haven’t met you yet, but I’ve heard enough for Natasha to know that as far Steve is concerned, you’re the best one he’s got these days.”

The three men sat in silence for several moments, letting TJ process Tony’s words. Realizing arguing would get him no where, TJ opted to change the topic.

“So why are the two of you here and not my family?” He looked from Tony to Sam and back again until Tony raised his hand.

“Me. Me. Pick me.” TJ began to understand Steve’s commentary about the billionaires sense of humor.

“Go for it.”

“Steve called me and then called Sam. Then I called Sam and we kinda hijacked your care. It’s amazing what the Stark name will get you. Private ambulance, false name for check-in, private room in a secluded corner, and some very discrete doctors and nurses. Given what we know from your rather public past, we thought you might appreciate the chance to wake up and process on your terms before the rest of the Hammond family converged. We can call them now if you want. We’re not here to stop you from seeing them, just to protect your privacy if you want it.”

“Oh. But why? Sam at least knows me, a bit, but you? All you’ve got my rather public past as you put it and whatever Steve and Natasha told you.”

“A couple of reasons really. One, I like to feel needed, so no fucking way was I going to blow it when Steve called asking for my help. Two, we may have very different stories, but not nearly as different as you think. I’ve consumed the Hulk’s bodyweight in alcohol several times over, have enough Daddy issues to keep a battalion of therapists busy for years, and despite everything I have to my name have the self worth of a flea sometimes. Three, despite my rocky start with Cap, he’s grown on me, and spending time with you has done wonders for him. So while I might hope that you and I can become friends, I’m also selfish enough to want my friend to be happy. You die, that’s not gonna happen for a really fucking long time, if ever. He’s lost enough already.”

TJ’s eyes fell to his knees. “I can’t believe I almost did that to him. He deserves better. He’d be better off with someone like Sam to rely on.”

“He’s got me to rely on too, but TJ, we fill very different holes for him. If you stick around long enough, you’ll see that.” Sam interjected. “But enough about Cap for now. It’s you we’re worried about at the moment. Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“I had a really fucking shitty day, and went about handling it in the worse possible manner.” TJ shrugged.

“No. Trust me, there are worse.” Tony offered. “Not saying booze and pills are smart, but they’re easier to fix than some alternatives. Not that I’m endorsing or encouraging any of those alternatives.
Matter of fact, I rather endorse the phone a friend option. Preferably before actually consuming substances meant to kill you.”

“Yeah. I might have mixed that order up, but it’s not like he could have answered right away so not sure how much difference it would have made.”

“Yeah well, your shiny new phone arrived about an hour ago thanks to Ms. Potts.” Tony reached in his pocket, retrieving the latest Stark phone. “It’ll help us find you if you decide to pull a stunt like this again, but it also has some other nifty features.”

“Please tell me my phone isn’t weaponized?”

“You’ve spent too much time around Steve if that’s where your mind goes.” Tony chucked the phone into TJ’s lap. “But no. No weapons. I’ve already transferred your contacts from your old, new phone, and I added a few more. Consider them your bonus phone a friends - me, Ms. Potts, Natasha, Clint, Sam, Bruce, and my favorite - JARVIS. Though he’s less of a contact and more of a much, much cooler version of Siri that will respond to everything.”

“JARVIS? As as in the AI thing that Steve says runs your life?”

“Something like that. Just tap the phone and say his name.”

TJ stared at him incredulously for several seconds before letting his thumb brush the screen.

“JARVIS?”

“At your service, Mr. Hammond. What may I do to be of assistance?” The British voice emanated from the phone.

“Please, call me TJ. Mr. Hammond sounds way too formal.”

“Of course, TJ.” JARVIS replied kindly. “As I’m sure Mr. Stark informed you, I’m available for anything you might need. Including someone to talk to. When you’re feeling up to it, we can review my protocols for you.”

“Protocols?” TJ looked from the phone to Tony.

“A series of if then scenarios. For example, with me J will start dialing through a list of selected emergency contacts if I consume more than a given amount of alcohol within a 24 hour period.” Tony explained.

“Or fail to eat, or sleep, or any of your other endearing qualities, sir.” JARVIS added, a fond sarcasm blanketing his voice.

“Yeah. Things like that.”

Chapter End Notes

So I kinda love JARVIS. Just sayin’. And I'm really dying to know what you guys think of how this went.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Because you guys have been nothing short of amazing about commenting on the last couple of chapters and I finished this chapter at lunch, I'm going ahead and posting it this evening.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thanks to Tony and JARVIS, Steve rushed through the hospital entrance and straight for the stairs. He was in no mood to deal with people in the elevator, and since it was only 10 floors he knew he’d be up them before an elevator had a chance. To her credit, Natasha was parking the car and said she’d see him in a few minutes.

Rushing down the hallway, he might have missed the room had Sam not been standing outside acting both sentinel and guide post.

“How is he?”

“How is he?”

“Sleeping. The three of us had an interesting chat when he first woke up, but I think your boy is gonna be just fine with some time, patience, a lot of work, and a support system.”

“I should have been here, Sam. I shouldn’t have left him for so long. Not so soon. I knew he was still struggling. He was trying so hard to keep it together, but I knew it was hard on him. I should …”

Sam stepped away from the wall, grabbing Steve by his biceps to interrupt him. “That path isn’t going to help either of you. Yes, you being here would have helped, but you’re not always going to be here. And neither of you can expect to put your entire well-being in the other’s hands and come out of that unscathed. You’ve gotta do your parts, but you’ve gotta be willing to share the burden too.”

“But his family …”

“He asked to wait until you were here to let them know. I gather they were part of the chain of events that lead to this, and he’s not ready to deal with them alone. You know more of that story than Tony or I did, and we promised to let him make that decision. Anyway, the Hammond family isn’t what I meant. We’ve already gone over his new expanded support system with him, but you need to help reinforce the idea. You need to make sure he knows we aren’t just emergency only contacts.”

“We?”

“We, Tony, Natasha, Clint, Ms. Potts, Dr. Banner, and JARVIS. I know he can’t exactly invite JARVIS over for tea, but the rest of us are signing up for the full deal. For both of you. You aren’t as alone as you think you are, and neither is he.”

Steve stared at him like he’d grown a second head for several seconds before nodding. Sam was right. Letting others in wouldn’t diminish the friendship he and TJ were building, but might just make a positive difference for both of them. He’d grown fairly close to Natasha in recent months, but hadn’t really done the same with the others.
“Thanks, Sam. I know this probably isn’t what you expected when you started jogging with Captain America.” Steve watched him apologetically.

“Good thing I started jogging with two guys named Steve and TJ then. I may joke that bringing Captain America to the VA would do wonders for my street cred, but that isn’t why I keep turning up to let you run circles around me or why I let you two lure me to that little diner after. Like it or not, you two idiots are going to have to accept that there are people that care about you for more than publicity.” Sam glared at him until Steve nodded. “Good. Now I got first dibs, but Tony wanted to talk to you before you go in too.”

Sam didn’t bother waiting for a response before he ducked into TJ’s room, letting Steve catch a glimpse of TJ’s sleeping form. Sleeping not dead. Despite the nightmares he’d had when he dozed off on the quinjet, TJ was still alive.

When the door fell closed again, Steve startled as two arms wrapped themselves around him. Looking down, he was more than surprised to see Tony Stark hugging him, but as exhausted as he felt, he just wrapped his arms around the shorter man. No matter their prior relationship, Tony came through when he needed him, and at this moment the physical reassurance was needed.

“I’m sorry, Steve. I was a total dick before New York, and have been a shit friend since.” Tony mumbled against him.

Gripping Tony’s shoulders, he forced the other man to step back so he could see his face. “I’ll concede the first with no argument, but not the second. And it’s not like I was helping the matter when we first met. Neither of us have been at our finest with each other.”

Tony shook his head, opening his mouth to argue.

“Please. Not today, Tony. Right now I don’t care what happened before. The only thing that matters between us right now is that when I really needed you, you were there without hesitation. The only thing that kept me from fucking losing my mind on the way here was knowing that you and Sam had it covered.”

The billionaire nodded and Steve could tell it had been an emotional night for him. Steve knew Tony had a rough life, but he realized he had never bothered to really understand.

“He’s gonna be okay.” Tony finally offered. “I assume Sam explained the support network. I feel for him. Had it not been for Jarvis, I probably would have ended up in the the same place.”

“JARVIS?” Steve knew JARVIS was more than just an AI to Tony, but he didn’t think he’d been quite so involved in keeping Tony straight for as long as Tony seemed to be implying.

“Not the current JARVIS. Edwin Jarvis. He worked for my father, and in many ways was more of a father figure to me than Howard.” Tony gave him a sad smile. “He changed after you knew him. He wasn’t the same man by the time I came around.”

“I’m sorry, Tony.” Steve wasn’t sure what else to say, and Tony quickly waved him off.

“Anyway, I know this isn’t a fix money can buy, but if there is anything I can do to help I will. That includes offering up a safe place for him to get away from DC for a while if you think that might help. Travel and meals are included. The offer includes you of course too. You’ve more than earned a break.” Tony’s hands kept moving as he spoke, and Steve knew he was fully of nervous energy from being couped up in a hospital for too many hours.

“Thank you. I don’t know what he’s going to want to do, and as much as I’d like to whisk him away
and keep him safe, I have to let him decide.”

“Of course.” Tony nodded so hard Steve thought his head might fall off.

“That’s definitely an option I’ll keep in mind and discuss with him. Though I guess I should find out if he even wants me around first.” Steve’s face fell. He’d just assumed TJ would want him here. He hadn’t considered that he might blame him for things going south.

“What?” Tony stared at him. “What do you mean find out if he even wants you here? You’re kidding right? I’m pretty sure Sam and I have made poor substitutes, and he’s definitely going to feel better once you’re with him.”

Steve nodded, hoping Tony was right.

“Trust me, Capsicle. Your boy will be happy to see you. Though he’s likely to be a bit ashamed of what happened. Don’t be too hard on him.”

“Hard on him? Fuck, Tony. I’m just happy he’s still alive. He screwed up, but it could have been so much worse given how incredibly horrid the evening was. He gets enough shit from his family, I’m not here to lecture anyone. Though if and when they come I believe I’ll make an exception.”

“Please. They deserve to be the exception to the no lecture policy. They could stand to get a few of your righteous Captain America glares. Possibly followed by a dressing down by Iron Man, and if anything is left a few lessons in the proper way to treat family from Natasha.”

“There better be enough left.” Natasha’s voice was biting. “Though I can work with surprisingly little.”

Chapter End Notes

So I know this isn’t the TJ/Steve reunion you guys were probably hoping for in this chapter, but it needed to happen. I promise, there will be a reunion in the next one.

Chapter 26 is well under way, so there's a chance you'll get it this weekend.
Natasha followed Steve into the hospital room, leaving Tony lurking at the door.

“I think Tony and I will go get you a change of clothes and some food.” She gave Sam a pointed look. “I’m sure Wilson here is capable of keeping the riff-raff out. Something tells me it’ll be better for you to have some time with just the two of you when he wakes up.”

“The lady is right,” Sam pulled away from the wall where he’d been leaning, grabbing a small bag that sat on the table beside him. “Tony had these brought for you.”

Steve accepted the bag, peering inside to find a sketchpad and pencils.

“We thought it might help you kill the time since TJ is likely sleep a good bit for a while still and we didn’t think you’d be too keen to leave.”

“Thanks.” Steve turned toward Tony. “I really …”

“No need, Capsicle. We’ve got you covered. You’re gonna have to get used to that.”

“All the same, thank you.” Steve smiled, hoping Tony understood he really meant it. He watched as Natasha approached the hospital bed, stretching up on her toes so she could reach over and place a kiss on TJ’s forehead before whispering something in his ear.

“We’ll be back in a while, but call if you need us.” She ordered before giving Steve a tight hug.

Sam followed the pair out of the room, book in hand. “I’ll be out here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Sam.” The airman waved his words off as he closed the door.

Rearranging one of the chairs, Steve positioned himself next to TJ’s bed before pulling out the sketching supplies. There was no point letting them go to waste while he waited. As much as he wanted to see those too expressive eyes staring back up at him, he knew TJ needed to rest, so he settled in to draw.

Steve lost track of time, lost in his drawing and the rhythmic beeping of the various monitors connected to TJ.

“That makes for a rather sad scene.” TJ croaked, throat dry from sleep. “Why not draw something happier?” The brunet tried to keep his expression calm, not show the immense relief he felt at Steve’s presence for fear that despite what the others said, this visit was a final goodbye.

“I draw the scenes like this because they remind me what I’m fighting for.” Steve looked up at him, and TJ couldn’t miss the tear stains that looked so out of place on his cheeks.

“You’re fighting to keep me in a hospital bed?” It was a desperate attempt at humor, and TJ knew it as soon as the words were out.

“No. I’m fighting to keep you out of one.”

TJ frowned, taking in the tight lines around Steve’s mouth, the tired look in his eyes. “It’s not your
fight, Steve. This one’s all on me.”

“It’s not.” Steve argued, holding up a hand to silence TJ’s rebuttal. “It’s not all on you anymore than it’s all on me. I know it’s your life and your decisions, but I can still help you fight to stay on the path you want. To keep you alive. I can’t just make it all go away, but I can be by your side.”

Steve stood, pivoting so he could sit on the edge of TJ’s bed. He wanted to reach out, to pull the other man into his arms, but was afraid of hurting him with all the tubes and wires.

“Come here.” TJ held his arms up, careful not to pull anything loose. “You look like you could use a hug, and I damn sure know I could.”

The blond shifted, quick but careful, leaning forward and wrapping his arms around TJ. He held the other man against him, not wanting to make TJ strain. Burying his face in TJ’s neck, Steve closed his eyes and let himself soak in the warmth of his still very live friend. TJ clung to the hero, clung to Steve’s assertion that he would be by his side.

When they finally broke apart, Steve scooted back just enough that he wasn’t crowding TJ, but no more. Both men had tears in their eyes, but were also visibly more relaxed than they had been.

“TJ,” Steve paused not wanting to upset him by prodding, but needing to know. “Can you tell me what happened? Were you trying …”

“No.” TJ grabbed his hand, holding tight as he met his eyes. “No. It wasn’t planned or intentional. After dinner with Mom and Dad went so badly, I decided to go for a walk instead of going straight back inside when I got home. I thought it would help me calm down, instead I picked up a copy of the magazine that had my face on the cover.” He tried to offer a small smile. “Here’s a hint. That’s a really bad idea when you’re me.”

“I think that’s a really bad idea when you’re anyone famous. The press loves to make stories more dramatic even if it isn’t all factual.”

“True, but they didn’t really need to do much work to make mine dramatic. Anyway, after being stupid enough … don’t give me that look. It was stupid to read it. The final blow was seeing Sean out looking cozy with some guy at a restaurant. He was always so concerned with appearances and not wanting to be seen out with me, and then after everything he’s out fawning over someone else.”

“Did you wish it was you with him?” Steve asked, half dreading the answer as his thumb brushed over TJ’s hand where it was still tangled with his, neither man bothering to let go.

“No. I’m done with him. It just hurt to know that after everything he said behind closed doors, it was me he was ashamed of more than being seen with another man. After all, he’s still married so it’s not like circumstances have changed that much.”

Relief coursed through Steve, and he tried not to examine all the reasons why to closely. Better to just focus on the fact that TJ didn’t want to go back to a destructive and unhealthy relationship.

“So after that I went back to my place, dug up the remaining bottle of Jack, and attempted a repeat performance of the night we met. I wasn’t actually trying to hurt myself, just trying to stop feeling everything so much. Then my head started to hurt and that’s when I got really stupid. I had a bottle of prescription pain meds from hurting my shoulder a year or so ago. I just planned on taking a couple, which still wasn’t smart after drinking so much. But when four of them fell into my palm I just took it as a sign and downed the whole fucking bottle.”

“Oh TJ. I’m so sorry. You’re right, it wasn’t smart, but it is good to know you didn’t plan on hurting
yourself. And as fucked up as it all is, count it as a win that you didn’t decide to hunt down one of your dealers. So you were a step ahead of the night we met.”

TJ’s head fell back against the pillow, as he let out of huff of breath that almost could have been a laugh. “Leave it to you to find the positive spin in the shit storm I’ve created.”

“Not spin. It is true. You made bad decisions, but you could have made worse ones. These days I’m all for counting every little bit of positive as a win.” Steve watched as TJ yawned. “Why don’t you get some sleep.”

“I will, but I should probably deal with telling the family. Think I could get away with calling Doug instead of Mom?”

“Maybe. If you aren’t up to it, I could even call Doug for you.”

“That seems like the cowardly route.” TJ was tempted but didn’t want to seem like he was dumping it on Steve’s shoulders.

“You’re supposed to be focused on you and feeling better. I don’t mind dealing with Doug. Maybe he can give me a few pointers for dealing with your parents.”

“You’re sure?” TJ still hesitated.

“Wouldn’t offer if I weren’t.” Steve reached for TJ’s Stark phone on the table. “You sleep, I’ll have Sam come in while I step into the hall to call Doug.”

TJ nodded, fighting a yawn as he watched Steve step out the door. He managed to keep his eyes open long enough to see Sam appear.

“Don’t stay awake on my account.” Sam waves his book as he moved toward the chair. “I’ve been trying to finish this book for almost two months.”

TJ offered a small smile as his eyes drifted closed.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of the chapters I had mostly written, so don't freak out it if takes a few days to get new ones up.
Taking a deep breathe, Steve pushed the call button hoping that Doug wouldn’t freak out too bad when he heard his voice instead of TJ’s.

“Hey TJ! Everything okay? Not often you actually call me.”

“Doug.” Steve started and was immediately cut off.

“Captain …” Doug’s voice was full of panic. “Is he okay?”

“He’s resting at the moment, but he’s better than he could be.”

“What happened? Last I heard from anyone Mom said he was coming for dinner. Shit. They did something stupid, didn’t they? He really is okay, isn’t he?”

“They did, and he is. It was more than just them, it was just a really bad day for him. He drank a bit too much and mixed it with some pain killers.” Steve heard the sharp gasp on the other side of the phone. “It wasn’t a planned suicide attempt. It just spiraled.”

“I should have been there.”

“I know that feeling. Everyone keeps telling me it’s not my fault, and it’s not yours either.”

“Everyone? Are mom and dad there?”

“No. They don’t know yet. Sam, Tony, and Natasha have been taking care of things.”

“Tony and Natasha. You mean Stark and the Black Widow?” Steve could imagine the expression on Doug’s face based on their meeting.

“Yes.”

“Where is he?” Steve was pleased that Doug moved quickly back to questions about TJ.

“The hospital. Stark managed to keep it quiet and get him into a private area. TJ wasn’t up for dealing with your parents yet, so Tony and Sam dealt with it. I still don’t think he’s anxious to deal with them, but he knows he needs to.”

“Do you want me to tell them? You know they’ll converge as soon as I do, right?” Doug sighed. “I’m getting a flight lined up now, but it’ll take several hours before I’m back.”

“I’d love to push it off, but it needs to happen. Just know that TJ will not be dealing with them alone. There are several people here that are pissed about what happened and you parents’ part in it.”

Doug let out a humorless chuckle. “Just save a piece or two of them for me. I don’t know what they said at dinner, but I can make some educated guesses, and I’m sick and fucking tired of them tearing him down before he can really get his feet underneath him.”

“I can’t make any promises.” Steve replied.
“Suppose I can’t blame you for that.” Doug fell quiet, but Steve got the impression he wanted to say more. Several seconds later, he continued. “Captain …”

“Please, call me Steve.”

“Steve, thank you for taking care of him … for really caring. He hasn’t had nearly enough of that in his life. I know I’m partially to blame for it, and I’m trying to do better, but he’s been burned too many times by this family. It’s time he has someone he can count on more reliably.” Steve could tell the other man was struggling to get the words out.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Doug. You’re right. You’ve screwed up with him in the past, but he knows you love him and that counts for a lot. Fortunately, he has more than just me though. It appears Sam and my team have become pretty attached.”

“Good to know because honestly I think it’ll take a team of super heroes to wade through all the fucking baggage he’s fighting.” Both men laughed, though they both saw the truth in the statement. “I’ll let you know once I’ve talked to my parents. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to wait until I’m at least getting ready to board my plane before calling them. I still won’t be there fast enough, but it’ll cut down the delay between whatever insanity they introduce to the situation and my arrival.”

Steve smiled into the phone, glad to see clear signs that Doug really did want to help his brother. “That’s fine.” Steve rattled off the room info for him. “Just call or text and let us know when it’s done.”

“Will do.” The phone went silent, and Steve ducked back into TJ’s room.

Sam looked up from his book, arching a brow in silent question when Steve finally looked from TJ’s sleeping form to him.

“Doug’s catching a flight back. He’s going to call them when he’s about to board. His only real request was that we save a piece of them for him to chew on when we’re all done with him.”

Sam’s shoulders shook with amusement, but he managed to keep his laugh nearly silent to avoid waking TJ. “I assume you made no promises.”

“Of course not.”

“So how long do you figure we have?”

“Couple hours at best.” Steve sighed. He was exhausted, not having really slept at all on the trip home.

“I’d tell you to try and get some sleep, because to be honest you look like shit, but I know better than to think you’ll listen.” Sam rose, shifting the chair back closer to the bed. “At least sit down before you fall down. Maybe you can catch a cat nap before Tony and Widow return.”

“Maybe.” Steve fell into the chair, making sure TJ’s phone was silenced before setting it on the small table. Reaching up, he wrapped TJ’s hand in his, resting his head on his arm. TJ appeared to be sleeping soundly, so maybe a short nap wouldn’t hurt anything.

~*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*~

Waking from his latest nap, TJ new without a doubt he wasn’t alone. Even half awake, he recognized the feel of Steve’s hand wrapped around his. While the quiet snore was decidedly less familiar, he could guess it was the result of the blond’s sleeping position.
Cracking his eyes open, he couldn’t help the small smile that came at the sight of Steve seated in the chair beside him, but draped over the side of his hospital bed. Blond hair was slightly mussed from the odd arrangement of his body, but TJ appreciated how relaxed the other man looked in sleep.

He felt a pang of guilt at that observation. Steve spent so much time keyed up and worried about everyone but himself, and now TJ had made it even worse. Still, Steve hadn’t called him out for being a failure and left. He’d acknowledged that TJ hadn’t made the best decisions, and promised to stick around and help him figure out a better way forward.

The door cracked open, and TJ tensed not sure what the outcome of Steve’s call with Doug had been. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw red hair appear.

“Hey there.” Natasha came forward bags of what smelled like something far better than hospital food in her hands.

TJ held a finger to his lips, urging her and Tony behind her to stay quiet. They both nodded, offering up fond smiles at the sight of their leader sleeping soundly.

“Unfortunately, you aren’t cleared for anything substantial yet, but I brought you the best chicken noodle soup available in the DC area.” Natasha whispered as she pulled out the container, placing it on the tray table that could be wheeled over his bed.

“It smells delicious.” He watched as she arranged everything so he could eat with his free hand, somehow knowing he wasn’t about to remove the other from Steve’s grip. “Should I be worried that he hasn’t woken up yet?”

“Nah. He’d probably be up and ready to fight if it were anyone other than us, but I think some part of him recognizes us even in his sleep. Plus the guy hasn’t slept in something around three days.”

TJ felt a flood of guilt at that. Had he not screwed up, Steve would have been able to get some sleep on the return flight and would likely be safely in his bed right now.

“Don’t go there, TJ.” Natasha pulled his chin up with one finger until he met her eyes. “Tony filled me in on what happened. You didn’t do this on purpose, and we’re all going to make sure you’re better equipped to handle the next shit storm.”

“Thanks, Natasha. I just wish the next shit storm wasn’t such a certainty.”

“That’d be too boring.” She patted his shoulder. “And trust me, you don’t have the monopoly on shit storms around here. Some day I’ll tell you all about mine, but rest assured that none of us are offering you help because of some hero complex. We’re all offering because we know what it’s like to hit bottom and need help. We haven’t necessarily done a great job of showing it to each other, but our fucked up little band of heroes is the closest thing some of us have to family.”

“What she said.” Tony hiked himself up onto the corner of TJ’s bed, and TJ scooted his feet over to make more room. “You don’t mind if I eat do you?”

“Go for it.” TJ couldn’t begrudge them getting real food while he was stuck with soup given that it was a situation of his own making.

Before he could say anything else, his phone vibrated. Sam plucked it off the bedside table since TJ couldn’t quite reach with his free hand, and handed it to him.

“Ugh.” The message made TJ want to curl up and go back to sleep just to avoid what was coming.
“What?” Natasha, Tony, and Sam all asked.

“My parents. Doug texted to say he’s boarding his plane from California and the parents will be here soon.”

Steve started to rouse before any of them could react to this expected but still unwelcome news.

“Hey sleepyhead. Have a good nap?” TJ smiled.

Steve seemed unsurprised to find the other three in the room with them. “Yeah. Not a full night’s sleep, but definitely enough to keep me on my feet for a while. What’d I miss other than the arrival of food?”

“Doug texted. Invasion is imminent.” TJ watched Steve’s expression shift. It was a not so small comfort to realize that he was ready to go full on Captain America in the face of the senior Hammonds.

“Eat up, Cap.” Tony shoved a bag of food at the blond. “You may not need your frisbee for this fight, but we don’t need you passing out from hunger.”

“Thanks, Tony.” Steve took the bag, immediately tucking into the food.

TJ looked around the room for a few seconds, taking in the four people that surrounded him before settling in to eat his soup. Dealing with his parents was never fun, but it helped to know that he wasn’t going to face them alone, nor were the people surrounding him likely to take their side when the inevitable fight started.

Chapter End Notes

Guess what's next ... ;)}
Chapter 28

As soon as the food was finished, Natasha and Sam gathered the trash and headed for the door.

“We’ll keep a watch and alert you when they’re in the building so they don’t catch you off guard.” Natasha explained before focusing on Steve. “Remember what I said earlier.”

“I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that this time. There will be time for that later.” Steve sounded less than convinced, but he really did hope TJ’s parents wouldn’t end up provoking him in the middle of the hospital room. There would be time to make it clear just how much he disapproved of their treatment of their first born son later.

As Sam and Natasha left, TJ looked at Steve expectantly. “What was that about?”

“Um …” Steve wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Steve?” TJ pushed.

“Have I ever mentioned we’re a ridiculously over protective group? I’m sure I mentioned that at some point, right?”

“You might have before I met Natasha, why?”

“As you may have noticed, it appears the group has decided to keep you.” Steve stalled trying to figure out how to explain.

“What our darling Capsicle is trying to say is that none of us are happy with your parents and if they think they’re going to walk in here and bully you about this whole situation they have another thing coming.” Tony sounded rather emphatic.

“Sir,” JARVIS’s voice interrupted. “Ms. Romanov indicates they have entered the building.

“Thanks, J.” Tony replied. “Now, I’m just going to lurk over here in the corner. It’ll almost be like I’m not here at all unless you need me.”

TJ and Steve grinned at him, neither sure how well Tony Stark attempting to remain unobtrusive would go. Steve hovered next to TJ’s bed, within arm’s reach of the brunet.

“Remember, you aren’t alone. You don’t have to agree to anything and if they are too much just give us a clue and we’ll clear them out.”

A moment later, the door flew open with, Elaine and Bud storming the room in a flurry.

“TJ,” Elaine rushed to his side. “What did you do? Why didn’t the hospital notify us as soon as you were brought in? For that matter why didn’t you call us as soon as you were awake? And what are they doing here?”

She hadn’t even paid attention to the identities of the other men in the room. Bud, on the other hand, had already identified them both.

“Elaine …”
“What? He owes us answers.” She spoke to her husband, but glared at TJ. “Was it heroine again? Are these the men that supplied it?”

“Elaine!” Bud shouted this time, for once realizing he was outmatched by the others in the room, especially as Tony rose and stood just behind Steve.

“What?” She wheeled around to face him.

“Perhaps you should look at the men before you start throwing wild accusations.”

“How do you …” She fell silent as she actually looked at the two men next to her son’s bed.

“Ma’am,” Steve fixed his harshest Captain America glare on her, full of every ounce of disappointment he could muster at her behavior.

“Captain Rogers?” Elaine stared at him before her eyes shifted to the other man. “Tony Stark? What kind of mess has he gotten himself into now that the Avengers need to deal with it?”

“We’re here as friends to support TJ.” Steve spoke. “It seems he could use someone on his side.”

“Well that’s all well and good, but this stunt is our situation to worry about.” Elaine argued. “I’m going to have words with the hospital administration about the lack of notification …”

Steve cut her off. “From where we stand, ma’am, TJ does need someone on his side.” Her wording infuriated him. “And the hospital was given instructions not to notify anyone as we believed it was in TJ’s best interests.”

“Quite frankly, I don’t care what you think was in his best interests or what we should or shouldn’t know.” She turned her attention back to TJ. “As long as we’re paying for your healthcare, we have a right to dictate what happens.”

“Actually you aren’t and you don’t.” Tony stepped even with Steve’s shoulder.

“Like hell. Last I checked we are …”

“And as of two days ago, you aren’t. The moment I signed TJ on to help manage the latest additions to the Stark Foundation, he was added to the Stark Industries insurance.”

TJ’s eyes went wide, but he schooled his features before either Elaine or Bud could look back at him.

Seizing on the shocked silence, Tony plowed ahead. “Perhaps had you jack asses bothered letting TJ tell you what he wanted to do instead of jumping in to arrogant assumptions of his supposedly inevitable failure, he might have been able to tell you all the great things he’s about to do. Instead, the pair of you went straight on the attack. I don’t give a fuck who you think you are, I’ve been on the receiving end of that kind of treatment, and I will not tolerate any of my employees or friends being treated as such.”

Tony smirked as both elder Hammonds gaped at him in shocked silence. Steve and TJ had recovered enough that they both just grinned back at the billionaire.

“Now, I need to check in with Ms. Potts. I’ll be back in a flash, but have JARVIS tell me if you need me.” His words were directed at TJ and Steve.

“Thanks, Tony.” TJ spoke up, hoping Tony knew how much he was thanking him for. Even if
Tony’s words were only intended to shut TJ’s parents up and were complete bullshit, it was still enough to buy him a little bit of peace.

“TJ, you know this is nonsense. You’re not equipped …”

“Ma’am, I suggest you stop there. You’ve seen he is okay. I suggest you consider going home and letting TJ focus on feeling better. No matter what you may think, TJ hasn’t used. This unfortunate situation could have been avoided has people bothered to actually pay attention to more than what they think is happening around them.”

TJ stared in silence at the war being waged over his bed between his mother and Captain America. As much as he hated it, part of him couldn’t help but be encouraged that someone was actually taking his corner.

“Obviously we aren’t wanted here, but I would like a word with you before we leave Captain.”

“Of course,” Steve gestured toward the door, following Elaine to the hallway.

The door barely closed before she started. “I hate to say this, because as a mother I’d love nothing more than to think my son was friends with Captain America, but he’ll drag you down. The last thing you need is your reputation ruined by his carelessness and self-destructive tendencies.

“Well, ma’am. Seeing as I’m perfectly capable of making decisions regarding the people I choose to let into my life, with all due respect, you can take your advice and shove it.” Steve didn’t bother waiting for a response, turning abruptly to return to TJ’s room. He found Bud and TJ staring awkwardly at each other, clearly at odds for what to say. “Mr. President, I believe your wife is ready to leave now.”

Clearly ready to get out of the rather explosive situation, Bud nodded, grabbed Elaine by the elbow and retreated out the door.

“Well, that could have gone better.” TJ stared at Steve in a daze.

“Could have gone worse too. There was no bloodshed.”

“True. I can’t believe you and Tony …”

“Believe it. I’m not leaving you to fend off the wolves alone this time. Never again.” Steve grabbed TJ’s hand, squeezing it in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen my dad like that before. He’s usually all about throwing his Bud Hammond charm around to get what he wants.” TJ grinned at the memory of his dad’s face the moment he saw Tony and Steve. “And I’m pretty sure Mom has never received a look like that in her life.”

“It’s not often I really appreciate people only seeing me as Captain America, but sometimes it is helpful.”

TJ leaned back, the tension finally seeping out now that the inevitable confrontation was done. “I guess I should ask Tony to come back and explain what all that nonsense was about.”

“Yeah, there’s no telling with him.”

Chapter End Notes
So this is not actually how I planned on the confrontation going, but you know how Tony tends to go off half cocked sometimes. My look of shock and surprise when he jumped in probably rivaled TJ and Steve's.

Hopefully this wasn't a disappointment for you guys ...
“JARVIS?” TJ held his phone like it might explode, not having had time to acclimate to it yet.

“How might I be of assistance?” The calm British voice answered without delay.

“Can you let Tony know my parents are gone and I want to talk to him when he has time.” TJ’s eyes were fixed on Steve’s as he spoke. He knew they were both curious about what Tony told Bud and Elaine.

“Of course, TJ.” JARVIS confirmed. “Sir should be returning to your room momentarily.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

“You know it’s okay if he was just saying it all to throw them off, right? Though I do need to figure out how to pay the hospital bill now that I can’t let it go through my insurance.”

Tony slipped into the room halfway through TJ’s words.

“I feel like I should be offended by that.” Tony stopped at the foot of the bed. “You don’t have to figure out anything. I had Ms. Potts make sure you were covered under the Stark Industries insurance policy effective the day before you landed here. You are fully covered for medical, dental, and vision. The policy includes full psychiatric care because Pepper swears I drive everyone crazy and it’s only fair.”

“But Tony, I don’t actually work for Stark Industries.” TJ interrupted him.

“About that,” Tony’s face screwed up in a way that Steve knew meant he’d done something without asking and he wasn’t sure if people were going to be pissed. This once Steve was inclined to let him explain before he yelled at him.

“Just spit it out, Tony. All things considered, we’re in no place to get mad.”

“But you might be anyway because I was stupidly presumptuous about the entire thing.” Tony braced himself for a lecture. “Just know you don’t have to accept any of this. No matter what I’ll keep you on the policy long enough for you to figure out what you want.”

“Tony,” TJ wasn’t sure what to think of Tony Stark floundering like this. “If you don’t tell me what you did, I won’t know if I object or not.”

“Right. I put you on payroll for Stark Industries charitable foundation. Nat might have mentioned that the pair of you were hoping to get involved in some areas that the foundation doesn’t currently cover, and I just figured it would be easier to put you in place to sort out the specifics instead of making you corral someone else to do it.” Tony’s hands moved rapidly in front of him as he explained. “You have a twenty million dollar budget earmarked for each project. Just tell me if you
“What exactly did Natasha tell you?” Steve’s voice was almost a squeak.

“That you wanted to help soldiers suffering from PTSD and TJ wanted to do something with some combination of LBGT and recovering addicts. Not really sure either of us knew the specifics, but like I said they were new areas for the foundation and seemed like great ideas.”

“So you’re telling me that off a brief mention that we wanted to do something you put me on payroll and allocated $40 million toward it?” TJ’s mouth hung open. His family wouldn’t trust him with a fraction of that.

“That’s what I do. I’m kinda like the bank for the Avengers. They need or want things and I make it happen.”

“Tony,” Steve stopped him. “You’re more than a fucking bank.”

“I know.” His answer wasn’t as convincing as Steve hoped. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not the bank too. And seriously, I have more money than I could hope to spend, and I like spending it on you guys way more than anything else.”

“So this all sounds really great, but I don’t have the first clue how to run something like this.” TJ was still recovering from the shock that Tony hadn’t just been spouting off to shut his parents up.

“That’s okay. I have a host of lawyers and people, and if we don’t have enough of them or the right ones I can get more. And there’s no specific time frame for it. You can take your sweet time with all of it. And you can work from anywhere. I’ll have your computer and tablet ready before you’re out of here. If you want to base it out of DC just let me or JARVIS know what kind of space you want and we’ll find some options for you to look at. If you want to do New York I can find a floor at Avengers tower for it, or we can find other space if you don’t want to be there. And of course you can stay in your suite at the tower any time you want. Hope you don’t mind, Cap, I borrowed part of your floor to make his suite.”

Steve threw up his hands, trying to stem the rush of words.

“Slow down Tony. Maybe go back and explain Avengers tower and my floor.”

“Well, you know I had to remodel after Thor’s brother decided to visit. Since the team is all spread out, I thought it might be nice to have somewhere that everyone could come together when we wanted, or that you guys could just consider home if you needed a place to act as a base camp of sorts. Everyone has their own floor. Given that it made more sense to rename in Avengers Tower instead of Stark Tower. All the other letters got knocked off anyway.”

Steve crossed the room, pulling Tony into a bear hug. “That may be one of the most over the top and incredibly nice things anyone has ever done for me.”

“So you’re not mad?” TJ asked, relaxing some as Steve shook his head. “You either?” He looked to TJ. “I swear I’m not trying to force your hand. You’re supposed to be able to make your own decisions and I guess I didn’t really do a good job of letting you do that. But I wanted to make sure you were set up to be able to actually make those decisions without your family feeling like they had the right to force you into something because they had any hand in paying for things. I promise I won’t hold the funds over you. They are given free and clear.”

“Based on what you just said, it sounds like you’re paying me to figure out what the hell I’m doing,” TJ was sure he sounded completely confused.
“Pretty much. I’d like to think we’d be able to start actually helping people within a year or so, but I don’t want you to feel rushed. You two just figure out what you want to happen, and I’ll make sure you have the resources to make it happen.”

As he finished speaking, Natasha and Sam rejoined them.

“So, how’d it go and why does Tony look guilty?”

“It was interesting,” TJ admitted. “Mom thought Steve and Tony were my dealers before Dad made her actually look at them. Then there was some heated arguing, Tony basically taking full responsibility for my car, and Steve and my mother disappearing into the hall for an alarmingly short discussion that promptly ended in Dad having to haul her out of here before things escalated any further.” He shrugged. “All in all, better than I could have hoped for if it’d just been me with them.”

“You will NEVER have to face them alone again if you don’t want to.” Natasha spit the words out, full of venom. “Not on my watch.”

“Not on any of our watches.” Tony corrected. “I believe where your parents are concerned, the buddy system may be the best approach.” Seeing Natasha’s raised brow, he amended. “Unless you’re widow, and then you can do whatever the fuck you want.”

She winked at him. “I won’t kill them, but I will be paying them a visit soon.”

Chapter End Notes

I get the feeling I’m going to need at least one chapter in the future from Nat’s perspective, because she clearly has plans where Elaine and Bud are concerned and I get the feeling from previous comments you guys might be interested in seeing that. But maybe I’m just imagining that because I want to see what happens.

It’ll probably take a couple days for Chapter 30 to post since I’ve barely started it, but I thought I’d go ahead and give you what I had finished.
Steve and Natasha sat on either side of TJ, waiting for the nurse to return with confirmation that he would be released to their care. He’d passed the required psych evaluation from the possible suicide attempt, the effects of the painkillers were wearing off, and he just needed to rest and stay hydrated which he could do from home.

Of course, with the influx of people anxious to stay close for the short term, home took on a new definition.

“You don’t all have to stick around, Natasha. I know you have lives outside of dealing with a broken fossil and his new best friend.” Steve watched her, unable to shake the guilt that everyone aside from Thor, who was off visiting Asgard, had scrapped whatever they were doing to come to DC. Clint and Bruce were expected to arrive within hours.

Natasha shot him a whithering glare. “That may be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard, Rogers. And given the time I’ve spent around Barton and Stark, that’s really saying something.”

“But …”

“No. I know your stubbornness is a deeply ingrained trait, but get it through that head of yours that this isn’t you imposing on us. This isn’t us begrudgingly showing up because we’re supposed to be a team. I wasn’t kidding when I said this team is the closest thing some of us have ever had to a family. And we take care of our own.” She hesitated for a second. “If you don’t feel the same way and want us to go, that’s another story, but …”

“If you upset her, I’m hiding your shield.” TJ’s voice interrupted from the bed.

“I’m not trying to,” Steve argued, eyes shifting between the two of them. “And I do feel the same way, Nat. The team may not be the first family I felt like I was a part of, but you guys are damn sure the only family I’ve got left. I’m just sorry I didn’t realize it before.” Steve couldn’t help but think about all the days and nights he’d spent thinking he was alone in this new era.

“Well you realize it now, so stop acting like an idiot and let us coddle the pair of you for a bit.” Natasha smirked, knowing her choice of phrasing would mess with them.

Before either could reply, TJ’s phone alerted him of an incoming text. Grabbing the phone he sighed. “Dougie just landed. What should I tell him?”

“Tell him you’re not going to be here.” The nurse announced, walking into the room. “I have your discharge papers.” She waved them in front of her with a smile before handing them to Steve. “I’ll be right back with a wheelchair to take him out. I assume we’ll be headed out the back entrance.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Steve confirmed, knowing Tony was on standby with a car.

“JARVIS,” Natasha spoke, knowing the AI would pick her up from any of their three Stark phones. “Send Doug the address for the house, and make sure he knows the information is strictly on a need to know basis.”

“Consider it done, Ms. Romanov.” The British voice confirmed.
“That’s going to take some getting used to.” TJ shook his head, staring at his phone as the information popped into the text conversation with Doug. “Are you sure the team wants to deal with him?” He looked to Steve.

“You mean are they going to mind him freaking out over meeting the majority of the Avengers? Nah. We’ve all encountered our share of fans since New York.” Steve assured him.

“Plus we all want a chance to meet him and see for ourselves if he’s going to play nice. He turns into a puppet for your parents and we’re going to have words.” Natasha’s icy voice was such a contrast to her the warm smile she offered TJ that he couldn’t help feeling a bit terrified on his brother’s behalf.

“Dougie always means well, even if he doesn’t always show it the right way.” TJ defended him.

“If that’s true, we’ll help him figure out the right way, but TJ, I’m not going to put your well-being at risk just to save your brother from having his feelings hurt. None of us will. If he wants to be considered an ally, he needs to prove he deserves it.” It was clear Natasha wasn’t willing to go easy on any of the other Hammonds after what she’d seen of Bud and Elaine.

“In his defense,” Steve piped up, not wanting to upset TJ. “I do think Doug wants to do right by TJ. I’m willing to give him the chance before I read him the riot act.”

The nurse reappeared before they could discuss TJ’s brother further. It wasn’t like talking would do much good, since he’d be joining them within an hour.

Despite the nurse’s offer, Steve insisted that he would push TJ’s wheelchair. It wasn’t that they anticipated any problems on the way out given how careful everyone had been, but he still felt better being in control. Within minutes the three were ducking into the back of the black SUV with Tony behind the wheel.

“Ready to see our new digs?” The billionaire slipped into traffic. “It’s not exactly up to Avengers Tower standards, but I’m thinking it’ll do nicely as a home base if we have to deal with the DC types. JARVIS and I will have it up to snuff in no time.”

TJ and Steve stared at the back of Tony’s head stuck somewhere between shock and confusion.

“I thought you were renting a place?” TJ finally spoke, feeling slightly absurd when Natasha gave him a look that made it clear he should have known better.

“I looked at rentals, but couldn’t find anything right. I figure it doesn’t hurt to have a place in DC since half the team is here working with SHIELD on a routine basis. Not a huge fan of rentals anyway. You never know if you can trust the owners.”

TJ relaxed into the leather seat, feeling the warmth of Steve’s arm and leg pressed against his own as Tony continued to chatter on for the duration of the drive. Fortunately he didn’t seem to need anyone to respond to keep going.

TJ was lost in thought, considering all the ways the preceding day could have gone differently. Needing to feel more anchored, he started to reach out and tangle his fingers with Steve’s where the blond’s hand rested against his leg. Despite Steve having maintained very similar contact for much of the time in the hospital, TJ hesitated now that they were back in the outside world.

Starting to pull his hand back, TJ’s breath caught when Steve’s hand darted out and wrapped around his.
Looking up, TJ found Steve's blue eyes staring back at him. TJ found no judgment or criticism there, only an open warmth and acceptance. Caught up in Steve’s eyes, TJ jumped slightly when he felt a small hand snaking its way behind his other arm. Turning his head, he found Natasha wrapping her arm through him, her head coming to rest on her shoulder.

“Tell anyone outside of the Avengers that I was cuddling with you and I’ll kill you.” She smirked up at him, and he was almost convinced she was kidding about the killing part. Not convinced enough to test the theory though.

Chapter End Notes

So Natasha's down right sisterly attachment to TJ was not really planned, but the flippin' assassin just keeps sneaking her way into things and I'm really too terrified of her to say no. As it is, I'm kinda enjoying their little bond.

Despite the convergence of everyone in DC, there will be plenty of just Steve and TJ interactions coming up. Of course, first we have to get through Doug discovering his brother has been adopted by the Avengers.

As always, feedback and comments are very much appreciated!!! I know at one point I said this was probably going to land around 40 chapters, but I hadn't counted on Tony's involvement ... hopefully you guys won't mind the extra length.
“Tony.” Steve’s eyes went wide as they pulled into a long tree-lined drive in the outskirts of DC. “Did you buy a house or an estate?”

“I suppose it depends on your definition of those words.” Tony shrugged as he followed the drive to stop in front of the house. “I wanted to make sure we’d be comfortable and have some room to breathe. This was the best I could find. 10 bedrooms gives each of us a room plus leaves two as guest suites.”

“But there are only 6 Avengers.” TJ spoke as he climbed out of the car behind Steve.

“Plus you and Sam. I know you both have places in DC, but you’ll each have things here too. Now, we really do need to get inside, pick rooms, and give furniture selections to JARVIS or we’ll be camping on floors tonight.”

The three followed Tony into a house that was far grander than anything Steve had ever seen in person. Even TJ, used to all the pomp and circumstance that came with Washington politics and foreign dignitaries was a bit overwhelmed.

“Relax,” Tony spun around in the foyer, stopping to face them. “We’ll make it home in no time. Now, I imagine the others and Doug will be here soon, so maybe you three should scoot along and pick your suites. There are five in each wing. I kinda thought maybe you three and Clint on one side and me, Banner, Thor, and Sam on the other. That leaves a guest suite on each side.”

“You’re taking Sam?” Steve looked surprised. He knew they’d spent several hours together since meeting, but hadn’t realized they’d hit it off so well.

“Yes. Turns out your pararescue buddy was test pilot for the EXO-7 Falcon. He promised to tell me all about them if I build him a new set of wings.” Tony grinned.

“Far be it for us to interfere with your fun.” Steve laughed. “Do you have a preference on which wing you guys take? You did buy the place.”

“Not really, but that one has a couple of rooms that I thought might work well as gym and ballet studio, so you might want to check it out.”

Steve and Natasha looked at each other, exchanging quick smiles before nodding and bolting off that direction with TJ in tow.

Tony grabbed a stack of StarkPads sitting in the corner and followed behind them. “JARVIS started compiling some furniture options for each of you. You can pick whatever you want, but he thought it might make selections faster. If you decide soon he can get it all delivered and set up this evening.”

He handed each of them a tablet when they stopped to look at the first room. Natasha didn’t even look at hers as she practically floated toward the window. The three men all heard the small gasp escape her as she looked at the view.

“See something you like.” TJ asked.
“It’s beautiful. I can’t wait until it’s warm enough to take advantage of that pool.”

“J’s already got a crew lined up to make sure the indoor pool is in good working order, so you won’t even have to wait.” Tony grinned.

Exploring the other rooms, they decided Clint would do well in the room next to Natasha, Steve would be right across from her, TJ next to him, and the slightly smaller room on the end would be the guest suite.

“Please tell me you two really liked those rooms best and didn’t just pick them because they’re closest to the point of entrance for security purposes.” Tony asked as they ventured back toward the entry.

“I’m not sure we could find a room here we didn’t like, so let’s just call it a combined reasoning.” TJ just laughed. “Whatever makes them happy.”

Reaching the foyer, they heard a knock at the front door. Tony grinned, and bolted for the door. Opening it, he smiled at the newcomer.

“You must be Doug.” He extended a hand, practically pulling the younger Hammond inside as Doug’s powers of speech seemed to fail again faced with Tony Stark. “TJ, I think I broke your brother.”

“Nah, he just gets a little overwhelmed when faced with super heroes.” TJ stepped forward, still chuckling as his brother. “Snap out of it, Dougie. Tony’s not going to burst out into armor all of a sudden.”

Tony smirked, holding up his wrist to show the metal bracelet he wore. “I could.” He winked at Doug. “Don’t really see a need to at the moment though.”

Steve stepped forward, extending a hand toward Doug. “It’s good to see you again. How was California?”

Doug shook his head, finally remembering how to speak. “It was okay. Lots of people that want things, so I guess not much different than DC.” He looked back to his brother. “Are you okay?”

TJ nodded, not really sure what to expect now that Doug was here. The younger Hammond brother stepped forward, wrapping his arms around TJ, and squeezing him tight. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here, TJ. I should have known they’d do something stupid right when you were doing so well.”

TJ wound his arms around Doug, squeezing him just as tight, chin rested on his shoulder. “It’s not your fault. They were going to do something like that eventually, it was just a matter of when and why.”

Doug pulled back a bit, hands clinging to TJ’s upper arms. “That doesn’t make it okay, TJ. They ride you for being a failure all the time, but they never stop to look at how many times they’ve been the ones to push you into the situation. I don’t doubt that they love us, but the two of them are fucking toxic sometimes. Almost all the time where you’re concerned.”

Steve, Tony, and Natasha stood quietly behind TJ. Whether Doug noticed or not, they didn’t care, but the trio quite literally were in position to have TJ’s back if needed.

“Well, I don’t think they’ll be interfering for a bit. They didn’t exactly make a great first impression with Steve and Tony.” TJ smiled at Doug, not wanting to rehash the entire mess. “Anyway, I want
you to meet Natasha. The others aren’t here yet, so you’re getting to ease into introductions.”

Natasha stepped forward, features school in a way that was sure to make Doug’s skin crawl as she offered him her hand. “It’s lovely to meet you.” Her words were all sweetness, but it would take an idiot not to pick up on the underlying ‘Hurt him and I’ll tear you to pieces.’

“You too.” Doug squeaked. “I hear you’ve been teaching him some self-defense. It’s nice to see TJ have some friends that give him credit for what he’s capable of.”

“He deserves it.” Natasha squeezed his hand a bit tighter before letting go. “TJ’s got an expanded network of friends these days, but he still only has one brother.”

“And I’m going to do my best to be better at that. As I’ve told Steve already, I know I’ve fallen short. I can’t change what’s happened in the past, but I want to do better.”

“Good.” She moved to stand next to TJ, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind that the next person to try and hurt him was going to have to go through her.

“Okay, now that Widow has established dominance, why don’t we move this shindig into the kitchen and work on the aforementioned selection of things to make this place less empty. As long as you play nice Doug, I’ll let you have a vote on the guest suite.”

Following behind Tony, Steve looked at TJ and grinned. “He’s delusional if he thinks she just established dominance. I think we all accepted that a long time ago.”

From the other side of TJ, Doug gave him a wide eyed look right before Natasha sidled up to him grinning.

“Don’t worry, Douglas. As long as you stick to your word, we’ll get along as just fine.”

Entering the kitchen, TJ and Steve pulled away from the other two, mouths hanging open in awe. “Please tell me we can actually use the kitchen.” TJ was grinning looking at the massive island and all the top end appliances.

“Of course!” Tony grinned at the pair. “JARVIS has all the basics on the way already both for equipment and food supplies, but just tell him if there’s anything else that needs to be acquired.”

“Keep this up and we’re never going to want to go back to our apartments.” Steve laughed.

“That’s an option, Capsicle.” Tony leaned over the island counter, flipping through images on his tablet.

“You three, Clint, and Sam are the ones based out of DC full-time these days, so you can use it however you see fit. Not a decision that has to be made now though. I’ll make sure all the security is upgraded before I head back to New York and get JARVIS embedded better in the house, then we’ll be set for whatever you want to do.”

“Is he serious?” Doug leaned over, trying to whisper in TJ’s ear.

“You have no idea, Dougie.” TJ smirked. “Wait till I tell you what else he did.”

Doug stared at him, not sure he could comprehend something more than Tony buying a mansion outside DC just so all his friends could have a comfortable place to say.

“First things first, pick out your bedroom furniture, or you’ll be sleeping on the floor!” Tony pointed
to the StarkPad in TJ’s hand, prompting him, Steve, and Natasha to do as they were told.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious types - House is loosely based on 9005 Durham Drive in Potomac (http://www.zillow.com/homedetails/9005-Durham-Dr-Potomac-MD-20854/119332086_zpid/); 33,000 sqft 10 bed, 15 bath home on 6.33 acres. Because that seems like what Tony would do in this situation.
The third time the doorbell rang, Tony jumped up. “Maybe it’ll be our wayward friends this time instead of another delivery.” He was getting antsy for Sam, Clint, and Bruce to appear.

“I don’t know, I’m not sure I would mind it being some furniture,” Steve teased from where he sat on the marble floor. They hadn’t bothered moving far from the entrance. Tony had produced a couple decks of cards from somewhere and they’d all settled in playing random card games.

“I come bearing supplies.” Sam waltzed through the door, arms laden with bags. “There’s more in the car if some of you want to be useful.” He gave Steve a pointed look.

“I’m coming,” the blond jumped up from the floor.

“You must be Doug,” Sam approached the spot where the Hammond brothers sat. “Sam Wilson. It’s nice to meet you.” The two shook hands, Doug looking decidedly less alarmed than he had with the last introduction.

“Nice to meet you too.” Doug smiled. “I hear you’ve been keeping TJ company running.”

“Something like that. Gives me someone to commiserate with while the old man runs circles around my ego.” Sam laughed, the other two quickly joining him.

Steve returned, arms full of more bags. “What’d you do, pack my entire apartment?”

“Almost. You don’t exactly have a lot there.” Sam gave him a challenging look. “How long have you been at that apartment anyway?”

“Long enough that it should have looked like someone actually lived there.” Natasha teased.

“Knock. Knock. Anybody home?” Another voice chimed from the open doorway before Bruce popped his head inside.

“You happen to find a lost hawk on the way here?” Natasha hopped up, crossing the room to give him a quick hug before peering around him.

“He did.” Clint stepped up, wrapping Natasha up in a hug. “Getting worried about me?”

“Always.” She gave him a quick kiss before stepping back and tugging him toward TJ.

“I knew it!” Tony squawked, pointing toward the pair. “Tell me I’m not the only one.”

“You’re not. Wasn’t like it was really a secret.” Steve joked knowing the couple had been careful not to do anything that actually confirmed it in front of Tony before then.

Ignoring Tony, Natasha stopped in front of TJ. “I was starting to think I was never going to get to introduce you two. Clint this is TJ. TJ, Clint. You two will be great friends.” Saying nothing more, she darted off to do something else, leaving them standing there staring at each other.

“I’m not sure if that was an order or a prediction,” Clint’s eyes followed her for a few seconds before swinging back to TJ. “Either way, I’m game if you are.”
“Same here.” TJ smiled. “So, you and Natasha, huh?”

Clint just grinned at him. “Yeah. We’ve been trying to see how crazy we could drive Tony by not actually confirming it, but I guess the cat’s out of the bag now. What about you and Cap?”

TJ’s eyes went straight to where Steve stood talking to Sam. “There is no me and Cap.”

“Give it time.” Clint clapped him on the back, guiding him back toward the others. “Just give it time.”

As soon as he reached Steve’s side, the blond wrapped an arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer. “TJ, I want you to meet Dr. Bruce Banner.”

“Please, just call me Bruce.” The shorter man extended a hand, looking a bit nervous.

“It’s nice to meet you Bruce. I’ve heard great things about you from the others.” TJ was thankful he’d been warned about Bruce’s propensity to expect the worst in meeting new people because of his greener side. “I know you’ve just arrived, but if you have time while you’re here, would it be presumptuous of me to ask if you’d mind teaching me some meditation techniques. Natasha says you’re a wonderful teacher, and I’d really love to learn.” TJ ducked his head, sure he was sounded like a rambling idiot.

“You’re not afraid of spending time alone with me?” Bruce questioned, voice full of shocked surprise.

“Of course not.” TJ met his eyes, relaxing into the feel of Steve’s strong hand on his shoulder.

“I’d love to.” Bruce smiled, looking far less nervous now. “It’s a bit cold for outdoor meditation, but I have to think we can find a quiet room somewhere in this place.”

“Gotcha covered, Brucie Bear.” Tony was almost bouncing as he appeared at Bruce’s side. “Actually there are a couple options. There’s a small room off what is a sadly very empty library that could be very cozy. There’s also a greenhouse not to far from the house. JARVIS assures me it is completely temperature controlled and is quite lovely. He might have also suggested someone other than me should be responsible for filling it with actual plants. He had some long winded explanation that involved the need to feed and care for plants on a regular basis. Honestly, he’s probably right. Tech I can do, plants and animals less so. Maybe I should hire a gardener. Where does one find qualified gardeners?”

“Tony!” Bruce almost had to yell to cut off the billionaire’s rambling. “How much coffee have you had?”

“Not sure?” Tony shrugged.

“Well maybe you should eat something before you have any more. The room off the library will work fine for now. Once we get settled, why don’t you let me figure out the greenhouse and gardener.”

“Have at it.” Tony smiled, turning his attention to TJ. “Bruce here is way better with the living things than I am.”

Before anyone could comment, the doorbell rang again, and Tony flitted off to go answer it.

“Should I be alarmed that Natasha has gotten a hold of Doug again?” TJ asked Steve as he watched his brother and the red head on the other side of the foyer.
“Nah. She’ll give him a chance before she does anything.” Steve reassured him.

“Cap! It’s your stuff.” Tony called. “Head up so you can show ‘em where you want it.”

Steve looked a bit panicked. Deciding on the furniture had been hard enough. He had no clue how to arrange it all. Looking to TJ, he started to say something but stopped when he saw the fond expression and laughter in the blue grey eyes.

“Never fear, Captain. I’ve got your back.” TJ headed up the stairs, leaving Steve to follow. He saw Doug glance up from his conversation with Natasha, but the younger Hammond only offered a quick smile before returning his attention to her.

TJ stopped in the middle of Steve’s bedroom, turning in a slow circle to take in the positioning. The room had a large fireplace in the middle, separating the main bedroom from what was intending as a sitting area. Given the large windows, TJ guessed that would end up being where Steve did a good bit of drawing, but for this evening they only needed to worry about the bedroom portion.

“I’m thinking bed there, dresser there, and chest there.” TJ pointed out the spots.

“I still don’t see why I needed a dresser and a chest.” Steve added as he nodded his agreement to TJ’s plan.

“Because some day you’ll have more than a few pair of jeans and sweats to go with that collection of uniforms. Did you even look at the closet?” TJ gave him a devilish grin.

“No. I was pretty sure based on everything else it would be more than big enough to accommodate my admittedly sparse wardrobe.” Steve sighed. “This is just way more than I’m used to. Buck and I shared a apartment that may have actually been smaller than this room before the war.”

“You know we don’t have to stay here if you’re uncomfortable, right? We can go back to our apartments and just visit the team here. And borrow the kitchen.”

TJ stood right in front of him, and Steve wanted to reach out and smooth the furrowed brow.

“I said it was more than I was used to, not that I was dumb enough to turn down Tony’s hospitality. Not to mention, even if you really didn’t mind going back, it would upset Tony. He’s not particularly well-versed in the idea of people liking him for more than his money and status, so he tends to freak out when people he cares about reject his overtures. Someday we’ll convince him it doesn’t mean we like him any less. For now, we graciously accept.”

“Excuse me, sir. Where would you like the bed?” One of the delivery men stepped into the room, the ones carrying the bed immediately behind him.

“There.” Steve and TJ pointed to the preferred spot.

Twenty minutes later, the furniture was all in place, and the thickest mattress Steve had ever seen was in place on top of the frame.

As soon as the door closed behind the delivery men, Steve gave TJ a huge smile and launched himself onto the bed. Feeling how comfortable the bed was, the blond groaned as he rolled onto his back. “I may never get up again. You’ve got to come try this out.”

TJ stifled a groan of his own. He could imagine Steve had no idea just what a sinful picture he made, jeans low on his hips, t-shirt riding up to show a hint of hard muscle.
“Come on. I promise I won’t bite.” Steve prodded, eyes still closed.

TJ bit his lip, swallowing the ‘I wouldn’t mind if you did’ that wanted to come out. Steve was his friend. Just his friend. Despite the teasing they sometimes exchanged, he’d given TJ no reason to think he’d want anything more. Not to mention, TJ knew he needed to get his shit together better before he even thought about a serious relationship. And he knew, if by some miracle they ever went down that path, it would be no casual fling.

Chapter End Notes

So obvious I’m ignoring the whole Barton’s hidden family bit from AOU. Nothing against Laura and the kids or Bruce, but I’ve sailed far too long with the SS Clintasha to disembark now ;)

BTW I’m giving massive kudos to TJ here, because faced with Steve on a bed I have little faith in my own ability to show that kind of self control.

And on a random note of curiosity on my part - how many of you found AP through AO3 and how many of you found it on Tumblr first and followed the links here?
Natasha knocked softly on Steve’s bedroom door, swatting at Tony to keep him from barging in without a second thought.

“I can’t imagine our Capsicle taking advantage of him so soon. Do you think they fell asleep?” Tony asked when they got no answer.

“You stay here and be quiet. I’ll check.” Natasha glared at him. “If they’re sleeping, they deserve to stay that way.”

“But the bed hasn’t even been made.” Tony indicated the two large bags he carried and the king size pillows tucked under his arms.

“I know.” Natasha shook her head, resisting the temptation to smack upside the head with the pillows she carried. “But Steve’s slept on far worse than an uncovered mattress, and unless we’re all misreading things, TJ would suffer far worse to stay close to him.”

“Guess that’s a good thing since his furniture got delayed.”

Natasha grinned, holding a finger up to her lips to keep him silent as she opened the door and slipped inside, leaving the pillows on the floor.

The sight that greeted her confirmed her suspicion that no matter how slow they may move, and no matter how much they each may insist the other didn’t want to go there, the two were growing very close. Steve was stretched out on his back, TJ’s back nestled against his side, head resting on Steve’s bicep. That arm was curled back around TJ’s chest with the brunet’s hands wrapped around it. Meanwhile, Steve’s opposite arm was crossed over is stomach, hand resting atop TJ’s side.

Natasha retreated, pulling the door closed behind her. “Give me the blanket.”

Tony’s head cocked in silent question, but he set the bags down and pulled out the butter soft, blue king sized blanket.

“You make so much as a peep to disturb them or tease them later, and I’ll kill you.” Natasha warned Tony. “Now come help me cover them up.”

Tony nodded, knowing better than to push his luck with Natasha.

Ducking back into the room, the pair spread the blanket out between them at the foot of the bed, holding it up so it wouldn’t drag across the sleeping pair. Once it was high enough to cover them up to TJ’s neck, they let it drop gently over them.

Natasha paused as Steve’s eyes fluttered open. She wasn’t surprised even the light movement had woken him.

“Sshh.” She held a finger to her lips before pointing at TJ. “Go back to sleep. His stuff’s not coming until the morning, so you two might as well stay put.” She whispered just loud enough for him to hear.
“Doug?” Steve mouthed silently.

“We’ve got it covered.” She reached over, brushing a lock of blond hair out of his eye. “Sweet dreams.”

Natasha watched as his eyes closed again, smiling as he rolled carefully to his side curling himself around TJ.

Once they were back in the hall with the door firmly closed, Tony arranged the bedding items against the wall so Steve would find them in the morning.

“It’s good to see him so at ease with someone.” He commented. “I should have paid more attention to how lonely he was.” The billionaire frowned at Natasha.

“We all should have.” She corrected. “We can’t change the past, but don’t sell yourself short. You’re doing right by him … by both of them now.

“Well, somebody needs to, so why not us.” Tony answered, surprised when Natasha wrapped her arm around his waist as they headed back toward the stares.

“It’s nice to have a family.” She grinned as his startled expression. “So how are we going to handle these two? It doesn’t look like they’re going to need any encouragement, and quite frankly they need to be able to take things at their pace, but do you think all of us being around will mess with them?”

“Nah. TJ seems to want to get to know us better judging by his request of Bruce earlier. I can’t blame the kid, he needs to know he can trust this support network we’ve just promised he has. But at the same time, we all need to give the two some space to keep going on whatever path they were already started.”

“That’s surprisingly insightful, Tony.”

“I’m full of surprises, Agent Romanov.” He grinned at her. “Care to take a detour and go see your future ballet studio?”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Starting to wake, TJ felt the tickle of an incredibly soft blanket across his cheek and the solid warmth of a body surrounding him. Not entirely coherent yet, he kept his eyes closed as he tried to puzzle out just where he was and how he wound up waking up in an unfamiliar situation.

Memories of the day before came back quickly, but couldn’t understand why he was still in Steve’s room. Clearly either someone had come up or Steve had left long enough to get a blanket, so why hadn’t they woken him up to move him to another room.

Better yet, did Steve realize he was wrapped around him? Not that TJ was complaining, as mornings went, this was easily the most pleasant position he’d woken in, bar none. Still, if Steve just happened to have rolled over in his sleep and didn’t realize what he was doing, TJ didn’t want it to be awkward.

He shifted slightly, testing to see how easily he could move. Realizing that wasn’t going to be easy, TJ decided to just enjoy it while it lasted, so he settled into Steve’s embrace and closed his eyes.

“Morning.” Steve whispered a few seconds later, his voice still scratchy from sleep. “How’d you sleep?”
“Like a rock. I just woke up.” TJ whispered back, not moving. “Is there a reason why you didn’t kick me into my own room so you didn’t have to share your bed?”

He felt Steve stiffen as the heavy arm that had been anchoring TJ in place started to lift. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable …”

“Didn’t say I was uncomfortable. Just curious why I didn’t end up back in my room.” TJ grabbed his arm, pulling it back into place. “You’re warm.” He noted by way of explanation for keeping Steve’s arm in place.

“Nat said your furniture got delayed. She and Tony came in to cover us up. You were sleeping so well, I didn’t see the point in waking you up to tell you to stay put and sleep.”

TJ chuckled. “That’s entirely logical. I didn’t keep you up did I?”

“Nope. Possibly the best night of sleep I’ve had in a long time.” He fell quiet for a minute, but TJ could tell there was more he wanted to say, so he remained quiet. Finally, Steve broke the silence. "Buck and I used to share a bed all the time. Grant it, it was out of necessity to keep me from freezing back then, but I guess it’s still comforting to feel someone warm and solid next to me. It’s a far cry from being in the ice.”

TJ nodded slowly, letting his hand rub softly across Steve’s forearm in what he hoped as a comforting gesture.

“Can’t say I’m actually used to sharing a bed … even in a relationship the whole sleeping over thing never happened much, but if last night was anything to go by, I’m not opposed.” TJ groaned deciding he wasn’t making much sense. “Just … well … I guess what I’m saying is that if you have trouble sleeping alone, I’m okay if you want to crash together whenever you want. I … it …”

Steve squeezed TJ tighter against his chest, cutting off the rambling. “I think I get what you’re saying. And thank you. I hate to admit that I need something like that. It seems so ridiculous to be a fucking super hero when I can’t even sleep alone without issue.”

“We’ve been down this road before. Being a super hero doesn’t make you immune from being human. It’s okay to need people. Pretty sure your crazy band of friends is hell bent on proving that at the moment.”

“My crazy band of friends? Hate to break it to you, but I think they are officially our crazy band of friends now.”

Both men laughed, neither able to suppress a smile at the reality of that statement.

“Speaking of,” TJ started, “think we should drag our butts out of bed and see who else is up?”

“Probably.” Steve lifted his head, looking around the room. “Bless them, someone brought our bags up, so we can actually change.”

“Nice. Someone is trying to earn cookies.” TJ chuckled as he sat up. “Speaking of, I owe Natasha cookies anyway. Maybe we should test out that kitchen today.

“I’m game.” Steve grinned, reaching down to grab his back. Despite his fear of making TJ uncomfortable, it was turning out to be a promising start to the day.
Chapter End Notes

So yeah, this one might have been a bit on the fluffy side. Hope ya'll didn't mind ;)}
Steve stared out the window, watching as TJ and Doug strolled around the expansive yard. Judging by the laughter, the conversation appeared to be going well.

“Afraid he’s going to run off with your boy?” Sam appeared next to him, bumping against his side. “Pretty sure you’re more likely to find Doug hidden in a closet after he’s supposed to leave than you are to find him trying to steal TJ away.”

Steve snickered, “I don’t doubt that.”

“So why do you look like you’re on sentry duty?” Sam pushed. “He’s safe here. If, and I don’t think it’s likely, Doug says anything he shouldn’t, TJ knows we’re all here waiting and willing to help him.”

“I know.”

“And yet you’re still standing here.” Sam prodded.

“Is there something else I’m supposed to be doing?” Steve looked at Sam, brow arched in annoyance. “We already put everything that’s been delivered so far in it’s place, so unless another delivery managed to sneak passed me, there’s nothing on that front.”

Sam took a deep breath, exhaling in a loud sigh. “Anything other than just standing here staring at him. You look like a love sick puppy that’s been kicked aside.”

“I do not.” Steve argued.

“So you say. Listen man, I’m not saying it’s a problem. I think given a little more time to get on your respective feet, the pair of you would be great together …”

“Sam,” Steve cut him off with a warning glare. “How about you not start playing matchmaker. If and when both of us feel like we’re ready for something like that, he and I will deal with it.”

Holding his hands up in surrender, Sam grinned. “That’s all I wanted to hear.”

“What?” Steve looked at him, perplexed by his meaning.

“I just wanted to make sure you weren’t going to pull some stupid ‘he’s not interested in me like that’ bullshit. Natasha has already laid down the law with the lot of us about rushing either of you into anything, but I had to know you weren’t going to shut down the possibility before it ever had a chance.”

Steve shook his head, rubbing a hand over his face. “Why is everyone so worried about my love life?”

“Everyone just wants to see you happy. Listen, I’ve gotta go back to town today. My VA group isn’t going to run itself, but you call me and I’ll be back before you know it.”
Steve watched him, unable to miss the concern in Sam’s eyes. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be just fine. No final decisions yet, but I’d say there’s a good chance we’ll stick around here for a while. I know TJ wants to get to know the others a bit better, and after that last mission and everything that happened I told Fury I need some time off.”

“When did you find time to call him?”

“He didn’t. I did.” Natasha appeared beside the pair. “Anyway, looks like they’re headed back to the house in a bit of a hurry.” She pointed out the window.

Steve went rigid, turning to see if TJ looked upset.

“Relax Cujo,” Natasha rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. “Judging by the laughter, I’d say he’s okay.” She felt the tension in his muscles release a fraction as they turned toward the door.

Less than a minute later, the two brothers came through the door, making a beeline for where Sam, Natasha, and Steve stood.

“Um…” TJ started, looking slightly embarrassed. “I…”

Steve crossed the space between them, gripping TJ’s arms reassuringly. “What is it? Is everything okay?”

“I invited Nana to come. I didn’t mean to do it without checking first, but she called and was all freaked out because mom gave her some half baked version of what happened. She’s at the airport already, flew straight in before she called me. It’s just she worries. She’s got her own issues, but she loves me. And she’s worried. And I didn’t know how to not invite her, but it’s not my house.”

“TJ,” Steve interrupted. “Breathe. We’re not keeping you prisoner here. If you trust her and you want her to come visit, then I’m glad you invited her.”

“But…”

“We don’t want everybody under the sun knowing where we are, both for your sake and ours, but there are going to be a circle of people that know we’re here. I’d rather your parents not find out just yet, because I don’t think any of us are ready for a repeat performance of that last meeting, but we didn’t bring you here to keep you under lock and key.”

“He’s right,” Tony stepped off the last stair, startling TJ. “This is your home now. It may not be your only home, but it is home. While I hope you aren’t going to throw any wild orgies, at least not without inviting me,” Tony smirked at Steve. “I want you to act like this is home. Invite the people you want to see over if you want to. Tell people to fuck off if you don’t want them to know where you are. It’s your choice.”

Steve watched as TJ nodded slowly, eyes flitting from Tony to Steve to Natasha as if he expected some contradictory opinion.

“Told you.” Doug elbowed his brother, making TJ smile.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Damn it. Where are the chocolate chips?” TJ grumbled as he searched through the myriad of drawers and cabinets.

“I’m sorry, TJ,” JARVIS’s voice emanated from his phone on the counter. “Were we at any of Sirs
other properties, I would be able to answer that question. Unfortunately, it will be a while before he has fully integrated me into this residence. In the meantime, I do hope my appalling lack of assistance can be forgiven.”

“Seriously? I know they said you run things, but I didn’t think you got quite to that level of detail.”

“Of course. How else would there ever be food in the kitchen? Sir may be a genius, but he’s not inclined to pay attention to such frivolities.” TJ had no trouble picking up the dripping sarcasm from the AI.

“Well, lucky for you, Steve and I are pretty good at managing things like groceries, so we probably won’t starve before you’re up to your usual standards.” TJ grinned. “And JARVIS, there’s no need to apologize for stuff like this. It wouldn’t be fair to hold you responsible for something that is out of your control.”

“But it…” TJ cut the AI off before he could argue his way into being responsible.

“No. I get that you pretty much exist to take care of Tony, and apparently by extension the rest of us, but still doesn’t mean it’s all on you.”

“You know,” Tony startled TJ from the door. “The first time I tried to introduce JARVIS to people outside my tiny inner circle, they treated him like nothing more than a talking computer.” Tony started opening cabinet doors on the opposite side of the room from where TJ was working. “What are we looking for?”

“Chocolate chips.”

“Yummy.” Tony opened another door. “Outside of Pepper and Rhodey nobody seemed to get that he was more than a computer program to me, but somehow the team and now you all just met him and treated him more like a person than an AI from day one. I seriously don’t think I’d ever heard someone apologize to JARVIS until Steve.”

TJ stopped, closing the cabinet door and watching Tony.

“I guess that just seemed right. The way you guys speak of him, the way he spoke to me when we were introduced, it’s just… Even though I’ve only ever heard him through phones, he just seems more like a person than not.”

“Jackpot!” Tony exclaimed, holding huge back of chocolate chips above his head. “You need any help? I know I’m not your usual super soldier cooking partner, but I believe he’s trying to make himself more presentable before your grandmother arrives.”

“If I might interrupt,” JARVIS spoke. “I would recommend restricting sir to the non-critical elements of the recipe. His record in the kitchen leaves much to be desired.”

“Traitor.” Tony grumbled as TJ doubled over laughing.

When he finally caught his breath, TJ grinned. “Think he can handle spooning the dough onto a cookie sheet?”

“Provided you give exact specifications, sir’s chances of success are around 95%.”

“I hate you both.” Tony groused as TJ mixed the chocolate chips into the otherwise prepared cookie dough.
“I love you to, sir.” JARVIS spoke with every bit of seriousness his British voice could muster.

TJ’s smile spread across his entire face, lighting up his eyes as he set the bowl of dough in front of Tony. Surrounded by new found friends, removed from the madness of life in DC proper, TJ felt uncharacteristically optimistic about life.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Chapter End Notes

Because we knew Margaret was going to have to make an appearance before too long :)

Hopefully you guys enjoyed this one. The TJ, Tony, JARVIS bit wasn't planned, but JARVIS just kinda inserted himself and I couldn't say no.
“I don’t remember the last time I had homemade apple pie.” Steve sat across the island from TJ, sandwiched between Natasha and Tony. Bruce had disappeared to arrange his meditation room, and Clint was off exploring the far reaches of the house.

Doug and Sam had taken off for DC shortly after Margaret’s call, both needing to deal with work, and not wanting to distract TJ and Steve from the rest of their friends. They’d each promised to return during the coming weekend.

“Well, this is the first time I’ve made one, so please don’t judge it too harshly.” TJ looked up from the crust he was carefully crimping.

“I’m sure it’ll be delicious.” Natasha was the first to offer reassurance, making Steve and Tony exchange quick smirks. They had no doubt she could kill them with her pinky, but it made them both happy to see her able to relax her guard and let some of her softer side show.

“I hope.” The doorbell rang before the likelihood for success could be further debated. TJ looked down at the pie before glancing up at Steve. “Can you … I just … I want to get these in the oven.”

“Sure thing.” Steve slid from his stool.

“I’ll come too.” Tony hopped down, jogging a few steps to catch up with Steve. The two headed toward the foyer, curious to meet the woman that TJ clearly adored and hoping she was nothing like his parents.

Steve took a deep breath before opening the door, Tony standing several feet back. “Welcome, Ms. Barrish.” Steve stepped aside, letting her enter.

TJ’s grandmother eyed Steve and Tony. “You boys planning to frisk me before I can see my grandson?”

“No ma’am,” Steve looked aghast at the suggestion. “He just wanted to finish getting the pies into the oven or he would …”

“Too bad,” Margaret cut him off. “That’d be more action than I’ve seen in years.”

“Ooohhh,” Tony pranced forward, playfully shoving Steve to the side. “You sound like my kinda woman.” He slipped an arm through hers, grinning devilishly as he did it.

Margaret laughed, “A charmer like your father in his younger days, but I see more of your mother’s goodness in you.”

“You …” Tony floundered.

“I did. Met him back when I was a young thing singing in a lounge. Met her years later.”

“I want to hear more later, but I suspect you’d like to see TJ.” Tony offered. “I should warn you, you were invited because your grandsons believe you want what’s best for him. Prove them wrong and you’ll learn he’s not on his own these days.”
Margaret didn’t even flinch at his words. “Well, it’s about damned time that somebody stepped up for him. Heavens knows this family’s done a piss poor job of it so far.”

“So we’ve noticed.” Steve chimed in, “I’m not sure what your daughter told you, but suffice it to say, we met under less than ideal conditions and it did not go well.”

Margaret stopped walking, turning to face Steve. “I won’t bore any of you, TJ included, with the ridiculous rant my daughter went on when I called her. I’m not here to apologize for Elaine and Bud, and I’m damn sure not going to make excuses for them. I’ve had enough of the pair of them putting political aspirations ahead of the welfare of their son. He’s made some big mistakes, but so have I.”

Tony and Steve both stared at her, a bit surprised by the fire behind her words.

“I just want to see TJ happy again. To see him healthy and thriving. I miss seeing him smile so bright that it lit an entire room.” It was easy to hear the pain in her voice at the memory of what he’d been like before things went sideways for him.

“We didn’t have the privilege of knowing him when he was younger, but we want the same thing.” Steve assured her, reaching out to wrap her small hand in his. “Now why don’t we go see him before he thinks we scared you off.”

Margaret laughed, “TJ knows better than to think I’d be frightened by a couple of super heroes.”

The three were laughing as they made their way into the kitchen. Margaret froze just inside the door, which would have alarmed the pair had they not been equally absorbed in the sight they found.

TJ’s head was thrown back, whole body shaking with laughter, flour streaked across his face and hair, shirt splattered in white.

“I told you I’d retaliate.” Natasha flung a handful of flour at him, and their audience noted the white powder adorning one side of her hair.

“We leave you alone for five minutes, and this is what happens?” Tony admonished, all seriousness lost by the giggles he was trying to fight.

“He started it.” Natasha pointed at TJ.

“Hi Nana.” TJ grinned their direction, still shaking in silent laughter. “I’d come give you a hug, but …” he gestured to his flour covered shirt and hair.

“It’ll wash.” Margaret rounded the large island, pulling her grandson into a tight embrace. “It’s good to see you really laughing.” She whispered in his ear, clinging to him for several seconds.

“Nana,” TJ started when she finally released him. “I’d like you to meet Natasha Romanov.”

Natasha stepped closer, smiling at the pair as she extended a hand forward. Margaret accepted, smiling in astonishment at the assassin. “Are you really?”

“Yes ma’am.” Natasha grinned. “Didn’t TJ tell you who he was staying with?”

“No. We only spoke long enough for me to get the address and make sure he was basically okay. I’m afraid the rest of my information about his circumstances was relayed rather sketchily by his mother.”

“I bet that was flattering for us.” Tony stage whispered to Steve.
“Yes. I believe the words pompous and high handed were thrown around.” Margaret smirked at him.
“Sadly, she used them describing the pair of you instead of herself, and she failed to mention Ms.
Romanov’s presence altogether.”

“Well, in her defense, she never actually saw me. We decided not everyone needed to be present, as
entertaining as it might have been if we’d stayed.” Natasha grinned. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m
going to duck upstairs and do something about my hair.”

“Of course, dear.” Margaret watched the red head as she strode out of the room before turning back
to TJ. “Anyone else I should be expecting to see?”

TJ ducked his head, slightly embarrassed at the scrutiny, though really admitting to sharing a house
with five out of six Avengers was pretty amazing news compared to some of the discussion they’d
had.

“Um … Dr. Banner and Clint are around somewhere.” He admitted.

“Someone say my name?” The archer appeared in the doorway. “Ah, I see we have company. My
pleasure, ma’am.” Clint took her hand, dramatically bowing over it. “I see where TJ gets his good
looks.”

Margaret giggled, shaking her head at his dramatic entrance.

“TJ, sweetheart, I’m dying to hear the story of just how you ended up shacking up with the
Avengers.” She turned toward Tony. “And I don’t recall hearing that you had any property in this
area. I thought all your places were in Malibu, New York, and a couple of remote tropical islands.”

“It’s a new acquisition. Thought it was time to expand operations to the DC area since part of the
team is located here now.” Tony shrugged it off.

“Well, you picked a beautiful estate.”

“Would you like something to drink, ma’am?” Steve offered once he finished sweeping up the flour
that had covered the floor courtesy of Natasha and TJ’s little war.

“I’d love something, but only if the lot of you promise to stop calling me ma’am. Makes me feel old.”

“Of course, Ms. Barrish. What would you like? We have water, tea, soda …”

“Ms. Barrish isn’t any better, son. Please, just call me Margaret or Nana. You may be older than me,
but I still look like I’m old enough to be your grandmother.” She patted his hand where it now rested
on the bar beside her. “Water is just fine for me.”

Steve turned toward the fridge, leaning over to reach the water bottles on the bottom shelf, grabbing
a Coke for himself before venturing to find the glasses.

Margaret leaned closer to her grandson, whispering in his ear. “The television doesn’t do that
backside justice.”

“Nana!” TJ blushed furiously.

“Oh, don’t try to tell me you haven’t looked.” She elbowed him playfully. “Never thought I’d
actually get to see him in person. That man was the first crush of every girl and more than a few boys
back in my day.”
“Nana,” TJ pleaded. “Please stop.”

Tony scooted closer to them. “No, please don’t. It’s high time that national treasure was appreciated properly.”

TJ snorted, just as Steve reappeared across the island from them.

“What’s so funny?” The blond asked innocently.

“Nothing. Just discussing national treasures.” TJ tried to answer with a straight face, but knew he failed when he saw the red start spreading across Steve’s cheeks and neck.

“Come on, Cap,” Hawkeye swatted Steve on the backside. “You can’t walk around with an ass like that and expect that no one’s going to take notice.”

Still bright red, Steve slid the glass of ice water toward Margaret, pushing another glass with half the can of Coke and ice toward TJ, keeping the last one for himself.

“Thanks.” TJ smiled, mouthing a silent “sorry,” when he caught Steve’s gaze.

Cap just shook his head. He didn’t mind a bit of embarrassment if it meant seeing TJ’s eyes sparkle in amusement surrounded by friends and family.

Chapter End Notes

For those that have watched Political Animals, you likely recognized some of the sentiments Margaret expressed.

And I have no clue what got into TJ and Nat, but per usual I have given up trying to stop this bunch when they get some crazy idea into their heads. Thanks to the pair of them, some population of the restaurant where I was eating lunch thinks I’m a complete loon because I was giggling like a complete idiot while typing.
Unlike Elaine and Bud, Margaret Barrish was quick to decide being around Steve and the Avengers was just what her grandson needed. She’d been around a long time, knew enough about Stark to know he was more than the playboy the media loved to portray him as. She’d always thought that Captain America’s descriptions in the history books fell a little flat, imagining instead that he’d reflect more of the personality and grit you’d expect from a boy raised in Brooklyn. Thanks to what little Doug had told her before she found out TJ’s new friend was Steve Rogers, she guessed she was right.

She knew far less of the others, but saw how easy they all were around TJ. A day out of the hospital, and they weren’t walking on egg shells, waiting for him to shatter. They teased. They reached out with casual touches. They treated him no different than they treated each other.

It took less than ten minutes to notice all this. Margaret smiled into her glass of water as she watched TJ disappear down the hall, headed to go make himself less of a floured mess. The others, aside from Steve, had scattered only a moment before giving her smiles filled with both acceptance and warning on their way out.

“I don’t think I’ve seen him smile like that in years.” Margaret looked up, meeting Steve’s penetrating blue gaze. “Even when he’s tried to put on a good show, there’s always been the ghost of sadness hiding in those eyes of his.

“He’s had a lot of reason to be sad.” Steve held her gaze. “I know how that feels.”

“I suppose you do. I don’t know how you landed in his life, but I’m glad you did. For both of you.” Margaret stretched her hand across the island, wrapping old fingers around ones that looked so much younger. “I’m pretty sure my younger self would be swooning at sitting in the same room as Captain Steve Rogers.”

Steve grinned, ducking his head as he felt the blush creep across his cheeks again. It wasn’t lost on him that she didn’t call him Captain America.

“Something tells me I would have been the awkward one in that scenario. Never did learn how to talk to a dame without making a complete fool of myself.” He gave a small, self-deprecating laugh.

“Well, no matter. From the look of things I’ve missed my chance. Wouldn’t be very grandmothersly of me to compete with my grandson.” She winked at Steve. “And don’t try to tell me it’s not like that. I wasn’t born yesterday. It may not be yet, but it’s not hard to see it likely will be some day.”

“It may be, but I won’t press him for something he’s not ready for.” Steve was adamant. “I won’t be what he settles for just because he thinks I’m the only option. He deserves better than that.”
“The moment someone tries to tell you they are just settling for you, you need to run the other direction. I can’t imagine Ms. Carter or Sargent Barnes would appreciate hearing you say such things either.” She didn’t miss the flash of pain in his eyes at their names.

“What’d I miss?” TJ came back in the room, hair still wet with a light blue t-shirt clinging to his damp chest. Obviously he’d been anxious to return.

“Just trying to convince Steve here to run away with me.” Margaret quipped, giving Steve a second to recover from her prior words.

The blond grabbed his glass, starting to rise from the stool. “I’m just going to …”

“Son, don’t run on my account. Doug never would spill the beans on who TJ’s new friend was, but he made it clear you’d heard the worst and decided to stick around. I want to know what happened the other day, in his own words, and if having you beside him makes that any easier, then you’re welcome to hear anything I have to say as well.”

Steve looked to TJ, wanting him to make the choice.

“Stay. Please.” The laughter from earlier was gone, replaced with a look that reminded Steve of a puppy desperately waiting to see if it was going to be kicked aside or shown some kindness. Not for the first time, Steve wanted to find and hurt everyone that helped make TJ unsure of his own value and other’s willingness to do something to simple for him.

“Of course,” He stretched his hand out, encouraging TJ to sit next to him. Steve’s gaze was fixed on the brunet, but he caught Margaret’s knowing smile from the corner of his eye. “Do you want more to drink?”

“Water?” TJ answered though it sounded more like a question. “But I can get it.” He let his hand rest on Steve’s shoulder, squeezing lightly as he walked behind him instead of taking a seat beside him. “What can I get for you two while I’m up.”

“Water’s fine.” Steve watched him.

“Same for me.” Margaret replied, watching as he came back to grab their empty glasses.

A moment later, TJ was back with the fresh drinks. “So, what do you want to know?”

Winking at her grandson, Margaret laughed. “I want to know everything, but I’ll settle for how you ended up in the hospital. If you want to add some color around how you inherited your rather impressive contingent of over protective superheroes, I won’t turn down that story either.”

Before he could start, Natasha reappeared in the doorway. “Why don’t you three go sit somewhere more comfortable. There’s a couch and some chairs in the sitting room now. I can work on my shopping list from here,” she waved her StarkPad in the air. “And make sure the pies come out of the oven on time.”

TJ looked from Natasha to the stool he’d been about to sit on. “Thanks. That sounds like a plan.”

Steve slid out of his chair, waiting for Margaret to follow her grandson before bringing up the rear. He didn’t miss Natasha’s hand darting out to give TJ’s hand a quick squeeze, a simple gesture of support.

When he reached her, Steve paused. “Thank you.”
“No need. This isn’t a big deal.” She brushed him off.

“Not just for this, Natasha. For everything. I don’t know that I can ever repay you, Sam, or Tony for everything you guys have done for him … and me.”

The red head shook her head, “I hope you realize how absurd that is. Get it through that stubborn head of yours that none of us are doing any of this so you’ll feel like you owe us. We’re doing this because we care, and because we know if the tables were turned you’d stop at nothing to do the same for us.” She stopped, stretching up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. “Now go be with him. He’s gotta be able to tell the story, but he doesn’t have to do it alone.”

Steve leaned down, kissing her on the top of her head before making a silent exit to catch up with TJ and Margaret. Walking into the room, he saw Margaret sitting in chair near the couch. TJ occupied the couch, situated so there was just enough room between him and one edge for a roughly Steve Rogers sized person to fit. TJ glanced from him to the open corner of the couch and back again with furrowed brows.

There were other seats around the room that Steve could have taken, but it was clear TJ wanted him close, so he didn’t hesitate before slipping himself into the area between the arm of the couch and the brunet. Without a word, he stretched his arm out along the back of the couch and felt TJ immediately lean into his side.

Margaret watched without comment, but couldn’t help the affectionate smile that gave away her thoughts. It was obvious that Steve and his team were all very tactile people, and judging by TJ’s behavior, that was something he craved. It wasn’t that the family didn’t hug and touch, but there was such a difference between what they did and the steady stream of contact given here.

“Well, I don’t know about the two of you, but I’d like to just get this over with.” TJ gave a humorless chuckle, trying to calm himself. “Not sure what Mom told you, but ending up in the hospital really wasn’t intentional, and it had nothing to do with using.”

“I guessed as much since you were already out.” Margaret nodded at him to continue.

“It was just a really bad series of things and me not thinking right.” TJ explained. “I found out about that stupid magazine …”

“I really want to string that so called reporter up by her toes.” Margaret interjected.

“You should get with Tony on that. I think he’s already cooking something up.” Steve grinned at her surprised look.

“I don’t want to know, do I?” TJ turned his head to look at Steve.

“That’s your call. I don’t think he’ll do anything we wouldn’t approve of.” The blond replied. “And I’m sure he’ll stop if you ask him to.”

“I won’t do that. I’m sure she was just trying to do her job, but it was a pretty dick move the way I got singled out as the epic failure.” TJ admitted.

“It was, especially when she clearly had no clue who you really are or what drove the decisions you made.” Margaret chimed in. “Either way, Stark and I can make sure she’s dealt with.”

“I don’t doubt that at all,” TJ gave her a small smile. “Anyway, that all put me in a funk, then Mom called and invited me for dinner with her and Dad. I should have known better, but I wanted to tell him about what I’ve been up to … what I’m planning. It was stupid to think they’d react any
different than they did.”

Margaret scooted forward in her chair, propping her elbows on her knees as she leaned in toward TJ. “I want to hear about these plans myself, but for now, let’s just get through this. What the hell did those two do?”

“Dad laughed and Mom basically told me I was ridiculous to think I could do anything to help others.” TJ’s eyes filled with unshed tears at the memory, but it helped to feel Steve’s warmth surrounding him.

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m not saying you should have grand expectations from the pair of them, but you should be able to expect more than that.” Margaret looked equal parts sad and furious. “I don’t see how they ever expect you to succeed when they tear you down before you even start.”

TJ took a deep breath, hoping his grandmother wouldn’t flip when he told him the conclusion he’d come to. “I know, and I’ve decided for the time being I need to stay away from them. I know they love me in their own ways, but I’m beginning to realize what it means to have people that care and understand how to support my efforts to get my life together. I just don’t think I can deal with Mom and Dad making judgmental assumptions at every turn. Not until I feel like I’m really on more solid ground.”

Margaret rose from her chair, sliding onto the couch beside TJ. “Sweetheart, I’m the last person that will argue with that. I love my daughter, but sometimes I think she forgets that she should be a mother first and a politician second. You need time, you take it. I’ll defend your right to make that choice.”

TJ held her hand, thankful that for all her shortcomings, Nana really was on his side.

“So what else happened?” She prodded after a moment of silence.

“I decided to go for a walk after I got home, saw Sean out with his latest boy toy, drank myself into a raging headache, and in my epic stupidity decided to take some high dose pain killers to deal with it.”

“How many?” She tried to keep the worry in her voice in check.

“I only meant to take two, but several extras came out of the bottle. I was in such a bad state of mind that I took that as a sign.”

“Oh, TJ.” Margaret lost the battle to keep her tears in check at the idea of her grandson alone, coming off a horrible day and the rather cruel behavior of his own parents, deciding that a small slip was a sign that he should just end things.

“So how …” Her voice falter.

Steve could feel TJ’s body shaking as he cried silently, wedged tight against the hero, with his hands tangled in his grandmother’s.

“He called me. Unfortunately, I couldn’t answer immediately, but I got the message fast enough. Natasha dialed Stark before she even knew exactly what happened, then he had me call Sam. The pair of them managed to get TJ to the hospital in time.”

“I wasn’t exactly alert, but I vaguely remember feeling like I was flying and a rooftop.” TJ admitted, voice thick with tears.

“Yeah, Tony was suited up, so he took you the fastest way he knew. Thanks to JARVIS they had a
team waiting for you and it was all kept very quiet.”

“Wow.” Margaret swiped at her eyes, trying to remove the tears. “I gather from Elaine than they weren’t called immediately, and once they got their they were summarily dismissed for bad behavior.” She looked to Steve for clarification.

“That’s one way of putting it. Tony knew enough to wait until TJ could decide about calling them. The decision was made to wait until I returned from the mission a few hours later. Your daughter came in making some rather grand assumptions, and between Tony and I we shut her down. TJ is on the Stark Foundation payroll and insurance, so Tony rightfully pointed out that they have absolutely no right to interfere if TJ doesn’t wish them to.”

“There’s a story there, right?” Margaret’s eyes were wide.

“Yeah, there’s a story there …” TJ grinned, regaining his composure now that he knew Nana wasn’t going to undermine his decision or ridicule his lack of judgment that night.

“Where’s a story?” Tony came into the room with a sense of timing only he could manage.

“I believe someone was about to explain TJ’s new career with the Stark Foundation.” Margaret answered.

“Oh, that?” Tony grinned, flopping into one of the chairs. “I like that story …”

And before anyone could stop him, Tony launched into the tale of how he managed to preemptively outmaneuver Bud and Elaine, and give TJ the fresh start he needed.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think? This chapter was surprisingly hard to write and I'm half afraid I mucked it up.

On another note, for those not on Tumblr, I’ve updated the playlist, so I thought I’d share. Songs are linked to Youtube for easy access.

The American Punchline playlist (updated 4/19/16)
Human - Christina Perri (even if you know the song, click the link to watch the incredible fan video created for TJ)
Flares - The Script
Hold My Hand - The Fray
Just to Be Me - Josh Kelley
Start Again - Ryan Dolan
Walls We’re All Against - Ross Copperman
What You Need - Satellite
Unsteady - X Ambassadors
How You Love Me (feat. Bright Lights) - LAU
Stand By You - Rachel Platten
Superman - Rachel Platten
Good Enough - Lifehouse (this one is really for TJ & his parents)
Empty take out containers were scattered across the acting media room. Images of some late 1980s movie provided the only real light. Natasha and Clint were burrowed in a pile of blankets on the floor. Bruce was curled up in an over-sized chair with Tony sprawled out on a sofa.

On the other sofa, Steve sat angled in one corner, one leg stretched out along the back of the couch, the other foot on the floor. His head was lolled back, resting on a pillow that Bruce had produced when he noticed the blond drifting. TJ’s head was resting on Steve’s thigh, his body stretched out in front of the blond’s extended leg, kneels tucked up some so his feet rested on his grandmother’s lap.

Margaret was quite proud that she’d managed to focus on the first part of the movie, the temptation to just sit back and watch her grandson looking so at peace being almost overwhelming. Of course, when Bruce had moved to place the pillow for Steve, she’d looked and found TJ sound asleep, Steve’s arm draped protectively over his shoulder and chest even as he’d been falling asleep. She could barely tell you anything that happened after that point in the movie.

“Hey Tony,” Clint spoke, just louder than a whisper. “You realize that Robert Downey, Jr kid looks like he could be your younger brother, right? I’d say son, but since this was filmed in the 80s I figure you aren’t quite that old. Or you started your playboy ways a helluva lot earlier than I thought.”

“Can it, Legolas.” Tony didn’t even bother looking when he threw a balled up napkin in Clint’s general direction. “As far as I know there is no relation there.”

“I’m just sayin’” Clint snickered. “You ever get bored you should find the guy and run a DNA test just to make sure.”

“Quiet,” Natasha elbowed him playfully. “You wake those two up you’ll pay for it.” She gestured toward the couch.

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint stuck his tongue out but settled back down.

“Speaking of waking them, do you think they’ll be upset if I slip out and don’t wake them to say goodbye? I should really call a …”

“Nope.” Tony’s head popped up over the arm of the couch.

“I’m not going to let one of you drive me all the way into DC just to turn around and come back.” Margaret stated to argue with him.

“Wasn’t gonna suggest that anyway,” Tony gave her a playful smile.

“And just what would you have me do? Walk?”

“Nonsense. You came straight here from the airport and I already moved your bags to the guest suite in their wing. Just let any of us know if you need something else, and JARVIS will make it happen.”

“What?” Margaret stared at the billionaire in confusion.

“Listen, I know it was rather presumptuous, but TJ needs what little family he’s got sticking by him
to prove they really are sticking by him this time. He knew why Doug had to go back, didn’t say a
think to try to stop him, but unless you’ve got something more pressing, you’re welcome, encouraged
even, to hang around for a bit.”

“I’ll have to go back eventually, or Elaine will hunt me down and none of us want that, but I can stall
for a couple of days.” Her eyes drifted to her grandson, tucked so sweetly against Steve. “I want him
to know I’m really on his side this time.”

“Good.” Tony smiled, sliding back down until he was sprawled on the couch again. “Now let’s
finish the movie starring my younger not-brother.”

Everyone but Steve and TJ laughed quietly. The two of them just continued to sleep.

When the end credits finally rolled, Natasha disentangled herself from the blanket, smiling down at
the sleeping ones. Glancing at Margaret, she could see just how much the older woman loved TJ.

“Let me get them up and moving, then I’ll show you your suite.” She stepped closer to the couch
once Margaret nodded. Crouching down in front of Steve and TJ, she ran her fingers gently through
TJ’s rather unruly hair. “TJ,” she whispered quietly. “It’s time to head to bed.”

“Huh,” he muttered, eyes fluttering open.

“You two fell asleep during the movie, but it’s time to head to bed.” She watched to make sure he
registered what he was saying before shifting around so she stood next to the arm of the couch and
could wake Steve more easily. She used the same trick on Steve, running graceful fingers through
soft blond hair until piercing blue eyes stared up at her. “It’s time to make use of that great big bed.
Movie’s over.”

A few minutes later, Margaret had hugged both men before watching them trudge up the stairs
together. Turning to Natasha she grinned. “How long do we give it before they realize they’re
basically dating already?”

“No telling with the two of them, but unless either is doing something that’s hurting the other, we’ve
all agreed to stay out of it. They can be stupid and in love as long as they aren’t being complete idiots
about it.”

Margaret smiled thoughtfully, knowing the spy was right. “Well if this is how happy TJ is with them
being stupid, I’m fine with that. I’d hate to see them rush into anything anyway.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Natasha agreed as they moved toward the stairs. “I’m not even sure they
realize how much more hands on they are with each other than others, especially given that around
here we seem to have fallen into a pretty high frequency touch environment.”

“Have to say that kinda surprised me.” Margaret admitted, hoping she didn’t offend the red head.

“Can’t blame you. I think it surprised all of us when we realized it, but as Bruce pointed out, for
various reasons none of us have ever had that luxury in a healthy way for any sustainable period.
We’re all kinda making up for lost time.” She grinned as they reached the top stair. “Turns out even
cold blooded assassins need love sometimes.”

“Defining yourself as a cold blooded assassin is like me insisting I’m only an alcoholic. That may be
one way to describe me sometimes, but that is far from who I am. Your abilities are part of who you
are, but that’s the last thing I see when I watch you with the others. Doesn’t take a genius to see that
you’re a good woman … a good person.”
“I …” Natasha stared at her, unsure what to say as they stood frozen in front of the door to the guest suite. “I …”

“That’s okay. You don’t have to.” Margaret reached out, giving the younger woman’s hand to assure her she understood.

A few minutes later, Natasha had given her a quick tour, made sure she knew where to find her if she needed anything, and was about to step back into the hallway.

“Natasha,” Margaret called softly, waiting until the red head turned to face her, “I want to know what you have planned for Reeves and TJ’s parents. I’m not naive enough to believe you’re going to let them go unscathed.”

“I promise I won’t kill them.” Natasha assured.

“Didn’t say I was worried you’d go to far.” Margaret gave her a pointed look. “I’d be more concerned that you’ll go too easy on them, especially Reeves. That piece of shit deserves everything you feel inclined to dish out.”

“Duly noted.” Natasha gave her a devious grin as she pulled the door closed behind her.

Chapter End Notes

I give up. While I continue nudging them all in the general direction they're supposed to go, I know longer have any belief that I'm actually in control of this story. If it sucks I'm going to blame the entire unruly lot of them.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

I think Steve hates me. I really do. This was not my idea.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Staring out the massive floor to ceiling window overlooking the front of the property, Steve placed his hand on the glass feeling just a hint of the cold that permeated the outdoors as a light snow fell. Back when he was small and sick, he dreamed of being able to breathe well enough to actually enjoy the cold. He wanted to be one of those boys running around throwing snowballs.

But he was always the one cooped up in the small apartment, struggling to breathe.

By the time his body was fixed, he was too busy parading around like the dancing monkey they thought he was to enjoy any time in the snow.

Then there was the war … and Bucky falling from the train in the middle of snow covered mountains.

The snow held less appeal then. It made him sick envisioning his best friend’s body lying still in the middle of snow stained red with blood.

Then there was the water, ice, and snow. A decision to make. Thousands of lives versus his own. It was really no choice. He’d let the only family he had fall from that train. He wanted that ice to swallow him whole, to make the hurting stop. If he could end the mission and the pain all at the same time, there was no real decision to make.

Mind stuck in the loop of painful memories, Steve fell to his knees in front of the glass. Crumpling forward, his forehead rested on the smooth surface, arms wrapped around his middle in some failing attempt to hold himself together.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

As tired as he was, TJ decided a hot shower might help him fall back asleep. Part of him wished Natasha had just left them to sleep on the couch. His back might have argued that sentiment in the morning, but it would have meant staying with Steve.

Standing under the spray of water, hands braced on the wall in front of him, he leaned forward so the water cascaded over his head and shoulders. He didn’t want to face the night alone, wasn’t ready for the demons that would find him with no one there to keep them at bay.

He wasn’t lying when he said taking the pills wasn’t a premeditated act, but he was still terrified of how easily he’d heeded what he read as a sign to end his life. He was disappointed in himself for letting the actions of a few tear down that small sliver of confidence and drive to do more that he’d spent those few weeks cultivating.

Frustrated with himself, TJ shut the water off, grabbing the thick towel and drying himself quickly before throwing on pajama pants and a t-shirt. Several moments later, he found himself still standing in the middle of his room trying to decide what to do. Self-doubt was clouding his head, and he
knew trying to sleep now would be futile at best.

Debating his other options, and the likelihood of the others not being annoyed with him for interrupting their sleep, TJ caught sight of his journal sitting neatly on his nightstand. He’d forgotten about pulling that out earlier, thinking he should probably write something of the events of the last few days.

Deciding there was no time like the present, he grabbed the journal and pen, and curled up in the overstuffed chair near the window. The faint chill in the air so close to the glass helped keep him alert as he began filling the pages with his thoughts.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed before he stopped, but it was enough that he felt the tired. Setting the journal aside, TJ crossed back to his bed, pulling the covers back so he could slip inside. The sheets were cool to the touch, but soft against his feet and arms. The bed was easily one of the most comfortable he’d ever been in, and yet lying their alone he felt the tension seeping back into his body.

“Quit being stupid.” TJ grumbled to himself ten minutes later, flinging the covers back as he swung his legs over the bed. The floor felt colder now against his bare feet, but he didn’t care. Arms crossed tight in front of his chest in an effort to retain what little heat he’d gained from the bed, he strode toward the door. There was no point going slow, it would only give him time to decide he was being ridiculous and second guess his decision.

Closing his door as quietly as he could behind him, TJ headed down the hall. Raising his hand to knock gently, he shook his head, wondering if perhaps this wasn’t really the best idea.

Then he heard the choked sob from within the room.

All thoughts of why he’d come were forgotten as he skipped knocking and slipped into the room. TJ’s knees threatened to buckle beneath him when he saw Steve crumpled against the window, body shaking with tears he could no longer contain.

“Steve?” TJ fought to keep his voice calm, not wanting to startle the blond with his approach.

“TJ?” His voice was raw. “I’m sorry.”

TJ fell to his knees beside his friend, wrapping his arms around broad shoulders as he pulled Steve into his chest, letting the hero’s head fall onto his shoulder. “Why are you sorry?”

“I just … I didn’t mean … I’m just being stupid.” Steve couldn’t seem to land on a thought.

“If you mean you’re being stupid for crying, we’re going to have to talk about that later. How many times to do I have to tell you that you’re only human. You’re allowed to be sad, to cry, to feel things.” He ran his fingers through the soft blond locks. “Can you tell me what you were thinking about?”

Steve nodded but didn’t speak, his body shaking so hard that TJ couldn’t tell if it was from cold or from pure raw emotion.

“How about we go climb in that gigantic bed and burrow under those covers. Might be easier to talk if your teeth aren’t rattling.”

He felt Steve nod against him before they moved together to stand. It made TJ’s gut churn to see Steve so distraught. He wondered if he should call for Natasha, if maybe she would be better qualified to actually help, but Steve’s hand gripped his like a lifeline, so stepping away seemed
unlikely.

For now, he’d do the best he could and hope that Steve would share whatever burdened he carried with him. Tomorrow he could figure out what else needed to happen.

Chapter End Notes

This is what I get for having an image of TJ padding down the hall barefoot to Steve's room. Only I envisioned it with a lot less angst. Please don't hate me.
Pulling the covers back from Steve’s bed, TJ prodded the blond into them as carefully he could when Steve wouldn’t let go of his hand.

“I’m not going anywhere,” TJ assured him, wishing that it had been more than a couple days since he’d almost done exactly that.

“I’m sor…” Steve tried to apologize again, cut off by TJ’s finger against his lips.

“What did I say not three minutes ago? I know you have some deeply ingrained belief that you are supposed to keep your shit together all the time, but you’ve got to let that go. It’s not healthy and it’s not fair. Not to you and not to the people that genuinely care about you.”

Steve looked up at him, tear filled blue eyes filled with so much pain TJ couldn’t help but think he wasn’t the only one that might have been inclined to take the slightest sign as a reason to end things. The thought of Steve hurting that bad felt like a knife straight to his heart.

“I know. Or at least some part of me does, but I don’t know what to do with this. I was supposed to die seventy years ago. I was …” As soon as TJ slipped into bed beside him, the super soldier curled against his chest, tears soaking through the thin cotton of TJ’s shirt.

It took some maneuvering, but TJ managed to get his arm wrapped around Steve, holding him tight as he continued to fall apart. TJ knew there were no magic words to make this better. There was no guidebook for how to help someone deal with this situation. Instead he settled for making gentle sounds, reassuring Steve that he was there as his arm curled tighter around the blond, free hand stroking soft hair.

They stayed like that for quite some time. TJ wondered if this was the first time Steve had let himself fall apart so completely. Steve had given TJ small glimpses of how deep his heart ache ran, this was different. This was Steve Rogers raw and exposed, and TJ could barely wrap his head around how much that really meant to him.

Eventually the tears slowed and the shaking began to ease. TJ continued his ministrations, doing his best to offer what solace he could.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“It’s ridiculous,” Steve started.

“No. It’s not ridiculous if it’s how you feel. Especially if this is what it’s doing to you to keep it bottled up.” TJ brushed a lock of hair out of Steve’s eye, staring down at where the blond head rested on his chest. “I won’t force you to talk to me, but I really do want to know. I’ve laid all my demons out for you, I want you to be able to do the same with me. This only works if we’re actually willing to be honest with each other.”

TJ wasn’t sure exactly what the “this” he was referring to was, but after a lifetime of relationships built on lies and secrets, he knew he needed whatever he had with Steve to be different.

“You’re right, and I want to tell you. I just feel like an ass dumping on you when you’re working so
“As I recall from the day we met we were both pretty clear that we were a bit of a mess, and that we’d muddle our way through getting ourselves in a better place with the help of each other. My little crisis doesn’t cancel out my desire to help you, and in some ways thinking you might actually need me gives me more focus and motivation to keep myself on the right path.”

“I do need you.” Steve whispered, tracing random patterns over TJ’s stomach. “You’re really good at this.”

“At what?” TJ asked, unsure of his meaning.

“At being here … helping me calm down.” Steve’s voice was scratchy from crying and TJ wished he had something to give him to drink.

A quiet knock came from the door, and TJ wondered if JARVIS had managed to start reading his mind. Looking to the door, he called a quiet welcome, “Who is it?”

“Just me,” a familiar voice called back. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” TJ replied, unconcerned with the picture he made with Steve still curled around him. He kept his arm in place, essentially anchoring Steve against him in case he got some silly idea that he needed to move.

The door opened just wide enough for Natasha to appear, a small tray in her hands. “Don’t want to get in the way, but I heard sounds and though you guys might appreciate this.” She held the tray up as she approached.

“You are a goddess.” TJ smiled at her, seeing the concern in her eyes. “And possibly a mind reader as I was just thinking water would be good.” He watched as she set the tray with four bottles of water and a plate with several of the cookies he’d made earlier on the nightstand.

“Nah, just worried.” She shrugged, obviously deciding not to try and hide her intention of making sure they were okay.

“Thanks, Nat.” Steve pulled himself up enough to accept the water TJ offered him. “I’m okay … or I will be. Just having a bit of a snow induced meltdown.”

Natasha stretched up so she could perch on the edge of the bed. “There’s no shame in that, Steve. No shame in needing someone to help you through it either. I don’t exactly advertise it, but Clint had to pull me out of my own head more times than either of us care to admit. Still does sometimes. From time to time I even get to return the favor.” She held his gaze, hoping he was really listening. “Trust me, there are worse foundations to build a relationship on than the letting yourself trust someone with your deepest fears and regrets.”

Without saying another word, she leaned forward placing a gentle kiss on Steve’s forehead before doing the same to TJ. Then she slid off the bad, and disappeared out the door.

Steve took another drink before reach over TJ to set the bottle back on the nightstand. “TJ?” His voice wavered, worrying the brunet.

“I’m right here.”

“Does it bother you that everyone seems to think we’re in a relationship?” Steve asked, shifting so he was leaned against the headboard next to TJ.
“No. I know I’m not ready to cross that line yet, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in seeing where things go.” TJ surprised himself with his blunt honesty. “Does it bother you?”

“No, but if we’re being honest, I’m also afraid you’ll settle for me because I’m here and willing even if I’m not really what makes you happy.” Steve admitted, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Steven Grant Rogers,” TJ turned, grasping Steve’s chin with one hand so he had no choice but to look at him. “I have a hard time believing Peggy and Bucky wouldn’t kick your ass if they heard you say something so completely and utterly ludicrous. The idea that anyone would be settling for you is bullshit. Someone ever tells you that, I’ll help Natasha kick their ass.”

TJ was surprised when Steve laughed.

“You think that’s funny?”

“No. I think it’s funny that you and your grandmother both referenced Buck and Peggy while telling me I was being an idiot.” Steve shrugged, realizing it sounded kind of strange that he’d had a similar conversation with Margaret.

“Well, Nana’s a pretty fucking smart lady.” TJ grinned. “Now, not that I don’t love correcting your odd assumptions about how someone would view being with you, but assuming we intend to sleep at all tonight, how about you tell me why I found you on the floor.”

Steve sighed, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

“Okay … can we …” The words hung in his throat, leaving him making large senseless gestures, but TJ managed to piece it together. Shifting back down in the bed, he tugged at Steve until the taller man’s head was resting on his chest again. TJ knew from experience that sometimes confessions were easier when you didn’t have to look the other person in the eye.

“Better?”

Steve nodded against TJ’s chest, arm wrapped around his middle. “I was watching the snow, remembering how I used to watch it back before and wish I could go out like the other kids. By the time I could have enjoyed it I was too busy helping raise funds for the war and then trying to beat HYDRA with the Commandos. Never really had a chance to enjoy it.” He paused for a moment, trying to keep himself calm enough to finish. “When Buck fell I … it just … I had nightmares about him falling … his body broken and still in the middle of snow covered with his blood. We never found the body. Never had that closure. Sometimes I have nightmares that he’s still there, buried under layers of snow and ice like I was, except no one is coming to find him. He’s not going to wake up all these years later.”

TJ held him tight, remaining silent as he had the feeling that interrupting now would keep Steve from getting it all out. His patience was rewarded a few second later when the other man continued.

“Buck would have loved the future. If it had to be one of us to see it, it should have been him.” TJ felt silent tears soak through his t-shirt and wished he had some way to make this easier. “He didn’t choose to die. He tried to save me and I wasn’t fast enough to do the same for him. I let my best friend fall, and I didn’t know how to live with that. When I was on that plane, I wouldn’t even get Peggy a chance to figure something out. All I could think was that I could die being the hero that everyone thought I was supposed to be, but in reality I just wanted to make the guilt and pain stop.”

Steve sobbed quietly, fist tangled tight in TJ’s shirt as he said the words aloud for the first time. He half expected TJ to push him away, call him a coward for trying to take the easy way out, but strong
arms just held him closer. He felt TJ’s warm breath on the top of his head as the other man lifted his head, kissing blond hair in silence.

TJ moved one hand to cover Steve’s, prying long fingers loose from his shirt until he could tangle his own with them.

“That’s more than any person should have to deal with, but you know Bucky would never blame you. From everything you’ve told me about him, and everything I’ve read, he would have given his life a hundred times over if it meant protecting you. He would have wanted you to live, but he also would have understood the sacrifice you made. No matter other motives you had, you made a decision that saved thousands of lives. You don’t get to focus on the less than noble part of and forget all the good you did, all the people that are alive today because you made that choice.”

TJ ran his thumb over Steve’s fingers, trying to help ground him in the moment, keep his thoughts from getting stuck in the ice and snow of so many years before.

“You’re here. You’re still alive. You’re allowed to hurt, to be sad, to miss the people you loved. I’ll be here to curl up with you, to hold you, any time you need to let yourself feel that. But those people, Bucky, Peggy, the Commandos, all of them, they’d want you to let yourself live and be happy now. They all loved you. They’d want that for you every bit as much as you wanted it for them.”

“Thank you.” Steve whispered the words, not sure how to make them convey how much what TJ said meant to him.

After a few minutes, TJ sat up enough to grab another bottle of water, making Steve drink some before he took a few sips of his own.

“Do you think you’ll be able to sleep?”

Steve nodded drowsily, drained by the emotional breakdown.

TJ arranged them so he could pull the blankets up over Steve’s shoulder, perfectly content to act as his pillow for the night. Within minutes, he felt Steve’s breathing even out as the super soldier slipped into slumber. Moments later, TJ was snoring lightly, arms still wrapped tight around the blond.

Chapter End Notes

So feedback on this one would be very much appreciated as this one was something of an emotional beast for me to write. I’d very much like to curl up under the covers with those two so we can all recover from this chapter.
“Hey, Tony.” Steve called out, not wanting to startle the billionaire by approaching from behind when he appeared fixated on something outside.

“Hey. What can I do for you this morning?” Tony turned from the window kitchen, almost empty cup of coffee in his hand. “Pep said everything I need to start upgrading the house for JARVIS’s integration should arrive today. Factoring in my normal sleeping habits and trying not to keep the rest of you awake all night, it should take me a week, two max to have everything up and running. Then I’ll be out of your way.”

“Tony,” Steve shook his head. “It’s your house. You really don’t have to rush out.”

“Technically Cap, it’s your house. Yours and Widow’s.” Tony shrugged, heading to the coffee pot for a refill.

“It’s what?”

“It’s not my name on the deed. Legally the house belongs to you and Natasha. I didn’t really need another house. The two of you seem pretty content kicking it in the DC and to the best of my knowledge neither of you owned any real estate. I just figured it made more sense that way. If you guys decide someplace else suits you better it’s all in your names so you can do whatever you want and not just be stuck here.”

Steve just stared at him for what seemed like several minutes, not sure how he was supposed to respond to finding out that not only had Stark purchased a house instead of renting something, but had bought it for him and Natasha.

“Tony, I honestly don’t know what to say. That’s way more than you needed to do. Of course, almost everything you do is …” Steve noticed Tony’s posture shift as he started to shrink in on himself, “… but wow. Thank you. I’m pretty sure we’ve all fallen in love with the place, so I doubt there’s going to be any interest in moving.”

“Oh. Good.” Tony seemed to perk up a bit.

“Anyway, we really don’t want you to rush off. It’s been pretty nice having you around.”

“But …” Tony started to argue, and Steve knew the path he was going to go down.

Steve slid onto one of the bar stools across from Tony, sipping is coffee as he watched the other man. “TJ reminded me last night that it’s not fair to me or the rest of you for me to keep trying to pretend I’m doing okay on my own. I’m not. I’m having a hard time coping with things. I’m tired of being lonely. I’ve got an entire list of things I want to do, and I know …” he sighed. “I know I’m gonna need help.”

“Oh.” Tony rounded the corner, climbing into the stool next to Steve. “You know I’m good for whatever funding you need. You don’t even have to tell me what it’s for. JARVIS has everything he needs to either transfer funds to you or make purchases directly.”
Steve set his mug on the counter, pivoting so he could look at Tony. “Is that really what you think? That when I say I’m gonna need help I’m just coming to you to ask you for money?”

“That’s kinda the way it works.” Tony shrugged.

“You’re more than the fucking Bank of the Avengers, Tony. How many times do I have to tell you that.” Steve gripped Tony’s forearm, wishing the other man could see that he was so much more than that. “And please don’t take that as me not appreciating all the money you put into taking care of us. I see it, and I appreciate every bit of it. But that’s not the extent of your value to us. Like it or not, it’s Tony the person that I want to be around more. It’s the person I need to help me coping with life, not the bank account he happens to own.”

“Oh.”

“You said that once already.” Steve teased, trying to lighten the conversation before Tony went into feelings induced shock.

“This might take some getting used to. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I figure if I’m allowed to be slow as molasses with understanding the whole ‘you’re allowed to need help’ thing, then you’re allowed to be slower than normal grasping this. Just don’t be surprised when I remind you.”

“Fair enough.” Tony drained the rest of his coffee, hopping down to get more, grabbing Steve’s half empty cup to refill as he went. “So, if it’s not my money you need, what services can I offer?”

“Advice.” Steve gave him a crooked smile.

“That could end very badly, you know that right?”

“I do, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. I need someone that’s used to dealing with media and people and all the bullshit that comes with being a public figure.”

“You know your boy TJ is pretty savvy with all that, right?”

“I know, but I don’t want him tied to this one. Its … well … If it goes badly I don’t want him tied to it. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“And what exactly is it that you don’t want him tied to?” Tony watched as Steve seemed to stumbled over the words to say. “Oh. You want to come out! Is that it?”

“Nailed it on one, Tony.” Steve was surprised how fast the tension in his shoulder released at the simple knowledge that someone knew what he wanted to do.

“And you don’t want him to be involved in that particular revelation because you don’t want the idiots that be to decide he corrupted their supposedly virtuous paragon of innocence and conservative values.”

Tony handed Steve the now full mug of coffee.

“Precisely. I already told TJ that I wanted to come out before getting into any relationship because it’s not fair to dump that kind of drama on someone when they’re already getting the drama of dating a fucking Avenger.”

“Something tells me TJ is more than willing to take on the supposed drama.” Tony smirked, not
“No.” Steve’s blush deepened. “But we have both acknowledged that we see a future with each other. He needs to feel more grounded first, and I need to take care of some of my own issues. I won’t cross that line until he tells me he’s read, but we’d have to be stupid not to realize that in some ways we’ve already crossed the line from casual friends to more.”

“I’m proud of you, Cap.” Tony winked at him. “I was kinda afraid you two would dance around it until we ended up having to have a stupid intervention.”

Steve’s eyes danced over his cup of coffee. “It was tempting to play stupid, but no. There’s too much drama in our lives already. TJ doesn’t need me dancing around the subject like an idiot. Not to mention, I was basically crying all over him last night anyway, so not like I’ve got much to hide from him.”

Tony leaned toward him, grabbing onto Steve’s fingers. “You know I’m around if you want to talk, right? PTSD is right up my alley thanks to Afghanistan and all the shit that’s happened since. We can keep each other company at ridiculous hours of night if ever needed.”

“Thanks, Tony. I appreciate that.” Steve was surprised to find he really meant it. Though he hoped opening up to TJ and having a warm body to curl up with at night would reduce his sleepless nights, it was inevitable that it’d happen eventually.

“Anyway, back to the reason you came to find me in the first place. I have a few ideas, one in particular I think has particular merit.”

“And what’s that?”

“Ever heard of Ellen Degeneres?”

“She’s the one with that show, right? I’ve watched it a couple times. She seems cool. Why?”

“Well, she’s been after Pep and me to get an Avenger or two on her show. She’d be over the moon if we asked her to have you.”

“You think that’s a good idea? Going that big with this?”

“Steve, Captain America coming out of the closet is going to be fucking huge. You could do it a more subtle way, but then half the assholes on the planet will decide it was an accident and you weren’t intending to let it slip. I trust her. She’s one of the biggest fucking positive role models in the LGBT community, and one of the few people in popular media that was always a friend even when I was being stupid.”

“Well, if you trust her, I trust you.” Steve nodded, though Tony could easily see he was terrified. “What do we need to do to make it happen?”

“I’ll make a call, see when she wants to book us.” Tony grabbed his phone. “Do you want to meet her ahead of time, have a chance to get to know her a bit, and establish any boundaries. I can have my legal team write up a contract so you’re protected.”

“First, what do you mean we? Second, yes meeting her might help me calm down. And if you think I need a contract that’s fine. If you trust her without it, then that’s fine too.”

“You really thought I’d let you make your first major national television appearance alone? Fuck
that. For all intents and purposes, people see us as the figureheads of the Avengers. Makes sense to present a united front and go together. That way, while your coming out it part of the conversation, it doesn’t have to be the entire conversation.”

Steve stared at him. He was surprised with Tony’s offer, but part of him realized he shouldn’t be. Of course Tony would throw him into a potentially uncomfortable situation without backup.”

Before the conversation went further, TJ meandered into the room, obviously not much more awake for the shower he’d taken when Steve came down. “Please tell me that’s coffee I smell.”

“Sure is, sunshine.” Tony teased, hopping down from his stool again. “Take a seat and I’ll get you some.”

“I shouldn’t be this tired, I slept like a rock once we finally slept.”

Steve’s brows furrowed, guilt written across his face at the idea that he’d kept TJ up late with his emotional breakdown.

“Enough with the puppy dog eyes.” TJ slid onto the stool, immediately resting his head on Steve’s shoulder. “I’m glad I was there for you. Now, what mischief are you two in here plotting?”

“I was enlisting Tony to help with one of the things from my list.” Steve wasn’t sure why he was nervous to tell TJ.

“Not he karaoke I presume.” TJ whispered conspiratorially, smiling when it made Steve laugh.

“Coming out.” Steve said in a rush. “I want to do it sooner rather than later.” His eyes held TJ’s as understanding registered. TJ remembered what he’d said about wanting to come out before starting a relationship in an effort to protect his partner. He saw the cautious hope dance across TJ’s face, the small smile spreading at what Steve meant.

“Awesome.” TJ wasn’t sure what else to say. He couldn’t seem to articulate a single clear thought in the as it registered that Steve was actively making plans to do the one thing he’d stipulated he wanted to do before having a relationship. He wasn’t dragging his feet to use that as an excuse down the road when TJ decided he was ready.

“So,” Tony cleared his throat as he set TJ’s coffee in front of him. “I’m just gonna go make a phone call.” The billionaire wasn’t sure they even registered what he said or his retreat as they were busy having an entirely too sweet staring contest. He couldn’t help the wide smile. He might just stick around a while after all.

Chapter End Notes

So I don’t get to see Civil War until Saturday, but I’m willing to admit this chapter may have spawned as part of my complete denial that Tony and Steve are fighting ;)

Hope you enjoyed it. Sorry it took a few days longer than usual.
On his way to the sitting room, Tony ran into Margaret. “How’d you sleep? Did you have everything you needed? Let me know if there’s anything else we can get to make you more comfortable.”

Margaret laughed, stopping in front of him. “Relax, Tony. Everything was lovely. I’m not sure I’ve slept that well in ages.” She paused for a second. “Of course, I might attribute some of that to seeing TJ here with all of you. I’m not gonna lie, I wasn’t sure I’d ever see him look at happy and relaxed as he does with the lot of you.”

“Speaking of happy and relaxed, he and Cap are in the kitchen making heart eyes at each other over their coffee and I’m about to go put the wheels in motion to turn a few worlds upside down.” Tony gave her a devilish grin before hustling off to make the call.

Curiosity piqued, Margaret made her way toward the kitchen, pausing quietly at the entrance to observe the two men. TJ’s was bent over, pulling things out of the fridge while Steve pulled out various pans.

“How much do you think we should make?”

“I’d err on the side of more rather than less. You know I’ll make sure there aren’t leftovers.” Both men laughed.

“I hope Tony realizes what a grocery bill he’s in for with you around.” TJ set two large packages of bacon on the counter, reaching back in to grab the eggs. “Then again, I get the feeling he doesn’t care.”

“You might be right.” Steve answered as he moved around TJ to grab the bacon. Margaret knew she’d be caught when he grinned at her as he turned. “Hungry?” He called to her, encouraging her into the room. “We were just about to start cooking.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Pull up a stool and enjoy a cup of coffee,” TJ was already pouring a cup for her. “We’ve got it all under control.”

“Yes, sir.” She watched him prepare her coffee just the way she liked it, couldn’t help the delighted smile when he rounded the island to hand it to her with a kiss to the cheek. “You look happy.” Margaret couldn’t hold back the comment.

“I am.” TJ smiled, eyes lit up as he turned back to Steve and their breakfast prep.

“I never realized you liked to cook so much.” Margaret didn’t ever recall TJ being so interested in it before.

“I always wanted to try, but didn’t want to mess with the order of things. Then in the apartment alone it never seemed worth it to expend a lot of effort to feed myself. It’s more fun with other people to feed … even more with someone to cook with.” He bumped his hip against Steve’s as he moved to start cracking eggs.
“Everything okay, Tony?” Pepper asked, skipping all pleasantries. “Do I need to come down? Are …”

“Pep, breathe.” Tony was relieved that he hadn’t called with any crisis. He really needed to remember to call sometimes just to check in on her and say hello. “Everyone is just fine, or as fine as we ever get. Though I’m sure they’d all love to see you. Honestly, you need to come down and meet TJ at some point, but it doesn’t have to be right this minute. Just … fuck, Pep. He and Steve are adorable, and they both need …” Tony couldn’t find the right words. “We all do.” He amended, hoping Pepper would understand like she so often did.

“I’m clearing my schedule. I’ll be down tonight.” Tony sighed as how quick she made the decision and just how happy she sounded about it. He knew she loved the idea of being able to play mother hen to the group of them. “Now, why did you actually call?”

“I need Ellen’s number. It’s time to make her day.”

“She’ll be thrilled, but why now and who’s going?” He knew she’d have questions. “Just sent you her number.”

“It’s a favor for Cap. He wants to get the inevitable drama and backlash of his coming out over and done with. Pretty sure he’s tired of living a lie propagated by history books, but mostly he wants to make things easier for TJ when they finally decide to take that step.”

“And I’m not surprised that he’d think of something like that. He’d throw himself in front of any land mine out there if it meant protecting any of you.” Pepper sighed quietly. “Is he ready to handle it alone?”

“Any of us. You know he’d include you without a second though, and he won’t be doing it alone. I’m going with him. We can play it off as a thing with the two de facto leaders of the Avengers. That way I can help draw some of the focus if needed.” Tony could imagine the approving expression she likely wore on the other end of the phone.

“Good. I’m sure Ellen will do right by him. I’ll pull one of the senior PR people in as soon as we know dates to help me navigate Steve through the storm that will inevitably follow.”

“Thanks, Pep. I know we won’t be able to stop the backlash from certain groups, but I don’t want him dealing with it alone. I’ll throw whatever I have to at this to keep it as positive as possible.”

“You’re a good friend, Tony. I’m proud of you. Now make the call and let the rest of them know I’ll see them for dinner tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tony grinned at his phone for a few seconds. It was a bit odd having Pepper proud of him for being so responsible, usually she was lecturing him for doing something ridiculous.

Wanting to get back to Steve with an update, Tony didn’t wait before placing the next call.

“Tell me my caller ID isn’t lying to me. Is this actually Tony Stark calling me?” Ellen’s voice was all laughter when she answered.

“Believe it, my dear.” Tony quipped.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?” Tony knew he was smiling like an idiot thanks to her infectious enthusiasm.
“I need a favor.”

“And just what kind of favor can someone like me do for someone like you?” Ellen’s reply was dripping with curiosity.

“This stays close, I can’t have anything getting out before we’re ready for it.” Tony wanted to be clear up front. If they were going to have a chance of making this less of a nightmare for Steve, it needed to happen right.

“My lips are sealed. Whatever it is, you know I think more of you and Ms. Potts than to betray your trust.”

“It’s not just us, this one is for Cap.” Tony tried not to laugh at the gasp.

“Then they’ll have to kill me to make me tell.” Ellen replied immediately.

“Don’t think it’ll quite come to that, but I’m sure he’d appreciate that sentiment.” Tony smirked knowing that indeed Steve would be horrified to think the thought would even cross her mind.

“So now that we’ve established a vow of secrecy, what can I do for him?”

“I need you to invite Steve and me onto the show, spin it as a sit down with the leader and financial back of the Avengers, or however you want, but …” Tony hesitated.

“But … there’s an ulterior motive, isn’t there?” Ellen saw right through the ruse. “What’s the real story?”

“Steve Rogers isn’t quite the paragon of conservative values that some parties would like him to be.” Ellen gasped. “Are you telling me that Captain Rogers wants to come on my show to come out of the closet?”

“In a nutshell.”

“Now I understand the need for secrecy. You know I’m in, whatever makes him most comfortable, however we need to do it. I’m in. 100%. Do you want me to come out there and meet him first? Let him get the introductions out of the way somewhere he’s more comfortable?”

Tony grinned as he listened to her go. Her enthusiasm wasn’t just a television personality knowing her ratings would go through the roof with this sit down, it was her genuinely wanting to help.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Setting platters of food on the island, Steve realized he had no clue where everyone else was or how to find them all. “It’ll be cold by the time I track them down.”

“JARVIS?” TJ spoke, watching as his phone came to life.

“Yes, TJ?” The British voice sounded almost chipper at being summoned. “Can you tell everyone food’s ready. I’d guess they’ll have their phones with them.”

“Of course.” JARVIS readily agreed.

Margaret stared at TJ’s phone and then her grandson. “Not sure I could get used to that.”

“You’d be surprised,” TJ grinned. “JARVIS is awesome.”
“Keep that up and he’s going to decide he likes you better than me.” Tony quipped as he waltzed through the entrance. “And what is that amazing smell.”

“Food, Tony. You know that thing most people consume to help them stay live.” Steve teased.

“The Captain is correct, Sir.” JARVIS’s voice chimed from TJ’s phone where it sat on the island.

“Traitor.” Tony grumbled playfully. “So, Pep’s on her way down. Said she’d be here by dinner.” He looked at TJ. “Don’t let her scare you. She’s likes to take care of people, and you are now one of her people. She’s awesome. You’ll love her.”

“I’m sure I will. I’ve heard wonderful things about her, and I’d like to thank her for her part in the last few days.”

Tony smiled warmly though it made him a bit sad to think that TJ was so appreciative of everything that had happened because he was so unused to being truly supported.

“We’ll have another guest tomorrow. I’m sending a jet out to pick Ellen up for a visit. She wants to work through the details with you,” he looked to Steve, “without a bunch of extra people around. Needless to say, she’s 150% in your corner on this one.”

Steve let out the breath he’d been holding as soon as Tony mentioned Ellen. He was anxious to get through the coming out even as part of him wished it didn’t have to be an issue. Why couldn’t he just be a normal guy and not have to worry about major media announcements to live his life.

Seeming to sense Steve was feeling a bit anxious, TJ leaned into his side as they watched Natasha, Clint, and Bruce enter the kitchen.

“Someone mentioned food?” Clint eyed the spread on the island. “Why is everyone standing around? If you aren’t gonna eat, move so I can.” He nudged Tony out of the way to grab a plate.

“Ladies first,” the billionaire swatted at him before handing plates to Natasha and Margaret. The red head stuck her tongue out at Clint, barely holding in a giggle as she dove into the food.

“Smells delicious boys.” She paused to give Steve and TJ each a quick kiss on the cheek as she passed. “You’re going to spoil us if you keep this up.”

“I can think of worse things to do.” TJ grinned, glancing up to find Steve watching over their little makeshift family.

TJ could definitely think of worse things to do and far worse places to be.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Chapter End Notes

I will say, I adore Ellen but don’t get to watch her show as often as I’d like, so I should apologize now for probably hacking her character to pieces. :(
"How come you're in here every time I stop by the kitchen?" Clint climbed onto a bar stool content to see what Steve and TJ were concocting this time.

"Because this kitchen is amazing and I've found cooking to be very relaxing." TJ grinned as he slid a slice of pie in front of the archer. "Are you complaining?"

"Not a bit. I don't think I've ever eaten so well in my life." Clint's eyes closed as he took a bite of pie. "This is amazing."

"Thank you." TJ grinned wider, not used to all the compliments the team was showering him with when they tried anything he baked. "Hopefully dinner will turn out just as good. I thought it would be nice to have a home cooked meal for Ms. Potts."

"Please tell me you aren't going to call her that," Clint shook his head. "It's bad enough that Cap does it."

"Until she tells me otherwise. I will. She deserves the respect." TJ shrugged off Clint's surprised expression.

"So you'll get it out once and that'll be the end of that."

"Maybe, but it will be her choice."

Clint grinned, "She's going to love you." He jumped as Natasha appeared beside him. "Fuck's sake, Nat. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Nope." she smirked. "Just keeping you on your toes."

Steve and TJ both tried to stifle their giggles as they settled back in to cooking. "Pie or cookies?" TJ asked the redhead after he put a pan in the oven.

"Hard choice." Natasha contemplated the decision.

"This might make it easier." TJ turned, a plate piled high with white chocolate macadamia nut cookies in his hands.

"Wait a second," Clint fussed. "How come I didn't even get an option and she gets an entire plate of cookies?"

"Because I'm his favorite." Natasha elbowed Clint even as she reached for the cookies.

"I thought Cap was his favorite." Clint gave her a confused look, choosing to ignore Steve’s laughter.

"Different categories." Natasha moaned around a bite of cookie, winking playfully at TJ. "Nervous about meeting Pepper?"

Steve’s laughter died down as he turned his head, watching TJ's reaction to the question. He knew there was no reason to be afraid of Ms. Potts, but could imagine the influx of people surrounding him.
was a bit much for TJ given how few people seemed to genuinely care about him before.

"I am." I admitted, offering a timid smile. "Not that I haven't met more than my fair share of important people, but usually I'm just meeting them as part of the whole Hammond family experience. It's not often they actually care about me just for me."

Steve and Natasha’s eyes met, both reflecting sadness they felt at how little TJ had been valued for the person he was.

"Well, I'm sure Tony warned you, or maybe Steve did, but Pepper is one of those people that can scare the shit out of someone in a business negotiation, but loves to take care of the people around her when she can let her guard down." Clint explained. "Be prepared to be mother-henned."

“I gathered as much.” TJ watched as Clint tried to steal one of Natasha’s cookies. It was clear on the archer’s face that he thought he was going to make it when Natasha’s hand darted out and smacked his away.

“Awwww, come on Nat. You have more than enough.”

She glared at him. “Do you know the last time someone made these for me?”

“No.”

“Exactly because no one ever has. People don’t make cookies for assassins, Clint. They don’t even ask what my favorite cookies are. So yes, I’m going to be selfish and keep them all to myself.”

The three men stared at her, surprised by the admission given how rarely she spoke of the little things in life she’d missed out on because of the red room. Clint withdrew his hand, understanding that to her the seemingly simple gesture of TJ making her favorite cookies was a much bigger deal than he’d thought.

Unsure what to say, Steve settled for pouring Natasha a glass of milk to go with her cookies. Instead of sliding it across the island, he came around to her side kissing the top of her head as he set it beside her. “You know you’re more than an assassin to us.” He whispered against her hair.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Excuse me,” TJ jumped as the British voice spoke up from his phone, still not used to his phone appearing to have a mind of its own sometimes. “I thought you might wish to know that Ms. Potts should be arriving in the next fifteen minutes.”

TJ took a deep breath before looking toward Steve.

“I promise you’ll like her.” The blond reassured. “But I know how you feel. I was terrified the first time I met her.”

“You? Why?” TJ’s head cocked to the side, totally thrown by the idea.

“I’m not exactly known for being comfortable talking to women in general. All I really knew was that she and Tony were dating and she basically ran Stark Industries. That was enough to intimidate me.”

TJ grinned at him. “So you’re fine fighting off a bunch of bad guys with nothing but a metal frisbee, but she scares you. How is this information supposed to help me calm down?”
Steve pivoted around on the stool so he was completely facing TJ. Opening his arms, he invited the brunet into his embrace.

“I’m being ridiculous. I’m the son of a fucking president. I shouldn’t be rattled by this.” TJ melted into Steve’s hold, letting the blond support him.

“You’re allowed to be nervous. Honestly, you’re allowed to feel however you want to about the whole thing. The point of me telling you how terrified I was meeting her wasn’t to traumatize you. The point was that it took all of a minute after meeting her to realize I had nothing to be scared of.”

“Of course there wasn’t. You’re a fucking super hero. People love you.” TJ grumbled against Steve’s shoulder. “I’m like the opposite of that.”

“Not quite. Unless you’ve been hiding your super villain tendencies, you are definitely not the opposite of a super hero.” Steve smiled as he felt TJ’s shoulder shaking in laughter. “Seriously though, I know you’re used to being treated like shit, but I promise you Pepper is going to love you just as much as the rest of the team does.”

“That’s what you all keep telling me.” TJ felt ridiculous. He and Steve had carefully prepared dinner, he’d made a fresh batch of cookies, everyone insisted Ms. Potts would love him, and yet he couldn’t shake the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that she would be the one to jar them all to their senses. She would be the one to point out that they were wasting their time on a barely recovering drug addict that had done nothing with his life.

“TJ,” Steve wrapped strong hands around his upper arms, pulling him back slightly so their eyes met. “You know none of us expect anything from you, right? Nobody, Pepper included, wants you to be anything other than you. We just want to be here for you.”

Staring into those sincere blue eyes, TJ couldn’t even argue. “I just wish I knew why.”

“Well, I don’t want to speak for the others, but I’m happy to go over my reasoning again if you need me to.” Steve’s hand trailed up his arm, fingers wrapping around the side of TJ’s neck as his thumb brushed the brunet’s jawline.

TJ’s breath caught, his eyes fluttering closed as he felt the warmth of Steve’s embrace. There was nothing sexual about it at all, and yet he felt the heat spreading through him.

“Should we leave you two alone?” TJ’s eyes snapped open at the sound of Tony’s voice. He felt himself turning red when he spotted his grandmother beside the billionaire.

“Don’t let us interrupt.” Margaret grinned at him. Despite their gentle teasing, TJ couldn’t convince himself to move away from Steve. Instead he turned to face them but let himself lean back against the super soldier. The way Steve’s arms wrapped around his waist, it was clear the other man wasn’t bothered in the least.

TJ had to admit, knowing Steve was actively taking steps to do the one thing he’d stipulated he wanted to do before getting into a relationship coupled with their earlier discussion gave him a level of confidence in his interactions with Steve that he hadn’t anticipated. They weren’t ready to cross that official line yet, but it just felt right to let himself find comfort in Steve’s physical presence.

Chapter End Notes
I'm not even sure what just happened here. There were fluff and cookies... i think.

Someone please tell me if this chapter didn't make any sense, but my body and brain don't even know what timezone they're in right now and this could have been a complete mess.
Staring at the fully set dining room table, Steve marveled out how full it looked. Despite the overwhelming size of the dining room, he’d had a fleeting moment where he thought Tony was insane for ordering a table and chairs to seat sixteen. Seeing eight place settings arranged for dinner, he realized it might not have been so crazy.

“You look like you’re thinking too much.” TJ appeared at his side, a soft smile on his face as he looked at Steve.

“Just not used to needing space for so many people. This is going to be overkill when it’s just a couple of us here.”

TJ shrugged, clearly more accustomed to large dining setups. “True, but I kinda figured we’d just eat in the kitchen most of the time. The island is plenty big, and there’s room for a smaller table near the windows if we wanted.”

“He’s right.” Tony meandered into the room. “You know what to do to get it ordered.”

“Yes, I believe we’ve conquered that process.” Steve answered. “No sign of Ms. Potts yet?”

“She should be pulling up any second. Thought I’d come drag you two out to meet her.” Tony jerked his head in the direction of the foyer. “She’ll ignore me until she sets eyes on the pair of you at this point anyway, so I thought I’d try to cut down on the delay.”

TJ started for the door immediately. “Well, we can’t have Ms. Potts ignoring you, now can we.” He grabbed Steve’s hands, pulling him along. “Come on Steve.”

The blond looked a bit startled at TJ’s quick acceptance of diving right into introductions, but after a second he decided the other man was probably just anxious to get it over with. Whether it went as smoothly as Steve expected or as badly as TJ feared, he reckoned TJ just wanted it done.

“Where’s everyone else?” TJ asked, apparently having expected that everyone would be gathered.

“On the way.” Steve heard footsteps coming down the various halls as Tony spoke.

“Ms. Potts has arrived.” JARVIS intoned from Tony’s phone, making everyone jump slightly. Even Tony was more used to JARVIS speaking directly in his ear or from the speakers throughout the various Stark properties. Having him speaking through the phone speaker was odd.

“We’ve gotta get you properly installed.” Tony mumbled as he moved to the door.

“I concur, though my ability to do anything about it is sorely limited by my lack of physical presence.” JARVIS said, tone serious.

“I’m not exactly an genius.” TJ spoke up, “but I’m happy to provide an extra set of hands if it’ll help the process along.” He couldn’t resist offering given how frustrated JARVIS seemed to be by his lack of true integration in the house.

“Me too.” Steve added.
“I might just take you two up on that.” Tony’s answering smile told them he wasn’t kidding. “Not that he needs more reasons to adore the pair of you.”

Tony pulled the door open just in time to see Pepper striding up the steps. Watching over Tony’s shoulder, Steve noticed that she was in jeans under the layers of winter clothes instead of her usual business attire. He wondered if she hadn’t made a concerted effort to look more casual for TJ’s sake.

“Welcome to DC, Ms. Potts.” Tony reached out, giving her a quick kiss before guiding her through the door.

“It’s good to be here, Mr. Stark.” Pepper grinned at him before turning toward Steve and TJ. “You must be TJ.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Potts.” TJ stepped forward, offering her a hand to shake.

“None of that nonsense.” Pepper reprimanded as she stepped closer, pulling him into a hug. “Handshakes and Ms. Potts are for business acquaintances and other such people. Hugs and Pepper or Pep are for family.”

TJ stepped away, head ducked down in slight embarrassment. “But …”

Pepper pulled his chin up with one finger. “You’re family. There’s no room for argument there.” When he finally met her eyes, the kindness and love there would have sent him crasching to his knees had it not been for the sudden feel of Steve’s hand on his hip when the other man stepped up behind him. “That goes for both of you.” Pepper added, eyes shifting to Steve. “Whatever happened before, you are not alone now.”

Steve reached his arms around TJ to embrace Pepper, effectively sandwiching the brunet between them.

“That means a lot, Pepper.” He whispered. “More than you may ever realize.”

“Are you hungry?” TJ asked, slightly overwhelmed by the affection, but at the same time not wholly inclined to ask them to stop.

“I think I ate a protein bar for lunch while reviewing a contract. This wasn’t my best day for details like that.” Pepper groaned. “Someone help. I’m starting to sound like Tony.”

“Hey! I resent that remark.” Tony fussed.

“We made dinner, chicken tetrazzini and salad. Nothing too fancy. We can find …” TJ felt the panic rising as he realized he hadn’t asked anyone if Pepper would even like it. Would JARVIS have told him preemptively if she didn’t?

“That sound delicious. Tony mentioned you two were making great use of the kitchen. That’ll be a first for any property he’s purchased.”

TJ spotted Bruce, Natasha, Clint, and his grandmother standing several feet behind Pepper. “I think the others want to say hi, and then we should go eat before it gets cold.”

“I’ll go grab the pans from the oven.” Steve offered, stepping back to give TJ room even as Pepper released her hold on them, turning toward the others.

“We’ll meet you in the dining room.” TJ smiled at Tony before hustling to catch up with Steve.
When the brunet was even with him, Steve cocked his head in silent question.

“I like her.” TJ answered. “She wasn’t what I expected.”

“Told you she’d love you.” Steve grinned.

“Still think you’re all crazy.” TJ shrugged, trying to hide the fear behind a hint of humor.

Steve stopped in the middle of the kitchen, grabbing TJ’s arm so he was forced to stop and face him. “We may all be a bit crazy, but not for caring about you. You’ve got to stop worrying that somehow we’re all going to suddenly wake up and change our minds. We don’t … I don’t care about you because I have some unrealistic view of you as some perfect person with no flaws. You’ve made mistakes, you’ve got baggage, same as all of us, but TJ you’re more than those mistakes. You are one of the most caring people I’ve ever met. You accept all of us for who we are, you accept me for the person I am without all the trappings for Captain America. I just want you to accept that I feel the same way about you.”

“You right that speech down ahead of time?” TJ tried to lighten the mood, not ready to deal with a full on heart to heart right before sitting down with everyone for dinner.

“Nope,” Steve smiled, eyes softening as he searched TJ’s eyes for some sign that he understood and accepted what he’d said. “It’s just … I want … I don’t want you to feel so unsure of your place here, of your place with me and with this team.”

“I’m not,” TJ rushed to reassure him. “At least not all the time. I don’t know what my deal is.”

“Everything considered, TJ, I’m not surprised it’s hard for you to trust all this. You’ve got good reason not to trust people. I just hope we can prove ourselves worth your trust in the long run.”

“I’d say you’ve got a better chance than most, all things considered.” TJ gave him a more convincing smile. “Now, we better get the food in there before they send a search party.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Pepper made it safely. After yesterday I needed some fluff.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's taking longer than it had between chapters. Real life is being a royal PITA right now (nothing wrong just general craziness and lack of time). Hopefully it'll settle down before long! Of course, it's summer so just bear with me when there are delays.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why don’t I wrangle the dishes this evening,” Bruce rose from the table after everyone had finished dessert. “We can’t have the pair of you doing all the cooking and the cleanup.” The scientist gave Clint a pointed look.

“I’m coming,” the archer rose with a slight pout.

“Me too.” Natasha swatted at Clint as she followed. “Quit pouting.”

The others tried not to laugh as the trio grabbed the dessert plates and made for the kitchen.

Pepper cleared her throat, drawing the attention of the four remaining. “We don’t have to do this now,” she began, reaching for TJ’s hand when she saw him pale at her words. “Nothing bad. I promise.”

“Sorry.” He whispered, relaxing into Steve’s hand that was suddenly resting on the back of his neck.

“I was just going to say I brought a few things you might want to look over as it relates to the foundation. Nothing urgent, but I thought you might appreciate something to help keep you occupied.”

“That’d be great actually. I know I’ve got a lot to learn, and I don’t want to screw it up.” TJ perked up now that he knew the topic at hand. “I want to know everything you’re willing to teach me so I can do my part to make these programs a success.”

“Well, if anyone can help you with that, it’s Pepper.” Tony smiled at him. “Something tells me I’ll just get in the way of this conversation, so if it’s all the same to you I’m going to kidnap your grandmother for a while. We have a bit of business to discuss.” He gave a dramatic wink in her direction.

Margaret laughed, “It’s not kidnapping if I go willingly, and that sounds like one of the better propositions I’ve received.”

Tony rose from the table, coming around to offer Margaret his hand. “Don’t wait up for us.” He called over his shoulder as they disappeared through the door.

“Am I the only one that is actually a bit scared by that?” TJ looked from Steve to Pepper and back again.

“As long as they don’t leave the grounds, it should be reasonably safe. JARVIS won’t let them cause any irreversible damage.” Pepper assured him.
“Indeed, Ms. Potts. I will screen everything before allowing Sir to take any actions.” The British voice chimed in from TJ’s phone. “Judging by the files he is accessing, it appears they are discussing the actions of a certain reporter.”

“In that case,” Steve interjected, “short of blatantly illegal activities, let them have at it.”

TJ looked to the blond, surprised by his tone.

“What? You honestly thought I was going to be okay with what she did? Tearing someone down so brutally just to make a name for yourself is reprehensible.”

“You saw …” TJ’s voice was barely a squeak.

“I didn’t read the entire thing, but enough to know that any self-respecting human wouldn’t do that. Especially not this far after most of it happened.”

“He’s right, TJ.” Pepper nodded sharply. “I’ve had a few people doing some digging and this isn’t the first time she’s used questionable tactics to try to draw readers. Her future with any even remotely reputable media outlet is pretty well over.”

Seeing the fire in her eyes, TJ wasn’t about to argue. “I’m trusting you guys to handle it. I’m just … I’m not sure being involved with whatever happens is going to be good for me.”

“That’s why you have us,” Pepper assured. “You don’t need to be reminded of the bullshit or waste any time considering how to handle it. Stark legal is on it. Everything will be completely above board, but the bitch is going to be stopped.”

“Thank you.” TJ sighed. Even when his family had managed to hush things up it had always been done out of an obligation to protect the Hammond name, not a desire to protect him, and usually at some significant emotional cost to him. “Now, why don’t we get back to the foundation stuff. That sounds like far more fun than this.”

“Of course,” Pepper gave his hand a quick squeeze. “I just need to grab my bag …”

“You sit,” Steve was already rising from his chair. “I’ll grab us some waters and bring it back with me.”

Pepper and TJ watched as he strode through the door before turning back to face each other.

“You’ve been good for him.” TJ couldn’t help the shocked expression that froze on his face at her words. “I don’t know how much he told you, but adjusting has been hard on him. I hate to say it, but we didn’t do enough to help him. We should have … should have realized how isolated he was, but that man can put on a fake smile and act like everything is just fine and dandy with the best of him. We still should have seen through it, should have paid more attention to know.”

“You know he doesn’t think that. He’s told me a lot about his life after the ice. Opened up a lot about how he felt … the isolation. We’re a lot a like in that respect. Hell, the first evening we met I asked him why he even cared and he told me that when he looked at me he saw himself. I’m still not sure I’m good enough …”

“Stop that.” Pepper scolded gently. “Stop believing all the bad things other people keep telling you about yourself. Stop thinking everyone in this house is going to change their mind and turn their back on you. We aren’t. Not one of us is perfect. A good number of us have some pretty serious demons in our past, but while the rest of us will never discount the pain of those experiences, we also will never hold the past against them. The same goes for you.”
TJ could feel the single tear slip from his eye, but he couldn’t make himself break the eye contact that Pepper held. Her eyes held the same sincerity, the same determination that he saw with Steve and the others. He couldn’t understand. “How …”

“How did I know that’s what you’re thinking? I can see it in the way you paled when I said we had something to take care of, the way you cringe just a little bit every time something unpleasant is mentioned. And I’ve seen it in Tony and all the others. Believe me, I don’t think a couple of pep talks are going to suddenly free you of the fear, it certainly hasn’t with anyone else. But I’m going to keep saying it anyway and one day you’re going to believe it.”

TJ gave her a small, watery smile. “You know, I’m beginning to think you guys have a playbook for this shit.”

Pepper’s head cocked to the side, the silent question written across her face.

“It’s just that I’ve gotten some form of this pep talk from a few people now. So either there’s a playbook or you guys really believe it.”

Pepper leaned forward, wrapping both her hands around TJ’s where they fidgeted in his lap. “We really believe it, TJ. And sometimes I’m pretty sure that belief in each other is the only thing that allows them to get up and keep doing what they do every day. With Tony more than any of them I’ve seen what this team … this family means. I may be his girlfriend, but his demons are more than I can fight on my own. Caring for the team, making sure they have everything they need or want, making them into the family he’s lived so long without, that fills a hole that I can’t.”

Steve reappeared in the door, Pepper’s bag slung over his shoulder, three bottles of water in his large hands. “Everything okay? Should I give you two a few more minutes?” TJ could see the concern in his eyes, could almost tell Steve was physically forcing himself not to surge forward and wrap them in his arms. Knowing the calm that came with that embrace, TJ freed one hand from Pepper’s hold and beckoned the super hero forward.

Seconds later he registered a dull thud of the bag and waters dropping to the ground as Steve knelt between the chairs, pulling both he and Pepper into his arms. They both went willing, snaking arms around his waist even as they held tight to each other.

After a long, silent moment of simply holding on, TJ murmured against Steve’s neck, “I’m beginning to think there is nothing in this world that can’t be solved by one of your hugs.” He felt Steve’s shoulders shake in silent laughter.

“I’m not so sure about that,” the blond leaned back, loosening his grip to allow TJ and Pepper to sit straight again. “But you know I’m always willing to try.”

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this wasn't complete shit. I'm always afraid when writing amidst chaos that it's going to turn out as complete rubbish :(
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Yeah you read this right, two updates in two days. Don't get too excited. Not sure I'll be able to keep this up for long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hours after dinner had ended, TJ and Steve stood up front the table, stretching long limbs as they yawned.

“I’m sorry,” Pepper started. “I really didn’t mean to take up the entire evening. You both look exhausted.”

TJ waved off the apology and her accompanying frown. “Pretty sure you would have been done in under an hour if I’d stopped asking so many questions. I should really be apologizing to you. I’m sure you wanted to actually see Tony this evening.”

“Nope. I see him enough. I came down today so I could see you.” Pepper pulled him into a hug. “But now I think I will go find him and make sure he hasn’t gotten your grandmother into too much trouble. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

“Thanks, Pepper.” Steve called as she headed for the door. “You’ve been a tremendous help.”

“That’s my job.” She winked before resuming her exit.

Steve collected the empty water bottles from the table as TJ gathered the documents and computer that Pepper left with him. The brunet was both exhausted and full of excitement based on the plans they’d ironed out over the preceding hours. They’d developed a basic outline of what they hoped the two new arms of Stark Foundation would do, and Pepper was already looping in the appropriate people to start the leg work.

Tony had mentioned before that there was a room on the main floor that TJ could turn into his office until he reached the point of needing more public facilities. Even then it would be nice to have somewhere to work when needed, and he imagined it would be plenty big enough for he and Steve to both have work space.

As TJ followed Steve toward the kitchen to dispose of the bottles before turning in for the night. “What time is Ellen supposed to arrive tomorrow? I thought I might try to get JARVIS to help me with what I need for the office before she comes. I know I won’t necessarily be doing much yet, but that way everything doesn’t have to be rushed.”

“Ms. Degeneres should arrive at approximately 2:30pm, TJ.” JARVIS’s voice erupted from his phone atop the pile he was carrying. “As for the other, I will be more than happy to assist with the office whenever is most convenient for you. I’ll even walk you through how to use your phone to let me scan the room so I can show you what things will actually look like.”

TJ grinned up at Steve as the blond tried not to chuckle at the fact that question had been directed at him, not the AI. Of course, given that JARVIS’s answer was far more accurate he didn’t mind.
“Thanks, J. That sounds awesome. We can tackle that after breakfast.”

“As you wish, TJ. Let me know if I can do anything else; otherwise, sleep well.”

“Will do.” He watched as his phone screen went dark again. At least it lit up when JARVIS was fully active. “I really can’t wait until Tony gets him fully integrated around here. Having my phone randomly start talking to me is kinda weird.”

The pair laughed as they headed toward their wing of the house. It was strange to think they’d only been there for such a short period, but it was already starting to feel like home.

Reaching Steve’s door, the both men paused. TJ clutched his pile of stuff to his chest, staring at his feet unsure what to do. They’d talked about sharing a room to sleep to help them both sleep better, but it felt so presumptuous to just say he’d be back as soon as he got ready for bed.

“TJ,” Steve’s voice was hushed. “It’s okay if you want to sleep alone tonight. I … I’m … I can handle the nightmares. ‘M used to them anyway.”

The brunet’s head snapped up, blue-grey eyes staring into the piercing blue that hovered just above him.

“No.” He shook his head vehemently. “I don’t want to sleep alone. Just wasn’t sure how … didn’t want to presume …”

“We’re such a mess sometimes.” Steve wrapped one arm around his shoulders, pulling him into an awkward embrace given the papers and computer between them. “I don’t ever want you to feel forced to share a bed, even for something as innocent as sleeping, but don’t ever think you aren’t welcome … aren’t wanted. Wasn’t kidding when I said I sleep better with you there. It’s just … it’s nice to have that connection, to know I’m not alone.”

TJ let his head rest on Steve’s shoulder as he spoke. “Well, in that case, let me go put this stuff away and get changed.”

“Just come on in when you’re ready. No need to knock.” Steve gave the back of TJ’s neck a gentle squeeze before releasing him. He watched as TJ made his way to the neighboring room, not opening his own until TJ’s door was shut.

“Ya know, he’s not likely to get abducted in the short distance between your rooms.” Natasha teased as she came up behind him. “Tony said Margaret already turned in for the night. Sounds like she approves of the actions Stark legal is taking with the reporter. I think they spent most of the evening with her telling stories about Howard and Maria.”

“Is Tony okay?” Steve knew his parents could be an upsetting topic.

“Yeah. I think he enjoyed hearing them. Plus he’s got Pepper tonight. She knows how to handle things him.” Natasha stood there, obviously debating her next move.

As if he read her mind, Steve opened his arms to her, enveloping her in a bear hug as soon as she closed the distance between them.

“TJ’s right.” Natasha’s words were muffled against his chest as her arms wrapped around his waist. “You give the best hugs.”

Squeezing her just a bit tighter, Steve kissed the top of her head. If you’d asked him when they first met, he’d have told you the idea of feeling like a protective older brother to the red head was absurd.
Of course, he knew that she could probably kill him in any number of ways, but she seemed to content to let him fill that role anyway.

When her arms finally fell back to her sides, Steve released his hold. “Night, Tasha.”

“Night, Steve. I’ll see you in the morning.” He watched as she crossed the hall to her room. “You know I’m not likely to get abducted either … but I do appreciate the sentiment.”

“See ya in the morning.” Steve ducked into his room before he got distracted again and managed not to get changed before TJ returned. Grabbing his sleep pants, he ducked in the bathroom deciding it was better to be careful and not put TJ in the awkward position of walking in on him naked.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Leaning back against the door as it closed, TJ closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This day had gone nothing like he’d expected it to. Not that he’d really known what to expect when he woke up with Steve still wrapped around him like a human octopus.

That thought prompted him to start moving again. Setting the things from Pepper on top of his dresser, he kicked off his shoes. Within minutes he was changed into pajama pants and a white t-shirt and had his teeth brushed. Glancing at himself in the mirror, he shook his head at the goofy grin he wore.

He felt more than a little ridiculous at the excitement coursing through him over sleeping with Steve. Aside from Doug he’d never shared a bed with another person just for the sake of actually sleeping better. The idea of routinely sharing something so simple without feeling like he was obligated to put out or otherwise pay for the comfort he received was quite refreshing.

Shaking off that train of thought, he hurried toward the door anxious to get his bare feet off the cool floor.

This time he didn’t hesitate when he reached Steve’s bedroom. He turned the knob and slipped through, freezing only have the door closed behind him.

Steve was leaned over the large bed to straighten the blankets, but the position gave TJ an excellent view of his back and the often fussed over backside.

“You coming to bed or just planning on staring at my ass all night?” Steve’s voice was full of laughter.

“The latter is tempting, but I’d imagine the view will fade once you’re under the covers.” TJ laughed, moving to the other side of the bed to help fold the blankets done.

“Very true.” Steve smirked at him, eyes full of laughter. A few seconds later they were climbing into the bed, both scooting toward the middle so Steve could curl himself around TJ. “You know, it’s kinda nice to do this without the preceding nightmare or emotional breakdown.”

“Yeah, it is.” TJ agreed with a smile as he tried to fight off a yawn.

Steve stretched an arm out to turn off the bedside lamps before settling it back around TJ’s waist. “Tell me if you get too hot. I know I run a bit warmer than is average thanks to the serum.”

“S’okay. I was always the weird one that slept under layers of blankets because I liked to stay warm when I’m sleeping.” TJ shifted just a bit so his back and legs were pressed fully against Steve’s chest and thighs. “Night, Steve.”
“Night, TJ. Sweet dreams.”

Within minutes the two were sound asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about the rest of you, but I wouldn't mind getting in on those snuggles. And seriously, Natasha and Steve are just killin' me here. They're so freakin' sweet!!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Warning: Fluff levels may rise a notch or three in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bundled up in his warmest clothes, TJ yawned as he made his way into the kitchen.

“Making a jail break?” TJ startled at Bruce’s voice, immediately freezing in place.

“Um … I … I just …”

“TJ, I’m just kidding. You’re not captive. Pretty sure you’re free to come and go as you please.” Bruce handed him a cup of coffee with an apologetic smile.

“I just felt like a walk … getting out of the house.” He took a long drink of the coffee.

“Want some company? I still need to check out the greenhouse.” Bruce watched TJ closely, not wanting to force his company on him.

“That’d be great. I’d drag Steve with me but he was getting a shower.” TJ tried not to blush at Bruce’s playful smirk.

“Well, I’m happy to fill in. Let me just grab my coat.”

Taking another drink of coffee, TJ nodded and watched as Bruce hustled off to retrieve his things. He really hadn’t had a chance to spend time with just Bruce in the last couple of days, so this seemed like a great opportunity to get to know him a bit better.

A few minutes later the pair were headed out the door, having given JARVIS the heads up on their intentions in case anyone was looking for one of them.

“So how are you feeling this morning?” Bruce inquired after they’d strolled along the snow covered drive for a few minutes. “I know we can be a pretty overwhelming group even under the best of circumstances.”

TJ thought about it for a second, despite his instinct to immediately deny any discomfort caused by others. “Honestly, it’s a lot to take in, but not in a bad way. Just not used to having this many people around and none of them trying to tell me all the ways I either just fucked up or am about to fuck up.” TJ gave a small laugh, shrugging at his own comment.

“Well, you’ll get no judgment from me. After all, I managed to turn myself in a big green rage monster that helped destroy part of New York City.” Bruce grimaced a bit at the confession. “And yes I know the whole spiel about how I saved more lives than I took and the like, doesn’t change the fact that I’ve done things that I regret.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you were there to help save us. Pretty sure those aliens weren’t planning on stopping with New York.” TJ grinned.
The pair walked in silence for another few moments, not really feeling up to saying more, but content to enjoy the peace.

“Do you hear that?” TJ froze mid-stride, prompting Bruce to start scanning for a potential threat. “It sounds like a kitten.” The younger man took off much faster than before in the direction of the tree-lined fence that provided a border between the estate and the road.

Bruce followed, the irrational and slightly paranoid part of him afraid that whatever TJ thought he heard was going to end up being a threat. The rest of his brain reminded him that not every strange noise was something trying to destroy the human race, or even just a small corner of it.

Chasing after TJ, Bruce noticed the sound he’d asked about. It did sound like a kitten. No. More like kittens.

TJ pushed through the tree branches, falling to his knees right against the wooden fence. As Bruce approached he saw a tattered, snow soaked cardboard box. TJ pulled it toward him beneath the bottom rung of fence, thankful it wasn’t one of those ridiculous security fences like most places he’d lived in recent years.

“Who the fuck leaves a box of kittens on the side of the road in the middle of a fucking DC winter?” TJ sounded both furious and heartbroken.

“Someone that doesn’t deserve the love of a pet.” Bruce’s eyes narrowed as he stared at TJ and the box, imagining what kind of person would do this.

Folding back the flaps, TJ looked down inside the box. “Shit, their adorable. Can’t be more than a couple months old.” He reached one hand inside, scooping up one mewling ball of fur. “The bottom of the box is about to give from the snow. Can you take one and I’ll try to handle the other two?”

Bruce reached out for the kitten without hesitation, reaching out with his free hand to help TJ to his feet once he had the other two secured against his chest.

“Looks like we’re cutting our walk short. Hope you don’t mind missing out on the greenhouse.” TJ commented as they made their way back through the trees.

“It’ll be here another day. I’d say these three are a higher priority at the moment.” Bruce quickly brushed off the concern.

“Hey JARVIS,” TJ spoke hoping the AI would register his voice from where the phone rested in the breast pocket of his coat.

“Yes, TJ. What can I do for you?” He and Bruce both smiled at the immediate response.

“Um, Bruce and I just found three abandoned kittens. We need … um … kitten stuff? Shit, I don’t even know what to feed them.”

“No need to worry, TJ.” JARVIS responded as calm as ever. “Can you show me one of them so I can help assess their age and procure the correct dietary requirements?”

TJ looked to Bruce since his hands were full.

“Got it.” The scientist raised the flap on TJ’s coat pocket, pulling out the phone and pointing the camera toward TJ and his two passengers.

“Thank you.” JARVIS responded almost immediately. “Based on their size and appearance I would
guess they are between 6 and 8 weeks old.”

“You were close.” Bruce nudged TJ with his elbow as they walked.

“I’m putting in orders for all the necessary kitten related items. They should be delivered via courier within the hour. In the meantime, I suggest simply keeping them warm once you reach the house.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

The walk back to the house took less time than the outward journey, both men picking up their pace to help get the kittens into the warmth of the house as quickly as possible. Within a few moments they were bursting through the door, seconds later Steve and Tony rushed from the kitchen.

“What’s wrong?” Steve rushed to TJ’s side as Tony stopped in front of Bruce. “Are those …”

“They’re Scottish folds.” TJ answered before Steve could finish the sentence.

“They’re what? I thought … they look like kittens not …”

“They are kittens. A Scottish fold is a breed of cat.” TJ laughed, handing the darker of them over to Steve. “You can help warm him up.”

The blond tucked the shivering ball of fur against his chest without question.

“And we have Scottish folds, why?” Tony finally asked. “Not that I’m complaining. Despite rumors to the contrary, I actually like animals, especially cats.”

“Found ‘em in a box on the side of the road. Somebody dumped them.” TJ held his remaining kitten close, stroking it’s still damp fur with long fingers.

Tony and Steve’s eyes both narrowed at TJ’s explanation.

“Who fucking does that?” Tony was the first to speak.

“My thoughts exactly.” TJ readily agreed. “JARVIS has stuff on the way for them.” He frowned slightly. “I should have checked …”

“Nope.” Tony cut him off. “This is a pet friendly establishment. Particularly when said pets have been ruthlessly abandoned and left to freeze on the side of the road.

“Did I hear a meow?” Natasha almost flew down the stairs to where they stood, reaching for the small white kitten that Bruce still held. “We have kittens?”

She immediately snuggled the kitten against her neck, leaning her cheek down to brush against the small furry head.

“We do now.” Steve grinned at her.

“Can I name it?” She looked around to the others.

“Don’t see why not.” TJ smiled at her, marveling at her enthusiasm for the kitten despite the circumstances.

“Clint.” She looked down at the small white kitten, kissing the top of it’s head with a mischievous smirk.
The four men standing with her failed to keep straight faces at her announcement.

“I bet Legolas will just love that.” Tony choked out despite his laughing fit.

“What are you two going to name the others?” Natasha asked TJ and Steve as they continued to snuggle their respective kittens.

“Easy.” TJ’s smiled widened as he reached out to pet the kitten that had climbed up and was settled just inside the collar of Steve’s shirt at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. “This is Bucky.” TJ caught the flash of emotion in the blond’s eyes. “And this one,” he returned to petting his own kitten, “is Peggy.”

Chapter End Notes

So I will say the kitten concept has been in the works for this story for a while. I'm holding Sebastian Stan and his Scottish Fold comments for this.

I added pictures I found for each of the three kittens when I posted on Tumblr, so I'll add them here as well.

Clint:
Peggy:
Bucky:
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stepping inside the foyer with their latest arrival, Tony grinned as he waved his hand toward the assembled group. “This is the gang, including a recent addition or two.” He pointed toward TJ and Margaret where they stood together. "Pretty sure introductions aren’t really required.”

“Yeah, I think I can figure out who’s who.” Ellen grinned, eyes sweeping the room, finally landing on Steve. “That’s an interesting growth you have on your shoulder there, Captain.”

Everyone laughed, though Steve tried to keep his shoulders from shaking, afraid he’d startle Bucky from his nap.

“Little rascal seems to have taken a liking to that particular perch.” Tony shook his head before pointing out the two other kittens tucked safely in Natasha and TJ’s arms. “Newly acquired mascots. Some jackass dumped them in a box along the road out front. Fortunately for the little fur balls, Bruce and TJ decided to go for a walk and found them before too much damage was done.”

“Well, those may be three of the luckiest kittens on the planet.” Ellen smiled, eyes lighting up with how adorable the three were with their kittens.

“Why don’t I show you where your room is,” Pepper stepped forward, embracing Ellen in a quick hug. “Then we can handle the getting to know you portion of the evening. I’m sure you’re tired from the long trip, and I know you have to leave at the crack of dawn tomorrow to get back in time for filming. Your producers weren’t too upset about today were they?”

“Don’t fuss, Pepper.” Ellen followed the taller woman toward the stairs, relenting when Tony followed and grabbed the bag she’d refused to hand over when getting out of the car. “And they were great about today. Had a friend that stepped in to play relief host for me, and the guests didn’t fuss at all.”

“That’s good. I’d hate for them to think we’re problematic before we even get there.” Tony chimed in as they reached the top of the stairs.

"Tony, you're always problematic." Ellen teased. "We'd worry if you weren't."

Pepper laughed as Tony tried to look offended. Even the billionaire couldn't deny the truth to the statement.

Twenty minutes later, Ellen followed the instructions they'd given her to find the living room. Despite the short time they'd been in the house all the key rooms were filled out with furniture and a good bit of decor.

As she got closer, she could here laughter coming from the direction she was headed, and hurried her steps to see what had them all so amused. Rounding the corner, she found Natasha sitting in the middle of the floor, arm stretched up as she dangled a cat toy for one of the kittens. Every time the
toy jerked, the kitten pounced after it.

"So just how recently of an acquisition are these little cuties?" Ellen asked, folding herself onto the floor near the pair.

"This morning." TJ was the first to answer.

"Wow! Didn't take them long to settle in." Ellen reached her hand out, letting the small white kitten sniff it. "Are they Scottish Folds?"

"Yes, ma'am." TJ nodded, grinning wide at her recognition.

"Oh please, don't start that ma'am crap with me." Ellen rolled her eyes at him, but TJ just stared back unsure of what to say. "Ellen. Just Ellen. No ma'am. No Mrs. No Ms. No anything remotely stuffy and formal. Life's to short for bullshit like that unless situations strictly require it."

Everyone laughed, TJ included.

"Same goes for you there, Captain. Pepper already warned me about you."

Steve blushed at the scrutiny, half wishing he could hide behind the small kitten that he'd finally coaxed onto his chest instead of his shoulder. "You guys make it sound back that I try to respect you." Steve's eyes snapped closed, head falling forward when he realized he sounded like an ass. "I'm sor ...

"Nope." Ellen cut him off, pulling herself off the floor so she could join him on the couch. "We appreciate the respect, but we trust you to continue to treat us with respect without the need for formal address. Respect is more than just titles."

"I know. It's just …" Steve wasn't sure how to explain any of it, especially knowing he wouldn't win the argument. "Nevermind, I know when I'm beat. But if I'm not allowed to call you ma'am, you're not allowed to call me Captain." He met her eyes finally, "Please, just call me Steve."

"Fair enough." Ellen accepted the hand he offered, shaking it firmly. "Now, does the little one here have a name?"

"Bucky," Steve spoke quietly as he looked down at the kitten, one hand still holding it tight to his chest.

Ellen's smile softened, the significance of the name not escaping her. "Fitting name given his evident attachment to you." She turned her head to where the other two kittens continued playing on the floor with TJ and Natasha. "What about those two?" She asked just as the grey and white kitten tackled the white one in an attempt to catch the toy.

Natasha smirked, "That's Peggy that just plowed over Clint."

"Still can't believe you named that ball of fur after me." Barton grumbled from his perch on the arm of the couch. "Seriously, Nat. Hawkeye. Not Cat-eye. How is that even appropriate?"

"Come on, Clint. He's adorable." Pepper cooed at the kitten as she knelt down next to Natasha.

"What are you saying? I'm not adorable. I'm a spy for fuck's sake. Adorable is not part of the description. Stealthy. Deadly. Accurate. Fast. Skilled. Those are all accurate descriptors. Adorable is not."
Clint continued to glare at the others as they went back to playing with the kittens.

"Thank you for coming all the way across the country to meet." Steve decided to move the conversation in a more productive direction. "Especially on such short notice."

"It really wasn't a problem. I don't think I've ever flown so comfortably in my life thanks to Tony, and I'm sure he told you I've been pesterling him to get part of the team on the show for what feels like forever."

"Well, I still appreciate it since I know this probably isn't want you imagined when you invited part of the Avengers to the show." Steve's brow furrowed, shoulders tensing as he realized he wasn't sure how to bring up the heart of the reason why Tony asked her to have them.

"Steve," Ellen grabbed the hand that rested on his lap. "It's all fine. We'll figure out what angle we want to take for things while I'm here today, so we can try to avoid any surprises when we're on air. I know you've probably got a million thoughts and emotions running through you about the idea of coming out on national television, but I'm going to make what I'm pretty sure is a safe assumption and say that everyone here has your back. I'm also willing to bet that the vast majority of your fans and supporters will also have your back. Yes, there will be haters. There always are, but you aren't dealing with them alone."

"Not even close, Steve." Pepper interjected. "As soon as we've settled on how we want this to go, I'm going to bring in a couple of my most experienced PR people. With their help, we'll be able to corral the response to some degree. No matter what though, remember why you're doing this." Pepper smiled as she saw Steve's eyes immediately focus on where TJ sat, quietly stroking Peggy's fur as he observed the discussion.

"I will." Steve's voice was absolute determination. "I don't want to live a lie. And based on all the stuff I've been reading on the internet, I can't help but feel like maybe me doing this can help others." Steve took a deep breath, sighing as he shook his head. "Or maybe I'm just being ridiculous and nobody actually cares what Steve Rogers is doing when he's not dressed up as Captain America and saving the world."

"Trust me," Ellen responded immediately, not wanting Steve to get stuck in his head. "People care. Sometimes in odd ways, but they do care. And I do think having someone like you taking such a bold step will help. People want to feel like they aren't alone, no matter what it is that they feel like makes them different. Knowing that Captain America has something like this in common with you is a pretty big step toward feeling less like a freak."

"She's right." TJ scooped Peggy up, coming over to sit closer to Steve's knee. Setting Peggy on Steve's lap, he watched as she climbed up next to her brother, curling up beside him with a yawn. "I wish I'd had that kind of knowledge when I got outed. I know you're nervous about this, but you have no idea how much I admire the courage it takes to do it and appreciate how much it's going to mean for kids that are in the same position I was all those years ago."

Ellen reached down with her free hand, squeezing TJ's forearm. "You know I wish I'd been in a position to do something about the way you were treated back then. I know it pretty much made your life a living nightmare."

"Thanks. Can't say I wouldn't have appreciated the support, but it's all in the past now." TJ's eyes shifted from Ellen to Steve. "These days I'm starting to think that living through all the bullshit was just getting me where I needed to be to appreciate the things to come."

Ellen grinned, eyes flickering to Natasha and Pepper as she realized neither Steve nor TJ were
paying attention to her in that second, too caught up staring at each other. Both women grinned back.

"I assume this," she bobbed her head toward the men, "is supposed to remain silent for the time being."

"You assume correctly," Tony nodded. "That particular development will be kept quiet and restricted to close friends and family until such time as they decide to go public. I will personally hunt down the first seedy photographer or reporter that causes them problems."

"Well it won't be me." Ellen assured them. "I'm a huge believer in keeping the media out of relationships, especially in the early days. There's plenty of time for public scrutiny later. Now, why don't we knock out the plan for your appearance so we can get back to playing with kittens."

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are much appreciated! Or pop over and say hi on Tumblr. Questions, comments, ideas, and requests are always welcome!
“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I think we’ve got the makings for one helluva show.” Ellen beamed at Steve, Tony, and the others.

“I’d say you might be right.” Tony nodded sharply. “I’d also say it seems like a good night to order in for dinner.” The billionaire tried not to laugh when TJ’s head popped up from Steve’s knee, a wounded expression across his face. “Humor me? It’s already after 6 and everybody, you included, looks far to comfortable to want to actually have to cook.”

TJ pursed his lips, making it look like he was giving the matter serious thought even though he knew Tony was right. “I’ll concede, but I’m cooking breakfast.”

“We’re cooking breakfast.” Steve’s hand covered TJ’s where it rested atop Peggy’s small, sleeping body. “Something tells me these little monsters will have us up plenty early.”

“They can always sleep with me.” Natasha offered. “I’d guess they’ll all want to sleep together for now.” Clint had curled up on her lap to sleep, but she guess for a full night he’d be more comfortable with the other two kittens.

“You’re kidding, right?” The other, much mouthier, Clint glared at the sleeping kitten.

“I’d guess she’s not,” Steve snickered, “but they can all sleep in my room. I don’t mind.” Steve glanced down at TJ, silently questioning if the other man had an issue with the proposed arrangements.

“Works for me.” He grinned.

“Don’t expect objections from that one.” Margaret teased. “He always wanted kittens, but we never could convince his parents.”

“Now that we’ve agreed on sleeping arrangements for the mascots,” Tony waved his phone around. “Why don’t we agree on what we’d like to eat so J can order.”

Tony shook his head and groaned when it was just a chorus of “Whatever” and “I don’t know” around the room.

“J, help me out here.”

“Of course sir. There is a Chinese restaurant nearby that gets excellent reviews. They appear to have everything we ordered for the team last time. If Ellen, Ms. Barrish, and TJ can confirm that would be okay and what their preferences are, I’ll be happy to placed the order.”

Ellen stared at the phone, then looked around the room to the others. “I see I’m the only one not used to this.”
Margaret laughed. “I would say I’m used to it yet, but I’ve had a bit of a head start on you at least.”

Without any further distractions, the three let JARVIS know their dining preferences and he promised to have the food delivered promptly.

“As the others settled into random conversations with each other, TJ looked up at Steve. “Hey,” he whispered just loud enough for the blond to hear. “You okay?”

Steve nodded, but bit his lip in a way that made TJ decide he wasn’t really.

“Hey guys, we’re going to go up and get the kitten stuff arranged for the night so we don’t have to worry about it later.” He knew there were a pile of supplies waiting at the foot of the stairs.

“Here,” Ellen reached for Bucky and Peggy. “I’ll keep an eye on them while you get their stuff settled.”

“Thanks, Ellen.” TJ smiled warmly before pushing himself off the floor and grabbing Steve’s hand to tug him along. “Holler when the food arrives.”

“I’ll let you know when the driver pulls up.” JARVIS answered before the others could. TJ was actually glad that with a bit of help Tony had managed to get a few exterior cameras linked to JARVIS’s system before Ellen’s arrival, even with the chaos of kittens.

Steve and TJ each grabbed an armful of bags and boxes, silently heading up the stairs. Neither spoke until they’d deposited their loads atop the bed.

“Steve,” TJ turned to him, stepping so he was mere inches from the blond. “What’s wrong? Is there something about the plan for the show you aren’t comfortable with? Are you … have you decided you’d rather not go through with it?” TJ’s brow was furrowed, eyes tense with concern about why Steve had seemed to withdraw.

“No. No. No second thoughts about that. It’s just … it’s stupid.” Steve shook his head, but didn’t try to turn away.

“It’s bothering you, so obviously it isn’t stupid.”

Steve groaned, “But it really is. There is no reason for me to be bummed about learning to dance on Ellen’s show. After all, it sounds like she’s famous for loving to dance.”

“But?” TJ pressed a bit given that Steve seemed to be edging around the topic.

“It’s nothing. You probably don’t even remem …”

And just like that TJ understood. “That I offered to teach you?” He reached out, taking Steve’s hand in his own. “You think I’m likely to forget that offer?” TJ brought his other hand up, brushing a stray lock of hair out of Steve’s face. “If you’re afraid I’m going to be upset that Ellen gets to do it instead, please don’t be. It’s fucking Ellen Degeneres. It would be impossible to hold something like that against her.”

Steve sighed, warm breath brushing over TJ’s face. “That’s not … I told you it’s stupid.”

TJ brought his hand back up, wrapping long fingers around Steve’s neck while brushing his thumb against a very tense jawline. He watched as Steve’s eyes closed, felt the sharp intake of breath.

“Look at me,” TJ encouraged, words soft but insistent. When blue eyes finally met his, he offered a
small smile before continuing. “Whatever it is, you can tell me. It’s just us in here and it doesn’t have
to go any further than that if you don’t want it to.”

Steve gave the slightest nod, pressing into TJ’s fingers. “I wanted it to be you. I know it’s just the
first time, but I’ve had that stuck in my head since that night.”

TJ let his head fall forward onto Steve’s shoulder, unable to stop the shiver that raced up his spine
with the way Steve said those words.

“JARVIS?” The brunet’s voice was a bit choked, but clear enough.

“Yes, TJ?”

“How long until dinner arrives?”

“Delivery is estimated in 45 minutes.” JARVIS quickly confirmed.

“Thanks, J. Can you play an easy waltz?” TJ picked his head up, eying Steve as he spoke.

“Of course. Shall I put it on a loop?”

TJ grinned at the sparkle in Steve’s eyes. “Yes, please.”

Music began playing softly from the phone. TJ pulled it out of his pocket, tossing it gently onto the
bed before reaching back to take Steve’s hands.

“This may not be exactly what we had planned, but there’s no time like the present.” He tugged at
Steve’s hands, pulling him more toward the middle of the room. “You trust me?”

“With everything.” Steve’s eyes bored into TJ’s, full of something TJ wasn’t sure he was ready to
identify.

“We’ll start with the simple box step.” He arranged them into the proper hold “I’m going to step
forward with my left foot and you’re going to go back.” TJ started moving, guiding Steve as he
moved. “That’s right. Just follow my lead.”

“I’m afraid I’m gonna step on your toes.” Steve felt his face turning red, but he forced himself to
keep his eyes locked on TJ’s.

“Relax.” TJ chuckled. “You’re a natural.” He wasn’t even exaggerating. Steve fell into rhythm with
him, following his lead without hesitation. TJ kept them in the basic box for a full song before
leading Steve into a turn.

By the time the song ended a third time, they’d made their way around the room several times. Both
men were grinning, relaxed enough that they were able to laugh at the occasional misstep.

“We should probably actually get the kitten stuff settled since that’s what you told everybody we
were going to do.” TJ brought them to a stop.

“Thank you.” Steve didn’t let go of his hand, letting his other hand slip from TJ’s shoulder to his hip.
“I guess I’ve just lost control of so many things in my life that I didn’t want to lose this too.”

TJ pivoted his hand, interlocking their fingers. “You’re welcome. Pretty sure Ellen isn’t going to
teach you a waltz, so she can still teach you something new.” He winked playfully.

“You might be right.” Steve shook his head. “Something tells me I’m going to have a harder time
with whatever she cooks up.”

“Maybe, but you’ve got plenty of natural rhythm, so you’ll do fine. And Tony’ll be there to draw attention if it’s too much.”

Steve squeezed TJ’s hand, following him back to the pile of kitten gear on the bed. “I know. And I get why we decided to do that part. It’s just a stretch from what I’m used to.”

“You know you can change your mind. You don’t have to do this. Plenty of people stay closeted from all but a few people.” TJ’s heart clenched. Staying hidden wasn’t his first choice, but he’d do it in a heart beat if it didn’t put so much pressure on Steve.

“TJ,” Steve dropped the cat bed he’d just pulled out of a bag. “I may be a little nervous … more than little nervous about the show, but I’m not backing out. I don’t want to live a lie. It’s not fair to myself. It’s not fair to the people I might be able to help. It’s definitely not fair to you.”

“But this isn’t about me.” TJ deflected.

“Not entirely, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to think about the impact this has on you.” Steve closed the distance between them. “TJ, I will not be another guy that tries to hide you in the shadows. If there were no other elements in this equation, that would still be enough to make me do it. You deserve the world. I may not be able to give you that, but when we take that fucking step I’m going to be able to take you out on dates, hold your hand as we walk down the street, do all the things couples are supposed to be able to do.”

TJ stared at him, at a complete loss for what to say. He opened his mouth, but quickly shut it again when the words failed to materialize.

“Was that too much?” Steve paled. “Shit. I know we haven’t really talked that much …”

“Not too much. It was perfect.” TJ swiped at the errant tear that threatened to spill from his eye. “No. We haven’t talked specifics yet, but we will. Just get through the trip first.”

“I can do that.” Steve nodded.

“Now where are we putting the kittens?”

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is always much appreciated.

For the Steve/TJ lovers out there, if you haven't already, pop over and check out Quake by BuckyBuchananBarnes.
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Guess what! I’m not dead. Trying to recover from the last 6 weeks of chaos, but not dead. Alas I have produced another chapter. Updates will take longer for a while thanks to work and my son’s football, so please hang in there. I’ll update as fast as I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“TJ,” Margaret reached for his elbow as he started to pass her. “Can I talk to you for a minute before bed?”

Hearing the question, Steve turned back to look at the pair. TJ’s eyes were fixed on him, a look of uncertainty there that made the blond take a step toward him before he could even consider it.

“Nothing bad, sweetheart.” Margaret assured, thumb rubbing his arm. “But I’m going to have to make an appearance with your mother for a few days or she’s going to send the troops after me, and we don’t want that.”

“Why don’t I take Peggy,” Steve reached for the kitten in TJ’s hand, “and you two can visit for a while. You haven’t had much chance with everything going on. You know where I’ll be.”

TJ nodded, reaching up to scratch behind Peggy’s ear as she settled against her brother nestled in the crook of Steve’s arm.

Natasha appeared beside him, Clint curled against her chest. “Want to sneak in some more training tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” TJ smiled. “That’d be fun … at least as fun as getting my ass kicked can be.” He stifled a laugh at her small bounce of excitement.

“Yay.” She stretched up on her toes to brush a kiss across his cheek before grabbing Steve’s free hand. “Come on, Cap. Let’s get the kids to bed.”

Margaret and TJ both chuckled as Steve shook his head, but obediently followed as directed.

“You have to admire a woman that can command such cooperation from the likes of this group.” Margaret spoke thoughtfully as she settled back into the sofa.

“She’s pretty amazing. When Steve was first telling me stories, I just assumed it was because she’s that dangerous, but the reality is they all love her … we all love her. She’s like Steve’s little sister, Bruce and Tony’s too. More like a big sister to me though. I think she might even be starting to realize how highly we all regard her, and that it’s for more than her professional abilities.”

TJ watched his grandmother as he curled into the corner of the couch, trying to figure out what the look she was giving him meant.

“I hope you realize the same. It’s pretty easy to see the people in this house don’t just want you around because of your political connections.” She snickered. “I’m actually pretty sure they’d prefer the political connections would stay the hell away.”
“Possibly.” TJ agreed, still not sure what she was getting at.

“Point is, sweetheart, they all care about you because of who you are. Flaws and all. And it’s about time someone bothered to appreciate that properly.” She reached across the space between them, drawing his hand into hers. “I’m sorry I haven’t always done a good job of making sure you knew how much I cared and how much I loved you even when things weren’t going well. You deserved better than that.”

TJ hated the tears he saw pooling in her eyes.

“It’s not like I made it easy, and you did try.”

“But not hard enough, honey. Especially not with the way your parents acted. You deserved more from us.”

Unfolding his legs, TJ scooted closer to her, letting his head rest on her shoulder. “If there’s anything I’ve learned lately, it’s that we can’t change the past. We can only change how we handle things going forward.”

Margaret continued to stroke the hand she held. “That is very true, and if what I’ve seen here is any indication you are headed amazing places now. You know, I can’t wait to see what you do with the Stark Foundation work. Given your caring nature, I think you’ll be brilliant.”

“I’d argue that I have no clue how to run something like that, but Pepper is already getting me up to speed on what I need to know. I’m actually starting to believe it’s going to work.”

“I have no doubt.” Margaret smiled against his hair. “Are you really okay with me leaving in the morning? I know I kind of sprung it on you. I mentioned it earlier when you were upstairs with Steve and Tony offered to go to all kinds of drastic measures to ensure I wasn’t harassed into going back or have the driver take me home tomorrow when he came for Ellen. For all that things here are much more pleasant, I thought it might be best to get the inevitable over with.”

“I get it. Just don’t stay away forever.”

“You couldn’t keep me away if you tried. I already have Tony, Pepper, Natasha, and Steve’s contact info so I can reach out when I want to come back. Pepper rather astutely noted that I should avoid using the cars your mom usually insists upon unless we want someone reporting back on location details.”

“She’s an amazingly smart one.” TJ wasn’t at all surprised that Pepper had thought of something like that.

“All I have to do is make a call and I was assured one of them or JARVIS would arrange everything.”

TJ laughed, “By one of them, I assume you realize you still mean JARVIS. Very little actually happens unless he’s the one doing it.”

“Do you think he’s listening to this conversation?” Margaret wondered, knowing that he often spoke up as soon as his name was spoken.

“I’m pretty sure he’s always listening, but is good at giving us a sense of privacy when appropriate. Right, JARVIS?” He pulled is phone out of his pocket, setting it on top of his leg.

“You are correct, TJ. I maintain a constant state of awareness through all devices, but will always
maintain your privacy and confidentiality unless you are in danger.”

“Thanks, J.” TJ grinned. “Always good to know you’re keeping tabs on us.”

“That is pretty impressive. I need one of those to rescue me from your mother sometimes.” They both laughed at how true that statement really was.

“Don’t underestimate sir, Ms. Barrish.” JARVIS spoke again and TJ didn’t miss the hint of mischief in his tone.

“Should …” Margaret started, stopping when TJ shook his head.

“Sometimes it’s better to just go with it. Whatever Tony is cooking up will no doubt be well meant, extremely helpful, and possibly way over the top. But it’s Tony, and that’s how he tells us he cares.” TJ paused for a minute. “No matter how many times people tell him he doesn’t need to give us things to prove that, that seems to be how he is most comfortable operating. If that’s what it takes for him to accept that we don’t hate him, it’s what we do.”

“I get the feeling you think a lot more highly of him than simply ‘not hating’ him.” TJ could tell Margaret was confused by his word choice.

“That’s true, but as best I can tell in his mind if we decline the things he wants to give us it must be because we hate him. We’re all trying our damnedest to prove to him that not only do we not hate him, but that we genuinely care about him. It’s harder than you might suspect.” A yawn interrupted anything else TJ was going to say.

“I think that’s a sign that we should head to bed.” Margaret nudged TJ into a more upright position. “Maybe Dougie and I can sneak away in a couple of weeks and stay for the weekend.”

TJ pulled himself off the coach, pivoting around to tug Margaret to her feet. “I think that sounds like fun.”

Wrapping her arm around TJ’s waist, Margaret couldn’t help but notice how genuinely happy TJ looked compared to any point since his father was in the White House. She paused on the bottom step, turning to look him in the eye.

“Just so you know, I think it’s admirable that you and Steve are waiting to pursue a romantic relationship, but he’s not Reeves. You take all the time you need to feel confident and comfortable taking that next step, but don’t for one second let what you think anyone else is going to think of your relationship make you hold back. You deserve to be loved and cherished, and I’m willing to bet he’ll do exactly that.”

TJ gave her a small smile. “Thanks, Nana. It’s good to hear someone say it.”

“Well you just let me know if you need it repeated. I’m only ever a phone call away.” She turned to head up the stairs, grasping his hand so he would follow.

Stopping in front of the guest room door, TJ wrapped his grandmother in a tight hug, kissing the top of her head before sending her off to sleep and ducking down the hall to change in his bedroom.

He didn’t bother knocking on Steve’s door, simply pushing it open and stepping inside. He grinned at the sight before him.

Steve was reclined back against the headboard, blanket draped over his waist. Beside him, Natasha lay curled tight, decked out in what appeared to be Avengers pajamas, head resting on his thigh with
3 kittens tucked in the small space between her knees and her chest.

“Think human-Clint will notice if we just keep her for the night?” TJ grinned as he approached the bed.

“Notice and complain about it all day tomorrow.” Steve shrugged. “I’ve survived worse.”

“Yeah, me too.” TJ grabbed a small throw blanket from one of the chairs by the fireplace, bringing it with him toward the bed. “JARVIS, let Clint know she’s safe.” He whispered as he set his phone on the nightstand.

“Of course, TJ.” The AI responded immediately.

TJ spread the blanket over Natasha with a bit of help from Steve, both men careful not to cover the kittens. Climbing into what had quickly become his side of the bed, he pulled the comforter over himself and turned on his side so he could see Steve.

“Are you going to sleep sitting up?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time. Except this time there is no gunfire or explosions and this bed is infinitely more comfortable than frozen ground.” Steve winked at him. “Don’t worry, I’ll be just fine.”

Yawning again, TJ nodded sleepily. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll be here.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I have no excuse whatsoever for the cuddle fest that happened at the end there. Or the odd fact that TJ and Margaret hijacked this chapter, so what I thought I was going to write is ending up in chapter 50.

Anyway, I know I’ve been MIA for ages. Hopefully this didn’t suck and you all didn’t give up and decide to stop reading. Take a second to leave a comment, pretty please. It means a lot to know people are still interested.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

So if you recall where things ended in chapter 49 ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Starting to wake, TJ tried to figure out a logical reason for the heavy weight atop his feet without opening his eyes. Coming to no reasonable conclusions, he slowly pried his eyes open, momentarily startled by the green eyes staring back at him.

"Morning," Natasha whispered. "Sorry I hogged the middle of the bed." She offered a sheepish smile. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I was just ..."

TJ pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her. He could see over her head that Steve was still sleeping soundly.

"It's really not a problem. You looked so comfortable that we couldn’t bear the thought of waking you.”

TJ tried to shift his foot, but it was wedged under the ‘still unidentified, but clearly not dangerous given Natasha’s calm presence’ weight.

Seeming to understand the mystery, the redhead grinned. "Clint. The human one. Though the feline one is sleeping on top of him."

TJ nodded, unsurprised that the archer had joined them. He couldn’t stop the smile that spread over his face as he saw Peggy’s front paws appear on Natasha’s waist, followed by her small head, eyes searching for something. As soon as they landed on his face, the kitten scrambled to make her way over the obstacle, toppling onto the bed between TJ and Natasha with little grace. He could tell Natasha was fighting a laugh just as hard as he was, trying not to disturb the sleeping men on the bed with them.

Righting herself from her landing, Peggy trotted across the blanket with all the dignity of a princess until she reached him. The purring kitten head butted him in the nose, rubbing her head and body along his cheek before curling into a small ball of fur against his neck.

“I think someone has taken quite a liking to you.” Natasha gave him an approving grin.

“I’d say the feeling is mutual.” TJ reached up to stroke the kitten’s fur, enjoying the warmth and gentle vibration of the small body tucked securely against him. “How long do you think those two will sleep?"

“Not sleeping.” He heard Steve’s mumbled answer. “Just too relaxed to bother moving.”

“What about Clint?” TJ queried, wondering if the archer was playing opossum as well.

“Nope. Unless he’s actually on duty, he can sleep like the dead anywhere. You could kick him and he’d probably just roll over and keep sleeping … albeit he might land on the floor first.” Natasha smirked, eyes flashing with mischief.
“Nah, I’d rather not get on his bad side just yet. What time is it anyway? I don’t want the others to think I decided not to cook breakfast.”

He heard the rustle of sheets as Steve turned to look at the clock. “Only 6:30. Given the last couple of mornings, I’d say we’re fine to relax a bit more.”

“Yay.” Natasha smiled, reaching out to stroke Peggy’s fur. “JARVIS, can you make sure we’re up in time to cook?”

“Of course.” The AI’s voice chirped quietly from TJ’s phone on the nightstand. With his confirmation, the room fell silent aside from the soft purrs of three very content kittens.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Your parents are definitely a piece of work.” Tony shook his head at TJ. They’d spent the last hour commiserating over sub-par parenting. After Margaret and Ellen departed, the other five had decided to go see what mischief they could get into setting up other parts of the house, but Tony had asked him if he had time to talk.

“Sounds like I’m in good company there, though I think you came out pretty far ahead in the mom department. Maria sounds like a pretty amazing lady.” TJ wished he’d had a chance to meet her.

“She was. And honestly, I’m not sure Howard actually set out to be such as asshole. He just had impossibly high standards, but I guess when you have a hand in creating Captain Fucking America, that’s to be expected.” Tony paused. “When I found out they’d thawed Cap out, I wanted to hate him. I wanted him to be a pretentious asshole just so I could feel like Howard’s expectations all those years were bullshit. Maybe then I could have felt like I was justified in feeling like his standards were impossible. Instead he was like a fucking superhero stereotype come to life. Then I wanted to hate him for being so fucking perfect. It’s no wonder Howard never thought I was good enough.”

“I’m sorry, Tony.” Steve stepped into the room clearly having overheard the billionaire’s words. “I wish I’d known what’d he’d done to you then. Fuck.” Steve scraped his hands over this face, trying to find the right words. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did hate me.”

Tony rose, glancing at TJ before stepping around the sofa to stand in front of Steve.

“It wasn’t your fault, Steve. You didn’t make Howard an abusive asshole. Sure you could have been a bit less perfect and that might have saved me a beating or two, but probably not.”

“I’m not perfect, Tony. I’m just a fucking loud mouth kid from Brooklyn that never learned when to walk away from a fight.”

“Maybe, but you’re a better man than I could ever dream of being. I wanted to hate you for it, but I couldn’t … can’t. Instead I just ended up seeing all the reasons that he never gave up on trying to find you. Truth be told, had I been in his position I would have done the same thing.”

Steve stared down at Tony, a look of complete and total surprise on his face.

"Your wanna hear the really funny part?" Tony's expression made Steve and TJ both wonder what craziness he was about to spit out.

"What's the funny part, Tony?" Steve humored him with the question, knowing he would tell them even without the prompt.
"I'm pretty sure you would have beat the shit out of him if you'd ever caught him using me as a punching bag. All that time he lorded you over me, but it finally hit me that you had no part in that. You didn't know and you damn sure wouldn't have let him do it."

Without saying a word, Steve reached out pulling Tony into a tight embrace.

"You're right, Tony. I never would have stood by and let him do that to you. I wish I'd been there to stop him. I really do." Steve could feel the dampness against his shoulder wear Tony’s tears soaked through his shirt.

Sniffling again, Tony finally pushed himself away from Steve. “So, I think I’ve exceeded my daily quota for emotional expression.” His eyes flitted from Steve to TJ and back again. “I’m just going to …”

A loud meow that sounded almost like a howl from the foyer interrupted the billionaire’s words. All heads snapped toward the door as another meow erupted into the air. The three men ran for the door, having no idea what they were going to find.

“What is going on?” Pepper landed at the bottom of the stairs, having obviously sprinted down them.

Before the men could answer, the three kittens barreled toward them, meowing all the way.

“What is it?” TJ squatted down, scooping Peggy up as she skidded into his hands.

“I have no idea what got into them.” Steve leaned over to grab Bucky before the kitten could decide to scale his leg.

“I guess I have to do since your chosen human isn’t here.” Tony swiped Clint off the floor where he’d already started rubbing his small body against the man’s ankles.

“How were they before all the howling started?” Pepper asked, fighting a giggle as the three men cuddled their little balls of fur.

“They were curled up in the cat perch in our office when I left.” Steve shook his head, cradling Bucky against his neck. “I guess I didn’t even think about them being spooked when they woke up and no one was there.

“Lesson learned, I guess.” TJ snorted a small laugh. “No leaving the babies unattended.”

Natasha appeared at the front door, hurrying to remove her coat. “Was that them I heard?”

“I told you they were fine.” Clint pushed his way through the door before closing it against the cold. “See, they have them.”

Natasha glared at him as she strode toward Tony, waving him off as he started to pull kitten Clint from where he’s nestled against his neck. “Don’t. He looks like he’s fine.” She assured Tony, stopping in front of him to stroke the kittens fur. “So what happened?”

“Steve left them sleeping alone in the office.” Pepper explained.

“It’s not like I did it to traumatize them. I just didn’t realize how freaked out they’d get.” Steve frowned, brows furrowed as he clearly regretted having let the poor things get frightened.

“We all know you didn’t do it on purpose.” TJ assured him.

“But …”
“Steve, it’s okay. They’re fine.” Natasha shushed him. “TJ’s right, no one thinks you did it to upset them. It could have been any one of us. We’ve all been cat parents for all of about 30 hours.”

“Why don’t we take them in and see if they’re hungry.” TJ suggested. “If you can handle their food, I’ll pull out some goodies for us.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Steve agreed as the six of them turned for the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Tony, sometimes you just kill me. Leave it to the furry ones to interrupt the emotional tension.

Comments are greatly appreciated!!
Chapter 51

So in some wild twist of fanfic writing chaos, all my muses decided to start jumping up and down, screaming ideas for my current stories. As a result, while it took a week to get this chapter posted, I managed to finish off the first story in the Ohana series (Hawaii Five-0 + Cap/Avengers crossover) and get 3 new chapters up of the Hawaii Five-0 fic I hadn't touched in over a year. I have no idea what the heck triggered all that. Fortunately, they're still cooperating, so hopefully this is a good thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Bruce appeared from whatever corner of the house he’d been exploring, the other six and the kittens were perched around the kitchen nibbling on pie and cookies that TJ had conjured up.

“Room for one more?” The scientist asked.

“Always.” Tony waved him in. “Grab something to munch on and pull up a chair or a counter or really any surface you feel like occupying.”

“Water?” TJ was already halfway to the fridge to pull out a bottle.

“Thanks.” Bruce accepted the bottle, grabbing a cookie before finding a spot on the floor near the window. Already done with her snack, Peggy ventured over to explore his legs. Everyone watched as she climbed around, finally deciding to curl up atop one thigh.

“Looks like you’ve been claimed.” Natasha laughed.

“Guess so.” Bruce set his water bottle down, wiping the moisture from his hand onto his shirt before reaching to stroke the kitten’s fur. “I forgot how nice it can be to have animals around.”

The rest of the ground made sounds of assent, all happy to have the surprise addition to their makeshift family.

“So, I hate to say this, but I need to pop up to New York for a couple of meetings.” She laughed when Tony pouted at her. “Don’t give me that look. One of us actually has to run the company.”

“Fair point. Doesn’t mean I have to like it though.”

“Does anyone need anything while I’m there?” She offered to the room at large. “Steve, do you have what you’ll need for the trip to California?”

"Which is her nice way of asking if you have appropriate attire for television that doesn't imply you're in your nineties." Tony teased.

"Something tells me I'm the wrong person to make that call." Steve frowned, looking down at his jeans and t-shirt. He thought he was doing better about blending into the current decade, but maybe he wasn’t.
TJ leaned closer, nudging his shoulder. “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with how you dress. You look good.”

“Shit, Steve.” Tony buried his head in his hands before looking back up at the super soldier. “I’m an ass. I was just kidding. Seriously though, Pepper tends to help dress me for stuff like this so I don’t come off wrong. I think that’s what she was getting at.”

Pepper slipped off the stool she’d been occupying. “He’s right, Steve. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the classic jeans and tee look you’ve got going. They show off your assets quite nicely.” She winked at him, happy to see him relax just a bit.

“Oh come on. This does not need to become another conversation about my ass.” Steve blushed even as he tried to give them all his best Captain America glare.

“Sure it does.” Clint countered. “It’s been days since we last talked about that particular national treasure.”

“I hate you all so much.” Steve couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face. For all that he could do without talking about his backside, it was fun to have friends to joke with.

“Now, not to make it awkward again, but I really was just trying to be helpful with my offer. Tony tends to wear suits for television appearances, but I feel like that would be overkill for Ellen’s show, and all things considered you need to be in something you’re more comfortable in for this appearance.” Pepper looked from Tony to Steve.

“What are you thinking?” Steve asked. “I really am more than happy to let you take the lead on this. I can do jeans and t-shirts and my uniform pretty easily, but outside of that I make no claims at being up on current fashion trends.”

TJ reached over, patting his thigh. “That still puts you ahead of a fair number of people that still think velour tracksuits are appropriate attire for being out in public.”

“What is a velour tracksuit?”

“Nothing that you belong in. Ever.” Natasha shook her head. “Just no.”

“Now that we’ve established the obvious,” Pepper rolled her eyes dramatically. “How about we talk realistic options. I’m thinking jeans, a tailored button up, and a blazer for Steve. Maybe something in a vivid blue for the shirt to bring out his eyes. For Tony, I think jeans, a white button up, and red sweater.”

“I approve.” Natasha nodded thoughtfully. “They’ll look well coordinated, but not like twins.”

“Anybody ever mistakes me for being Cap’s twin and I’m going to celebrate.” Tony stuck his tongue out at the spy.

“That ever happens and I’ll help you plan the party.” She countered, throwing a small chunk of cookie at him.

“Now kids,” Bruce teased from the floor. “Pepper, would you mind if I hitched a ride with you? I wanted to pick up a few things from the tower.”

“Of course, Bruce. If anyone else wants to join, there’s plenty of room.”

“There are a few things I should grab to finalize J’s install.” Tony shrugged.
“Fancy a night on the town, Nat?” Clint gave her a cheesy wink. “We haven’t gotten into any trouble in New York City in a while.”

“I could get behind that plan.” Natasha grinned.

“Is there a reason you all suddenly feel the need to run off?” TJ eyed them suspiciously, noticing Steve looking puzzled beside him.

“Not running away, and only for a night or two.” Natasha was the first to answer.

“Also not pre-meditated,” Pepper chimed in. “But we all know you two were used to having plenty of time to just chill without a bunch of people around. Not saying we think you don’t want us around, but before Steve conquers the wild world of television appearances you guys might enjoy some quiet time.”

TJ cocked his head, thinking about what she said before slowly turning to look at Steve. He found brilliant blue eyes staring back at him, looking more than a bit excited at the prospect.

“Fair enough.” He quipped. “We’ll try not to burn the house down while you’re gone. And if you happen to see fit to bring back good pizza, I won’t complain.”

“Consider it done.” Tony jumped at the request. “Though you know I can always make good New York style pizza appear if you want it. I’ve got connections.”

“I don’t doubt that.” TJ shook his head at the billionaire.

“When did you want to leave, Pep?” Natasha decided to get the conversation back on track.

“First meeting is at 8am, so we should probably head out in the next couple of hours.” She checked her watch. “That should give us time to get dinner when we get there and still let me get to sleep at a reasonable hour.”

“You heard the lady,” Steve teased. “Avengers, go pack!”

Bruce picked himself up off the floor, careful not to startle Peggy as he did so. Seeing the other two kittens curled up with Steve and TJ, he brought her over to join them. “I suppose this one should stay here with you.”

“Probably so.” TJ watched as she curled right up on his lap next to Clint. “Something tells me she’ll be happy to snuggle some more when you get back.”

Bruce gave him a small smile and not as he turned to follow the others out of the kitchen.

“So, what do we want to do with our unexpected free evening?” Steve asked, reaching over to scratch the top of Peggy’s head.

“Try a new recipe or two and watch a movie?” TJ shrugged. “Or we can do something more adventurous if you prefer.”

“Nah, I think the trip to California is going to fulfill any need I have for an adventure for a while. I think your plan sounds perfect.”

Chapter End Notes
I know this one was a wee bit shorter than usual, but this seemed like a good breaking point. Next up I think I'll let the boys try to conquer something challenging in the kitchen - any good ideas?
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

I just can’t. These two are killing me.
This was supposed to be a light fluffy chapter. WTF?!?!?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So what are we trying our hand at tonight?” Steve set two cups of tea on the counter as he slid onto the bar stool next to TJ. The blond waited, as TJ stared down at the cookbook.

“I wanna try this one,” he pointed to the recipe. “But maybe we save it for tomorrow because we’re going to need to get the ingredients and it seems like it takes half a day to cook.”

“Boeuf bourguignon. Wow.” Steve skimmed over the recipe. “You really are feeling adventurous.”

Shrugging his shoulders, TJ reached for the cookbook again. “If you think it’s too much …”

Steve covered the brunet’s hand with his. “I didn’t say that. Adventurous yes, but since when is that a bad thing.” He held TJ’s gaze, brow arched in silent challenge. “JARVIS, can you have whatever we’ll need delivered?”

“Of course.” The AI answered without hesitation.

“Now, what are we fixing tonight?”

“Chili.” TJ replied, considerably more confident than he’d been with his previous answer.

“Which kind of chili?” Steve grinned at him, knowing full well that these days chili encompassed quite a variety of recipes.

“Ever had Cincinnati style? I’ve heard it has a unique flavor and I found a recipe for it online.”

“Can’t say I have, but I’m always game to try. What’s so special about it?” Steve leaned over, peering at TJ’s phone screen. “Does that really say chocolate and cinnamon?” He looked back at TJ.

“It does.” TJ nodded. “And the recommendations are to serve it over spaghetti noodles with shredded cheddar and onions with those little oyster crackers.”

“Do we have all that on hand?”

“You do.” JARVIS confirmed, sounding incredibly pleased.

“Did Tony finish your integration in here?” TJ asked, curious at the AI’s tone.

“Indeed, he did.” JARVIS answered. “I didn’t approve of him staying up half of last night to do it, but he seemed to happy to get it done that I couldn’t bring myself to call Ms. Potts to make him stop.”

“He hasn’t been staying up every night has he?” Steve asked, concerned that Tony wasn’t sleeping.
“No. This is the first night he’s done so. All things considered, he’s had quite the run of good sleep since arriving here. At least by his standards.”

“Pretty sure all our standards on a good night’s sleep are skewed, but I’m glad he’s been sleeping.” Steve looked at TJ, considering just how well he’d been sleeping and why. Steve’s eyes lingered on the way TJ’s t-shirt pulled against the muscles in his shoulders as he reached for cans from the top shelf. It wasn’t that he hadn’t noticed them before, but in that moment he truly appreciated the display. Shaking his head in an attempt to stop that train of thought before he let it get out of control, Steve slid back off the barstool. “Where should I start?”

“Want to start dicing onions?” TJ answered.

“Consider it done.” Steve pulled out his supplies.

“I’ve taken the liberty of pulling up the recipe on the StarkPad sir mounted for you.” JARVIS spoke as the tablet neither man had noticed came to life, mounted on the wall so it wouldn’t be in the way but was easily viewable.

“You know, for someone that doesn’t cook, Tony is great about thinking of stuff like that.” TJ remarked as he worked.

“Yeah. The more I’m around him the more I realize he is very adept at noticing what will make other people’s lives easier and just doing it without saying anything.” Steve set to work on the onion. “I feel like such an ass for the way I treated him when we first met. I just … I hope he knows how wrong I was.”

TJ looked over at Steve, hating the way his shoulders hunched at the admission. “I’m pretty sure he’s getting there. You two have talked. Not saying he’s gonna forget what happened, but you’ve both admitted to making assumptions that you wish you hadn’t.”

“I know.” Steve agreed. “I just worry that even though I know he’s forgiven me, somewhere deep down he’s still going to think I meant it. To think that what I said was true.”

“If I might interject,” JARVIS spoke. “You are unfortunately quite right, sir tends to hang on to all of those things as evidence of his shortcomings. Fortunately, so long as he is around people that care and not left alone to brood, he is less likely to dwell on those things.”

“Good to know, J.” TJ answered. “I know we can’t always keep him from being alone, but maybe we can at least stay connected enough that he doesn’t have time to brood as much. Even when he’s in New York alone and we’re here, I’m guessing J can patch us through to do some fancier version of Skyping.”

“Indeed I can.” The AI confirmed. “And I believe sir would find that most beneficial.”

“Then consider it done.” TJ smiled at Steve, seeing the relief on his face and in the way his shoulders relaxed. “You know, for once I feel like my fuck up might have actually led to something good instead of just causing problems.” He watched as Steve turned to look at him. “Not saying I don’t wish it hadn’t happened or that I plan a repeat performance, but think about it. Thanks to one very scary and very accidental chain of events, everybody came together here. All of us are realizing we have a lot more people to rely on that we ever thought. Not to say it wouldn’t have all happened eventually, but I think what we’ve found here - all of us - is something we all needed.”

Steve watched him for a moment, considering what he’d said. “You’re right. I could have done without the heart stopping way this all started, but a lot of good came from it.”
“Speaking of the heart stopping way this all started,” TJ set the can he was holding onto the counter, taking the few steps to stand next to Steve. “I know we talked about what happened, but I don’t think I ever apologized for that voice mail. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Don’t.” Steve reached out, placing a finger over TJ’s lips to silence him. “Yes, I’m pretty sure I haven’t been that scared since there were aliens coming out of a wormhole over New York City, but please don’t apologize for that. If you hadn’t reached out … if you hadn’t called.” Steve’s hand shifted, long fingers wrapping around the back of TJ’s neck, holding him tight. “I can’t … I can’t even think about what that would have meant.”

TJ reached up, brushing the tears from the corner of Steve’s eyes with his thumbs. “I …” He couldn’t find the words. Couldn’t bring himself to really consider all the implications of what Steve said.

“Just promise me you will always call. I don’t care where I am. I don’t care how stupid or earth shattering you think what you want to say is. You call me. You call the others. But you always calls.” Steve leaned down, resting his forehead against TJ’s. “I need you to promise me that, TJ. I can’t handle the idea of you alone and not reaching out for fear that we don’t care.”

“I will. I promise.” TJ’s hands slipped down, resting on either side of Steve’s neck.

Vision blurred by tears, Steve breathed in TJ’s scent as they were so close together. Blinking away the tears, he stared into blue-gray eyes, seeing the storm of emotion there.

“I know I … we … it’s not …” His words were cut off by the gentle press of TJ’s lips against his. The kiss was brief and gentle, TJ pulling away before either could be tempted to take it further.

“I know we agreed to wait before we take things further, but …”

“I know.” Steve knew what he was getting at. They each had their reasons for waiting, for sticking to the plan, but that simple kiss was a promise for what the future held.

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna go hide now because these two completely hijacked this entire chapter. Everything after the decision on their adventurous cooking plans for the following day just happened and I'm just ... I can't. I can't decide if you guys are going to love me or hate me for this shit.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took a few extra days to get a chapter up. Between work, my son’s football, and the sinus infection from hell, I’ve been operating under less than stellar conditions for roughly 10 days. Alas, a second visit to the doctor seems to have my pointed back in the right direction. I hope.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is really how we’re supposed to eat it?” Steve questioned as he handed a bowl of spaghetti noodles to TJ to top with chili. “I mean I guess chili isn’t so far off from some spaghetti sauces I’ve seen, but still.”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared to try it.” TJ teased, knowing full well that Steve would devour the whole meal.

“Not even. This doesn’t even come close to some of the crazy things I ate during the war. At least I actually know what went into this. There were some meals over there were you just closed your eyes and tried not to breathe while you swallowed because you were pretty sure whatever it was you just put in your mouth wasn’t actually intended for human consumption.”

TJ traded bowls with him, topping the second one with chili as Steve moved to add the onion, cheese, and crackers to his.

“Well clearly none of them managed kill you.” TJ joined him to finish getting his ready.

“I was lucky. The serum does wonders for stuff like that. I remember one night where the other guys weren’t so lucky. Everybody but Buck and I spent most of that night off in the brush swearing they were dying.”

“Bucky skip the meal or just have an iron stomach?”

Steve set his bowl down, brows furrowed as he thought. “I think …” His eyes closed and he felt TJ’s hand come to rest on his back, clearly picking up the shift in his countenance.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” TJ could tell he was struggling with the memory.

“It’s okay. It’s just … after I found him at the HYDRA base, we never really talked about what had happened there. About what they did to him. I should have sent him home, let him recover in peace.”

“And you know damned well he wouldn’t have gone. You’d have had to knock him out and restrain him for the trip to keep him from staying at your side and you know it.”

“You’re right. Still doesn’t stop me from wishing I’d tried or that I’d at least had the courage to ask him about what happened. It’s just, he tried to close off that part. I could tell it haunted him, but I never tried to make him tell me, never tried to share that burden.”

“You couldn’t have forced him to talk if he wasn’t ready. Maybe someday he would have been, and I bet he would have come to you. Would have known he could.”
“I hope so … it’s just thinking about that night with all the guys. Bucky was usually a pretty healthy guy, but I’d seen him get waylaid by bad food before. I just … I wonder if what they did to him didn’t make him more like me. Which then makes me hate myself all over again for not trying harder to find him after the fall, because if he had any version of the serum in him it wouldn’t have been a quick death.”

Steve felt the tears trailing down his cheeks, swiping at them, he shook his head. Bucky would kick his ass if he saw him like this when he was supposed to be having a good time. Despite his own reservations about whether or not he really deserved to be happy, he knew Margaret and TJ were both right about what Bucky’s opinion on the matter would be.

“I’m sorry.” Steve started to apologize, startling slightly when he felt TJ tugging on his arm so he would turn to face the brunet. “I don’t mean to keep falling apart.”

When he finally met TJ’s eyes, Steve’s breath caught. He didn’t see judgment or disappointment in that expression, only compassion and possibly something more.

“Nope. We’ve been over this before. You don’t get to apologize for things like this. One, you’re only human. Which means dealing with memories and emotions and all the fun that comes with them. Two, I keep telling you I want you to be able to talk about them … all of them, with me. The fun stuff, the sad stuff, the scary stuff. Any of it. You deserve the chance to do that. They deserve to have their rightful place in your memories and in your life. And, fuck it all, I deserve to get to hear all of it because good, bad, ugly, or indifferent, those are things that matter to someone that is really fucking important to me. Not to mention, my inner history nerd jumps up and down and squeals every time they come up.”

TJ stepped forward, closing the small space between them so he could wrap his arms around Steve, letting his chin rest on the blond’s shoulder.

“Thank you. For all of that.” Steve’s arms pulled him even tighter as his head rested against TJ’s. “Still sorry I seem to be determined to ruin what was supposed to be a fun evening by turning it into some melodramatic emotional crisis.”

“Nah, you haven’t have ruined anything. If nothing else, we should should enjoy the emotional catharsis of getting it all out and then watching some crazy funny movie to make ourselves laugh until we can barely breath.”

Steve kissed the top of TJ’s head. “That sounds perfect.”

“Then grab your bowl and something to drink and let’s go find a movie. Any ideas?”

“Um, not really. I think most of the stuff on my list of movies to catch up on were more serious. Not sure why there aren’t more comedies there.”

The two men grabbed their things, heading toward the living room, kittens winding around their ankles as they refused to be left behind.

“JARVIS?” TJ spoke as he set his bowl and drink on the coffee table, opting to slide onto the floor so he could eat without making a mess.

“Yes, TJ?”

“Can you pull up some good movie options for us? Funny stuff. Nothing serious.”

“Of course. Any particular types?”
TJ glanced over at Steve as the bigger man folded himself onto the floor beside him, scooping kittens up to place them on the couch behind them.

“Some of the classics. Important stuff that we need to get Steve caught up on.”

“I think I have just the thing.” JARVIS sounded almost excited as the TV screen came to life.

“I see Tony’s been sneaking your integration in all over the house.” TJ smiled, even though the AI likely couldn’t see it.

“Indeed, he’s making steady progress.” JARVIS replied. “Let me know if you prefer another selection.”

TJ waited to see what was going to come up and promptly broke into a huge grin. “Oh this is perfect. JARVIS, you’re a genius.”

“Thank you, TJ.” The AI sounded downright smug.

“Monty Python and the Holy Grail?” Steve read the screen, trying not to laugh at TJ’s obvious excitement.

“It’s a classic. Please tell me you haven’t see it yet.”

“I haven’t.” Steve shook his head.

“Awesome!” TJ was almost bouncing. “Start the movie please, J.”

“So I can already tell from your reaction that this should be good, but do I get any other hints?” Steve cocked his head as he waited for an answer.

“Mid-70s British, slapstick comedy. As cheesy and over the top as it is hilarious.” TJ answered after a moments consideration. “If you don’t laugh at this movie I might have to reconsider our friendship.”

“Judging by your reaction, I have no doubt I’ll manage to laugh.” The two settled in to their dinner as the movie started.

Steve found himself laughing repeatedly, even harder on the ever growing collection of lines that TJ managed to recite verbatim along with the characters.

“What... is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?” TJ asked, matching the inflection of the character on screen perfectly until he giggled at the end.

“How many times have you seen this movie?” Steve leaned his shoulder against TJ’s where they were both leaned against the couch, the three kittens curled up against Steve’s broad back.

“Only a couple dozen times or so.” TJ smirked at him. “What can I say, I like vintage things.”

“Guess that works in my favor.” Steve turned his attention back to the screen.

“Guess so.” TJ let his head fall to the side, resting on Steve’s shoulder. Reaching over, he tangled his fingers with Steve’s where they rested on his thigh.

The day had definitely had it’s ups and downs, but in this moment he wouldn’t have traded it for anything.
First, for those unfamiliar with Cincinnati style chili and all it’s trappings, it really is a thing. I recommend trying it. :)
Second, I actually thought this was going to be a fully light and fluffy chapter. Of course, writing said fluff with my new one armed Winter Soldier Funko Pop! Staring at me could have been where this went wrong. I’ll admit though, it both makes my heart hurt and makes me happy that TJ is encouraging Steve to talk about him and the Commandos.
Third, I now really wanna watch Monty Python and the Holy Grail again. I was afraid coming up with their movie selection was going to be a challenge, and then that one popped into my head and I just had to let them watch it.
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slow progress of late. The whole having the plague (aka an evil sinus infection that wouldn't take the hint and go away) for 2 weeks coupled with lots of craziness for work and family stuff makes it hard to have time to string two coherent sentences together, much less enough to make up a chapter. That being said, if this isn't coherent - I'm sorry. Please don't hate me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time the movie ended, Steve was feeling much more relaxed. The kittens were a warm, comforting presence as they purred against his back. TJ’s laughter and the warmth of his body pressed against Steve’s side was a great reminder that he wasn’t alone anymore.

“Want to watch another one before bed?” TJ asked.

“Are there more Monty Python movies?”

“Sure are. JARVIS, what do you think? Life of Brian?”

“I concur, TJ. An excellent choice.” The AI agreed, and TJ grinned as the screen began to change already.

“Thanks, J. Maybe give us a couple minutes to grab new drinks and stuff.” TJ started lifting himself on the floor, reaching for the empty bowls.

“Of course, just let me know when to start the film.” JARVIS replied quickly, sounding quite pleased now that his integration was progressing.

Steve grabbed the empty glasses, following TJ toward the kitchen. “Do we have any of the cookies or pie left, or did the team clean it out before they left?”

TJ chuckled. “They put a good dent in things, but I’m pretty sure there’s still some sweet stuff hiding in here.” The brunet rinsed the bowls before putting them in the dishwasher.

“You’re going to spoil all of us if you keep baking like this.” Steve grinned.

“Is that a problem?” TJ turned to watch Steve, suddenly afraid that he was doing the wrong thing.

“Nope. Pretty sure Nat would kill me if I even alluded to the idea that you should stop baking.” Steve held his hands up in surrender, indicating he wasn’t crazy enough to risk that. “Not to mention you seem to really enjoy it. We all get enough exercise that we can afford the indulgence.”

“Something tells me you could afford it even if you didn’t work out like you do. Hell, you could probably eat an entire pie and be fine the way you work out.”

“True. Does that mean there’s pie?”

TJ shook his head, a smile playing on his lips as he reached around to the counter behind him. “It
might.” He uncovered the pie plate, revealing an untouched cherry pie.

“How did that manage to stay in tact?”

“Easy,” TJ winked. “I distracted them with all the other options. “There are actually two of them because I didn’t realize everyone was leaving when I made them and by the time I knew that I’d already fed them other things.”

“Damn, it smells delicious.” Steve leaned forward, inhaling the rich aroma of homemade cherry pie.

“Grab some bowls. We’ll see if it tastes as good as it smells.” TJ grabbed a knife and the pie server.

“Judging by track record in the kitchen, I’d say the likelihood of success if high.” Steve retorted as he grabbed bowls. “You know, you could just take a piece and leave the rest for me.”

“Don’t tease or I might just do it.” TJ bumped his hip against Steve’s as the blond returned to his side.

“That isn’t much of a threat when I’m standing here drooling over your homemade cherry pie.” Steve watched as TJ dished an extra large portion of the pie into one of the bowls, scooping a equally impressive chunk of vanilla ice cream on top of it before setting a spoon in the bowl. Steve’s hands shot up to accept it as soon as TJ held it up, immediately taking a big bite.

TJ watched, anxious to see if his latest creation was any good. Steve’s eyes shut as he savored the flavor, a low moan rumbling from his throat, sending a shiver straight up TJ’s spine.

“Fuck, TJ. That is the best damned cherry pie I’ve ever had.” Steve was already going for a second bite and TJ was more than a little relieved the blond was so busy staring at the pie that he hadn’t looked back up at him. Steve Rogers on a normal day was enough to drive TJ to distraction. Steve Rogers moaning around a mouthful of pie was positively erotic.

“I’m glad you like it.” TJ managed to speak after several seconds, taking great pride in managing to keep his voice from squeaking. He finished fixing his own bowl, setting it on the counter so he could refill their water glasses. A few seconds later, he was trying to shut the image of Steve and the pie out of his mind as they headed back to watch the second movie.

“What do you think? Should we make the furballs share the couch this time?” Steve asked as he set his glass on the table, scooting it closer to the couch so they wouldn’t have as far to reach.

“I think the furballs can probably manage to share. After all, the three of them combined don’t exactly take up a lot of room.” TJ sat down on one side of the kittens, grinning as Peggy lifted her head with a big yawn as she peered up at him. “Hey there, Pegs. Have a good nap?”

He chuckled as she extracted herself from the tangled web of kitten limbs and climbed into his lap.

“Something tells me nap time isn’t over.” Steve watched, eyes full of affection as he watched TJ and the kitten.

“Yeah, well it looks like she isn’t the only one looking for a new place to sleep.” TJ nodded his head at where Bucky was stretching, already pointed in the direction of Steve’s lap. “I guess we’ll just have to see if Clint decide we’re good enough surrogates for Natasha to sleep on or if he holds out for her return.

Both men watched as the third kitten lifted his head, eyes blinking open as he realized his siblings had left him for their preferred humans. Standing up, he looked from Peggy to Bucky before
stepping closer to the edge of the couch, seemingly looking for Natasha. Failing to find her, he meandered over to Steve, sniffing at him in consideration before doing the same to TJ. After a couple of minutes of back and forth, it appeared that Peggy and TJ had won out as he climbed up to join her.

“Guess you’ve got a fan.” Steve grinned. “He’s got good taste.”

“With Natasha yet. With her surrogate, that’s debatable.” TJ held his bowl in one hand, stroking the kittens’ fur with the other before reaching for his spoon.

“Hey, don’t say that.” Steve frowned. “Kidding or not, you’ve got to stop thinking that someone or something liking you is a sign of questionable judgment.”

TJ kept his eyes on the kittens a few seconds longer before making himself look up and meet Steve’s gaze. “I know … it’s just … I guess old habits die hard.”

“They do,” Steve began, shifting his bowl to his right hand so he could reach out and grip TJ’s shoulder with his left. “But you know I’m gonna keep pushing back every time you say something like that. Then maybe some day that won’t be the first thought that comes to mind or the first words that slip out when someone says something nice.”

“That’d be nice.” TJ offered him a somewhat shaky smile, upset that he’d manage to let the evening take yet another serious turn. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to derail our evening again.”

“You didn’t derail anything. There’s nothing wrong with having serious moments sometimes. That just means we’re being open and honest with each other. But now, we’re settled in with three of the cutest kittens on the planet, bowls with the best cherry pie to be found, good company, and another fun movie to watch. I’d call that the makings for a pretty great evening.”

This time TJ’s smile was more heartfelt. “You really are pretty amazing at these little pep talks.” He reached up, covering Steve’s hand where it still rested on his shoulder with his own. “Thank you for that because you’re right. Things are always sunshine and roses and it’s really fucking nice to have someone around that not only accepts that but embraces it. Though now that we’ve gotten all serious, it really is time to start the movie.”

“Fair enough.” Steve grinned, giving TJ’s shoulder one last squeeze before settling in to eat his pie. “JARVIS, you know what to do.”

“Of course.” The AI responded as the TJ came back to life. “Enjoy the movie.”

“Thanks, J.” Both men replied.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are like food for writers - they provide the motivation to keep going even when characters are giving us blank stares and their middle finger as decide to be stubborn or when RL is just being a contrary beast and not allowing time to write.
“Are you sure it’s supposed to look like this?” TJ stared at the casserole dish as he pulled it out of the oven.

“Considering I’ve never made it before I have no idea, but we followed all the directions to the letter.” Steve shrugged, inhaling the aroma from the dish. “It smells delicious.”

“I think we probably could have made a smaller batch. I don’t think even you are going to manage to eat all this in one sitting.” TJ checked is tablet, making sure he had the right steps to finish up the recipe so they could eat. His stomach was begging for food after smelling their dinner for the last few hours.

“True, but from the recipe it sounds like it reheats well too.”

“Is that dinner I smell?” Clint’s voice interrupted their discussion. “Please tell me it’s dinner.”

Both men turned toward the door, shaking their heads at the archer and grinning as they saw Natasha coming up behind him.

“Is food all you ever think about?” The red head elbowed him as she walked passed. “Sorry we didn’t warn you we were coming back early. We hit the town last night, knocked out our other errands early this afternoon, and decided we’d rather come back here than stay up there. Pepper was tied up in meeting and Tony and Bruce hadn’t surfaced from the labs since we got there.”

“It’s your home too, Nat. You don’t have to warn us that you’re coming home.” Steve wrapped her in a hug, kissing the top of her head.

“And we were just debating whether or not there was too much food, so extra mouths to feed is not an issue.” TJ grinned, accepting the hug she offered him and lifting her off her feet in the process.

“Great, so when is dinner?” Clint slid onto one of the bar stools.

“About 10 minutes.” Steve answered, chuckling at the archer. “You act like Natasha hasn’t fed you all day.”

“And it’s all a lie,” Natasha shook her head, grinning as she leaned around TJ to see what they were making. “Is that actually homemade boeuf bourguignon?”

“It is. Julia Child’s recipe and everything.” TJ’s smile spread wide. “I guess if your recognize it we can’t have screwed it up too bad.”

“It look perfect. I’ve only ever had it once, but this is exactly what I remember.” Natasha’s eyes misted slightly as she spoke and TJ couldn’t resist wrapping an arm around her.
“Good memory or bad?” He whispered, even though he knew Steve would likely still hear.

“A bit of both.” She leaned her head on his shoulder, biting her lip for a few seconds.

“Why don’t we go set the table?” Steve’s voice interrupted and TJ looked over his shoulder to see the blond give him a quick nod as he hustled the archer into the other room with the dishes and silverware.

“Want to tell me about it?” TJ turned his focus back to Natasha, knowing his window would be limited.

“It was a mission gone wrong back before my SHIELD days. I was in a pretty remote area of France, got injured to the point I couldn’t make the rendezvous point for extraction. My comms were completely busted, so I had no way of reaching out. It was the dead of winter and it looked like I was going to freeze to death on my own. Not exactly a stellar ending for a graduate from the Red Room, but it was one of those missions where every thing that could go wrong did plus a lot of things that nobody ever considered could.”

TJ held her closer as she shivered, familiar with how the remembered cold messed with Steve and imagining it was the same for her.

“I found an old barn and decided to try to wait things out there. I didn’t count on the farmer, an elderly Frenchman, coming out to check on things. I’d all but passed out from the cold and blood loss when he found me. I never did understand why, but he carried me back to his house. It was just him and his wife. They never asked where I came from or why I was such a mess. The woman helped me clean up, gave me warm clothes, and had me wrapped up in warm blankets by the fire with a cup of tea as she finished dinner. The next morning I used their phone to make the call for extraction. I was with them for four days before anyone came for me. The last day she made boeuf bourguignon. It smelled just like this.”

“I’m glad they found you.” TJ whispered, fighting back tears at the idea of Natasha injured, alone, and expecting death.

“Me too.” Natasha nodded against his chest. “It wasn’t too much longer before Clint found me. I’ve wondered sometimes if things would have been different had I not met them. Would there still have been that small sliver of hope that maybe things didn’t have to be the way they were if I hadn’t experienced such unexpected care and kindness from two complete strangers.”

“Well, I’m kinda glad we don’t have to find out. Personally, I’m really glad Clint found you and that whatever the reasons were, you took the chance he offered.”

“Me too.” Natasha wrapped her arms around his waist. “Speaking of chances, I’m glad you took one and let Steve convince you to get that coffee. I’m glad we get to keep you.”

TJ could feel her shoulders shake with a silent giggle.

“Why do you guys always make it sound like I’m some sort of pet?” He chuckled as she released him, stepping to the side enough that he could get the food ready to take to the dining room.

“Not a pet. More like a brother, at least to me. Though from what I hear brothers are sometimes a lot like pets. Speaking of pets, where are the kittens?”

“Last I saw they were curled up on one of the dining room chairs. I have no doubt Clint will be very happy to see you. He gave up yesterday and conceded to snuggling with Peggy and me, but I don’t think it was the same.”
“Of course it wasn’t.” She elbowed him playfully, obviously ready to leave the seriousness of the moments before behind. “Come on, let’s go eat.” Natasha grabbed one of the dishes, leaving him to carry the larger one.

“Yes, ma’am.” TJ followed behind her, an affectionate smile plastered on his face at the idea that Natasha had trusted him with another small piece of her story. He wasn’t foolish enough to believe those stories were shared with just anyone.

“Does this mean we finally get to eat?” Clint winked at TJ, taking the sting out of his playfully whining.

“Yes, Clint. It means we get to eat.” TJ set the dish down, checking to make sure they had everything.

“You guys start dishing this up, I’m just going to grab the drinks.” Steve darted toward the kitchen before anyone could argue.

Within minutes the four were settled in to enjoy the meal, the three kitten still sleeping quietly in the chair between Natasha and TJ.

Before they started eating, Natasha raised her glass of water in a toast. “To good food and family. May we appreciate both.”

“I’ll second that.” Steve nodded as he and the other two raised their glasses. The super soldier didn’t know what was said between TJ and Natasha, but the bond between the two was obvious and he couldn’t have been happier for them both.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t even know what happened here. Steve and TJ were cooking and then Clint interrupted, and next thing I know Nat and TJ are totally having one of their adorable little moments.
“Getting bored of life in the country yet?” A familiar voice started as soon as Steve answered his phone.

“I wouldn’t exactly call this the country, Sam. And I wouldn’t exactly say it’s been quiet either.”

“Yeah, Tony might have let it slip that you’re about to do your first big daytime television interview. Look at you gettin’ all famous and shit.”

Steve couldn’t help but laugh at Sam’s playful teasing.

“So what can I do for you?” Steve asked, hoping everything was okay.

“Nothing. I just thought I’d see if you lot were up for a little company. Just wrapped my last session for a few days so I’ve got some time to kill. I know you, Tony, and Pepper are headed out tomorrow for LA, but thought I might try to drag your boy out for a run or something.”

Steve knew what he meant. Sam was offering a little extra support for TJ since he was staying behind to watch the entire fiasco on television. Usually the show was filmed further in advance, but Ellen and team had agreed to filming this one minutes before it would air given the near impossibility of keeping the entire crew and audience quiet for any period of time.

“I know he’ll have Natasha and team with him, but …”

“You don’t need to convince me. I’m sure everyone will be more than happy to see you.”

“That’s good, because I’m already in my car.” Sam didn’t sound apologetic in the least about his assumption that he’d be welcome.

Steve’s head fell back as he laughed, not surprised that Sam already knew he would be welcome. “Well thanks for the heads up that you’re coming. I’ll let the others know they’ll see you soon.”

"Sounds like a plan." Sam replied. "See ya in a bit."

Slipping the phone back into the pocket of his jeans, Steve scooped Bucky off the bed, grinning as the kitten climbed straight onto his shoulder. "Come on, Buck. Let's go find TJ and your siblings."

The kitten offered a small mew as it licked Steve's ear, purring contentedly at his chosen human. Ducking out of his room, Steve managed not to startle when Natasha appeared beside him at the top of the stairs.

"I suppose Clint is with TJ." She reached up to scratch Bucky's chin as they descended the stairs.

"Last I saw him, he was taking them down to feed them." Steve grinned. "He tried to take this little hellion too, but he howled up a storm and refused to go without me."

"Aw, he's not a hellion. Though I'm seriously beginning to wonder if Barnes reincarnated as a cat." Natasha continued to look up at the kitten as they crossed the foyer toward the kitchen.

"There you are." TJ looked up, smiling as they approached. "I was beginning to think you got lost."
He waved a small bowl of kitten food under Bucky's nose in an attempt to lure the kitten off Steve's shoulder.

"Not lost. Just got sidetracked by Sam calling. He's on his way. Finished up his last session for a few days and thought he'd come chill in the country."

"He does realize this is not actually country, right? He wants to see country I'm gonna have to take him to Grandpa Hammond’s farm some day." TJ set Bucky and his bowl of food next to the other kittens.

"Ya know, I don't know if he's ever been in the country or not. I mean the guys been overseas in a war, but I don't know much about where he's been stateside." Steve shrugged, filling a glass of water.

Natasha climbed onto one of the bar stools, curious to see what the two were about to cook up in the kitchen. They’d already worked out and showered this morning, and lunch time was rapidly approaching.

“I’m thinking grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch,” TJ looked at Natasha as he spoke.

“Sounds warm and homey. I’m good with that.” She watched as Steve started helping pull things out to cook. “I’m sure the others will start appearing as soon as they smell it.”

“Probably.” Steve started to reply, stopping as Tony and Pepper appeared in the doorway. “Or before.”

“Should we leave?” Tony cocked his head to the side, picking up that they were early but he wasn’t sure why.

“Nope.” TJ grinned. “Those two were just speculating if people would start wandering down when they started smelling lunch. Given that we’re just starting and thus no aromas have filled the air, you simply showed up before they expected.”

“Did he just use the words thus and aromas in normal conversation?” Tony looked from TJ to Pepper.

“People use those words all the time, Tony.” Pepper shook her head as she moved to claim a stool next to Natasha. “Steve, are you set for tomorrow? Is there anything else you need me to help you with before we head out?”

“No, ma’am … Pepper.” He corrected as he turned to see her glaring at his formality. “I’ll just put everything in the bag in the morning and I’ll be set.”

“Perfect. Now that the rebuild is finally done, we’ll be able to stay at the Malibu house. It will afford a bit of privacy. Then we’ll pop over to the studio the next morning for filming. At that point we can either hop the jet back to DC or crash there for another night and head home in the morning. We can always play that one by ear depending on how exhausting the show turns out to be.”

“I’m sure the show itself will be great. Ellen’s quite an amazing woman.” Steve countered.

“True enough, but because of how the show is airing, the backlash will likely start before we ever leave the studio lot.”

“Likely?” Steve gave a humorless laugh. “Look at you being all optimistic.”
Everyone frowned at Steve’s words. They all hated that someone they loved so dearly and had already sacrificed so much was likely to get crucified by at least some portion of the population.

“Come on, guys.” Steve hated seeing their expressions. “I know there are going to be assholes, but I’m not going to let that stop me from being who I am. They don’t like it, that’s fine. They can go live their lives. I’m not going to let them live mine for me through fear.”

Sensing that the blond really didn’t want to continue the conversation, TJ offered a distraction. “Who wants extras on their grilled cheese?”

*_~*~ American Punchline ~*_*

“Honey, I’m home.” Sam’s voice rang out from the foyer as he heard footsteps approaching. “Hey, there are still people here.”

Sam grinned as TJ and Steve both embraced him in a quick hug.

“Thanks for coming to visit,” TJ spoke quietly. “I imagine the timing is not a coincidence.”

“I won’t insult your intelligence by insinuating otherwise, but I really was ready to come back for a visit. The groups I work with are great and I feel like I’m doing important work most of the time, but sometimes the city is just too much.”

“Well you always have a place here.” Steve spoke, hoping Sam knew how much he really meant that.

“So I heard there are small furry things around here now too? How come all the fun stuff happens when I’m not here … kittens, Ellen. What’s next? What other big stuff did I miss?”

“Lots of delicious food.” Natasha laughed as Sam jumped at her words, not having realized she was sneaking up behind him. “These two, especially TJ, are well on their way to becoming gourmet chefs.”

“I don’t think I’d go that far.” TJ tried to downplay the compliment.

“You won’t, but I will. You haven’t gone wrong in the kitchen yet.” Natasha slipped around Sam, wrapping an arm around TJ’s waist as she let her head rest on his shoulder.

“So where are the others?” Sam inquired. “Who all is still in residence?”

“Bruce, Tony, Pepper, and Clint are all around here somewhere.”

“Clint was curled up on the couch with the kittens last I saw,” Natasha smirked.

“I thought he didn’t like them?” Sam questioned. “Or at least that’s the gist I got from Stark.”

“What he says and what he does are not always the same thing.” She grinned, grabbing Sam’s arm and pulling him toward the sitting room, the other two falling in behind them. “Ssshhh.”

The four stepped quietly into the room, taking in the sight of Clint curled up in a ridiculously small ball in one of the chairs, the three kittens curled atop him where ever they could find space for themselves.

“Please tell me there are pictures of this.” Sam tried not to laugh.

“Oh yes. There are pictures.” Natasha’s grinned widened. “I’m just waiting for the right time to use
them.”

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, Steve, Tony, & Pepper will depart for LA. Sorry about the delay - work + the plot bunny CACW fix it otherwise known as Better kinda kept me busy. Comments and feedback are much appreciated and highly motivational ;)
“You really don’t have to take them, Nat.” Steve watched as she sauntered toward his bedroom door with an armful of kittens.

“No. I don’t have to, but I want to. I know you two aren’t going to do anything, but …” She shrugged, not quite sure how to explain what she meant.

“Thank you,” Steve nodded, appreciating her thoughtfulness.

A moment later, TJ slipped through the door. “Natasha stealing the kittens?” His voice was light and teasing.

“I’m pretty sure we’ll get them back, or at least our two. She just thought we might enjoy a kitten free night before …”

“That was sweet,” TJ smiled warmly, crossing the room to wrap his arms around Steve’s waist, leaning into the blond’s warmth. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Steve tightened his own arms around TJ, inhaling deeply as he considered his answer.

“I’m ready. Not necessarily looking forward to the shit storm that will probably follow.” Steve chuckled. “Then again, what’s a bit of a lashing from the media when you’ve gone up against HYDRA and a bunch of aliens.”

“You know I’ve got your back, no matter what, right?” TJ pulled back just enough to meet Steve’s eyes. “I’m no strangers to being dragged through the media and court of public opinion. I may not have done a stellar job of handling it, but I don’t want you trying to shield me from the bullshit that gets flung at you.”

“Well unless I take away all your access to the outside world I doubt I’ll be able to pretend everything isn’t happening.” Steve countered.

“Not what I meant.” TJ shook his head, reaching up to caress Steve’s neck with one hand. His thumb brushed across Steve’s jaw as their eyes locked. “I don’t care what’s being said by everyone else. Some of it will be nasty, some of it will be nice. Some of it might even be true. What I want you to promise is that you aren’t going to put on your Captain America smile and pretend you’re a-okay when you aren’t.”

Steve stared into TJ’s eyes, a small smile stretching his lips. “Something tells me if I so much as think about bottling things up I’m going to have more than you on my ass about it.”

“Something tells me you’re right.” TJ smirked in response, thankful that they were surrounded by people that truly cared. “Now, I don’t know about you, but there’s a big bed just over there that looks really warm and my feet are freezing.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he knew he was in trouble. The mischievous twinkle in Steve’s eyes did not bode well.

“Well in that case,” Steve moved quickly, hauling TJ off the floor and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “I wouldn’t want you to get frost bite on your toes.”
“I can’t believe you,” TJ yelp, taking advantage of his position to swat Steve on the ass. “I’ll get you back for this.”

“I’m sure you will,” Steve lowered him onto the bed, careful to control the impact. “But maybe revenge can wait until I’m back from California.” Slipping into bed beside TJ, he tugged the covers back over them before wrapping an arm around TJ’s waist.

“Yeah, it’ll wait.” TJ yawned, letting himself settle in against Steve’s chest. It was amazing how fast he went from being completely unaccustomed to sharing a bed, to being okay with having someone in the bed, to wanting the closeness that came with sleeping curled together. Aside from his brother, he’d never spent this kind of time in bed with someone with such innocent intentions, much less been so at peace with that idea.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Steve?” Natasha poked her head around the partially open door of his bedroom.

“Come on in,” he smiled as he placed his toiletry kit into the small overnight bag. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to come check on you.” She shrugged, climbing onto the big bed where the kittens slept in a small pile. They’d stayed with her for the night, but wasted no time returning to Steve’s room when everyone was awake. “As a resident expert on preferring to stay out of the spotlight, I know this whole thing isn’t exactly something you’re looking forward to, no matter what you said yesterday.”

Steve let out a wry chuckle. “Not my first time under the spotlight. Though word traveled a lot slower back in the day. Would have taken at least a day or so for things to really spread with the newspapers and such.” He paused, staring down at his bag.

“And now it will take seconds.” Natasha finished for him. “You know you don’t have to do it. Even being on the show doesn’t mean you have to go through with coming out.”

“And you know that’s not going to happen.” Steve met her eyes with a hard look of determination. “I want it done. I’m tired of hiding behind a lie. I’m tired of not being able to live my life the way I want just because I happen to be some fucking national icon.” He didn’t miss Natasha’s smirk at that phrase, blushing slightly as he knew what she was thinking. “And damn it Nat, I’m sick at the idea that TJ thinks so little of his own happiness that he’s willing to give up the ability to be together like any other couple just to save me the shit storm this is likely to become.”

“You two are so fucking perfect for each other.” She shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t expect you to back down, but I wanted to say it anyway. You change your mind at the last second and we’re all gonna love you and respect you just as much after as we do now. Just remember that.”

“I will.” Steve climbed onto the other side of the bed, reaching out to pet Bucky.

“And you know that’s not going to happen.” Steve met her eyes with a hard look of determination. “I want it done. I’m tired of hiding behind a lie. I’m tired of not being able to live my life the way I want just because I happen to be some fucking national icon.” He didn’t miss Natasha’s smirk at that phrase, blushing slightly as he knew what she was thinking. “And damn it Nat, I’m sick at the idea that TJ thinks so little of his own happiness that he’s willing to give up the ability to be together like any other couple just to save me the shit storm this is likely to become.”

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“I will.” Steve climbed onto the other side of the bed, reaching out to pet Bucky.

“Now, I have one more question for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you want me to come with you? Be there in case things get out of hand? I know Tony and Pepper will be there, but I just …”

“No.” Steve winced when he realized how sharp his answer sounded, but looked up at her to explain. “I need you here. With him.” Steve shook his head, a hint of panic in his eyes. “I just … I know … Fuck, it’s stupid, but last time …” He stopped, closing his eyes as he tried to get the words
Natasha understood. Wrapping her small hand around his on the bed, she squeezed tight. “I get it. Last time you and I took off all hell broke loose. I know you know he wouldn’t be offering up a repeat of that mess even if he were alone, but Sam, Clint, Bruce, and I will be here to keep him occupied. He’ll barely have time to notice you’re gone.”

“Thanks, Nat.”

“That’s what family is for. Plus it means I get to stay with these three.” She winked at him as she scooped the now waking Clint into her arms. “Maybe I can convince Bucky he likes me better than he likes you.”

Hearing his name, the kitten peered up at her before turning his furry head toward the hand that was stroking him. Seeing Steve, he stretched his small body before launching himself at the soldier’s chest.

“Well, it was worth a thought.” Natasha giggled. “I’m beginning to not be joking about the idea that Barnes reincarnated as a Scottish fold. I mean Clint and Peggy show some level of preference for TJ and me, but that one takes it to an entirely different level. He really wasn’t too please about being kept away from you last night.”

Steve chuckled as the held a hand under Bucky’s body, giving him something to support him as he climbed onto Steve’s shoulder again. “I’d argue, but he does seem to have an uncanny attachment.” He reached up to scratch behind the kitten’s ears. “Sorry buddy, but you have to stay here. I promise I won’t be gone long.”

Bucky head butted him in the nose, causing Natasha to giggle. “I think your request to leave has been denied.”

Giving the kitten a rather pathetic look, Steve scooped his back off the bed. “Hopefully he won’t hold my defiance against me.” He was at a loss as to how to detach Bucky from his shoulder so he could leave.

“Just let him hitch a ride down with you. TJ or I can bring him back to the others once you’re out the door.” Natasha grabbed the garment back off the closet door hook. “Let’s go before Tony starts getting antsy.”

“Lead the way,” Steve followed her out of the room and down the stairs. As soon as they reached the foyer, Tony grabbed his suitcase and disappeared out the door with Natasha, leaving TJ and Steve alone.

“Try to have some fun.” TJ started. “And don’t let them stress you out. No matter people say, remember why you’re doing this and that at the end of the day, their opinions don’t really matter. They’ll all love you again as soon you save the world anyway.”

TJ stepped closer, wrapping Steve in the tightest hug he could manage. He laughed when Bucky reached out and swatted his ear.

“Listen here ya little hellion, you’re stuck with me until he gets back, so you better play nice.”

Bucky’s answering howl sounded less like acceptance and more like a determined objection to TJ’s statement.

“Something tells me the sweet, cuddly version of Bucky is going to go into hiding while you’re
Steve frowned, suddenly worried that he was creating a problem for the others.

“Relax, Steve.” TJ soothed, seeing the concern flood the blond’s eyes. “We’ll be just fine. I can deal with a bit of attitude from a kitten, and Natasha is here to back me up.”

“Don’t let him terrorize you.” Steve shook his head, pulling the kitten off his shoulder and handing it to TJ. “I’d rather not come back to you covered in scratches.”

“You won’t. Now get out there before Tony comes in and drags you out by force.”

Steve leaned forward, pressing a quick kiss to TJ’s cheek before disappearing out the door.

Chapter End Notes

So there might be an interesting little bit of Clint and TJ coming in the next chapter. Or I suppose I could delete it and write something else ;)}
“Hey TJ.” Clint slid onto the barstool, watching as the other man pulled a pan of something out of the oven.

“Hey Clint, hungry?” TJ set the pan down before turning to the archer. “It’ll be a few minutes before those are ready to cut into, but I can probably find something else for you to munch in the meantime.”

“Is there a reason you try to feed me every time I come in here?” Clint asked, curious at the slight hint of panic in TJ’s eyes as he was clearly trying to figure out what he could offer up to eat immediately.

“Why else would you come into the kitchen?” TJ swallowed.

“Maybe to see what you were up to and hang out? Ever think of that?” Clint arched his brow, watching for TJ’s reaction.

“Um … uh … why?” TJ’s eyes fixed on the counter in front of Clint, unsure enough of things not to want to meet his eyes.

“Remember when I first got here and Nat declared that we were going to be good friends?”

“Yeah.” TJ leaned back against the counter, eyes slowly lifting so he was watching Clint. Despite having been in the same house for several days at this point, they hadn’t actually been alone much.

“Well with all our company and other excitement, we really haven’t had a chance to hang out yet to work on that. And whether she was giving me an order or just predicting we’d hit it off, I’m damn sure not going to tell her I didn’t make the time to get to know you.” He smirked. “Plus I heard that you refused to kick me off the bed to test her theory of me sleeping through anything, and that gets you serious bonus points in my book. Along with all the incredibly good food.”

“So if Natasha hadn’t said that you wouldn’t be here?” TJ frowned a bit, wondering if Clint was really only making nice for her.

“Nope. I’d still be here. I’m not always the quickest to warm up to new faces, but you fit here. And you make Cap happier than I’ve ever seen him.” Clint paused, eying TJ. “And something tells me there’s a good bit of mischief hiding untapped in you, and I can always use a partner in crime.”

“If I could remind you,” JARVIS’s voice interrupted, “I believe we’d like to avoid causing actual property damage to this residence.”

“Jeez, you accidentally cause one little fire in the tower and nobody every let’s you forget it.”
TJ stared, mouth agape at the archer. “You started a fire in the tower?”

“I didn’t mean too. I was just trying to get the jump on Tony. He had his back to me and I didn’t realize he was working with a torch. It didn’t end well, despite Dum-E’s best effort with the fire extinguisher.” Clint had the good grace to look guilty.

“How come I feel like I need to see this to actually understand just how not well that ended?” TJ eyed Clint, trying to imagine the scene without having any idea what Tony’s workshop or what he assumed was some sort of robotic assistant looked.

“Conveniently,” JARVIS intoned in a voice that gave away just how much fun he was having tormenting Clint. “I happen to have footage if you care to look at the tablet on the wall.”

“Oh I care to look.” TJ laughed. “I definitely care to look.”

“JARVIS.” Clint whined. “Why do you hate me?”

“I don’t hate you, Clint.” JARVIS answered as the video started to play. “I just take great pleasure in tormenting you given how much pleasure you seem to take in tormenting sir.”

By the time Natasha and Sam found the pair in the kitchen, TJ was laughing so hard he had tears streaming down his face.

“What did you do to him?” Nat glared playfully at Clint.

“I didn’t do anything. It was JARVIS …”

Natasha’s laugh made him stop short. “And which video of your lunacy was J showing that left TJ in this state?” She tried to regain composure from the laughter, but Sam had already caught the giggles from watching TJ and she was realizing it was a losing battle.

“Which video? How many videos are there?” Clint’s eyes narrowed as he stared at her.

“Enough.” She choked out, still laughing.

“JARVIS?” Clint asked, knowing he’d get an answer.

“I have 147 videos of your various antics on my servers.” JARVIS answered smugly.

“Seriously? Why? And why hasn’t Tony done something to stop me if there’s that much 71, believe sir appreciates your humor and the inherent sense of camaraderie implied by such acts.” The AI’s response was full of fondness this time.

“Well damn. Didn’t see that one coming.” Clint shook his head, grinning as the other three seemed to be getting past the fit of laughter. “In that case, who wants to help me plan something for when he gets back?”

“I can think of worse things to do with ourselves.” Sam smirked. “I’m in.”

TJ glanced at Natasha, noting the mischievous sparkle in her eye before answering. “Me too.”

“Might as well.” Nat grinned. “We should find Bruce and rope him into the madness too.”

“What are you finding me for?” The scientist in question strolled into the kitchen, an empty tea cup in his hand.
“Pranking Tony.” Clint waggled his eyebrows dramatically as he spoke.

“Just promise we aren’t actually going to cause any damage this time. I know how your pranks tend to get out of control sometimes.” Bruce shook his head, chuckling as he started to make a fresh cup of tea.

“I promise,” Clint grudgingly replied despite never having entertained the idea of damaging the house they’d all so quickly fallen in love with.

Dishing up the barely cooled brownies into bowls that Natasha promptly topped off with vanilla ice cream, TJ turned his head to Clint. “So, what are we going to do?”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“This is one heck of a view, Tony. It’s not New York, but it’s beautiful.” Steve stood next to the other man as they leaned over the railing of the large deck on the newly rebuilt Malibu house.

“Yeah, a bit less human interference in this view.” Tony’s eyes shifted sideways, trying to get a good look at Steve without being obvious.

“Is this the point where you give me the same pep talk I got from everyone else?” Steve angled his head, catching Tony watching.

“Well I was going to try to be smooth about it, but I suppose it is. Or at least some version of it.” Tony shrugged. “That a problem?”

“Once upon I time I might have said yes and told you to mind your own business, but I think we’re passed that. So no. It’s not a problem. After all, this is likely to drag all of you through the media just by association, especially you since you’re going on the show with me.”

Tony practically snorted in amusement. “Oh Steve, don’t you realize how many times I’ve dragged myself under the lens of public scrutiny with my own antics. I’m quite at home in the middle of a media frenzy. It’s you I’m worried about.” Tony took a deep breath. “It’s just … I know you’re made of tougher stuff than some of us gave you credit for, even without the serum, but people these days … The internet gives people this sense of protection or anonymity that makes them feel like they can say anything they want without consequences. Sometimes it’s used for good. Other times people are even bigger assholes than usual just because they feel like they can be.”

“I haven’t completely lived in a bubble since I came out of the ice, Tony. I’ve spent some time on the web.” Steve watched his friend thoughtfully.

“I know you haven’t. I just want to make sure you’re prepared for this. I’m not trying to stop you. I know that’d be a lost cause, and I’m really hoping we can shut the worst of it down without you ever having to see it. I just don’t want to you think even worse of what we’ve done to the world since you went to all the trouble of saving it because humans have done a lot of epically cool shit since then, some of us kinda went the other direction and became even more questionable.”

This time Steve chuckled, seeing that Tony was trying to ease the mood at least a bit. “Promise, I won’t make any efforts to go back in time and undo my prior work because people are assholes. I won’t even hang up the shield and quit trying to protect them going forward. I have to believe that people like that are only a small portion of the population, even if they manage to be some of the most vocal. Most people are still good. I have to believe that.”

Tony nodded, turning to look at the waves as they crashed into the rocks below again. “Most of the time I even think you’re right about that.”
Steve didn’t respond, following Tony’s lead and watching the surf. He did wonder just what people, other than Howard, had said and done to Tony to cause that last statement. Most of the time implied that some of the time Tony felt like more people were in that cruel and very vocal population. The soldier frowned at the thought, remembering the things he’d said to Tony before the battle of New York.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly it will likely take a couple of weeks to get the next chapter up. I'm leaving Saturday for a 5 day trip to Mexico City for work. Alas, more will come soon. Hope you all are continuing to enjoy. Even though I usually don't get a chance to respond to all the comments, I do read and appreciate every single one!
Surprise! I'm not dead!!! Even better, the Ellen appearance is finally happening!!

“Hello everybody! Thank you for coming out today!” Ellen bounced on to stage with all her usual energy. She couldn’t wait to tell the audience the surprise they were in for. Smiling and waving, she waited for the excited cheers to settle before she bothered trying to speak.

“First off, you should all know that while we normally tape the show a few days in advance, today is going to be a bit different. Today the show is airing with just a couple of minutes of delay. We wanted today’s guests to be a surprise for everyone.”

Ellen watched the crowd, saw the curiosity growing on their faces.

“You all know that aside from the occasional prank,” she did her best to look innocent, “we try to keep the show fun and friendly for both guests and audience. Every once in a while that means we get access to guests that are less interested in the normal interview circuit. That definitely holds true for one of today’s guests, so I hope you’ll help me show him how much fun we can have after we dance.”

From behind the stage, Steve and Tony listened and watched on the monitors as Ellen and her audience danced.

“Think her little pep talk will make any difference?” Steve wondered aloud.

“Honestly?” Tony watched him. “I don’t think it’s the people here you have to worry about. Can’t imagine a lot of closed minded assholes go to the trouble of getting tickets to see the show taped.”

“Keep moving around like that and you’ll dance your way straight onto camera before she calls for us.” Steve chuckled as Tony kept half dancing to the song.

“You ready for your televised dance lesson?” Stark grinned as he tried to get Steve to move along with the music.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Steve shrugged, trying to feel a little more sure about it than he really did.

“Don’t worry, Cap. I’m sure you’ll do great. And if you don’t I can take one for the team and distract them. Wouldn’t be the first time I took a fall.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” Steve watched the monitor, noting that it appeared to be in the commercial break. “Looks like we’ll be up soon.”

Within a few minutes, one of the crew was standing with them waiting to send them through the opening to the set with Ellen.

“Just so you know,” the man that couldn’t be more than in his early twenties spoke. “I’m a huge fan of you guys. Love the way you manage to save the world and all that.”
“Anytime.” Steve and Tony both smiled. Tony had to wonder if the poor kid was quite as
dumbstruck with all the big guests, or if it was just them.

“There’s your cue. Have fun.” The aide sent them on their way.

“Don’t worry when you see our guests. There’s no alien invasion on set, but just when I’d about
given up on the idea of getting an Avenger on the show.” Ellen had to pause as the crowd erupted in
screams at the direction her intro was taking. “I managed to get two.”

Steve and Tony strolled around the corner, waving at the audience as they approached Ellen.

“In case you’ve been living under a rock and aren’t sure who these two strapping young lads are, let
me introduce you to Mr. Tony Stark and Captain Steve Rogers.” Ellen laughed as the audience
screamed and clapped even louder. “Or as some of you might have heard of them - Iron Man and
Captain America.”

When everyone finally started settling down, Ellen led them over to the couch. “I have to say, I
couldn’t be happier that you guys decided to come for a visit. I know it is a real treat for the audience
as well.”

“We’re happy to be here.” Steve smiled, relaxing just a bit as he took in the unbelievably warm
reception they were getting.

“We really are,” Tony added. “Cap and I had to do quite the round of press conference and news
interviews following New York, so it’s nice to make an appearance without the global security crisis
beforehand.”

“Yeah, I think we’re all pretty happy to see you without the accompanying alien army.” Ellen looked
at the audience.

As hoped, the conversation progressed easily through general questions about the team. True to her
word, Ellen kept the focus away from the members of the Avengers that tried to stay largely out of
the spotlight to protect their identities and work.

After a while, Ellen guided the conversation intended direction, letting things get a bit more personal
for Steve. “So it had to be a pretty big adjustment waking up and finding out you missed a handful of
decades.”

“Not gonna lie,” Steve leaned back, feeling Tony lean just a bit further into his shoulder in support.
“Life after the ice has been a bit rough sometimes. Things have changed so much from what I
remember and for me it seemed like it was overnight. It’s a pretty lonely feeling sometimes. This isn’t
the kind of adjustment anybody really understands. I mean if you stop and think about it, it’s like an
insane combination of being in a coma for a really long time and having to readjust from a war zone
to life back at home all at the same time. Neither is an easy adjustment. The combination was a bit
brutal.”

Steve paused as several members of the audience called out their support. He caught Tony’s eye and
corresponding grin at all the “We love you, Cap” yells they heard.

“Thanks.” Steve let his eyes wander over the audience. He couldn’t help but feel that Tony was
right, this was the right place to do this. “One of the strangest things about coming back after so long
is seeing how people remember me and things that have been accepted as fact about me even if they
aren’t true.” Steve spoke the words that determined how his coming out would go.

Their host picked right up on it. “You mean the history books don’t have it all right?” Ellen asked,
adding a dramatic gasp as she tried not to laugh too hard.

“They might have gotten a few things wrong.” Steve gave the audience a shrug and a look that said a few might be an understatement.

“Any particular ones you care to share?” Ellen leaned forward, her expression full of support and encouragement.

“For one, I’m not nearly as innocent as the history books make me out to be. I grew up in Brooklyn and was on the front lines of the war. You pick up some colorful vocabulary along the way.”

“I’d ask you to demonstrate, but I don’t know that the audiences at home would appreciate the bleeps.” Ellen teased.

“Yeah, might get lost in translation.” Tony chimed in. “So what else did they teach us wrong?”

“Well, I might have been the figurehead for the Howling Commandos, but that didn’t mean those guys blindly followed me. I picked them for my team because they’d shown incredible bravery, commitment, and a keen ability to think for themselves. The commandos had my back through everything because they knew I had theirs and I listened to their input. It’s kinda like the Avengers now. The powers that be seem to look at me as the leader, but the truth is we’re a team. No one of us is as strong alone as we are together.”

“He’s right about that,” Tony added. “Grant it, we all defer to him sometimes because he’s an amazing strategist, but Cap always looks to the team to help vet a plan and identify the best approach forward. Of course, that doesn’t mean we still don’t get his disappointed look when we go off script. He holds us to a pretty high standard.”

“They hold themselves to a pretty high standard.” Steve amended. “And they make me better by holding me to one as well.”

“It sounds like you guys have a pretty good working relationship.” Ellen interjected.

“We do.” Steve and Tony answered together, laughing with the audience when they realized they sounded so in sync.

“It wasn’t without it’s challenges, but we’ve come along way.” Tony added. “I count Steve as one of my few real friends. I’ve got his back no matter what.” Tony looked straight at the camera, letting his words hang for a few seconds. “Pretty sure the rest of our motley crew of heroes feels the same way.”

“Sounds like you’re pretty protective. Any particular reason you feel the need to defend a national hero?”

“National hero or not, I can manage to get myself into some sticky situations.” Steve grinned. “Fortunately, these days whether I’m stirring up a hornet’s nest in a fight or challenging public opinion, I know the team has my back.” Steve took a slow breath knowing it was time. “And this time their support means a whole lot. We got to this point talking about the things the history books got wrong. I’ve struggled with some of those things since coming out of the ice. Next to coping with PTSD, realizing history tried to fit me into a neat little box that I didn’t belong in has been a real challenge. For a while I considered just leaving it be, letting the world force me to be something I’m not. Fortunately, in recent weeks I’ve come to realize that letting that happen isn’t fair to me, it isn’t fair to the people that care about me, and it’s not fair to all the others that feel like their alone and struggling in the same situation.”
“The truth is, while I stand and fight for freedom and justice, I’m not the paragon of conservative values that some want me to be. Seventy years ago I couldn’t come out as bisexual because the chances are I would have gotten killed for it. Today I’m coming out as bisexual because I’m tired of hiding and tired of hearing about others like me struggling to be accepted.”

“And before any of you start jumping to conclusions,” Tony spoke, letting Steve catch his breath. “I’m still committed to Ms. Potts, but the two of us along with the rest of the team fully support Steve in this. Now more than ever, I’m proud to stand with Cap.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments are very much appreciated. I’m really hoping I didn’t jack this one up.

Also, for those that want to play a role in the way this story continues to unfold, I’m looking for some input. In response to Cap’s revelation and Tony’s choice of words supporting him, the aftermath of the show will include a flood of activity on social media tagged with #IStandWithCap. The tag will be used by supporters to show their love, give their reasons for standing with him, and generally support the idea of being free to come out without fear. So, if you want to contribute something, feel free to include it in comments to this chapter or hit me up via message or ask on Tumblr (@jlstreck). I will be including responses in the next chapter or two.
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

No, this is not an illusion. Yes, this is the 2nd chapter in 2 days. Doubt I'll be able to keep this up, but hey at least we're getting somewhere!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wedged between Sam and Nat on the couch, TJ stared at the television screen. No matter how much he believed in Steve, part of him had expected him to back out at the last second. People just didn’t follow through where he was concerned.

“Hey,” Nat whispered next to him. “It’s okay.” She reassured, reaching up to brush away tears he hadn’t realized.

He stared mutely at her for several seconds before nodding. “Yeah, it will be. I just … I guess part of me didn’t really expect him to go through it with.”

“But why …” Clint started before Natasha turned her head to glare at him.

“It’s okay. You’re still adjusting to this whole concept of people actually doing what they say they will. There’s nothing wrong with that.” She tangled her fingers with his, letting the conversation die down as they watched things unfold on screen. The audience has fallen silent for a few seconds after his announcement, but by the time Tony finished speaking the room had come to life. TJ was amazed at how many people were standing, cheering for Steve.

“I wonder if Tony realizes he basically just started a hashtag?” Sam laughed.

“What?” TJ asked, eyes still fixed on the screen.

“You don’t see it? His whole ‘Now more than ever, I’m proud to stand with Cap.’ It’s totally going to turn into a thing. Ya know hashtag ‘I stand with Cap’. Somebody check Twitter or Instagram or Tumblr or something. It’s gotta be a thing by now.” Sam looked at the others like they were crazy if they didn’t see it.

“Shit. He’s right.” Bruce stared at his tablet screen. “At this rate it will be trending in no time.”

“JARVIS, can you compile everything? Something tells me Steve will want to see them.” TJ spoke, eyes still fixed on Steve as things shifted to he and Tony learning what appeared to be some sort of hip hop something from Ellen and one of the guys from So You Think You Can Dance.

“Of course.” The AI immediately answered. “I’ll make sure he, Pepper, and Tony all access to it when they leave the studio.”

“Thanks, J.” TJ’s phone vibrated in his lap and he almost jumped off the couch. Glancing at the screen, he saw a message from Doug. Laughing, he turned it so Natasha could read it easily. “News travels fast.”

“What?” Clint leaned over trying to see what they were talking about.
“Doug sent me a message. And I quote, ‘Does this mean what I think it means?’ What do you think I should tell him?’”

“Well, you could annoy him and plead the fifth.” Sam grinned. “Or you give him an answer completely unrelated to what we all know he’s asking.”

TJ smirked. “Might as well annoy him some.” He quickly typed back, “Does what mean what?”

“Either Tony is throwing this whole dancing thing or Steve is actually a better dancer than he is. I mean look at them? Cap’s keeping up with that tWitch guy and Tony looks like a nutcase.” Clint snickered.

“I have to imagine Tony’s got better skills than that, though possibly not as many as Steve. I know he was nervous about the whole dancing thing, but he’s killin’ that.” Bruce’s voice was full of awe as he gestured toward the screen.

TJ laughed when his phone vibrated again, reading the message aloud for the others. “Ass. Don’t play stupid.”

“Well now he’s just making it easy.” Clint teased, grabbing for TJ’s phone. “What about my ass?” He spoke as he typed it in, glancing at TJ to make sure he wasn’t going to make him mad before sending.

“Go for it. You’re right, he made that one too easy.”

By the time the show ended, the five of them had all taken turns responding to Doug’s increasing annoyed texts. TJ was pretty sure that Doug kept egging them on just to keep TJ from worrying too much about Steve. He couldn’t complain though, because the distraction had worked pretty effectively.

The next time TJ’s phone went off, it was Steve calling.

“Hey you!” TJ answered without hesitation, jumping to his feet and heading for the door to find a little bit of privacy. “Did you have fun?”

“The dancing was more fun the I expected.” Steve chuckled. “Honestly, the whole thing went a million times better than I could have anticipated.”

TJ could hear a good bit of noise in the background and guessed they were still at the studio.

“We haven’t left yet. Tony’s making lifelong fans of the entire audience at the moment. I should probably join them, but I wanted to check in.” TJ caught the longing in Steve’s voice. He wanted to be back home.

“We’re all good here. Lots of excitement over how things went. We were having fun harassing Doug via text and now we’re enjoying the hashtag Tony sparked.”

“What?” Cap sounded a bit confused.

“People latched on to his whole stand with Cap thing pretty quick. JARVIS is pulling the summary feed from all the social network so you guys can check it out when you have time. To say the least, you have an army of people standing behind you.”

“Wow. I guess I’ll have to catch up while we’re on the plane. I … wow.” Steve wasn’t quite sure what to say. He’d braced himself for hate, but had avoided hoping for the opposite.
"I know. It’s a lot, but it’s really cool. You were hoping coming out would make a difference to at least one or two people. It looks like it’s making a difference to a lot more than that.” TJ couldn’t help but be proud of the way Steve took his stand. He just hoped that the outpouring of love managed to outweigh the hate that was inevitably brewing at the same time.

“If this keeps up, we need to find a way to turn the support into a bigger thing. Maybe we can get some initial legs to the Stark Foundation work sooner than we’d planned.” Steve suggested.

“I like the way you think, but from the sounds of things you need to get back to that crowd. I’ll start thinking through things and we’ll figure something out when you get home. Let me know when you’re on the plan, okay?”

“Will do.” Steve answered. “And TJ, thank you.”

“I …”

“Don’t argue,” Steve cut TJ off with a laugh, knowing he’d try to downplay whatever Steve was thanking him for. “Despite everything you’ve gone through, you’ve had my back for this and it means a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” TJ conceded, knowing Steve wasn’t going to let him minimize whatever roll he thought he played. “Now go visit with your adoring fans. We’ll see you in a few hours.”

“See you soon.”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Alright, Pepper. What’s the damage so far?” Steve asked as they settled in on the jet, pulling out the In-N-Out Burgers they’d stopped to grab on the way to the airport.

“How much do you want to know?” Pepper asked. They’d decided that for the first couple of days she would manage the majority of what he was exposed to from online and media sources, but he’d made her promise she’d give him honest assessment and not hide things.

“Let’s just start with the high level on all of it.” Steve shrugged before taking a bite of his burger.

“Well, you already know about the #IStandWithCap thing. You can scroll through JARVIS’s summary on that one on your own.” She pointed to the tablet in front of him. “Overall, it’s a mix. Ultra-conservative outlets are having a fit, the idiots at Westboro Baptist Church are threatening protests.”

“Oh, I want to see them try.” Tony cackled at that idea.

“Whatever it is you’re cooking up,” Pepper sighed, “I might just let you do it this time.” Before Tony could get too excited she moved on. “Liberal outlets are thrilled. Most of the more moderate groups appear to be leaning positive, though there is a bit of a mix there. As far as the public goes, the hashtag is at the top of the trending list right now. The counter one is trending, but at 9th in the rankings.”

“So more positive than negative. That’s actually a hell of a lot better than I expected.” Steve was quite surprised. “Think it’s just the calm before the storm?”

“I think the storm is starting, but I think you’ve got enough reinforcements that you’ll weather it without a problem.” Tony answered first. “Have you considered what you want to do next? I mean you can definitely just ignore it all and go about your merry way.”
“Which would be tempting, but defeat part of the reason I decided to go completely public. The response is leaning positive, but that doesn’t negate the fact that the hate is there. If I were a normal person, I wouldn’t have a team of people assessing responses and giving me the summaries. I’d have to face every bit of the hate or completely isolate myself to avoid it.”

“True.”

“I don’t like bullies. Never have.” Steve spoke with conviction. “I’m not saying this becomes my primary focus, but if I’m really going to help all the other people like me that don’t fit into conventionally accepted norms, I’ve gotta do something.”

“Let me guess, that whole ‘try to help people in a year or so’ timeline I gave TJ for the Foundation work is gonna be more like ‘Now. Let’s help people now.”’ Tony grinned.

“That a problem?”

“Not at all, Cap. Not at all.” Tony was almost jumping in his seat. “I say we finish eating and call TJ so we can start planning the Foundation’s inaugural event.”

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is always appreciated. Seriously. You have no idea how excited I get when I get those little notifications from AO3.

And feel free to keep submitting for the #IStandWithCap content.
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone that contributed to #IStandWithCap

:) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The car pulled into the drive,” JARVIS’s voice chimed through TJ’s phone as he, Natasha, and Sam played with the kittens on the kitchen floor. By the time he was finished, TJ was almost out the door.

“You’d almost think he missed them?” Sam laughed as he and Natasha rose, following at a more sedate pace even though he was certain she would have run just as quickly had she not wanted to give TJ a few seconds to collect himself.

The three kittens trailed behind them, tackling each other to the ground as they walked. They were becoming increasingly playful as they continued to thrive around TJ and the Avengers.

“Don’t forget to breath,” Natasha reminded TJ as she slid into place beside him, wrapping her arm around his waist as his came to rest around her shoulders. She couldn’t help but marvel at the relative normalcy of standing with family waiting for someone to return home. It was an unfamiliar yet welcome feeling.

TJ inhaled deeply, holding the air for a few seconds before exhaling slowly. “I’m not sure if I’m more excited or nervous.” He admitted quietly.

“Nervous?”

“I don’t know. I guess there’s always going to be a part of me that expects him to realize he’s wasting his time with me when there are so many other options out there. You’ve read all the stuff people are posting. I’m pretty sure he could have his pick of over half the population. Why settle for me?”

Natasha leaned more heavily into his side. She knew part of it was just the nervous excitement of Steve returning home, but part of what TJ expressed was because somewhere deep inside he truly believed he didn’t deserve to be loved by someone that wasn’t going to use him and leave him. While it wouldn’t change anything, she thought it might be time to pay Reeves a visit. At least she would feel like she had avenged the hurt done to the man that had become a brother to her.

“What would you say if Steve said the same thing?” She challenged him knowingly.

“If … you mean what I said when Steve basically did say the same thing.”

“Exactly.” Natasha grinned.

“Point taken, but you know it’s not exactly the same thing.” TJ started to argue, but the car pulled to a stop in front of them and his focus was shifted Steve stretching to his full height as he emerged. “Welcome home!”
The pair met in the middle of the stairs, embracing each other as if they hadn’t seen each other in weeks not the short two days Steve had been gone.

“’It’s good to be home.” Steve whispered into his ear, not yet ready to release his hold. “I missed you.”

“We spoke five times while you were gone.” TJ teased, feeling his nerves lessen now that he was wrapped inside Steve’s arms.

“Not the same as being here though. My phone may be able to do all kinds of crazy things, but it sucks at giving hugs.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?” Tony fussed as he appeared beside them with Pepper. “I gave you hugs.”

“Leave them alone,” Pepper admonished before turning to give Natasha a quick hug.

“You did and I appreciated every one of them.” Steve released TJ so Tony and Pepper could get their hugs. “Still not the same though.”

“So what have you kids been up to while we were gone?” Tony asked as they moved toward Sam and the entryway.

“You know us, wild keggers and strippers,” Sam teased.

“I’d almost believe it of you, but not the rest.” Tony countered.

“Fair enough. Would you believe watching movies, getting our asses handed to us by Natasha, and playing with the mascots?”

“Yes. That I believe.” Tony laughed. “Speaking of the mascots,” he watched as Bucky disentangled himself from the wrestling match with the other two and charged at Steve.

Realizing he was going to turn into a human climbing post, Steve squatted down and grabbed the kitten before his jeans ended up full of holes. “Hey there, Buck. Were you good for TJ and Nat?”

“He did just fine.” TJ scratched the kittens ear as it rubbed against Steve. “He missed you. We all missed you, but we managed pretty well.”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

After dinner, everyone claimed they were tired and planning to head to their rooms early for the night. Steve and TJ saw through the rouse, but appreciated the others giving them some not so subtle encouragement to have a quiet evening to themselves.

“Do you want me to take the babies?” Natasha offered after she finished drying the last of the dinner dishes that they’d washed.

“Nah. I think Buck might take it personally if we kick him out when I just got home.” He looked over to what he could only describe as a jungle gym for cats by the window where Bucky was perched staring at him.

“Yeah, I didn’t think you’d go for it, but thought I’d ask anyway.” She gave them each a hug before disappearing through the doorway.

“Think you can wrangle the furry ones if I grab us a couple bottles of water?” TJ asked, reaching
“Yeah, I can manage.” Crossing over to the kittens, he grabbed Bucky first, letting the kitten climb up to his favorite perch on his shoulder before picking up the other two. TJ couldn’t suppress a giggle when Steve turned to face him.

“Hold still. I need a picture of this.” Setting the bottles on the counter, he pulled his phone out to snap a picture as Steve grinned back at him.

“Send me that one. From what I’ve been told there’s nothing like cat pictures to help diffuse some of the madness on social media. Might as well make that my second post.” TJ and Pepper had helped him set up Twitter and Instagram before he left for California. Despite only posting once, he’d gained over a million followers in just a few short days. “I feel like I’m disappointing them all by not posting much.”

TJ tucked the bottles of water under his arms so he could do as Steve asked as they headed to Steve’s bedroom. “I’m sure they won’t complain getting a picture, but I’d imagine your supporters understand you being a bit scarce at the moment.”

“I don’t know. I know I agreed to it, and I really don’t relish the idea of seeing all the negative, but part of me thinks it’s going to look like I’m sticking my head in the sand or hiding behind a wall of people. Put in a similar position, most of them can’t do that, so am I really setting much of an example if I do?”

Steve smiled as Bucky head butted the side of his head, seeming to pickup Steve’s building tension.

“You might be right. You might not. Coming out is almost always met with mixed reactions, but not everyone has to deal with the level of public scrutiny that you do. People will forgive you for hiding a bit to let it die down.” TJ watched Steve’s face, recognizing his expression almost immediately. “That being said, if you want to jump feet first into the fire, I’ll be right by your side and so will the rest of the family.”

Shutting the bedroom door behind them, TJ deposited the waters on the small table near the window before helping Steve divest himself of the three kittens.

“I never have been able to sit back and let a bully go unchallenged.” Steve smirked at TJ as he pulled out his phone. Before TJ could respond he shook his head, “Don’t worry. I’m not gonna run around social media picking fights with close minded trolls. Stooping to their level won’t do any good.”

TJ let out the breath he’d been holding as he considered all he ways unleashing Steve on the trolls could go very wrong. “Glad to hear it. I’m sure Pepper will be relieved too.” He grabbed Steve’s hand, pulling him onto the small couch they’d had delivered. “Why don’t we start with catching up on the latest from your hashtag?”

“Is that a hint to focus on the … positive seems like the wrong word …”

“Focus on the people that support you or are finding strength or comfort in your actions. Trust me, there’s nothing that drives internet trolls crazier than being ignored.” TJ pulled the hashtag feed up on his tablet so they could both see it.

#IStandWithCap because dedicating your life to saving the world doesn’t mean the world has a right to tell you how to live

Love Wins #Istandwithcap
Bi-SGR = Stars AND Stripes forever #IStandWithCap

If Steve Rogers, who has been scrutinized ever since he came out of the ice, has the courage to come out then so can I #IStandWithCap

What’s the big deal? Cap can be who is now now and there’s nothing wrong with that. I’m bisexual too lol he’s my hero! #IStandWithCap

*screaming* #IStandWithCap until the end. So proud of you Cap! Bravery at its truest!

#IStandWithCap because in a world where gender identity is still the norm, being ‘different’ isn’t so different anymore. #NonBinaryPride

#IStandWithCap, it's not easy to come out. Doing it on television must have been so hard, I'm proud of you cap! And I thank you, for showing the world that everyone can be like us, that not everyone is the default of cishet. Thank you so much, Cap! I'm a proud pansexual nonbinary dude and I stand with you until the end.

The list of messages went on and on. Every time Steve thought they were getting to the end, more were added.

“So what should I say with the kitten pic?”

“How about, ‘Love wins. So do kittens.’ Gives a nod to some of the messages you’ve received, but is still simple.”

“I like it.” Steve started typing up the post in Instagram. “Remind me how to make it post to Twitter too?”

“Just push that button.” TJ pointed at the screen.

“Guess that should have been obvious.” Steve looked apologetic for asking what appeared to be a stupid question.

“It’s been a long day. You’re allowed to miss a few things.” TJ leaned closer, letting his shoulder rest against Steve’s. “What do you say we crawl in bed with the kittens and watch a movie?”

“I say that sounds like a plan I can get behind.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you're all continuing to enjoy!

For those that didn’t get the notice, I decided to post the original, now alternate, ending for American Punchline. Just imagine TJ never landed back in the hospital, so all the awesome Avengers family stuff that’s happened since then didn’t. You can find it here.
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

So I feel like I should apologize for the ridiculous almost 4-month delay between chapters. I swear I haven’t just been off partying and ignoring you guys. Things got a little crazy right after the last chapter went up. For those that might care here’s the cliff notes version - from 3 days after I last posted until now I’ve had 7 different trips to various locations across the country including funerals for 2 grandmothers exactly 2 weeks apart. Add in getting actual work done, the rest of real life, and attempting to get myself in shape (because there’s nothing like 2 funerals to remind you why you should get healthy) and my time to write has been non-existent.

Anyway, I’m going to try to actually get the initial story wrapped up before hell freezes over and move into the sequel and various shorter follow-ups. On that note, if you plan to follow any related works make sure you’re following the American Punchline Collection, not just this fic.

Now onto the chapter …

“Why can’t I just kill him?” Clint huffed as he watched Natasha applying a shade of lipstick she only wore when she really meant business. “They’d never know it was me.”

“The arrow might give it away.” She rolled her eyes, careful not to smudge the red on her lips as she applied the finishing touches and rose from the small chair.

“I don’t like this.” The archer pouted.

“Relax,” Natasha tried not to laugh. “You don’t honestly think a slimy politician is too much for me to handle on my own do you?” Slipping into her nearly five inch Louboutin heels, she smiled feeling Clint’s arms wrapping around her waist as his chin rested on her shoulder.

“I don’t honestly think there is anything that is too much for you to handle on your own. I’m just whining because you won’t let me help.”

Patting his cheek affectionately, Natasha let her head rest against his. “You can have your turn later. Something tells me he’ll need at least one reminder.”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Where’s Nat?” Steve’s brow furrowed noticing that she was the only person not filing in for breakfast. His eyes landed on Clint, knowing the other man would know. Seeing Clint’s expression was somewhere between guilt and concern, made Steve tense. “Is she okay?”

“Oh yeah. She’s fine. Just perfect.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” TJ countered, immediately picking up that Clint was trying to hide
something.

“She’s just running an errand.”

Tony chuckled, drawing TJ and Steve’s attention to him. “Is there a reason why you’re trying not to tell them where she is?”

“No … maybe. She didn’t tell me if I was supposed to or not.” Clint finally admitted with a huff.

“I don’t believe Ms. Romanov intended for her whereabouts to be a secret.” JARVIS finally interceded. “Indeed, she almost seemed surprised not to find anyone in the kitchen when she departed.”

“So where is she?” TJ asked, getting a little freaked out by the avoidance of the question.

“Capitol Hill.” Clint huffed as he answered.

“Why?” Bruce spoke up, curious what Natasha would suddenly decide she needed to visit the capitol.

“Is this related to the tweet from last night?” Pepper chimed in, eyes slightly wide with whatever she had just put together.

“Yes.” Clint nodded, looking for all the world like he hoped Pepper was going to take over the explanation. “She decided it was time to play Guard Spider.”

“Guard Spider?” Tony was trying not to laugh. “Is that actually a thing?”

“Apparently,” Clint shrugged.

“Somebody start from the beginning, please.” Steve was getting more frustrated by the moment. “Who tweeted what that made Natasha decide she needed to take off first thing this morning to deal with it?” He noticed that everyone’s eyes immediately shifted from him to TJ.

“Just spit it out, guys. I’m pretty used to mud being flung in my direction.” TJ gestured for someone to fess up. Pepper grabbed a Stark pad from the counter, tapping the screen a few times before handing it over.

“You know the more he reveals his true self, the more I regret ever having thought he mattered.” TJ shook his head. “Obviously he’s managed to connect us somehow.”

“One stupid tweet isn’t worth Natasha’s effort,” Steve shook his head, “but I know she’s been antsy to pay him a visit for a while for other reasons. Reasons that definitely warrant a visit from the Black Widow.” Part of him wished he could be the first one to crack down on Reeves, but he knew that for a myriad of reasons, she was the right person for the task.

“Guard spider,” TJ giggled. “It has a ring to it.” Grabbing his plate, he joined Tony and Pepper at the table. “Hopefully she’ll give us a full report when she gets back.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will. We might even get pictures.” Clint snickered.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“I’m here to see Congressman Reeves.” Natasha strode up to the congressional aide, all haughty
confidence and sophistication.

“Do you have an appointment?” The aide squeaked, intimidated by the unknown woman.

“No, but I don’t think that will be a problem.” She smiled sweetly, further disarming the young aide.

“But the congressman said he wasn’t to be disturbed.” He just watched as she stepped closer, feeling his knees buckle as she applied the lightest pressure to his shoulder, making him collapse into his chair.

Natasha leaned close, whispering in his ear. “Then see that we aren’t disturbed.” She didn’t bother to wait for his response before slipping through the door to Reeves’ office.

“I thought I told you …” Sean fell silent as he looked up and realized it wasn’t his aide at the door.

Natasha sauntered into the room, not bothering to wait for an invitation or a rebuttal. “Good morning, Congressman.”

“I don’t believe I had any appointments this morning.” Sean spoke, voice betraying his nervousness at Natasha’s presence even though he didn’t appear to recognize her.

“Really? It’s been on my calendar for week.” Natasha pulled out her Stark phone, pretending to look at the calendar. “Yep. Right here. Priority meeting regarding a pathetic American punchline.” She glanced up, watching as Reeves went pale.

“How did … who are you?”

Ignoring his questions, she stepped closer to his desk. “You even sent a confirmation last night. I’m certain that’s what your ‘Not my captain’ message was meant to accomplish.”

“I …” Sean stammered, swallowing nervously as she perched on the corner of his desk, leaning over him.

“He may not be your captain, but he is mine.” All trace of a smile disappeared from Natasha’s face, her eyes alight with fury. She reached for his tie, wrapping it around her hand as she jerked him out of his seat. “I’m not sure where you learned it was okay to play the bully - turning on a man that did nothing but love you and then cowering behind a computer screen to harass someone that’s a thousand times the man you’ll ever be, but I’m here to remind you of your manners.”

“But I …”

“If the next thing out of your mouth is anything that resembles a denial I would think twice about finishing that statement.” Natasha’s expression stayed cool as he trembled in front of her. “You’re getting off easy this time. You’re going to walk out of here and it will be like I was never even here, but you need to know a few things. We’re watching you. If you so much as think about getting near TJ or Steve, mention them, or even allude to them in conversation, social media, or any other correspondence, we will know about it. If you step one foot out of line, we’ll appear when you least expect it. You make one comment about either of them or anyone close to them and every dirty secret you ever wanted to keep will be splashed across every major media outlet within minutes. Am I clear?”

Sean nodded, eyes wide in fear.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you.”
“Yes.” The congressman squeaked.

“Good.” Natasha pushed him back into his chair, turning on her heels to leave. “Lovely chatting with you. Don’t forget what I said.” She slipped out the door, disappearing before Sean’s aide could say a word.

“Congressman,” the aide jumped out of his chair and bolted through the office door. “Are you …”

“Ssshhh.” Reeves hissed. “Whatever it is you were going to ask, just don’t. Just forget it ever happened.” He grabbed for his phone, frantically pulling up Twitter to delete his tweet from the night before. He should have known he was playing with fire, but the idea of TJ moving on with someone like Steve Rogers drove him crazy. He hadn’t lied when he told TJ he was reviewing constituent letters that day at Starbucks. He just hadn’t told him that it was the third day he’d been there hoping to run into him. When he’d followed TJ outside, he’d just wanted to see who had caught the other man’s eye so quickly. When he’d seen Rogers he assumed TJ must have been playing nice with the Avenger as some type of penance with his mother. As soon as he heard about Steve’s coming out on Ellen, he knew he’d been wrong.

TJ had his issues, but Sean had quickly discovered that as far as Capitol Hill flings went very little measured up by comparison. As soon as his aide shut the door, Sean closed his eyes, sighing as he leaned back into his seat. He’d hoped to draw TJ out with his comment on Twitter, not end up getting threatened by a woman that looked like she could kill him without breaking a sweat. This day was not going as planned.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Pulling up in front of the house, Natasha was less than surprised to find Steve and TJ waiting for her. Stepping out of the car when Steve opened the door for her, she gave him a quick grin.

“I take it someone told you where I was.”

“How’d it go?” TJ asked, not bothering to confirm her statement.

“I just gave him a gentle reminder that he shouldn’t mess with the two of you - in any capacity.” She headed up the stairs, kicking off the heels the second she walked through the door. “I’m reasonably certain he didn’t even realize who I was, but I suppose the sense of mystery just adds to the fun.”

“Save anything for me?” Clint slid down the last few feet of the banister.

“Plenty. I told you I wasn’t going to actually hurt him, just give him a gentle reminder that he should play nice with others.” Natasha grinned. “Though I did promise him we would be watching and WE would be returning if he so much as breathed on the line again.” She emphasized the we heavily.

“Oh goody!” Clint clapped his hands together. “JARVIS, are you helping keep an eye on him?”

“Of course,” the AI confirmed. “I have been since TJ joined us.

“Of course you have,” TJ shook his head.

“Does that bother you?” Steve stared at him, eyes full of concern that somehow this crossed a line.

“Nope. It’s actually refreshing that for once it’s not my every word and move that’s being monitored. It’s the asshat that tried to fuck me over.”

“Well put.” Tony smirked as he joined the group. “J does keep tabs on all of us for safety and
security measures, but only because we have a propensity for landing in dangerous situations - usually not of our own making."

“I get it, Tony.” TJ nodded. “After growing up with my parents, the secret service, and the media constantly watching for my next fuck up, I am well aware that what monitoring is done here is done for very different reasons.”

“Good. Didn’t want to scare you off. Cap might not appreciate it.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t.” Steve quickly agreed, squeezing Tony’s shoulder in hopes that the shorter man knew he was simply agreeing, not judging Tony.

Deciding they’d had enough of the current topic, TJ turned his focus back to Natasha. “Have you eaten breakfast? I know it’s only a couple of hours until lunch, but I can throw something together for you.”

“I wouldn’t mind a bite of something. I slipped out without grabbing anything and didn’t feel like stopping on the way back.”

“Run up and throw something more comfortable on. Not that you don’t look amazing, but you’ll be covered in cat hair in minutes.” TJ grinned. “Then meet me in the kitchen.”

“Yes, sir.” Natasha gave him a playful salute before swiping her shoes of the floor and all but floating up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know a great many of us would like to hang the jerk up by his toes and tear him to pieces, but fortunately Natasha and the others have more sense. I’m reasonably certain the congressman will be having nightmares about his mysterious visitor for weeks to come though.

As always, comments and feedback are much appreciated. I know I’m the evil author that hasn’t updated in ages, but knowing that there is continued interest is great motivation to finding time to write.
Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

This one is short, but I thought I'd give you guys a little Monday present and go ahead and post :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What are you two up to?” Sam wandered into TJ and Steve’s office. “That may be the biggest white board I’ve ever seen. Where did you even find that?”

TJ and Steve both laughed as their friend walked around the massive board.

“Tony had it custom made for us. I think it killed him a bit not to install some super high tech version of one, but we both wanted an old school whiteboard.”

“Old school to you. Still pretty new to me.” Steve poked TJ in the side as he moved to write on a different section. “Of course, he did set JARVIS to capture everything we write on here and archive it so we don’t lose things. Plus I think we’re supposed to be able to edit stuff.”

“Indeed you are, Captain.” JARVIS piped up. “All whiteboard activity will be fully cataloged and searchable.”

“I take it this is all tied to the event you guys are planning?”

“Sure is,” TJ grinned. “Thanks to Pepper and the team, we’ll be ready to go in far less time than ever expected.”

“Now that we have enough of the details locked in, Tony was going to have information printed up so you can invite anyone you think would benefit. I still can’t believe he managed to get the convention center on three weeks notice.” Steve shook his head.

“I’m not. It seems like there’s very little a determined Tony can’t do.” TJ shoved the cap onto his marker. “Since you’re here, any interest in helping out with this little shindig?”

“Lots of interest. What can I do?” Sam was quick to jump in to assist.

“We could use some more volunteer therapists, counselors, really anyone trained to help deal with our big three issues - PTSD, drug or alcohol abuse, and sexual preference. Stark is pulling in a bunch through his connections, but we want to make sure we have plenty of people for participants to talk to when they come.”

“You can certainly count me in and I definitely know people that will likely want to help. I assume you’re going to have some way of making sure people get with the right professional.” Sam slid into the over-sized chair near the whiteboard.

“Yes. Pepper has a team of people helping us on that front. With JARVIS’s help they’re building out a system that will track level of training and expertise for each of the mental health volunteers. Then as people come through registration they’ll have an opportunity to indicate which topics they want to speak with someone about so we can match them accordingly. Because we don’t know how long
each one will take, the system will match each person to a team of specialists and they’ll have something that indicates there current place in line.” TJ explained, full of enthusiasm with how organized it sounded and how many people he hoped they could help.

“So basically they can wander around to the other areas until they’re one of the next ones in the virtual line?” Sam nodded thoughtfully. “I like it. It sounded like there was going to be a lot on offer. What else did you guys land on?”

“Obviously the mental health thing is a major piece of the event. On top of that we’ll have resources for education, employment, housing, various assistance programs, and service animals. Not to mention workshops on handling social media, networking areas for those that want to meet people in similar situations, plenty of quiet spaces for those that prefer to avoid the crowds, and lots of food.”

Steve listed off all the offerings. “Honestly, if it weren’t for having Tony, Pepper, and the majority of the Stark Foundation behind us there is no way we’d pull something like this off so fast.”

“It makes me tired just listening to you.” Sam conceded. “Who should I point people to if they’re interested in helping?”

“You can provide the contact information to me and I’ll be sure the coordinators receive it.” JARVIS offered before Steve or TJ could fumble through providing contact information.

“Perfect. I’m gonna go make some calls.” Sam hopped out of the chair, sparing a quick glance back to where the other two had refocused on their whiteboard as he headed for the door.

“Do you really think we’re gonna pull this off?” TJ asked Steve, eyes fixed on the list he was currently making.

“Yeah, I do. With the team we’ve got supporting it there is no way it doesn’t come together.” Steve reached out, squeezing TJ’s shoulders. “JARVIS can you capture all this and send it to the Pepper and Emily?”

“Of course.” Steve and TJ stepped back so JARVIS could get a full view. While he wasn’t fully installed in the office, Tony had hooked up enough to integrate him with the board.

“What do you think …” TJ’s question was cut off by his cell phone ringing. “Shit. It’s my mother.”

“I suppose it would have been too much to ask for her to remain oblivious to my coming out?” Steve gave TJ a sympathetic look as the brunet bit the bullet and answered his phone, putting it on speaker so Steve could hear the conversation.

“It’s about time you answered.” Elaine snapped.

“I’ve been a bit busy.” TJ watched as Steve sat down on the couch near the window, following when the blond patted the space beside him. “And it’s not exactly like we left things in a way that made you think I was going to be calling to check in on a regular basis.”

“Your brother and grandmother both told me you needed space, but Thomas this is ridiculous. How in the world did you manage to convince Captain America that he was bisexual after only a few weeks. Do you realize the irreparable harm you’re doing to his reputation.”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Steve cut in before TJ could even think of a response. “TJ had nothing to do with my bisexuality. As I stated during the show, this is one of those things the history books just didn’t have right. And as far as any damage to my reputation goes - quite frankly I don’t particularly give a damn. I’m done living my life to please those that want to use me as nothing more than a show pony.”
“But have you thought this through?” Elaine sounded desperate.

“I guarantee I’ve given more thought to what this means for my life than you have. I don’t expect everyone to support my decision, but it is my decision. I’ve come out and now I’m going to make the best of the platform I’ve been shoved onto to try and make life a bit better for those like me. If you have an issue with that, I suggest you take it up with me and stop harassing TJ about it. Your son has been nothing short of an amazing friend and supporter since I’ve met him. I believe it is no small miracle that he retained such amazing compassion and humanity given the circumstances of his life, and I’m damned glad to consider him such a close friend. Now if you’ll excuse us, we have more important things to deal with.”

Steve disconnected the call before Elaine could argue.

“Did you mean that?” TJ’s voice was quite as he remained frozen against Steve’s side.

“Every fucking word.” Steve tossed the phone onto the empty cushion beside them, wrapping his arm around TJ’s shoulders as they fell silent.

Chapter End Notes

Am I the only one that kinda went "aaaawwwwww" there at the end?

Realistically speaking, I’m hoping to wrap this up in the next several chapters and move on to the sequel. You guys won’t mind if I pretty much completely rewrite CATWS will you?
Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

For a few minutes, I seriously thought Steve was trying to kill me. You'll understand in the second part of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Tony?” Steve called as soon as he heard the other man’s footsteps in the hallway. “Can you come here for a minute?”

“What’s up?” The billionaire popped into the office where Steve and TJ had been holed up for the last hour.

“Angela sent us the list of requested interviews they’ve received since the announcement went out about the event.” TJ answered, still a bit shocked with the extensive list they’d received. “My parents didn’t even get this many requests for most things they were doing.”

“Of course not. This is far more interesting than anything a couple of career politicians are going to do.” Tony shrugged when they looked surprised at his assessment. “J, can you show the list?”

Seconds later a list of roughly 30 requests was floating in the air. Tony started swiping some of them away immediately. “Not wasting your time on those jokers. They’re just trying to take advantage of the situation. I need to talk to Angela about screening these before she sends you everything. You should only receive the list of ones that are both worth your time and energy and not likely to be assholes.”

Steve and TJ stared at him, nodding as he spoke, his hands never stopping as they reordered and discarded the various entries on the list. By the time he was done, he had it down to five.

“There. That seems manageable. Especially if we divide them up.” Tony clapped his hands. “Probably best that the two of your don’t make television appearances together yet. Some people will take one look at the pair of you and know something is up.”

“You really think …” Steve started.

“Yeah, Cap. I really do.” Tony grinned. “And there’s nothing wrong with that, but I know that’s not the attention you two want right now. Instead I think maybe we mix it up. We can reliably count on the three of us and Pepper. Sam mentioned he was willing to assist too. So I’m thinking we sent Pep for that one, Sam and TJ here, Steve and me here, Steve and Sam for this, and TJ and me for that.” He nodded as JARVIS made the names appear next to each of the indicated spots.

“Whatever you think makes sense.” Steve was more than happy to trust Tony given his relative depth of experience with press. “We’ll make sure we have any key talking points together before hand so we all have it straight.”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“No, Bucky!” Steve grabbed the kitten from his precarious perch, lowering him to eye level. “You’ll hurt yourself if you fall from that high.”
“Meow.” Steve shook his head as Bucky tried to squirm his small body closer to Steve’s face. “Meow.”

“I know, Buck. I’m no fun, but I already lost one Bucky to a fall. I’d prefer not to lose another one.”

TJ stood at the kitchen door torn between slipping away so Steve wouldn’t realize his confession had been witnessed and wrapping his arms around the soldier to try and make it hurt less. As soon as he heard the muffled sniff and saw Steve try to wipe tears from his eyes with that hand that wasn’t securing the kitten to his chest, his decision was made for him.

“Steve,” TJ spoke softly hoping to avoid startling him.

“Hey,” Steve cleared his throat, trying to sound normal.

“Come on. Don’t do that. Don’t try to play the tough guy with me.” He stepped into the blond’s personal space, careful not to crush the kitten as he pulled Steve into a hug.

“Heard that did you?” Steve sighed.

“I heard enough. Wanna talk about it?” TJ waited to see if he would volunteer anything before speaking again. “Where was the little monster at?”

“On top of the fridge, peering over the edge.” Steve shook his head, one hand still carefully surrounding the furry body. “I came in to grab a water and … I just … Fuck. He’s a kitten. I should not be having a meltdown over a kitten.”

“Don’t do that.” TJ repeated. “Don’t act like you aren’t allowed to have emotional reactions to even little things.” TJ poked at his chest even as he kept one arm firmly around the super soldier’s waist. “You’re human. Nobody ever said human emotions made a bit of sense.”

“I still don’t like it. He’s a kitten. He’s going to climb and jump and all kinds of other kitten things. I don’t even know why seeing him up there made me think of the train.”

TJ reached up, tickling the kittens chin. “Maybe because he bears an uncanny behavioral similarity to your best friend. Nat still swears that is Bucky reincarnated.”

“Can you blame me?” Natasha appeared by their sides as if she’d just materialized in the middle of the kitchen. “Why are we cuddling in the kitchen?” She didn’t bother waiting for the explanation as she slid an arm around each of them.

“Nothing important.” Steve tried to play it off, but quickly stopped when she gave him a challenging glare. “Just me having a minor flashback to the train when I cam in and found Buck here on top of the fridge, peering over the edge about to either jump or fall. Either way, I’m not sure he understood the lecture I gave him.”

“Meow.” The kitten rubbed against Steve’s neck.

“I don’t know. He’s a smart little devil.” Nat laughed, scratching the kitten behind the ear. “So I actually came to see if you guys wanted to spar. Clint … human Clint, not feline, is bored and if I don’t find a way to keep him occupied I’ll be forced to hide his bow and arrows.”

Both men laughed. Clint had a tendency to conduct target practice in strange places when he was bored.

“Just promise you’ll take it easy on me.” TJ squeezed her a bit tighter, picking up that she was trying
to give Steve an outlet for his frustrations with himself.

“We’ll make it fun - you and me against Client.” Natasha winked.

“What about me?” Steve pouted.

“Depends on how super soldiery you’re feeling. If you want a challenge we might have to make it all three of us against you.” Steve’s eyes shifted to TJ.

“I’m game for tag teaming Clint, but I think I might just play judge for the second one. Something tells me the two of you can provide enough of a challenge for Cap here.” TJ reached up to pet Bucky again, hoping Natasha didn’t push him to spar against Steve. From the other man’s look, it seemed like that might not be the best way to help him relax.

“Fair enough.” Natasha grinned. “Now go change. It’s time to get sweaty!” She let go of the pair, walking over the fridge to grab waters. “Meet us in the gym.”

“We’ll be there in ten.” TJ agreed, pulling Steve toward the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed!! This week is going to be a bit crazy, but I'll try to get at least one chapter up by the end of it.
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

*Peeks around the corner* Anybody still reading this thing?

I'm not dead and neither is the story. I've been crazy busy with work, life, and running (yeah I've actually stuck with it and completed a 10k, 10 miler, and half marathon since July 4th).

Alas, I've managed to get a chapter written. Hope you guys forgive me for the insane 5 month delay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You ready for this?” Tony glanced at TJ across the limo.

Grinning back at him, TJ shrugged. “As ready as I ever am for these things. The last one went really well … at least I thought it did.”

“It really did. Pep’s been quite pleased with all the interviews so far.” Tony waggled his eyebrows before adding, “This is the last one so we better not blow it.”

“No pressure.” TJ chuckled.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Glancing at Tony, TJ was relieved that the other man had accompanied him for the interview. Either Tony was an amazing actor or he was genuinely almost as excited about the things the foundation was about to do as TJ and Steve were.

“I have to ask, TJ,” their host started and TJ tried hard not to grimace. “What makes someone that could sit back and enjoy a relatively comfortable life decide to unearth their darkest memories to help others? It seems rather out of character with the TJ Hammond we’ve all seen splashed across the media for years.”

The woman smiled and TJ was surprised to find he didn’t think she was asking to be rude or hurtful.

“There are a few reasons. First, not all that long ago an amazing friend of mine challenged me to think about what I wanted out of my life. Not what others expected me to want or what they wanted from me, but what I actually wanted for myself. As I thought about that I realized that I wanted to be more than what the media told people I was. I was a child of the White House during a part of my life that would have been rough under any circumstances. That existence was made more complicated by being in the closet, preferring to be out of the spotlight, and trying to cope with an incredible level of self-doubt.”

TJ took a deep breath, wondering just how much he really wanted to admit on national television. He could feel Tony’s eyes on him. Glancing up he saw the question there and knew Tony would jump in to redirect the conversation without question at the first indication he didn’t want to continue. That silent support encouraged him to continue knowing he wouldn’t be judged by those that mattered.
“I’m not claiming to be the poster boy for how to handle stressful situations, but with the support of some wonderful friends I’ve realized that all those bad decisions, all the times where I felt like I was completely alone … I survived them all. All the mistakes and pain have taught me a great deal about what it takes to not only survive, but live. I just want to try and help others skip some of the really bad parts.”

Tony reached up to squeeze his shoulder as their host smiled warmly at them.

“From everything I’ve read about the upcoming event and what you’ve both said today, it sounds like you’re on the road to doing just that. For anyone that can’t make it tomorrow but is struggling with addiction or fallout from opening up, by choice or not, about their sexuality what would you tell them?”

“A few things. First, if you need help visit the Stark Foundation site and you’ll find a collection of resources. Second, if you’re struggling to come clean for addiction know that you have to want it for yourself not just because those around you want you to clean up. At the same time, don’t let your sobriety become tied to those around you. This includes both staying clean solely for someone else and letting the behavior of those around you push you to use when you want to stay clean. Trust me. I’ve done both. Neither ends well. For those dealing with either coming out or being pushed out of the closet, know that you deserve love and respect. Don’t let anyone make you feel like less because you don’t fit into the box they expect you to stay inside. Don’t let them marginalize your feelings or try to shove your experiences into the shadows. But also remember that for all the negativity you will encounter, there are so many wonderful people that will accept you with open arms. Seek them out so that love really can win.”

“Well said, TJ.” Tony chimed in before anything else could be added. “I can second what he said. My own experiences may not exactly mirror his, but they’ve been splashed across the tabloids enough that I’m sure you all know I speak from experience. His guidance to seek out those that will accept you with open arms is so important. No matter what challenges you’re facing you have to find the strength to walk away from toxic people and find the ones that will help you pursue the life you want to lead.”

“Clearly in TJ’s case, he found that support system with the Avengers.” She smiled. “I have to say, it’s fantastic to see the same group that protects us from aliens is also trying to help with things that hit much more closely to home for many Americans.”

“Well, we can’t fight aliens all the time.”

*_~*~ American Punchline ~*~*_

“Aw look, the welcome home committee is waiting for us.” Tony laughed as soon as they made the final turn toward the house.

“Surprised?”

“No a bit.” Tony shook his head as he brought the car to a stop in front of the stairs where Pepper, Steve, and Natasha were all waiting for them. “Or at least not that those three are waiting for us. Just a bit that the rest of our motley crew isn’t out here with them.”

“I’m sure they aren’t far.” TJ grinned as he started to open his door, only slightly surprised when he felt it moving without his help. “Miss me?” He peered up into Steve’s blue eyes.

“A bit.” Steve pulled him into his arms. “Glad our little press tour is over. How’d everything go?”
“It was fine.” TJ shrugged as they turned toward Natasha.

“Just fine?” The spy didn’t look overly impressed. “Do I need to take care of anything before it airs?”

“No,” TJ stepped forward to give her a hug. “I’m sure there are people that will read into some of what I said and won’t appreciate it, but that’s their problem.” He had no doubt that some of his family would be affronted by his reference to avoiding toxic people.

“Well, you just let me know if I need to assist in reminding them of that.” Nat squeezed him tight.

“I will, but hopefully there won’t be a need. After all, they still don’t know where this place is and it’ll be hard for any of them to surprise me at the event given the level of security we have lined up.”

“True, but you know if they get any ideas there’s likely to be a hawk lingering in the rafters. Doesn’t take much for him to get a good shot off.”

The three laughed as they joined Pepper and Tony heading toward the house even though TJ wasn’t entirely sure she was kidding.

As soon as they stepped inside, they heard the others in the kitchen.

“Come and get it!” Bruce’s voice carried into the foyer and they headed to find him. “I make no claims to compete with the fair the two of you keep cooking up in here, but I did manage to throw together some spaghetti for lunch. Thought you might be ready for some food when you got home.”

“If it tastes half as good as it smells I’d say you held your own.” TJ grinned as he sniffed the air.

A few moments later the eight were settled around the dining room table chatting about the interview and the final arrangements for the following day. Despite how fast the event was planned, everyone felt confident that the day would make a positive impact on its participants.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, we're getting super close to this first installment wrapping up at which point I am going to attempt to start working on the sequel and maybe a few random shorts to go along with the collection. Though I have to ask - are ya'll still interested?
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

Don't freak out. This really is the second chapter in as many days.

Please also don't freak out when it'll probably be post-Christmas when the next chapter gets posted. I do think this might actually wrap up before or by chapter 70. I'm both excited about the sequel and kinda sad to let this one go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As their small caravan maneuvered toward the back entrance to the convention center everyone caught sight of the crowd amassed out front. It was a full hour before the doors were scheduled to open, but there were hundreds if not thousands huddled in the brisk DC morning.

"Are those protest signs I see?" Steve groaned. They’d been expecting this.

"They are, but notice they are being held at bay." Tony commented. "It’s a little outside their normal duties, but when they caught wind of what we were putting together a couple of the Patriot Guard groups reached out to see if they could assist. Apparently they were expecting the Westboro idiots just like we were."

"Remind me to find a way to thank them." Steve noted to the group with him.

"I’m sure they’d appreciate the thought," Tony started. "But don’t stress too much about it. After their call they received a rather sizeable donation to help support their efforts."

"Thanks, Tony." TJ replied as he squeezed Steve’s hand.

"JARVIS is having coffee and donuts delivered momentarily for the crowd." Pepper shifted the focus to something more positive than Westboro’s inevitable protest. "We can’t do much at this point, but that makes the wait a bit more pleasant."

"That’s perfect." Steve hopped out of the SUV as they stopped beside the door, reaching back to give TJ and Natasha each a hand as they slipped out behind him. "If everything is in order and any of the volunteers are free maybe I could take a small team out to start pre-registering people."

"Emily confirmed everything is exactly as it should be and the majority of volunteers are already checked in." Pepper grinned. "Let’s stash our stuff, grab what we need, and head out front."

"I didn’t mean you needed to freeze …"

Pepper glared at him before he could finish.

"Right. In that case, let’s go." Steve followed without further argument.

Ten minutes later they were emerging from the front of the building, staring into a crowd that seemed to double in size since they’d driven by.

"Thank you for the coffee." A young woman spoke as soon as she recognized them.
“You’re welcome.” TJ smiled. Judging by the fading bruises on her cheek and almost dangerously thin build, he suspected he wasn’t a service member. “Why don’t we go ahead and start getting you registered.”

As TJ started entering her information into the Stark Pad, he heard Tony prompting Steve to speak up so at least part of the crowd could hear him.

“Thank you all for waiting patiently for the doors to open. The team and I hope you are each able to gain access to resources that can help make like a bit easier today. Even though things won’t get under way for another 45 minutes, we wanted to go ahead and start getting people registered.” He turned as he heard a door open behind him and noticed about 30 more volunteers spilling out of the building.

“Don’t mind us, Captain.” A young man in the front spoke up. “Just thought we’d lend a hand.”

Nodding at the volunteer, Steve turned back to the crowd. “If you can try to form up into fairly orderly lines, we’ll work our way as far as we can before the doors open. Once you’re registered you’ll either receive one of these to be notified when you’re getting close to your time with any specialist or you can receive updates via your phone.” He held up his hand waving a small device.

By the time the doors opened they had registered over 350 people that all needed one or more of the services they were offering for the day. It seemed the majority needed multiple forms of assistance.

Knowing they needed to trust the system they’d set up Steve, TJ, and the others headed toward the main convention floor meander and talk to people while the army of volunteers continued registration and kept things organized. They all split up, staying close enough to see at least one other person from the family while also ensuring they were available to assist as many different people as possible.

“Thank you, Captain.” Steve shook the hand of yet another young veteran.

While Steve wanted to downplay his part in it, he remembered what Sam had told him. This was no small thing for the people here and to brush off their thanks could to some serve to make them feel like they should have been able to cope without assistance.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled taking a few seconds to look at the man that appeared to be no more than in his mid-twenties. “Are you finding everything you need?”

“I think so.”

Cap couldn’t help but think he looked rather overwhelmed. “Anything I can help you with?”

“No. You’ve done so much already. You don’t need to bother with me. I’m sure I’ll figure it all out.”

Steve shifted, resting his hand on the younger man’s shoulder as he navigated them toward one of the many sets of chairs set around the room to allow for conversations.

“Nonsense. The whole purpose of today is to make sure guys like you and me get the help they need including figuring out what some of that help might actually be. Believe me, I have some idea how overwhelming stuff like this can be. Let’s start with something easy. What’s your name?”

“Trevor, sir.”

“Nice to meet you Trevor. Please just call me Steve. Now why don’t you tell me what brought you out here today.”
“I just … I don’t know what I’m doing. My parents …” The young man fell silent and Steve could see he was struggling to keep his composure.

“Whatever it is, I’m not here to judge you and as several friends have been persistently reminding me lately - no matter how tough we are we’re still only human and are allowed to struggle with things and need help. Now, I’m not saying I’m going to have all the great advice that the battalion of professionals we brought here today have for you, but I’d really like to help where I can and make sure you’re able to take advantage of everything you need here today.”

“Thanks, Capt … Steve. I joined up when I was 18. The day after I graduated high school. My parents weren’t thrilled, but at the same time they knew we couldn’t afford college and they were barely scraping by. Things plugged along pretty well until my third tour in the Middle East. The convoy I was in … there were IEDs … so many IEDS. They keep telling me I was lucky. I was the only one from three vehicles that made it out alive. I was thrown when the humvee exploded, lost a couple parts and pieces in the process.”

Trevor gestured to his legs and Steve noticed how the material lay rather odd at each knee.

“I’m able to walk on these, but they hurt like a son of a bitch. Turns out as far as my dad is concerned it would have been better if I’d died. Then he’d have gotten the insurance payout to cover a chunk of his gambling debts. Instead he ended up strapped with a crippled son. Suffice it to say, I get the care the government will pay for and not a bit over what insurance covers. As if that weren’t enough, the docs think I have PTSD. Of course, Dad just thinks that is a bunch of psychobabble bullshit. I’ve gotta get out of there, but nobody wants to hire a military trained mechanic with two bum legs that can barely walk.”

“I wouldn’t say nobody.” Steve gave him an encouraging smile, grinning even wider when he saw Tony out of the corner of his eye. “I think we’ll be able to help you with just about everything you need, but first I want you to meet someone.” He waved at Tony, leaning back when Stark spotted him and picked up his pace to join them.

“What can I do for you?” Tony pulled up a third chair, looking rather excited about being summoned as he gave the young soldier a second to regroup from his appearance.

“I can’t believe I’m sitting next to Tony Stark. I mean, meeting Captain Rogers was easily the highlight of my life, but this … I’ve got to be hallucinating.”

“Nope. I’m here. Now I’m guessing Capsicle wanted me here for a reason, so what I can do for you and what can I call you?”

“Trevor, sir.” The young man choked out.

“None of that sir stuff.” Tony shook his head before turning to see if Steve would clue him in on what was needed.

“Got any experience with prosthesis?”

“A bit.” Tony grinned. “What are we dealing with?”

Trevor stared wide-eyed at the two men. “Um, legs.”

“Mind showing me or would you prefer to take advantage of one of those snifty little makeshift rooms we’ve got set up?”

Glancing around and seeing that no one was paying them any attention, Trevor reached down and
tugged both his pants legs up.

“Please tell me that’s not what’s being passed off as viable options for guys returning from war?”
Tony grimaced.

“Depends on how much money you’re able to shell out on top of the insurance. Let’s just say these are the base models.”

Tony glared harder at the prosthesis looking for all the world like they’d been made to personally offend him.

“Well that’s gonna have to change.” Stark looked at Steve before turning his attention back to Trevor. “As for you, what’s your background?”

“I was a mechanic for the Army.”

“Still want to be a mechanic or are you pursuing something else these days?” Tony inquired.

“I’m pursuing anything that’ll let me get a place to leave and afford to eat. Not overly picky these days and crippled mechanics are in pretty short demand.” He frowned. “Always did like tinkering with the machines though.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Tony grinned. “I’m gonna need to get a few things in order, but that shouldn’t take long. Are you in line for career counseling today?”

“Yes. Was hoping they might be able to help me find a solution.”

“What’s your last name, Trevor?” Tony was already tapping away at his Stark Pad.

“McElroy.”

“Perfect. Just made sure you’re going to meet my the Stark recruiter and gave her the intel she needs. Any preference on location?”

Trevor looked to Steve, trying to figure out just what was happening.

Cap gave him the only answer he could think of, “Just be honest.”

“Not really. Given the way things are with my parents I think maybe away from Virginia and DC would be a good thing, but I’ll find a way to get wherever I need to be if it’s a chance at stable work and paying my own way.”

“Fair enough. I’m thinking one of the upstate New York facilities is gonna be the best bet for this, but don’t hold me to that just yet.”

“What exactly is this, Mr. Stark?” Trevor was completely lost.

“Stark Industries Prosthesis. Full scale development and production of a range of prosthetics for all budgets. Ones that will actually give amputees a real chance at having the lives they want.”

Steve tried not to laugh at Trevor's awestruck expression as they sat in silence for several seconds.

“But what does that have to do with where I want to live?”

“Facilities like that require people to work at them. People that can help take care of the equipment. People that want to tinker and try creating and building. People that have a vested interest in
producing something that is going to make a difference.” Tony grinned. “People like you. Assuming you’re interested. I assure you, Stark Industries pays more than a livable wage, includes full benefits, and most my facilities offer both short and long term housing options for relocation.”

“I’m interested. I’m definitely interested. I can’t imagine there are many people in my shoes that wouldn’t be.”

Tony was almost vibrating with excitement over this latest plan. “I need to find Pepper .. run something by her before I speak to the recruiters. You may be onto something.”

“Thanks, Tony.” Steve laughed as the shorter man rose, already looking for Pepper.

“Anytime.” With that he darted off across the room.

“Well, I think that just solved several of your challenges. Hopefully you’ll be all set by the time you leave here.”

“What do you think he was in such a rush to do?”

“Knowing Tony … he’s going to find a way to create the entire Stark Industries Prosthesis team using as many amputees as possible.”

Chapter End Notes

As Tony is oft prone to doing, he took this in a bit of a different direction than I had initially planned. Gotta love his enthusiasm for helping people though.

Next up will be what was supposed to be the second half of this chapter before Steve and Trevor decided to get a little deeper into things than I expected.

As always, comments and reviews are much appreciated! You guys have no idea how many times I’ve reread this story to try to keep things from going off the rails and ended up rereading every single comment. They mean more than you may ever know.
“How do you think it’s going so far?” TJ looked anxiously at Steve as they ducked into the small room designated as command central.

“How amazing based on the reactions I’ve been getting. What about you?”

“Better than I ever expected. It feels so weird.” TJ shrugged, turning a bit so Steve couldn’t really see his face.

“Hey. Why are you trying to hide?” Cap reached out, tugging TJ closer to him.

Letting his head fall against Steve’s shoulder, TJ thought about Steve’s question. “Ingrained reaction?”

Resting his chin atop TJ’s head, Steve wrapped his arms around him hoping that it would help center him as TJ always claimed it did.

After a few silent moments, TJ finally spoke up. “I guess it’s a couple of things.” He paused for a second. “I’m not used to being so involved with anything that is considered a success.”

“Well, you might have to get used to that feeling. This is just the beginning for our foundation work.” Steve squeezed him a bit tighter silently reinforcing the message.

“Yeah, I’m not opposed to that at all.” TJ chuckled even though he knew it was very true.

“So what else is it?” Cap guessed whatever else TJ was thinking was less happy.

“I feel like an ass. I’m talking to all these people that have had it a million times harder than I ever did. I’m a fucking spoiled rich kid that couldn’t keep his shit together despite a fleet of expensive doctors and therapists. So many of the people out there have done so much more with so much less than I ever had.”

Hiding his face in Steve’s shoulder again, TJ tried not to fall apart.

“Hey, remember when we were talking about our list of things we wanted to do and you were worried that yours was going to seem ridiculous next to mine because of the things I’ve done?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember what I told you then?”
“Something about my wishes have no less value than yours just because we’d led different lives.” TJ mumbled.

“The same thing applies here. No two lives are the same. No two situations are the same. Yes having money makes some things easier, but it doesn’t guarantee an easy life nor does it mean people with money don’t struggle. Yes, the people out there have done a lot of things, both good and bad, with less resources than you had. They also weren’t shoved into a media spotlight with their every move, their every word scrutinized for the entire world. None of this about comparing stories and deciding who deserves to have struggled. This is about understanding and accepting that all of us have struggled, but that with a bit of help we can all do better. We can all lead a life we can be proud of.”

“You’re doing it again.” TJ finally stood straight, grinning at Steve.

“Doing what?”

“Giving those insanely good motivational talks that I swear must be written ahead of time.”

Both men chuckled.

“Does that mean you think I’m right?” Steve asked, hoping that all they good they were doing for others today wasn’t going to cause TJ to struggle more.

“You tend to be. I’m sorry you keep having to repeat yourself to make me listen.” TJ’s eyes dropped to their shoes.

Reaching out, Steve cupped TJ’s chin, pulling his head back up until the other man finally looked at him again.

“I’ll repeat it as much as you need to hear it. I get it and I want to be able to tell you things like that any time you need to hear them.”

TJ nodded unable to find any words to explain how Steve’s statement made him feel. Before they could say anything else, Sam ducked into the area with them.

“This is amazing.” He was smiling wider than they’d even seen before. “I’m so glad you guys asked me to be a part of this. I mean, my VA groups are great. I’m helping a couple dozen people there, but this … this is unreal. Pepper said we’ve had over 3,000 people come through registration so far.”

Sam grabbed a can of Coke before ducking back out the door.

“What do you say we go see what we can do for some of those 3,000.” Between the talk with Steve and Sam’s sudden but timely reminder of just how much good today was doing, TJ was re-energized to get back at it.

“Let’s do it.” Steve started to follow him to the door, grabbing TJ’s hand to stop him just before he opened the door. “Just promise me you’ll come find me or at least send me a message if you start feeling overwhelmed again.”

“I promise.”

With that the two emerged to go talk to more people.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*  
Despite all the security in place to ensure the day was safe for everyone involved, Natasha couldn’t
stop herself from staying where she could see anyone and everyone that came through the doors. Something about having the team and TJ exposed at a very publicized event made her nervous. That it was being held in DC only made her that much more on edge.

Seeing a group approaching the door, the spy groaned. This was why she was on guard duty. Heading them off before they could enter the building, Natasha confronted them.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see my son.” Elaine’s tone and expression made it clear she expected to get exactly what she wanted. “Since no one will tell me where he is these days, I had no choice but to come here since the entire world knows where he is today.”

“Oh, you’ve had plenty of choices and you’ve made the wrong ones.” Natasha snapped.

“I just want to talk to him. I … I saw his interviews. I guess I never really thought about how all this messed with him and now everyone is looking at me like I failed him..”

“You’re not coming in here and stirring up shit with him today.”

“If I can just talk to him. I’m sure we can smooth things over. Maybe get a picture or two to counteract the current public sentiment.”

Natasha clenched her fists, reminder herself that assaulting a woman that may very well be the President one day wasn’t the best idea even if it would make her feel better.

“No, I’ll pass along the message when the event is over and when he’s ready he can reach out. But right now you need to get over the idea that everything is about you and let TJ have this day unencumbered by the Hammond family bullshit. He’s worked too hard for this for me to let you ruin it.”

Elaine’s mouth gaped open and Nat couldn’t help but wonder at how a human being as loving and generous as TJ could possibly have spawned from such a self-centered, politically motivated mother.

“I …”

“No. I suggest you and your security detail march back to wherever you came from and go the hell away. Nothing about this day involves you.”

“Is there a problem here?” Tony stepped up beside Nat and she caught Clint on her other side from her peripheral vision.

“TJ’s mother was just leaving. Weren’t you?”

“I think it’s best we leave now, ma’am.” One of the guards finally spoke up, gripping Elaine’s elbow in at attempt to encourage her to leave.

“Fine.” Elaine huffed, storming back in the direction she’d come.

“Why do I get the feeling we missed the fun?” Clint asked as they watched her go.

“She wanted to turn this into a fucking photo op to smooth over the backlash she’s getting from people that are realizing she’s not the ideal mother she wants them to believe. She’s got some balls trying to come in here and turn this into an event for her own gain.”

“I assume we aren’t telling TJ about this until later. Possibly much later.” Tony commented as they
finally turned to head back into the building.

“Correct. He doesn’t need this bullshit interrupting what has so far been an amazing day. If the chatter I’m hearing from volunteers and participants is indicative of the general sentiment, I’d say this will be counted a rousing success.”

Clint laughed. “That’s a lotta big words, but I’m pretty sure you’re right.”

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

“Ashley?” TJ spotted the first person he’d helped register this morning as she emerged from the housing assistance area.

“Mr. Hammond, thank you again for organizing this.” She stopped a couple feet from him, eyes meeting his only briefly before they fell to the floor.

TJ frowned, recognizing the timidity that so often came with abuse.

“Please, call me TJ. And you’re welcome. Are you getting everything you need?”

She nodded. “The counselor helped a lot. I’m going to start going to meetings to help stay clean. Just got transitional housing set up so I can get out of the apartment and away from Jeff. Looks like I’m almost up for the job assistance.” She held up the Stark device.

“Good. I’m glad it’s all working out.” TJ smiled when she finally peered up at him.

“Maybe if I make it work someday I can volunteer at one of these.” She gestured around the room. “I wasn’t at the top of my class in high school, but I did pretty well. Maybe I could go back to school again.”

TJ nodded. “We’d love to see you helping out when you’re ready. Do you want to meet with the education volunteers? The can help you figure out what your options are and get you set up for the follow up assistance.”

“Follow up assistance?” The young woman asked.

“We knew there would be some things that people would want to do but wouldn’t be in a position to jump into it until other things got settled. The help we’re offering doesn’t just end today. When you’re in a place to be able to go back to school, you’ll have access to a team that will help. Anyone you meet with that falls into that category will go over the system, but you’ll also get briefed on all the follow ups as part of the exit process.”

Ashley smiled, eyes lighting up at this additional information. “You guys really went all out. It’s hard to believe people like you and Captain America want to spend your time with stuff like this.”

Chuckling, TJ found he could understand where she came from. “I guess it is, but at the same time it isn’t. Steve’s dedicated his life to trying to help the people around him and I’ve hit rock bottom and learned how much easier it is to climb back up when you’ve got help. Combine that with Tony and the Stark Foundation and their mission to pretty much help everybody and it’s suddenly not so surprising.

“I guess when you put it that way …” Ashley help her Stark device as it chirped. “Looks like I better head toward my next stop. Do you know how I get added to the list for the education stuff.”

“Sure do.” TJ tapped at his Stark Pad. “You’re on the list.”
“Thank you!” She smiled, giving a small wave as she made her way across the floor.

TJ stood watching as she disappeared, happy that the woman that looked so frightened and frail this morning was starting to feel like she had a future to look forward to.
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

Hope you all had a wonderful holiday season! I survived the road trip to the outlaws. Now I just need it to warm up because this whole sustained cold weather in the south is a bunch of BS. It took me until sometime this morning to thaw out from my 10 mile run yesterday. Yuck.

Anyway, thank you for patiently waiting for this chapter. I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I could go for something sweet before I crash.” Tony didn’t bother stopping or turning around to face the others as he headed for the kitchen. They would either follow or they wouldn’t.

TJ shook his head, laughing at the billionaire as they followed. Once they reached the kitchen, he veered off toward one of the less used counters. “Lucky for you, I happen to know where to find something sweet.”

Tony aborted his trek to the fridge, spinning around to find TJ. “Yep. Those look sweet.”

This time everyone laughed as Tony all but started bouncing up and as TJ walked toward him carefully balancing two rather delicious looking cakes.

“How did you find time to make those?” Pepper asked as she rounded the island to help Steve retrieve plates and silverware.

“We baked them yesterday evening while prepping dinner and finished them after everyone headed to bed for the night.” Steve grinned. “TJ rather correctly assumed we might want something when we got home.”

“Is that German chocolate?” Bruce eyed one of them as TJ set them on the island.

“Sure is,” he grinned. “Dive in. The other is carrot cake with a cream cheese frosting.”

TJ stepped back, bumping into Steve’s chest as they watched the others ooh and aah over the cakes as Bruce and Natasha cut into them.

Plates and glasses in hand everyone made their way into the living room where they could enjoy their treats comfortably.

At the sound of the humans entering the room three kitten heads popped up from the pile of fur on the couch. All yawning as wide as their little mouths would open, they started to stretch so they could find their favorite people.

“So what did you think of your inaugural event?” Bruce directed the question to Cap and TJ.

“It was amazing.”
“I still can’t believe there were so many people.” TJ shook his head. “Makes me wish I’d gotten my head out of my ass to do something sooner.”

“We can’t do anything to change the past, but your current path set us in motion to help 5,879 people today.” Pepper tried to redirect his focus before TJ spun a positive into something he did wrong. “And we already have calls from 5 other cities that heard about today’s event and would like to schedule their own.”

“Wow.” Steve and TJ both stared at her.

“If the participants we all spoke to and the high level exit survey results I’m seeing are all accurate, I’d say it was a day very well spent.”

“Thanks, Pep.” TJ gave her a big smile, knowing exactly what she was doing. “I think I might need sleep before I think about where we’re doing this next.”

“I’ll second that.” Clint mumbled around a mouthful of cake earning him a playful smack on the head from Natasha.

“I’m just glad we made it through the entire day without any family drama.” TJ leaned back into Steve’s arm as he took a bite of cake, missing the glances exchanged between Nat, Tony, and Clint.

“About that …” Tony started.

“What happened?” TJ sighed, knowing he’d apparently spoken too soon.

“Nothing crazy. Mommy dearest and a couple of her hired muscle made a very brief appearance in the afternoon.” Clint answered.

TJ’s brows rose as he waited for someone to elaborate.

“I made sure to personally greet her and ensure she headed right back where she came from.” Natasha explained. “I didn’t think you needed to waste your time on that particular bit of drama today.”

“Lemme guess, she watched the interview Tony and I did and isn’t happy.” He gave a humorless laugh. “I did notice an uptick in calls from her after that. I’m sure she’s pissed that I didn’t answer them.”

“Something like that. I made sure she understood that you would be in touch when you were ready and not before.” Natasha grinned at him.

“Thanks, Nat.”

“Anytime. I’m sure I could have had a bit more fun, but I didn’t think standing at the entrance to the convention center was the time to really give her a piece of my mind.”

“I’m sure she would appreciate that concept if she ever stopped to consider that you took it easy on her.” TJ took another bite of cake, happy to realize that he wasn’t at all upset that the others had waited until now to tell him that his mother tried to interrupt his day. Rather than feeling like they were trying to shield him so he wouldn’t have a meltdown and cause a PR incident, he felt like they were trying to help him protect the amazing day he was having. “I’m just glad I didn’t have to come face to face with her in the middle of the crowd today. The last thing they needed was a day meant for them to become a Hammond family three ring circus.”
TJ felt Steve’s hand give his shoulder a gentle squeeze and knew he wasn’t the only one.

“Anytime. You know we’re perfectly content to run interference as long as necessary.” Clint spoke up wanting to make sure there was no question.

“I know.” TJ grinned at him. “How’s the cake?”

“Delicious. I might have to grab a piece of the carrot cake too. I hate to make it feel left out.” The archer slid off the loveseat and headed for entry. “Anyone else need anything while I’m up?”

“Nope. We’re good.” Tony answered seeing everyone else shaking their heads. Once Clint was out of the room, he turned to TJ and Steve. “You two do realize he’s likely to have both those cakes eaten before lunch tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, but knowing us we’ll just end up making something else.” TJ shrugged.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Stepping into the steaming shower, Steve couldn’t help but think about how much his life had changed in the last month all because of one random evening stroll through DC when he was too restless to stare at his apartment walls for another moment.

If anyone had bothered to ask at the time, he would have insisted he was getting along just fine on his own. He had his work with SHIELD, visits to Peggy, plenty of time to run and workout … and more than enough time to stare at empty walls while he wasn’t sleeping.

If he was being honest, he knew Bucky would have kicked his ass if he’d seen the way he was living. No. Not living. Existing.

For all that he told TJ it felt like people forgot there was a person behind the shield and uniform, he had to admit that sometimes he seemed to forget it as well.

Now silent dinners were replaced with what could best be described as family meals with everyone gathered together. Solitary evenings were full of laughter and hugs. Lonely nights of fighting the cold after nightmares were chased off by the presence of a man he had to admit he’d fallen completely in love with.

Steve sighed with his admission. It wasn’t that the thought it was some hopeless, unrequited dream. He knew TJ was interested in seeing where things went. But ever since coming out of the closet, it seemed like he spent more and more time thinking about what that would be like. More and more time watching TJ and seeing all the reasons he couldn’t imagine life without him.

The very thought of that future made the heat rise within him. Rinsing the shampoo from his hair, he let the water run over his face. Eyes closed as warm water poured over him, Steve reached for the knobs, adjusting it until the stream ran cold. After all, TJ would be joining him once he was done with his own shower and he’d promised he wouldn’t push anything until TJ was ready.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Hurrying to dry off from his shower, TJ wanted to give himself a bit of time to write in his journal before he headed to Steve’s room to sleep. He had to laugh at himself, knowing that the other man would tell him to take his time or even to bring the journal with him so he could write there.

It wasn’t like him journalling was a secret. He knew at least Steve and Nat were well aware he’d been keeping up with the habit, though what was written remained unknown to everyone but him. It
felt a bit strange that he simply left the journal atop the small table near the window, never bothering to try to conceal it. Yet he remained completely confident that no one in the house would pry.

Curling up in the chair, he pulled the throw over his lap as he grabbed the book. He’d started this journal while Steve was gone on that first mission. He’d ordered it that first night and been writing in it ever since.

A few times in the past he’d started to do the same thing, but the habit never stuck. It was always interrupted by random flings, family drama, and the unshakable belief that anything and everything he wrote was likely being read by his mother and or some random lackey she assigned the task of watching for signs of his next breakdown.

Grabbing his pen, he set to the task of recording his thoughts from the day. He made sure to note the feels of doubt and insecurity that had struck before his pep talk from Steve. Though he dealt with them then and new Steve was right, it felt important to acknowledge them here.

Ten minutes later, TJ closed the book and set it back on the table. Letting his head fall back into the chair, he closed his eyes and briefly pictured a day when he would curl up in the chair in Steve’s room as he wrote. He could imagine watching Steve emerge from the bathroom, hair wet with a towel around his waist.

Giggling to himself at the idea of where that fantasy would take him, TJ untangled himself from the throw and headed for the door.

As crazy as the idea sounded, he was beginning to think he might have to heed his grandmother’s advice and not force himself to wait for everything to feel completely perfect and in control before he took the next step. He only hoped that when he worked up the nerve to admit it, Steve was as serious about things as he was because TJ was pretty sure there was no coming back once you’d fallen in love with Steve Rogers.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boys. What am I going to do with you?

Me thinks that chapter 69 may finally bring this little plot bunny turned epic drama to a close.

So, quick show of hands - all in favor of the sequel with the full disclosure that it is going to have unpredictable update schedules, completely rewrite CATWS, and have untold amounts of family fluff and kittens - speak now.

Those that think the AP-verse should rest in peace at the conclusion of this fic - you should speak too.

Silence will be taken as a lack of f#$%#s what happens after this story ends.
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

First off - I apologize but this last chapter got a little long. Second - I hope you enjoy this last installment of American Punchline.

Still burrowed under the covers, Steve curled on his side to watch as TJ slept. He looked so different here than he had when they first met. Resisting the temptation to brush a stray lock of hair away from TJ’s eye, the blond couldn’t help but smile.

“I can feel you watching me,” TJ spoke a few minutes later.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to wake you.” Steve frowned, realizing that staring at the other man sleeping was probably kind of creepy.

“S’okay. It’s probably time to get up anyway.” TJ rolled to his side, noticing the faint redness on Steve’s cheeks and his closed eyes. “I’m surprised I haven’t ever woken you up doing the same thing.”

Steve’s eyes shot open, his head cocking slightly in confusion.

“You think I’ve never watched you sleep?” TJ chuckled. “Seriously, that’s all I did night you showed up at my door after your nightmare.”

This time it was Steve that let out a small huffing, laugh. “What gave me away?”

“Nat’s right. It’s a good thing you didn’t try to become a spy.” TJ skirted the question, leaning forward to kiss Steve on the tip of his nose instead. As his lips brushed the soldier’s skin, he realized just what he was doing.

Hoping Steve wouldn’t comment, TJ leaned back. “What do you think of going for a run before breakfast? It’s been a few days since we went and I’d hate for you to start going soft on us.”

Restraining himself from reaching up to touch the spot TJ had just kissed, Steve nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Should we invite Sam or just go?”

“You know he’ll fuss at us if we go without him. Plus, if he doesn’t come I have to run by myself while I send you off for your sprints.”

“Fair enough. JARVIS, can you see if Sam wants to run.”

“Of course. Give me just a moment and I’ll confirm if he’ll join you.” The AI spoke from the small speaker Tony had installed in the room.

“Is it strange that knowing JARVIS is literally always observing us doesn’t bother me at all?” TJ asked as they rolled out of bed, immediately turning to straighten the covers.

“I guess that depends on who you ask,” Steve shrugged as he tugged the corner of the comforter into
place. “I think I was so in awe of the idea that I never really stopped to be creeped out by him when I’ve visited the tower. This is the first time I’ve actually lived with him on a daily basis though, but it doesn’t really bother me.”

TJ started laughing, making Steve look at him questioningly.

“It just dawned on me that we’re having this entire conversation about him and he’s hearing it. Sorry JARVIS. I didn’t mean any offense with my question.”

“None taken, TJ. I’ve often wondered what people thought of my presence. It’s often obvious when I frighten them, but aside from the initial shock I rarely know.” JARVIS sounded unperturbed by the discussion. “I am glad to know that my presence doesn’t bother you. As we’ve discussed before your privacy is of utmost importance and barring risk to the safety of yourself or someone else on the team anything you say will not be repeated without your consent. Speaking of, Sam has confirmed he will be ready in approximately fifteen minutes if you care to meet him downstairs.”

“Thanks, J.” TJ headed toward the bedroom door. “Guess I better get ready so he’s not waiting on us.” He held the door open as Peggy hopped down from the cat tree she and Bucky had taken to sleeping in and made to follow him out the door. “Guess I’m going to have supervision.”

Both men chuckled as the door closed.

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

Natasha’s phone rang as she was helping Steve put away the last of the dishes from lunch. She’d volunteered to assist when Bruce suggested he and TJ take advantage of the unusually warm and sunny afternoon to sneak in a bit of meditation outside.

“Fury,” she gave Steve a heads up before accepting the call. “What’s blowing up that you’re calling on a Sunday afternoon.”

The director laughed, but she could tell it was forced. “Is everyone still there?”

“Everyone but Thor. Not sure when he’s going to make an appearance.” Her brows furrowed, something was definitely off.

“Hopefully soon. Listen, I know you, Barton, and Rogers were planning on coming in this week, but I think it may be best if you lay low for a bit longer.”

“Why?” Natasha asked cautiously.

“I’ll explain everything soon enough. Though it may be a few weeks. In the meantime, you might want to suggest to Stark that he make use of the information he collected during Loki’s visit. And whatever you do, don’t let anybody go off on their own.”

“Understood. We’ll be here when you’re ready.”

“I’m counting on it.” Fury replied before disconnecting.

“Well that was strange,” Nat met Steve’s eyes. “I’m assuming you heard what he said.”

Steve nodded, “JARVIS, can you ask Tony and Clint to join us. We can fill Bruce in later.”

“Of course.” The AI replied. A few seconds later he confirmed they were on the way.

Steve pulled out one of the barstools and sat staring at Natasha’s phone like it was going to explain
the mysterious call from Fury.

“Is it just me or was Fury telling us to start digging into all the SHIELD files that was was less than pleased that Stark got his hands on in the first place?”

“Fury’s what?” Tony froze half way into the room. “I heard that wrong, right?”

“No. You heard that right,” Natasha leaned back against the counter. “He just told us all to lay low, stick together, and to tell you to make use of the information you collected during Loki’s visit.”

“Shit,” Tony stumbled a bit as Clint pushed him further into the room. “JARVIS, you heard the lady. Let’s start digging.”

“Shall I share the files with the rest of the team, sir?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. You can start looking for anything suspicious and we can all start looking through files to see if there’s anything that jumps out to one of us.” Tony hopped up to sit on one of the counters. “Fury have any other insights to give us?”

“No, but he said he’d explain it all when he can, but it may be a few weeks.” Natasha offered what she knew.

“Whatever it is must be worse than SHIELD attempting to use alien technology they barely understood to make weapons. And that’s fucking scary.” Clint sat in the middle of the floor, staring at the other three.

“Considering he was on board with that plan. Yeah, I’d say it’s something worse.” Steve’s shoulders sagged at the idea of something worse.

“On the bright side, whatever the issue is he’s obviously working on a plan and he’s sharing more than he usually does.” Natasha shrugged. “I’m guessing that means that whatever it is, he’s decided we’re on the right side of it.”

“I suppose that is something,” Tony looked a bit surprised. “Never thought I’d be on the right side of anything where he was concerned. So what’s our plan.”

The other three agreed.

“Do we leave Sam and TJ out of this, or let them know something may be amiss?” Natasha looked to Steve.

“On one hand, I’d love to keep them out of the drama. On the other, short of cutting ties with them anything that blows up around us is going to impact them too. Unless you guys think differently, I’d like to read Sam in completely and give TJ as much as he’s comfortable knowing. They’re both smart guys and outside of the situation enough that they might pick up on something we’d overlook.”

“Fair enough,” Tony nodded. “Now, I’m gonna go cozy up with some intel. Somebody holler if I’m late for dinner.” Hopping down from the counter, they could hear him talking to JARVIS as he headed down the hall.

“Did Tony just tell us to make sure he didn’t miss a meal? The same Tony that JARVIS swears lives on bourbon and coffee?”
"Indeed, Clint. He surprised me too." JARVIS answered before anyone else could. "I believe the time here has been quite beneficial for him."

"More than him," Natasha smiled as she reached down to pull Clint off the floor. "We’re gonna go spar for a bit before we start digging into all of SHIELD’s secrets. Have JARVIS ping me if you want my help explaining things to the other three."

"Thanks, Nat." I should be able to handle it, but if they start asking too many questions I won’t hesitate to call for backup. Enjoy your workout."

*~*~ American Punchline ~*~*

"I still can’t believe you guys asked for my help with your ‘little’ research project," TJ added the air quotes hoping to make Steve smile.

"Well believe it. You’re a smart guy and these days if it affects us, it is likely to affect you too.” Steve looked up from the bowl he was mixing. “I did try to warn you that there was a downside to hanging around with me.”

“You did and I heard you. I also chose ignore the warning and do it anyway because the upside far outweighed the risks.” TJ shrugged, pulling out the non-stick mats for the cookie sheets.

“You know I’ll do my best to protect you if shit hits the fan, right?” Steve stepped closer, setting the bowl of cookie dough on the counter next to where TJ stood. “But promise me that if at any point I tell you to go, even if it is to go to your parents, you will and you’ll know that it’s to keep you safe not because I don’t want you here.”

TJ looked into Steve’s blue eyes, searching for a something even if he didn’t know what. “I promise, but you have to promise me that’s a last resort.”

“I promise.” Steve pulled him closer, holding him tight against his body. “And if I do, it will be temporary.”

TJ nodded against his shoulder.

“Now, I’m pretty sure whatever it is won’t blow up for at least a few weeks based on Fury’s call, so I say we focus on finishing our cookies and then maybe go find a movie to watch. We can add our brains to the research in the morning.”

As soon as he finished, the oven chirped that it was preheated.

“Sounds like it agrees,” TJ smiled. “Better get them ready to go into the oven.” Grabbing the two spoons he’d set out to portion the dough, he handed one to Steve.

“Can’t argue with the oven,” Steve’s smile lit his eyes and TJ was thrilled to see him looking happy despite the unknown looming on the horizon. Standing side by side as they spooned dough onto their respective cookie sheets, TJ couldn’t resist playfully bumping his hip into Steve’s.

“Trying to wreck my concentration?” Steve teased.

“Are you saying you have to concentrate to do this?”

“Fair point,” Steve conceded as TJ grinned at him.

The pair were content to tease as they finished filling the cookie sheets. By the time they were
slipping them into the oven and setting the timer, they were both more relaxed.

Grabbing the dirty dishes, TJ headed to the sink though his eyes were still fixed on Steve’s features were the other man was checking a recipe for another kitchen project. He couldn’t help but think he would never get tired of the time they spent together cooking up whatever struck their fancy whether it was quick and simple or something more extravagant that took hours to finish. No matter their different experiences, in this they were learning together.

Hearing the sink running, Steve looked up. He couldn’t help but smile at the now familiar site of TJ, relaxed and happy in the kitchen. When he was younger if his mother had said he would someday look forward to moments like this he would have thought she was crazy.

Remembering his thoughts from the night before, Steve let his eyes roam over TJ while the other man’s back was turned. He was slimmer than Steve, but he could see the strength in the lines of TJ’s back and shoulders underneath the fitted t-shirt he wore. Steve swallowed as his eyes drifted lower. Everyone teased him about his ass being a national treasure, but he was fairly certain a monument could be built in honor of TJ’s backside and people would come from across the world to appreciate it.

“You gonna help dry or are you planning to stare at me all night?” TJ called over his shoulder, winking at Steve.

He didn’t know how TJ had caught him, but Steve hoped his face hadn’t turned too red at being called out. Either way, he grabbed the dish towel and moved to help.

Unable to resist a bit of teasing, he stopped right behind TJ. Leaving only an inch or two between them, he leaned toward the other man’s ear to whisper, “I was just enjoying the view.”

“Well enjoy it while you work,” TJ scolded playfully as he set the last of their small collection of dishes onto the drying rack.

Wiping off the counter, TJ watched as Steve put a mixing bowl away. The blond turned around, offering up a broad smile when he caught TJ staring at him. TJ didn’t bother to look away since it only seemed fair that he got to stare too.

Steve stepped closer, reaching around TJ to grab the last bowl to put away. TJ could feel the heat radiating from the super soldier’s body, caught a scent that was uniquely Steve as he inhaled sharply.

TJ almost whimpered when Steve stepped back, eyes unsure as if he thought he might have crossed some imaginary line despite them being in a similar position only moments before. Deciding there was no time like the present, TJ took a deep breath.

“Remember when you told me you always wanted me to tell you what I wanted?” TJ fought his instinct to look away, instead making himself meet Steve’s brilliant blue eyes.

“Yes.” Steve eyes softened, appearing pleased that he remembered. TJ noticed a smudge of flour on Steve’s cheek, but resisted the urge to reach up and wipe it off.

One more deep breath and he jumped in with both feet. “I want you to kiss me.” The words were a whisper, nerves almost robbing him of his voice as his eyes dropped to stare at another smudge of flour on the grey t-shirt that was easily a size too small.

He heard Steve’s breathe catch, waited for his warmth to pull away. No matter what they’d said before, no matter how much Steve flirted with him, TJ couldn’t shake that last bit of insecurity. Couldn’t rid himself of that small voice that told him no one really wanted him like that.
“TJ …” The blond growled his name, as TJ realized the flour smudge he was still staring at was getting closer. “TJ, look at me.” He could feel the heat of Steve’s breath against his face.

Hands gripping the counter behind him, TJ lifted his eyes. He wasn’t sure what he expected to see, but the heat in Steve’s gaze, pupils blown wide, wasn’t it.

“Did you mean it? Is that really what you want? Because once I kiss you I don’t think I’m going to want to stop. Once I have you I’m not letting you go … ever.”

“I know. I’m sure. I may not be exactly where I want to be in my life yet, but I know I want this.” He leaned closer, his nose brushing against Steve’s cheek. “I know I want you.”

The words were barely out of his mouth before he felt Steve’s lips press gently against his. It was soft at first as if the soldier was giving him a chance to change his mind, but TJ knew what he wanted. Licking at the seam of Steve’s lips, TJ felt the moan from the soldier reverberating through his body. Lost in the sensation, he almost missed Steve lifting him off the ground and setting him on the counter as he fit himself between TJ’s legs.

Steve heard the oven timer beep, but with TJ pressed against him, their mouths joined, he really didn’t care if the cookies burned. They could make more later. Possibly much later.

“You boys gonna …” Natasha looked up, noticing what was going on. “Never mind, I’ll just pull those out of the oven before the house burns down. I think Clint and I are gonna hang out with the kittens and have a movie marathon tonight, so you two have as much fun as you want.”

She never stopped grinning as shut off the timer, retrieved the cookies, and placed them on the cooling racks. She wasn’t actually sure if TJ had registered her presence. Steve’s quick glance her direction as he nibbled at TJ’s collarbone told her the super soldier had.

Natasha stifled a laugh when Steve clearly decided it was time for more privacy. Guiding TJ’s legs around his waist with his hands, Steve reached around his partner and lifted him off the counter. TJ clung to the blond, not seeming to mind that he was being carried from the room.

Shaking her head, Natasha decided she might as well make the best of being left with the cookies, so she moved to grab a glass and the jug of milk.

“Did I just ….” Clint started as he strolled into the room.

Natasha’s answering grin halted the rest of the question.

“Awesome,” the archer was thrilled for both of them. They deserved a chance to be happy.

“Lucky for us they finished the cookies before they got distracted.” She handed Clint a glass of milk. “I might have told Steve we were going to hang out downstairs and have a movie marathon with the mascots tonight.”

Clint nodded. “Works for me.”

A few moments later everyone else had meandered into the kitchen, lured by the smell of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies.

“Is it just me or are we missing a couple people?” Tony noted their absence.

“They are otherwise occupied,” Clint winked.
“Seriously?” Sam’s brows shot up. “I’m impressed. They didn’t make us stage an intervention after all.”

Tony and Pepper handed glasses of milk to Sam and Bruce before Tony raised his in a toast. “To the love birds. May they continue to be happy so they’ll keep feeding us.”

“Cheers to that,” Clint was the first to raise his glass in return. “Nat promised me a movie marathon. Anyone care to join?”

Grabbing the platter of cookies, Tony headed for the door. “I get first pick.”

Everyone else laughed, following behind him.

No matter what threat Fury’s call warned them was coming, for tonight they would enjoy laughter together thrilled with the knowledge that two men that both deserved so much more happiness than they’d previously been given had finally found some together.

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna admit I'm a bit emotional about this coming to an end even though I have more planned for this crew. Still, this 69 chapter behemoth took on a life of its own at some point and has been a full two-year labor of love.

Clearly, I left you with a bit of a hint about where the sequel will take us. I'm going to spend a bit of time trying to get the basic rails of that one setup before I start writing and posting, but I'll do my best not to leave you hanging for long. Just make sure if you want to know when it goes up that you've subscribed to the collection, not just this individual fic.

Finally, to all those that have read, reread, left kudos, commented, or otherwise supported American Punchline - THANK YOU!!!! The story wouldn't be where it is without you.

I hope you all enjoyed this final chapter.
the sequel

Not a chapter, just a heads up for those that had this bookmarked and were interested in the sequel. The first chapter is up :)

Find it [here](#).

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End Notes

Take a second to leave a comment and let me know if there's interest in this being continued. There's definitely potential for more chapters if readers want to see them.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!