Summary

Tony is driving from Malibu to Manhattan with a robot in the back seat and Captain America riding escort at Pepper's behest. What could possibly go wrong?

Notes

Once upon a time, FedEx lost a satellite that Nakki was trying to ship. Once found, she sent some students to retrieve it in an epic technological road trip. I decided the only thing better than road trip with satellite would be road trip with robot, and here we are.

Unrelatedly, this story does not take into account certain IM3 spoilers, or the fact that Lavo is apparently not open for lunch.

"Remind me, again, why you're doing this?" Pepper said from the video screen. "I thought you were shipping the 'bots to New York."

"So did I," Tony replied, from underneath his one remaining car left in Malibu. "Butterfingers and U should be arriving at the Tower tomorrow. JARVIS has it covered."

"Good, because I'm your CEO, not your PA, and I don't take deliveries for you anymore," Pepper said.
"Do I owe you flowers or sparkly things?" Tony asked, pushing himself out from under the car. "I'm not picking a fight, I genuinely don't know if I do."

"No," she said with a smile. "I'm just saying if you expected me to meet your robots and sign for them, I'm in Tokyo tomorrow."

"Then why are you all fretty about me taking a road trip? You'll be in Japan. Japan is no place for a fret, Pep."

"Call it force of habit, I prefer to know where you are at all times."

"You adore me. You can't live without me. It's okay, I'll have my cell," he said. "Anyway, so U is small enough I could ship him regular old FedEx, and I can ship Butterfingers industrial freight. Dummy's too big for the commercial and too little for the industrial, but he's just right for the roadster."

"You're driving Dummy from Malibu to Manhattan in a top-down roadster?" Pepper asked.

"He won't fit if I put the top up."

"Are you not a little worried about thieves?"

"Have faith! Besides, what would thieves do with a disembodied mechanical arm with the IQ of a four year old?"

"What do you do with him?"

"I made him, I don't need to give him purpose," Tony said.

"Why don't you just fly him out in the jet?"

"Well, first, you have the jet this week, and second, I may have made a bet with the post office."

"The entire post office?" Pepper sighed.

"In the form of one very cranky shipping manager who refused to accept Dummy with a box of stamps clutched in his claw. If I make it inside of a week he owes me a postage stamp with my face on it." Tony patted Dummy, who had rolled over to see what the fuss was about. "It'll be fine. It'll be fun!"

"Don't say I didn't warn you that it will not be fun," Pepper said, but she was smiling. "What time are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll be in Manhattan soon and I'll make you dinner."

"You can buy me dinner, I've had your cooking."

"Wounded. I'm wounded," Tony said to Dummy. "Mommy's words hurt, baby."

"I'm hanging up now, Tony."
"What, no videophone sex?"

"I love you, bye," she said, and the screen went black before he could either respond in kind or utterly fail at being in a grownup relationship.

"Come on, you mockery of existence, let's test out the ramp. I know you wanted shotgun but it was easier to take out the bench seat," Tony said, and Dummy obediently allowed himself to be coaxed into what used to be the back seat of a roadster.

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At seven the next morning, Tony was drinking the last of the orange juice in his very empty kitchen, preparing to hit the road, when he heard the roar of a motorcycle. He turned and saw, through the video monitors he was about to shut down, a familiar bike come barreling down the private road.

"I'm gonna kill her," he announced, and went to open the front door. By the time he got there the bike had been parked, and he leaned against the door jamb, watching as the rider dismounted and pulled his helmet off. Captain America gave him a sunny smile as he hung the helmet on his handlebars.

"Ms. Potts said I could find you here," he said, coming up the walk. "She thought you'd probably still be asleep."

"Well, you know us billionaires, all work," Tony said, arms crossed. "Where you been, Ice Cube? Touring America without the dancing girls this time?"

"Somethin' like that," Rogers answered, smile undimmed. "Ms. Potts said you were heading back to Manhattan and could use an honor guard."

"I bet she did," Tony replied. "How'd she get ahold of you?"

"Oh, she has my phone number."

Tony blinked. "Since when?"

"You know, things happen, people talk," Rogers said vaguely. "Anyway, I was in San Francisco -- phew, now there's a place," he added, shaking his head. "And I've been thinking about heading back east now anyway, so when Ms. Potts called, I said sure. Why not, y'know?"

"Sure," Tony repeated. "Why not. Well, keep up, old man, Dummy and I stop for no national icon."

"Dummy?" Rogers asked.

"She didn't say why I was driving back?"

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"Wow," Rogers said, when Tony rolled the roadster out of the garage. Dummy, who didn't get out much, swung around three hundred and sixty degrees, chirping excitedly, fingers flexing and clacking. He had a couple of red flags adorning various joints and pistons, and he fluffed them proudly when he caught Rogers watching. "What did you do to your car?"
"That's Dummy. Dummy, Cap, Cap, Dummy."

"Is it a robot?"

"He's a failure on every level," Tony replied, putting his sunglasses on. He watched Rogers and Dummy inspect each other like two curious cats. "Built him when I was seventeen. He's such a loser even the post office won't take him, so I'm driving him out to New York."

"You built this?" Rogers asked, as Dummy poked him in the head.

"Yeah, he doesn't think much of you either."

"No, Stark, it's...wow," Rogers said.

"Stop gaping and saddle up or I'm leaving you behind," Tony ordered, and vaulted into the roadster. "We can do lunch in Vegas. Ever been to Vegas?"

"I hear it's swell."

"Swell," Tony sighed, firing up the engine. Dummy flailed joyfully. "Great."

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Tony would give the Otter Pop this: he wasn't a granny driver. They made stupid good time to Las Vegas, and Rogers kept up the whole way, at least until they hit the traffic near the strip. Tony deliberately led him all the way up the Strip itself, giving the tourists a show: Tony Stark, billionaire and superhero, cruising Las Vegas. Rogers pulled up behind him when he stopped outside the Palazzo, but he didn't cut the motorcycle's engine.

"We can't park here," he said, pointing to the huge NO PARKING sign.

"I gotta keep an eye on Dummy while we eat," Tony replied, as a valet came running up. "Hey, cool, valet. Okay so the deal is..." he peeled a hundred out of his clip and offered it to the man. "You make sure nobody tows my car, nobody fucks with the robot or the motorcycle, and there's a second one for you when we get done. Hey, yeah, photos with the robot? Go nuts. Charge for 'em if you want. Hello Vegas!" he added, as a crowd began to gather. "Come on, Captain, let's eat."

Rogers switched off the bike, but he still looked hesitant. "Are you sure we should -- "

"I am absolutely sure we should do whatever it is you think we shouldn't do," Tony said, and led him up the steps to Lavo.

Where, half an hour later, he watched in awe as Steve Rogers put away an entire twenty-ounce steak with all the trimmings.

"Where does it go?" he asked.

"I get hungry," Rogers replied. "Sides, in the war you learn to eat when you can."

"So you're saying you could eat more?"

"Well, I could, but it's not war now. There's no reason to get greedy," Rogers answered. He leaned
back, turning his face up to the bright noontime Nevada sun, long legs stretching out under the table on the terrace. A crowd had gathered down below, equal parts tourists wanting their photo with Dummy and onlookers wanting a snap of Tony enjoying his lunch. He saw a couple of them studying Rogers with interest.

"You want a banana split or something? 'Cause we should probably get back on the road," he said. "Normally I’d stay and lose a few thousand at the tables, but the real action doesn't start until after midnight."

"No, we can go," Rogers answered, catching the hint of challenge in Tony's voice. "Does Dummy uh. Need anything?"

"He's cool, I hooked him into the engine. You good?"

"Ready when you are," Rogers agreed, and calmly let Tony pick up the check.

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They stopped that night at a diner outside Grand Junction, getting burgers to go and eating them in the roadster under the brightly starred sky on a mostly deserted road. Dummy was fascinated by the stars, aiming his camera up at them, arm almost vertical, fingers clicking softly.

"So how smart is he, this thing you got here?" Rogers asked, brushing one of Dummy's hazard flags out of his eyes.

"Smarter than a dog, dumber than a fifth-grader," Tony said. "Why, you want him? He's a pain in the ass, I'll sell him to you cheap."

"If he's that much of a pain, you wouldn't be driving him to Manhattan."

"Excuse for a road trip."

"Sure," Rogers agreed, and Tony narrowed his eyes. "Give you two bits for him."

"You insult me. I said cheap, not absurd."

"Ms. Potts said you were gone on robots. I didn't believe her."

"Oh she did, did she?" Tony asked. "Feeding you malicious rumors, going behind my back. I should call her and tell her you spilled. How did you two hook up, anyway?"

"Apparently Stark Industries still owns the trademark on my shield's design," Rogers said. "Or, well, did. After the whole...everything, she sent me the original paperwork and a transfer-of-ownership. Said she thought I should have it. I wrote her a thank-you note -- "

"Of course you did."

"Didn't anyone ever teach you not to interrupt?" Rogers retorted.

"They did. I studiously ignored it."

"I noticed."
"So you wrote my girlfriend a thank-you note."

"She's a classy dame, Stark, she appreciated it. We got to talking. I haven't got so many friends in the world I can afford to give someone a cold shoulder."

"Hence me," Tony said with a grin.

"Just doin' a lady a favor, making sure you don't get yourself killed."

"Uh-huh. Get out of my car with your wholesome values and sense of duty. No, seriously, out, we are done eating, I want to find somewhere to sleep."

"Well, I got a bedroll in the bike's cargo bag, but it only sleeps one."

"You are a heathen, Rogers. There's a motel a few miles up, I think."

"Lead the way," Rogers said, pulling his helmet on. Tony gave him a little dust to eat, just because he could.

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"I didn't peg this for your kind of place," the human eating machine said, emerging from the bathroom of the single-bed room Tony managed to weasel out of an apathetic motel manager. He swiped at his hair with a towel, stepping into his boxers with a military unconcern for his nudity.

Everything in the room did, it was true, have a thin layer of dust on it. Tony was sure he'd seen mouse tracks along the floorboards, too. But it was one night and --

"I once lived in a cave for three months. Besides, it's road trip traditional," Tony called, lying on the bed with a projected desktop floating over him, picking at email and half-finished projects. "Are you sure about sleeping out in the car?"

"Doesn't bother me, and someone should stay out there to keep an eye on Dummy."

"I don't know why everyone thinks someone's going to steal him. Dummy doesn't, believe me, go anywhere he doesn't want to go. They'd have a hell of a time trying to shift him without his help."

"Yeah, you looked like you were ridin' a little low in the back."

"Besides, you think robot thieves grow on trees?"

"I think the world is full of opportunists," Rogers replied, pulling his shirt on.

"Odd sentiment for Captain America."

"I grew up during the Depression, you know. And then I fought a war. I've seen plenty of opportunism and I never figured geography was the root cause. Difference is I believe people can be better."

"Difference between you and me?" Tony asked.
"Maybe," Rogers said with a shrug. "Difference between me and the cynics, maybe. Everyone's so cynical nowadays. What I used to call hope people call cornball. Takes some getting used to."

"You'll figure it out."

"Oh, I didn't mean bein' cynical myself. Just have to remember to stand up against 'em," Rogers said cheerfully. Tony rolled his eyes. "Like that right there. You know how many people back down when you call them out on rolling their eyes?"

Tony rolled his eyes again. Rogers grinned.

"I know that's just your way," he said. "I'm up at 0600 tomorrow. Want me to wake you?"

"I didn't even want you to come," Tony pointed out.

"Sure ya didn't. Okay, 0700 it is," Rogers replied, and left before Tony could argue.

"You learned that from Pepper!" he yelled.

"Put a sock in it!" Rogers yelled back, through the thin wall.

***

Day two of the road trip, Tony got pulled over in Denver for riding in the carpool lane.

Rogers had stopped at some farmstand somewhere to pick up fresh fruit (Tony had eyerolled again) and told him to head onwards; after all, they were sticking to a pretty easy-to-follow route and if he went fast enough he'd catch up to Tony sooner or later at any rate.

Tony, sensing his chance to lose his Pepper-ordained chaperone, pulled into the carpool lane to dodge traffic, and ended up on the side of the road with a highway patrolman coming towards him.

"License and registration, please," the patrolman said, and didn't seem impressed when he saw the name on Tony's driver's license. "Sir, are you aware you were driving in the carpool lane?"

Dummy was inquisitively inspecting the officer, arm darting forward and then pulling back. The man looked up, narrowed his eyes, and rested one hand calmly on his gun.

"Well, I figured I had him in the backseat, which qualified me," Tony said, jerking a thumb at Dummy. "Trust me, we'd hold up traffic if he had to roll along on his own."

"Sir, the carpool lane is for two people or more."

"This is seriously the best thing you can find to be doing right now?" Tony asked.

The patrolman's mouth twitched. "Gotta make my quota, sir," he drawled, with a how many times are assholes going to hassle me about this expression.

"Look, I know he doesn't look like a person but I promise you he is at least as smart as some of the assholes in these other cars," Tony said. "It didn't occur to me there was an IQ test to pass."

"I'm pretty sure the definition of person doesn't extend to your toy robot, sir."
"Oh! Oh, good, we're going to argue about sentience now," Tony answered.

"You want to step out of the car, Mr. Stark?"

"I do, actually, yes," Tony said, just as Dummy reached over and stole the patrolman's sunglasses. He beeped triumphantly and held them out of reach, peering through them with his camera lens.

The patrolman turned to Tony. "Sir, would you like to ask your robot to give me my sunglasses back?"

"Dummy," Tony said through gritted teeth. "Give the nice man with the gun his glasses."

Dummy blew a raspberry, bouncing around, making the car rock gently.

"Look, I'll buy you some new ones. He's badly socialized," Tony said.

"Are you attempting to bribe me, Mr. Stark?"

"Why, would that work?" Tony asked.

"No," the officer said.

"Oh. Well, no, then. But come on, look at him, he's clearly pretty bright, he's definitely a person."

"He's a robot, sir. Robots do not qualify for the carpool lane."

"Turing test," Tony said. He could afford the ticket, of course, and he probably should just take it and go, but now his honor and Dummy's personhood were on the line and if you started giving in to the police who knew where it would end?

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Turing test. I can prove his intelligence. Okay..." Tony held up his hands. "So there's unintelligent human behavior --" he waved one hand, "and there's intelligent behavior that human beings don't do." He waved the other. "He'd given this lecture plenty of times over the years, he had all the hand gestures down. "In the middle..." he linked his fingers, "is where you test for whether a machine can emulate or replicate human behavior, which is the best measure we've been able to come up with for the sentience of artificial life --"

"Sir, I'm going to run your license and write you a ticket," the man interrupted firmly, and Tony heard Rogers' motorcycle approaching. He sighed.

"But Dummy is a person," he repeated.

"He's a robot, sir. He would not be traveling if you didn't put him in the car. Therefore he's not carpooling, he's the equivalent of a very large GPS system."

"Babies wouldn't be traveling unless you put them in a car, and they can't even work a GPS," Tony argued, as Rogers pulled to a stop next to them and got off his bike. The officer turned, and Dummy took the opportunity to gently lower the sunglasses onto Tony's face.
"Is there a problem, sir?" Rogers asked, getting off his bike.

"Are you accompanying this gentleman?" the officer asked.

"I was asked to keep him out of trouble. Sorry about that," Rogers replied. "What's he done?"

"Carpool lane."

Rogers frowned. "So?"

"He's only one person."

"Yeah, but Dummy --"

"We've been over it," Tony said tiredly. "He won't let me demonstrate a Turing test."

"Would that help?" Rogers asked, looking mystified.

"I can prove Dummy's a person --"

"Well, obviously he is," Rogers said with a bright look. "Is that the problem? Sorry to make trouble, sir, I know he doesn't look like a normal person, but then what's normal, after all?"

"I'd like to see your license and registration as well, Mr...?"

"Captain Steve Rogers," he answered. "Sure, here ya go."

He held out his wallet. Then, very casually, he reached into one of the bags on his bike, pulled the side of it down far enough that his shield was visible, and began rummaging for his paperwork. He found it and looked up, catching the officer staring at his shield.

There was a long, thoughtful silence.

"Captain...?" the officer asked.

"I'd be obliged if you didn't spread that around," Rogers said, nodding at the shield.

"But...for real?" the man asked, turning to Tony, who hastily took the sunglasses off and offered them to him.

"The real thing," Tony confirmed.

"I haven't been officially appointed any kind of...designator of personhood," Rogers said, straightening, "but the robot there was built in the USA and I'm pretty sure that's still the only qualification you need to be a citizen. Dummy, sing that song I taught you."

Tony stared up at his robot with a mixture of pride and horror as Dummy beeped and clicked his way loudly through the opening of the Star Spangled Banner.

"Taught him that last night. We couldn't sleep," Rogers said to Tony.

"Well." The officer looked indecisive. "I suppose I can take Captain America's word for it."
"That's big of you," Tony grumbled.

"I know I get awfully peeved when I see people driving alone in the carpool lane," Rogers continued earnestly. "Keep up the good work, officer."

"Th...thanks," the officer replied. He seemed to snap out of a daze suddenly, and offered his ticket-board shyly. "Can I...?"

"Oh!" Rogers laughed nervously. "Sure."

Tony watched as Captain America signed the ticket board, capped the pen, offered it back to the patrolman, and slapped him on the back. "Drive safe. Look me up if you're ever in New York."

"Yes sir!" the officer replied.

"Stark?" Rogers raised his eyebrows, and Tony hurried back into the car. Dummy was still trumpeting the Star Spangled Banner, probably somewhere in the third verse. He pulled back on the road with a robot singing patriotically in the back seat, a national icon following, and a highway patrolman throwing them a salute as he faded into the distance.

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"You know what really bites my bullet?" Tony said, over dinner in Des Moines that night. Captain Moving Violation had picked the place, claiming he'd been tipped off that it was good. Tony didn't ask by whom. "It's not that he thought Dummy wasn't a person, lots of people think Dummy's not a person, I think mostly he's a menace to those around him. It's that the guy wouldn't take my word for it when he clearly knew who I was. The man wouldn't listen to Iron Man, foremost expert on robotics in this country. But Captain America shows up and all of a sudden it's autograph and drive-safe time."

"Perk of the position," Rogers said, around a mouthful of what Tony would admit was the best meatloaf he had ever tasted. "I'm very believable."

"Get out of a lot of tickets with that accidentally-flashing-the-shield act?" Tony asked. "Why do you even have it with you?"

Rogers looked offended. "It's mine. It goes with me everywhere. And no, I would never get out of a legitimate ticket. If you'd been speeding I wouldn't have lifted a finger. But we can't have people running around saying your robots aren't people just because they don't have...noses, and bellybuttons, and stuff."

"I can't believe you taught him to sing the national anthem."

"Hum," Rogers corrected.

"Hum, sing, whatever, why would you do that to me?"

"I taught him Chattanooga Choo Choo too."

"I know, he serenaded me with it the last thirty miles or so."
"Well, I can't help it if you've neglected his musical education."

"I play AC/DC for him all the time! I play him Metallica and Def Leppard and Led Zeppelin!"

"Maybe he prefers jazz," Rogers said airily. "Are you gonna finish your meatloaf?"

"Trade you for your mac," Tony said, pushing his plate over, and Rogers offered him the bowl of mac and cheese. "We gotta take you to one of those places where if you eat the whole meal they give you, you win a prize."

"They have places like that?" Rogers asked.

"Scuse me," a small voice said, and Tony looked down.

A tiny person was standing next to his chair, gazing up at him. She had long black hair, huge brown eyes, and an Iron Man action figure in one hand. It was the one with interchangeable "Iron Man" and "Tony Stark" heads. (Tony was never one to let a merchandising opportunity pass him by.)

"Are you Iron Man?" she asked, holding up the toy. The tiny Tony Stark head on it mocked him.

"Yes," he said warily.

"Where's your armor?" she asked.

"Left it in my other pants," he said. She giggled.

"Mija!" someone cried, and a woman with a definite resemblance to the little girl scooped her up. "I'm so sorry, sir, I turn my back for a moment --"

"It's Iron Man," the girl complained, wriggling.

"It's fine," Tony answered, and the woman's eyes got huge. She let her daughter drop back to the ground, and the little girl promptly crawled up into Tony's lap, kneeling on his thigh painfully and staring into his face.

"Carmenita, no," her mother said, horrified.

"Kaboom!" the girl replied, making the unmistakable repulsoring you in the head gesture.

"Yes, that's me," Tony answered. Rogers, across from him, was desperately suppressing laughter. Tony narrowed his eyes. "You know who this is?"

The girl followed his gesture, pivoting on his thigh, bony knees digging in. Tony winced and adjusted her gently. She gave Rogers a once-over.

"The 'ncred'ble Hulk?" she offered.

"That's my buddy Steve," Tony said. "He's Captain America."

"Ooooh," the girl replied, impressed. "Are there bad guys here? Are you here to fight bad guys?"

"No," Steve said. Carmenita’s mother looked like she had been worried about this possibility also.
"Just to have dinner. You like Iron Man, huh?"

Tony glared.

"He's my favorite," she squeaked. "An' then Black Wid'w, an' then Captain America, and then the 'ncred'ble Hulk, an' then Hawkeye an' then Thor an' then Superman."

"Mija, Superman doesn't -- " the woman began, but Tony put a finger to his lips.

"You want a picture?" he asked, and the girl nodded. "Ro -- Steve, here, lean in. There we go. Mom, you got a -- great, okay, awesome," he said, as Carmenita's mother pulled a phone out of her purse. "And, mac and cheese!"

"Mac and cheese!" the girl repeated, and the phone's shutter-noise clicked. Steve's grin was a mile wide and matinee-idol pretty. Tony had probably blinked.

"Now we have to leave the nice men alone," the woman insisted, and scooped Carmenita off Tony's lap. He massaged his thigh subtly.

"Aren't you adorable," Steve remarked, as the girl waved goodbye all the way out to the parking lot.

"Shut it, Captain Sure I'll Autograph Your Clipboard Officer," Tony grumbled.

***

That night, Tony called Pepper. He even did time-zone calculations first. He was totally getting the hang of this boyfriend thing.

"You are busted," he said, when she answered. "I hope you're paying him for his babysitting duties."

"I guess Steve caught up with you," she replied, laughter in her tone. "Forgive me for wanting you to have someone around in case the car broke down or Dummy went all Skynet once he saw how much real estate he had to conquer."

"I am a grown man."

"You still think your social security number is five. It doesn't even start with five."

"I don't need my social security number to drive cross-country, I fly cross-country on a regular basis. In a suit of armor I invented and built myself. Without prior knowledge of my social security number. Why do I even need that? Am I seriously going to collect social security?"

"And yet you still wear sneakers with tuxedos."

"I think we're getting off the point here, which is that you coerced a superhero into shepherding me around like I'm incapable of parking a car."

"I hear he got you out of a ticket today."

"How did you hear that?" he demanded.

"He texted."
"Steve Rogers texts?"

"He was born in 1920, he's not still living in it," she replied. "He's a sweetheart, be nice to him."

"He taught Dummy the national anthem."

"You taught Butterfingers to throw the bird."

"And of the two which is more useful?" Tony asked. "You know if you wanted someone to ride along with me you could have come yourself."

"I'm the CEO, I can't take three days off to tool around Middle America with my mercurial head of R&D."

"Admit it, you're worried the places I'm sleeping would give you bedbugs."

"I do have a decontamination staff waiting for when you get home," she said. "Are you having fun, at least?"

"Yeah, I guess so. More fun if you were here."

"You mean more sex if I were there."

"That too. Phone sex?"

"Tony, it's eleven in the morning here and I'm standing outside an extremely fancy restaurant where a bunch of fellow CEOs are waiting to do lunch with me."

"Does it have a bathroom?"

"I'm not -- I can't even say aloud what I'm not going to do, but I'm not going to do it."

"A man gets lonely out on the open road."

"I'm sure your motel offered complimentary bottles of lotion."

"Pepper," Tony said, delighted and mock-scandalized. Then he lowered his voice. "You want to listen in?"

"I'm hanging up now," she said with a laugh. "Drive safe, I love you."

"I love you t -- " he started, but she'd already clicked off. Steve, coming into the motel room with a bag of snacks, raised his eyebrows as Tony tossed the phone onto the bed in annoyance.

"She always does that," Tony complained.

"Does what? Was that Ms. Potts?"

"She says I love you and then rings off before I can answer, like she's expecting I won't reply."

"Would you?"
"Of course I would!" Tony retorted. He scowled. "At least half the time I would. And the other half, she knows I'm crazy about her but also actually crazy in terms of expressing affection, it's not a thing I learned at MIT."

"Well, if she knows, and you know, it's a pretty minor problem in the scheme of things," Steve replied. "Besides, you have a phone. Call her back and say it. Or text her."

Tony frowned.

"For a supposed genius you're a little thick," Steve added, opening a giant bag of pre-popped popcorn. "Text her, ya idiot. Make use of the tools at your disposal."

Tony flopped on the bed sullenly and picked up his phone. "I would have thought of that eventually."

"Seventy years and women's lib later, you'd think people would be talkin' more," Steve observed to the air, as Tony texted love you too and hovered his finger hesitantly over SEND. Steve sat down next to him, leaned over, and tapped it before Tony could.

"Sack up," he informed Tony. "If I managed to land a lady like Ms. Potts she'd already be Mrs. Rogers."

"I think she'd keep her name, and also if you steal Pepper from me I will stab you to death," Tony replied, as a return text from Pepper appeared. It said only <3.

Great, they were that couple now.

"See? That's the spirit!" Steve punched him on the shoulder. "So what's this Pay Per View movie thing you were gonna show me?"

Outside, the distant strains of Chattanooga Choo Choo could be heard.

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On the third day, Steve wiped out his bike between Toledo and Cleveland.

Tony was just batting Dummy out of the way for the dozenth time -- he'd started angling himself forward over the front seat to fiddle with the radio, and kept tuning it from Tony's rock stations to Golden Oldies, which he was ridiculously skilled at finding. Tony shoved him off and glanced in the rearview just in time to see Steve, a few car-lengths behind him, suddenly swerve. The bike went sideways, screaming across the empty freeway, and Steve went down hard.

Tony hit the brakes. The car skidded around and slid onto the shoulder, and Tony was over the driver's side door almost before it stopped. Behind him, Dummy shrieked in alarm.

"Cap!" he yelled, running back along the blacktop, smoke from the bike obscuring his vision. The bike was making a noise like crunching metal, but at least it was smashed up against the guardrail and out of the way. Tony managed to find Steve in the smoke and drag him, praying for no sudden cars, to the side of the road. He coughed and waved dust out of his eyes, tugging on Steve's helmet until it popped off. The back of his bike jacket was shredded and there was blood all over one of his arms.
"Shit, shit, shit," Tony chanted, pressing his head to Steve's chest. There was a faint heartbeat, at least, and he was breathing. Tony leaned back just in time for Steve to startle awake, eyes flying open, and roll onto his front, curling into a ball. Shreds of his jacket tangled with road rash all over his back.

"Get down!" he heard, and then Steve yanked him hard by the hair, pulling him face-first into the dirt. "Where's it coming from?"

"Where's what -- leggo of me," Tony struggled against his grip, finally worming free.

"Get down, you'll give us away," Steve replied, and then lifted his head. "I -- what?"

Oh, Tony thought. Flashback.

"2012," he blurted, and Steve blinked at him owlishly, blood running down his face. "It's 2012, you're on the road outside Toledo."

Steve sat up, looking around at the clearing smoke, and then sat back on his heels. He lifted a hand to his shoulder and then studied the blood on his bike gloves.

"Come on, can you stand? We gotta get some help," Tony said, pulling out his phone. Steve put a hand on it and shook his head. "No, seriously, you need an ambulance."

"It's fine. Nothing's broken, I was just a little stunned for a minute," Steve said. "Where's the bike?"

Tony pointed to the steaming wreck.

"God dammit," Steve groaned. "Again?"

"Again?" Tony repeated. "This happened to you before?"

"Yeah, I was in Kansas last time. It's the fucking control cables," Steve said, and Tony wasn't even aware he knew how to swear, much less twice in a minute.

Then he actually stood up, pulling off his gloves and tugging at the snaps on his jacket. It came away in two pieces. "How's my back?"

"Shredded," Tony informed him. "What did you do last time?"

"Washed it out and took a nap," Steve replied. At Tony's look, he shrugged. "I heal fast. See?"

He pulled his hair back from the wound on his hairline, which was already scabbed over. Tony whistled low.

"Come on, let's get the road clear," Steve added.

He insisted on retrieving the shield from his bag before he'd let himself get looked at. Eventually Steve wound up sitting on the hood of the roadster while Dummy dabbed a sock soaked in alcohol on his road rash and Tony crouched across the highway, investigating the bike.

"Is this baling wire?" he asked, holding up a scrap of wire. "No wonder this thing keeps crashing,
"Work with what you've got," Steve replied. Dummy offered him the faintly pink sock. "Thank you," he said, setting it next to him on the hood. "Can you get it up and running again, Tony?"

"Nah, the fork's fucked," Tony replied. He grunted as he got the bike vertical, waiting for two big rigs and a sedan to pass before rolling it -- dragging it, mostly -- across the freeway. "Way to go, chaperone, you sign up to escort me home and instead I have to haul your sorry ass."

"I prefer to think of it as Tony Stark almost gets Captain America killed," Steve said with a smile. Tony popped the trunk of the roadster and took out the first-aid kit stowed there. "It's not necessary, you know."

"Humor me," Tony said, pressing a large bandage to his back and taping it down expertly. You learned how to doctor pretty fast, in the hero business. "No wonder Dummy likes you, you're kindred souls. Enjoy the rest because in a minute you're gonna help me strap the bike to the back of the car so we can get the hell back to civilization. You can ride shotgun but driver picks the music."

"If you want to drop me in..." Steve frowned. "Where's the next place with a decent garage?"

"Cleveland, and there's no way I'm leaving you in Cleveland. I've got a shop back at the Tower, I can rebuild your bike so it doesn't routinely try to kill you, which is ridiculous. He survives the second world war, hypothermia, and alien invasions, only to be brought down by Harley-Davidson. I will never live down the shame if I don't fix this, and neither will you. Baling wire, for fuck's sake," Tony muttered, cleaning up the debris of the roadside doctoring.

Just then a pickup truck drove past, honked loudly, and pulled onto the shoulder nearby. The door opened and a guy dropped to the ground, walking back towards them.

"You have a fender-bender?" he asked, taking in the classic car, the mangled bike, the robot, and the bandages. "You need some help? I got a cellphone."

"No, thank you," Steve said. "Just a wipeout, we're okay."

"You sure? That bike's not going anywhere. We can toss it in the bed of the truck if you want."

"He's riding with me," Tony said. The man glanced at Steve, who nodded. "If you've got a few bungee cords, we could use some help loading the bike up."

"Sure," the man said, as Dummy bent over to study him intently. "Say, what is this, refugee from a car factory?"

"That's Dummy," Steve said. "He's a sentient robot."

"Well, how is he at lifting?"

***

"One, two, three," Steve said, and he and the man from the truck, who'd given his name as Cliff, hefted either end of the bike, with Dummy's claw firmly clamped in the middle. As soon as it was off the ground Tony darted underneath it, hooking the bungee cords to the underside of the bumper and the back seat. He looped some rope around Dummy's middle, hitched it into the wheels of the bike,
and then ran a second strand from the back door handles to either end, securing it.

"Careful," Steve warned, as they eased off pressure. The bike shifted, settled, and then sat snug when Tony pushed on it.

"They don't make cars like this anymore," Cliff said admiringly. "That's a touring car and it's taking what, a half a ton between the bike and the arm?"

"More or less," Tony agreed, as Steve flopped into the front seat tiredly. "Dummy, try not to lean back."

Cliff grinned at Dummy, who carefully leaned over Steve's shoulder and rested his claw on the front dashboard.

"Well, I'll follow you as far as Cleveland," Cliff said. "Just to be sure you got help if it falls off."

"Thanks, much appreciated. Look, lemme make it up to you -- " Tony said, reaching for his wallet, but Cliff waved it off.

"No charge, Mr. Stark," he said, heading back towards his truck. Tony stared after him, shrugged, and hopped the door into the driver's seat.

"Sure you don't need some kind of actual medical attention?" he asked Steve, who was stretched out in the seat as much as possible and curled on one side to keep pressure off his back. He had the remains of his jacket pulled over his face.

"I'm fine," Steve replied, muffled by the leather. "Wake me when we hit Pennsylvania."

***

Tony ended up stopping in Youngstown that night, just shy of the Pennsylvania border. It was getting dark, and they weren't going to make Manhattan that day anyway; might as well find somewhere to get their heads down and re-inspect the damage. He nudged Steve awake as he returned to the car with a room key.

"We make it?" Steve asked groggily, looking around. "Oh, guess not."

"We'll finish up tomorrow. Come on, inside," Tony said, as Steve climbed creakily out of the car. "I want to take a look at Dummy's handiwork. If you're infected I'm using him to rebuild your bike."

"You wouldn't dare," Steve replied, and Tony kicked the one chair in the room around, settling Steve into it with his arms resting on the back, chest pressed up against it. He peeled up the bandage and frowned.

"How's it look?" Steve asked, craning his head around.

"Like a bad sunburn," Tony replied. There were still small bloody patches, but mostly it was just red, irritated skin. "You weren't kidding about your healing."

"Better living through science," Steve said. Tony glanced at him. "That was your dad's motto."

"Yep, guess he had a reason to believe it," Tony answered, balling up the bandage and tossing it in
"Have we got any eats? I'm starving," Steve added. Tony popped open his suitcase, tossing him a shirt. Steve regarded it, then looked up at him.

"Yes, I know you're freakishly large," Tony sighed. "Put it on and don't bitch, and I'll buy you all the food."

Steve struggled into the shirt, which wasn't really better than shirtless given that it did nothing to conceal anything, and followed Tony across the parking lot of the motel to where some mid-scale chain restaurant awaited their presence.

"We need three of the meal with the most food in it," Tony told the waiter, when they were seated. "Also a steady stream of whatever beer is strongest."

Two twelve-ounce steaks later, Steve was eyeballing the remains of Tony's own steak hungrily. Tony pushed it over, sitting back, three beers in and at peace with the world.

"Are you serious about rebuilding the bike?" Steve asked, polishing off a third bowl of coleslaw.

"At this point it's a matter of professional pride. I could give it jet boosters."

"Wouldn't say no. How much would it run me?"

"Seriously? You want me to charge Captain America for bike repairs? I'm offended, Steve. Together we have crossed this great country, meeting small bony children and good samaritans from Cleveland, eating pie from Vegas to Des Moines. While I do wish horrible things upon you for teaching my robot bad taste, I don't want you to die in a fiery crash. For you, gratis."

"That'd be swell," Steve said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. To anyone, or everyone will want one," Tony added, grinning. "So this little brodtrip will be over tomorrow, what's your plan when we're back in New York?"

"Dunno," Steve said. "Go back to my apartment, I guess."

"And?"

"Well." Steve looked faintly uncomfortable. "That's kind of why I went traveling in the first place. Not a lot to keep me busy. Look for a job, maybe."

"Do you need one?"

"No, not...not need. I got a pretty generous Army pension and some back pay," Steve said.

"I have to rebuild the bike anyway," Tony said. "Stick around, I'll put you up for a few weeks, you can make yourself useful in the shop."

"I couldn't impose -- "

"Look, I have ninety-five floors, I think I can spare you a bedroom," Tony said, and then played his ace. "It'll make Pep happy, she apparently likes you."
"If you're sure it won't be a problem."

"It'll be great. We can do sleepovers, paint each others' nails. Hey," he said, as the waiter approached hesitantly. Most of the staff had been covertly watching Steve eat. "What've you got in the way of dessert?"

***

They were halfway to Manhattan the next day when they saw the column of smoke rising to the south.

Tony pulled off the road and began scanning for news stations as Steve stood up and focused a pair of binoculars.

"...explosion outside the small former coal-mining town of Freeland, Pennsylvania, may be the work of terrorists," the radio was saying. "Sources are claiming a server farm providing internet to half of the eastern seaboard is located somewhere in the town and we understand hostages may have been taken..."

Tony flicked the switch to silence the radio.

"You up for it?" he asked Steve, who was settling back in his seat.

"Are you?" Steve asked.

"Got my spare suit in the back. You got your uniform?"

"Got my shield, that'll do," Steve replied. "Dummy?"

Dummy's claw dove behind the seat and came up with a fire extinguisher.

"Okay," Tony said. He revved the engine and shifted into gear, flooring it for Freetown. "Let's do this."

***

Two hours later, smelling faintly of singed metal, Tony sat on a park bench in the very nice if now somewhat bullet-riddled downtown square of Freetown, sipping a cup of coffee.

"This was fun," he announced to nobody in particular. Steve, enjoying an ice cream next to him, beamed.

"They were awfully incompetent, just how I like my terrorists," he said. "How much longer we gotta stick around?"

"Looks like the Army's cleaning up," Tony replied, craning his neck at where the terrorists were being held on the lawn of the square. "I think we can get going. Nobody said anything to me about a debrief."

"Well, I'm just about done," Steve said, crunching up the ice cream cone. "I -- "
He twitched, the universal sign for phone just rang on silent, and took it out of his pocket.

"Hey, it's Ms. Potts!" he said cheerfully. "Hello, Ms. Potts! Are you still in Japan?"

Tony watched in fascination as the blood drained from Steve's face.

"So it's on the ne -- well, I didn't see any news cam -- I know that's not the point," he said. "But Ms. Potts, we can't just -- no, we were driving pas -- ma'am -- yes, ma'am. Sorry ma'am. No ma'am, won't happen again. Yes, ma'am, he's fine." He held out the phone. "She wants to talk to you."

Tony took the phone and held it to his ear. "Sun of my days, moon of my nights, Pepper to my salt -- "

"Are you crazy?" Pepper demanded.

"People keep asking, it's like they haven't examined the evidence -- "

"You went into battle with men with guns in a full suit of armor!"

"...and?" Tony asked, baffled.

"Steve was in a t-shirt! An Aerosmith t-shirt! Your Aerosmith t-shirt."

"His jacket had a little accident?" Tony tried. "He had his shield, he said it was fine."

"He's like twelve years old and thinks he's immortal. You are thirty-nine -- "

"Thirty-five -- "

"THIRTY NINE and you know better!"

"He did great!" Tony insisted. "He didn't get shot even once. The man fought Hitler in dungarees and khaki, you know."

"I'm sitting here in the Tower, where you should be, by the way, watching him beat people unconscious with his shield on a news loop," she said.

"Do we look dashing?"

"You look dashing. He looks horrifyingly vulnerable."

"It's part of his charm. Okay, Steve needs his phone back, he has to tweet about our triumph or Foursquare or whatever." Tony said.

"Tony, don't -- "

"Bye Pep love you!" he blurted, and hung up. Steve caught the phone when he tossed it back to him.

"We should go," Tony said.

"Yeah, we should," Steve agreed.
Dummy adored Manhattan, as Tony knew he would.

They crossed over the bridge and onto the island to a whole symphony of delighted beeps, clicks, and squeaks from the robot in the back seat. Dummy waved at people on the street and flashed his LEDs at stoplights like he hadn't seen them all the way across the country. When they stopped outside the Stark Tower loading dock, he gripped onto a sign pole and refused to let go for ten minutes, apparently aware they were about to take him back inside. Steve had to coax him to let go with the promise of some Big Band lessons at a later date.

Until the sign pole incident, Steve had been reading aloud to them from his phone, in increasingly nervous tones, as the stories about the terrorist attack gave way to stories about Captain America and Iron Man and some valiant robot probably named "Dume" saving the day. Then those gave way to the story the newsmedia was carefully crafting about the two of them doing a best-friends road trip, and how they were clearly the heart of the Avengers. Tony's grin just kept getting wider.

"Well, apparently we're BFFs, that's great," he said, as they finally rolled into the garage. "Very good for my street cred. Terrible for yours, but you can afford to take that hit."

Steve was silent as Tony cut the engine and hopped out.

"I'd like to be," he said, while they began untying the bike. "Friends, I mean. I think...when we're not being manipulated by an evil alien we get along all right, don't we?"

"You want me to pinky swear or something?" Tony asked, as Dummy and Steve hefted the bike and he untied the rope, then the bungees. "Sure, friends, it's your funeral."

"I can see why Ms. Potts believes you're emotionally mature and capable of adult relationships," Steve drawled, as they lowered the bike to the ground. "Where d'you want me to put this?"

"Over there, I'll get to it later. Okay, you monstrosity, your turn," Tony added, opening one of the rear doors and dragging Dummy's ramp out. He unlocked the chassis wheels, unplugged the power supply running from Dummy's chassis to the engine, and stood back. Dummy clicked, glanced from Steve to Tony, and then rolled down the ramp with visible wariness.

There was a loud squeal from the other end of the room, and Tony sidestepped hastily as Butterfingers sped past, rocking up to Dummy and bumping arms with him. Dummy squealed back, zooming off after him, heading for a collision with U.

"Welcome home, sir," JARVIS said, and Steve jumped, looking around. "Captain Rogers, welcome to Stark Tower."

"Thanks?" Steve said, sounding confused.

"Come on, we'll introduce you formally later," Tony said, taking Steve's arm. "JARVIS, is Pep in?"

"Ms. Potts is in the penthouse. She requests your presence as soon as possible, including that of Captain Rogers."

"Time to face the music," Tony said. Steve squared his considerable jaw. "Just remember, I am 100% on your side until actually forced to speak and then I'm going to have to take sides with the
woman who controls my company and a significant portion of my cold, shriveled heart."

"Noted," Steve said.

As the elevator doors shut, Tony could hear Dummy leading the other two in a three-part harmony rendition of *Don't Fence Me In*.

END

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