Permanency

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Permanency

by the_wordbutler

Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

Notes

This installment within the Motion Practice universe features a good deal of discussion about and interaction with the child welfare system. Although I do not anticipate any serious depictions or descriptions of child abuse—be that abuse physical, emotional, or sexual—there will likely be portions of this story which deal with childhood trauma and child neglect. I know this can be a difficult subject for a lot of people, and I also know that, as my area of focus is child welfare law, I am fairly immune to these things. I will attempt to note possible triggers in the introductory notes to chapters. I do not anticipate triggering anyone, however.
Additionally, child welfare law is very idiosyncratic and can vary a good deal from state to state. Much of the child welfare law and procedure in the Motion Practice universe will be inspired by the law of my jurisdiction. I will likely be simplifying much of these laws, though, so don’t take too much stock in their legal effect. And because I do currently work in this field, I will add: the opinions and attitudes of the characters do not necessarily reflect my opinions, and any resemblance to a living person is merely coincidental. I work very hard to separate my real life from these works, but the problem with Bruce being both the central character of this story and the child welfare attorney is the natural overlap between the two.

Beta-read, as expected, by Jen, with some back-up beta help from saranoh.
“God, just—look over there, will you?” Tony asks in a way that’s actually a demand, and plants his hand on Bruce’s hip.

If you asked Bruce for the event he most looks forward to each year, the single point in time that he feels every other minute tipping toward, he’d answer that it’s this one: the Urban Ascent fundraiser. When he’d joined an Urban Ascent committee years ago—before he knew Tony Stark as anything more than the pretty face representing his father’s company—the fundraiser’d consisted of a bland Italian buffet at the Ramada Inn with an open bar and a DJ whose specialties included proms and bar mitzvahs. Now, it’s the biggest Urban Ascent event of the year, drawing people from all over the state.

There’s a string quartet trained into playing dozens of classical standards and a few oddball pieces here and there (at some point, he’ll ask Tony how the *Jurassic Park* theme song’d made this year’s playlist) and couples swaying to every tune. Everyone’s dressed in their sparkliest finery, cluttering the hall with gowns, suits, jewelry, and cufflinks. There’s art, exotic vacations, and one-of-a-kind collectables available through the silent auction, several of them now up to thousands of dollars.

(“Found that in one of Dad’s old boxes,” Tony’d commented about a mangled clump of metal that could be either a junk sculpture or a prototype, depending on your level of inebriation. “Dad’s Do-Dad, I call it. Up to eight grand already.”

“And to think,” Bruce’d replied, biting on the edges of his smile, “I could’ve had it just by going through your garage.”

Tony’s eyebrows had risen slowly, as though cranked up centimeter-by-centimeter by whatever invisible force controls his expression. “I’ll buy it for your office.”

And that’s when Bruce’d laughed. “Because you don’t already buy enough random garbage for my office,” he’d replied, and they’d drifted onward.)

Of course, those aren’t the reasons Bruce loves the fundraiser. Sure, it’s nice to see Darcy in her patterned dress and watch Dot dart between her various pseudo-uncles, demanding dances. And it’s refreshing, somehow, to take people he’s known for ages—not just his coworkers, but other members of the Ascent board, professors at the university where he teaches nights, neighbors, acquaintances—and watch them shake hands for the first time. But no, the reason he looks forward to this night every year, and the reason this night matters, is that it’s for the children.

Children like Jordan Silva-Riberio, a name that’s travelled across every lip in the room as a whisper tonight, but others, too. Children in the program and its feeder programs, children who’ve graduated the program and are working the valet stand, children busily applying for next summer’s program even as they speak, and children who never got the chance for something like Urban Ascent.

Like Clint Barton.

Not that Bruce’d ever say that aloud, or even think it without prompting. It’s just that Clint Barton is currently the center of Tony’s attention, and the person he’s waving his (empty) champagne flute at.

“Look at . . . Clint?” he double-checks.

“Yeah. Well, no. Not at Clint, necessarily, as much as that whole mess.” Tony waves the glass with a little more menace. Bruce, remembering last year’s champagne incident, plucks it from his fingers.
He gestures just as emphatically without it. “Y’know, the unresolved-sexual-tension mess.”

Bruce frowns. “You mean him and Phil?”

“I mean.” And Tony starts to speak, just like he always does, words strung together with a velocity and cadence no other human being on earth can replicate, but then . . . stops. He shifts, a little, his hand still planted on Bruce’s hip, and for a few seconds, they only look at one another. Tony’s flushed pink, and his lips are parted as they draw in shuddering little breaths. He looks drunk, Bruce thinks, or even high, but he’s not. At least, not on any kind of controlled substance. No, Tony’s high on life, on the meeting-and-greeting that secretly makes Bruce want to slip into a quiet corner and spend an hour studiously not shaking hands.

Most people, at events like this, need a bottle of wine and an hour on the dance floor to come alive. Tony needs the standing ovation after the keynote, and people gushing about the program’s “triumphant comeback” after Killgrave.

But the longer they stare at each other, silent and close, the more the mania—disappears. Bruce can almost track the way that the nervous energy drains from Tony’s face. The façades Tony’s spent a lifetime building—the entrepreneur’s son, the genius student, the polished attorney—slip away like ill-fitting masks, and he becomes . . . Tony.

The guy who drags him to truly awful movies every other weekend, who steals half his lunch out of the break room fridge three days a week, who sticks post-it notes to his ceiling when he’s away at a conference. Tony, the friend who trained Dot to call him “Uncle Bruce,” who always knows exactly which nights to show up with an extra-large pizza and a ridiculous board game, who he trusts with his time and his—

Well.

With any number of things, really.

He swallows around the way his stomach twists under Tony’s even gaze. “What?” he asks, glancing at the champagne glass.

“Nothing,” Tony answers, shrugging. “I mean, aside from the fact that, if you dressed like this every day, you could probably be D.A. Or general counsel for state social services. Or a round-faced, curly-haired Brad Pitt.”

Bruce blames the heat creeping up his neck on champagne and peppery hors d’oeuvres instead of on the way Tony’s eyes survey his body in an expensive black suit. “Thanks,” he says limply, and trades the empty glass for a full one as a waiter passes by. His swallow is maybe a little eager.

“Weren’t you trying to make a point?”

“A point?”

“About Clint. Unless that train of thought’s already de—”

“Oh, right!” Tony announces, and whether he realizes he bounces when he snaps his fingers, Bruce isn’t entirely sure. He reaches over, steals the champagne flute, and helps himself to what can only be termed a swig. “I wanted to tell you about how sick I got of the will-they, won’t-they, oh-look-now-they-have dance they forced us to suffer through for the last six months. ‘Cause, I mean, look at them.”

He points, this time with the fresh glass, and Bruce . . . looks.
Clint’s still standing in roughly the same place as before, his hip leaning lightly against one of the tables reserved for their office, but he’s not alone. No, Phil’s there with him now, close enough that they’re almost sharing the same air. Bruce isn’t sure what their last five or ten seconds looked like—whether they kissed, leaned in to laugh at a private joke, or what—but it doesn’t matter. Because the smile they’re sharing, and the way Phil presses his hand to Clint’s hip while Clint tips into him, that tells the whole story.

A private story, Bruce thinks, and glances away. “Must be nice,” he says without thinking.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Just—” He hazards a look over at Tony, who’s simply staring. Suddenly, his mouth feels dry, and his tongue clumsy. “They might’ve had a long road, but they found the end of it. I think it’s . . . nice.”

“Yeah, no,” Tony retorts almost instantly, his voice fierce, somehow, in its speed. Bruce blinks and raises his chin the rest of the way, but he almost regrets the decision; Tony’s face is fiery, his eyes wide and almost . . . demanding. When he spreads out his hands, champagne sloshes over the lip of the glass. “That’s not ‘nice.’ That’s— Who wants to spend all their time dancing around the point, huh? To wake up not knowing what part of the mulberry bush they’re gonna beat around in this morning?” He shakes his head hard enough that his hair flops around, but the intensity’s still there. Bruce feels it in his own chest and belly, like his organs are twisting themselves into knots. He swallows and drops his eyes to the floor, but Tony presses on. “No, see, you know what I think’s ‘nice’ in a relationship? Looking at the guy and knowing. The first time, and the next time, and the time after that. Every time, without hesitation, being definitely sure that this is the person you should be with. Playing possum and emotional hide-and-go seek, sure, that’s fine for some people, but I want—”

He pauses and rolls his lips together.

Bruce suddenly can’t remember the last time he’s breathed.

“I want something definite,” he finishes, and Bruce—

Bruce exhalés. It’s soft and slow, as gentle as he can draw it out, but he knows it still sounds like a sigh. He’s not sure what he’s sighing for, exactly. It’s not really Tony’s . . . monologue, or the still-twisting feeling in his core, but it’s something.

Eventually, he abandons his attempts to identify it and just shakes his head. His voice nearly catches as he murmurs, “I don’t think that’s possible, Tony.”

When he glances up, though, Tony’s looking at him. His eyes are steady and serious, the surest thing Bruce’s ever seen. It catches him, and his breath stills in the bottom of his lungs. His breath’s stilled a lot, tonight: at the sight of Tony climbing out of the limo in his tuxedo to let Bruce climb in, at the way Tony pulled him close and smiled with him during a photo-op, at the press of Tony’s hands and body when they’d collided on the dance floor.

He finds he can’t breathe again until Tony, finally, breaks his gaze. He shakes his head lightly. “Funny,” he says, but Bruce can’t hear any humor in his tone, “because I do.”
Laying on the Wire

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce answers a number of questions about a situation that Clint is wrongly calling “the epic love story of Bruce Banner and Tony Stark.” But, more significantly, Bruce also answers a desperate call from an old acquaintance . . . with interesting consequences.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: mentions, but no serious descriptions, of child neglect appear in this chapter.

Many thanks to Jen, who beta-read this chapter as well as its previous incarnation, and saranoh, who allowed me to ramble about my fears, read the clunkier version of this chapter, and helped me find the story that wanted to be told.

In order to avoid any kind of spoilers, information on the structure of child welfare system, as well as a description of the role of a guardian ad litem, appears in the end notes.

“This,” Tony Stark says as he glides into Bruce’s office on Wednesday morning, a crumpled-up dryer sheet pinched between two of his fingers, “was in my boxer shorts this morning. I think it belongs to you.”

He drops the dryer sheet and lets it flutter down onto Bruce’s desk, and Bruce sighs. He’s tired, a kind of bone-deep exhausted that’s settled into his core like a December chill, and he’s not been able to shake it all morning. Not with the pot of black tea brewed in his kitchen, not with the extra-strong coffee in the break room, and not with an entire five-pack of ginseng gum.

The gum wrappers are still littered all over his desk, along with the files for next week’s docket. There’re no fewer than a dozen review hearings between next Tuesday and Wednesday, never mind the truancy meetings, the status conferences for two cases that are still on informal supervision, an upcoming parental rights termination trial, and—

“Is that a dryer sheet?” Natasha asks, tilting out over the arm of her chair to squint at it.

“Yes,” Bruce answers. He snags it to throw it away, but Natasha’s fierce and also fast; within three
seconds, she’s out of her seat and snatching the sheet right out of his fingers. Bruce considers pointing out that Tony likely found the dryer sheet *after* putting his boxers on, but—

Well.

For one, Tony is still standing in front of his desk, his hair windswept from the chilly October breeze and his suit just the right side of rumpled. Bruce’d rather not find another excuse to examine him head-to-toe.

Not that he’s done that once already, this morning.

But secondly—

“How did your dryer sheet get into Stark’s boxers?” Natasha demands as though she knows the answer.

*As though* being the operative words, of course, because whatever salacious theory’s floating around in her head is clearly very wrong. Bruce glances over the rims of his glasses, and her eyebrows rise. When he shakes his head, they rise even further; when he purses his lips in what he hopes is a frown, she cocks her head to one side.

“Is this some weird family law non-sign sign language I’m not privy to?” Tony interrupts. Out of the corner of his eye, Bruce can see him spreading out his hands. His white palms remind Bruce a little of white flags of defeat, but thinking that feels a little mean. Still, any excuse to glance away from Natasha right now is a welcome one, so he swivels his chair to watch Tony’s hands start waving. “I mean, if it is, I’m cool with that. Just, y’know, get me the manual or something. ‘Cause I don’t wanna find out that a Bruce Banner half-grin is actually code for ‘I’ll murder you and everything you love.’”

At the corner of the desk, Natasha sighs. “We think that every time you open your mouth, Stark.”

“See, Red, you say that, but all I hear is love.” Tony points a finger at her. “I mean, not necessarily love of me, but love of the fact that if I’d never come here and never brought my super-hot, super-competent, super-some-other-adjective-I-can’t-think-of-right-now paralegal to the district attorney’s office, you would still be living a very solitary life.”

Bruce has to admit, at least to himself, that the only reason he presses his lips together is to stop himself from smiling.

A feat that becomes even *harder* when Natasha challenges, “I can think of at least seven ways to murder you with this dryer sheet, you know.”

“And that is my cue!” Tony announces. He snaps his fingers and then points at Bruce like some kind of cheesy pick-up artist. “Friday night. You, me, sushi, horrible art-house movie of your choice. Deal?”

Bruce snorts a little and dips his eyes to the files in front of him. The hearings on Tuesday are going to be knock-down drag-outs, he knows. He should spend the better part of his weekend focused in on them, not watching some Swedish-language film that Tony’ll nod off during.

But instead of explaining that, he just shrugs and says, “Sure.”

Tony’s face lights up in a grin, and then he’s gone, gliding out of the office in his usual expensive shoes. He exchanges high-fives with Darcy in the hallway—Bruce knows this only because she’s the only other person Tony high-fives on a regular basis—and then, the office falls back into its usual
Bruce very purposely picks up his highlighter and reaches for the first social work report he can find. “Tell me more about your new case,” he tells Natasha.

But Natasha Romanoff is not easily fazed. Honestly, she’s one of the steadiest people Bruce’s ever met. It’s a big part of why he likes her company, actually; he likes that they can both shut off their emotions even at the ugliest cases, that they do the work for deep and complicated reasons that require hours and entire bottles of wine to explain, and that they appreciate the messier side of human nature. Prosecuting a DUI or theft, Bruce thinks, is easy. Prosecuting a man who’s battered wife won’t testify against him or fighting for the removal of kids from a dangerous home, that’s a whole different ballgame.

It’s that part of Natasha’s skill set, the one that lets her see the shades of gray in every black-and-white situation, that causes her to clear her throat after a few impatient seconds. When Bruce glances up, she’s dangling the dryer sheet all of eight inches from his face. “In his boxers,” she says. Her voice is absolutely even.

“Aren’t you wondering when and how he found it in his boxers?” he replies.

There’s a single beat before she releases the sheet. Bruce smiles to himself, a little too pleased at what’s really a juvenile little game. He sweeps it off the top of his file, tosses it into the garbage can, and finds his highlighter again. “Now, about that case,” he repeats, and glances up at Natasha.

She’s still standing next to his desk, steady and silent, but her eyes . . . There’s something vaguely uncomfortable about her eyes. They’re intent, focused almost into narrow slits, but they’re soft, too. Thoughtful, he realizes, like a Buddhist coming face-to-face with nirvana for the very first time.

She rolls her lips together, and Bruce catches himself swallowing. “Clint’s right,” she finally murmurs.

He snorts lightly and hopes it sounds like a laugh instead of something caught in the back of his throat. “If Clint’s right, the world’s ending,” he teases, but his eyes don’t leave Natasha. Every step she takes is stilted, almost robotic. The longer he watches, the more his stomach twists into a knot, not that it matters; she backs into her chair, sits down hard, and just keeps staring at him. Her eyes are somehow simultaneously wider and softer than they were all of thirty seconds earlier, and they don’t blink away.

“What?” he asks when the silence is officially too much.

“You and Tony,” she answers, and he works as hard as he can to roll his eyes. But it reminds him of a “say cheese” smile, the complete opposite of genuine, and he can’t force any sincerity into even his best annoyed face. Glancing back at Natasha reveals that her wide-eyed look hasn’t lifted. “There’s something there.”

“No, there isn’t,” he returns, and glances back at the social work report. It’s not the one he needs, but it’s there, and he immediately focuses all his earthly attention on the cover sheet. He wonders if he can fake interest in the information there: case number, child’s name and year of birth, date and time of the hearing. He doubts it. “He left clothes at my place. I washed them. He wore them this morning. The end.”

“Bruce—”
“The end, Natasha.” But even as he tries to keep it casual, to sound unbothered by whatever assumption’s running through her head, he can hear the edge to his own voice. There’s force there, aggressive corners of those three words, and he can’t help but feel guilty for it. He knows he should meet her eyes and apologize for snapping at her, but all he can do is stare at information he already knows by heart and swallow around the tightness in the back of his throat. “I have a lot to do,” he says after a few seconds. “We can talk about your case later, okay?”

Natasha, for her part, is absolutely silent. A half-glance reveals that she’s still seated in the chair across from his desk, but he doesn’t dare let his eyes find her face. When she uncrosses her legs and rises, the only noise in the room comes from her clothes against her skin and the steady beat of her feet across the carpet.

“For the record,” she finally comments from the doorway, “you’re worse than Clint.”

“Nobody’s worse than Clint,” Bruce counters—but he wonders, too, if she might be right.

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“Before we get into the epic love story of Bruce Banner and Tony Stark,” Clint Barton says that evening, spreading out his hands on the table like a preacher about to address his sinful congregation, “you need to admit I was right.”

“Shut up,” Natasha returns, and steals one of Clint’s mozzarella sticks.

Bruce hates Clint’s favorite bar. He’s hated it since the first time he set foot inside, three days after the start of Clint’s suspension. It’ll grow on you, I swear! Clint’d promised, dragging him, Natasha, Tony, and Phil to a back booth. The only thing that’s grown in the last three weeks is the scent of stale beer, the price of pilsner, and the number of toothless strangers playing pool and singing along with terrible country music.

He’s not entirely sure, if he’s honest, why he agreed to meet Natasha and Clint for drinks after his night class at the university. It’s well past nine, and he’s exhausted from drawn-out discussions about laws of chastisement and children-as-chattel. He mostly wants to go home, pull out a mindless novel, and fall asleep reading. But Clint’s half-dozen poorly-typed texts’d practically begged him to come, and Bruce—

Bruce’d decided an hour out with friends was better than an hour at home, thinking about the dryer sheet conversation.

In retrospect, he should’ve guessed this was an “intervention.”

“There’s no epic love story,” he reminds Clint for the third time since they sat down. He’s picking at his nachos, pulling jalapenos off and leaving them on the edge of Clint’s plate (because Clint will, almost literally, eat anything), and it’s as good an excuse as any not to look at the man. He’s gotten to know Clint better since his suspension—Clint’s joined Jane and Bruce’s sloppily-cobbled together book club, he came and guest-lectured on juvenile DUI prosecution in Bruce’s class, he drags them out for drinks at odd hours of the night—and now knows that Clint’s eyes can stare right through a lie. It’s almost eerie, the way he sees shifts in body language no other human being catches.

The last thing Bruce needs to provide him is ammunition.
“His boxers were at your house,” Clint retorts. He drops two jalapenos into his mouth and, for reasons Bruce can’t quite understand, chews eagerly. “Even if they weren’t there because of kinky 50 Shades reasons—”

“You need to stop reading those,” Natasha points out.

“—they were still there.” He shrugs and reaches for his beer. “That doesn’t mean nothing.”

“It doesn’t mean something, either,” Bruce retorts. He scoops up a bunch of cheese and salsa with a chip, lifts it, and then pauses. “We’re friends. I know you like thinking otherwise, but really, that’s all. We spend time together, he crashes on my couch occasionally, he brings a bag every now and then, and he sometimes leaves crap at my place when he takes off. That’s it.”

He’s chewing when Natasha says, “Tell Clint what you told me.”

“What?” he asks, reaching for a napkin.

Her gaze shifts, promptly becoming viper-sharp. He momentarily forgets how to swallow. “The part where you said he wore clothes of his taken from your house this morning.”

And while Clint fights a spit-take, Bruce forces himself to roll his eyes.

The problem with friends like Clint and Natasha, he thinks not for the first time, is that they’re happy. They’re coupled-up, content to participate in all the ordinary events of dating: curling up and watching TV, attending gallery shows, eating fancy dinners, keeping neighbors up with their bedroom gymnastics. He’s not against all that, of course—hell, he’s happy for them, he really is—but it all sort of lends itself to this romantic lens.

The kind where, when they see two close friends who enjoy each other’s company, they imagine it’s the beginnings of true-and-everlasting, and not—whatever else it is.

Because this, it’s—

It’s different from what they see.

“We had dinner last night,” Bruce finally says. He tilts his beer as he says it, watching the foam cling to the side of the glass. Across from him, Clint’s abandoned his mozzarella sticks to focus all his attention on the top of Bruce’s head, and he can feel Natasha’s gaze burning a hole into his temple, too. He swallows, but his mouth feels like sandpaper; a sip of beer helps, but not in the way he’d like. “India Palace, nothing fancy, but then he’d wanted my opinion on a brief. We went back to my place, worked on it for a while, and then ended up watching a movie.”

“Porn?” Clint asks. The question’s followed promptly by the table tilting and a muttered swear from Clint, and Bruce tries not to smirk at the thought of how hard Natasha must’ve kicked him.

But then, they’re sitting in silence again. Bruce shakes his head. “A buddy cop thing.” Another swig of beer later, and he can hazard a glance at the two of them; Clint’s halfway to another sarcastic, smirking joke (probably about the homoerotic subtext present in every buddy cop scenario since Starsky and Hutch), but Natasha’s just watching him. Even and soft, a practiced sympathy he knows she only uses on the most reluctant victims.

He’s not sure how he feels, knowing that only victims receive that kind of gentleness.

He decides not to think too hard about it.
“He passed out on the couch at, I don’t know, midnight or so, and I headed to bed. In the morning, since he was still there, I dug out the boxers he’d left once after he’d spent the night—because he’d brought a bag that time,” he explains before an open-mouthed Clint can formulate words. “Those, plus the clean suit he’d left in his trunk, and he was good.” He shrugs. “No epic anything.”

No mention, however, of the weird warmth he’d felt in his stomach when he’d trailed out of his bedroom the next morning and found Tony sprawled out on the couch, shirt wrinkled and slacks all askew, his mouth hanging open and his whole body slack.

Or of the way they’d moved together in his kitchen after Bruce’d emerged from the shower, Tony’s hands catching his hips, elbows, shoulders, and back as they hunted down teabags, started water boiling in the kettle, and poured cereal.

And definitely not a word about how Bruce, still in his robe and slippers, had braved the October chill to walk out to fetch Tony’s suit from his car, or how he’d brought it into the bathroom after Tony announced he should, or how long he’d caught himself studying the silhouette in the shower curtain, the shape of shoulders, legs, and ass as Tony’d scrubbed himself down.

He’d smelled like Bruce’s shampoo and soap—Bruce’s life—when he’d wandered out of the bathroom, steamy and half-damp. And his murmured thanks had somehow gotten lost in a weird, backwards almost-hug, Tony’s nose and mouth nearly against Bruce’s hair as he’d reached around him to pour a second cup of tea.

Bruce tosses back the rest of his beer in a few greedy gulps.

No. No mention of those things.

“This,” Clint decides after a few seconds, “is bad.”

Bruce frowns, the glass still only inches from his lips. “What is?” he asks carefully.

“You and Tony. It’s bad.” He rolls his eyes as he sets down his glass, but once Clint gets started down a given path, it’s hard to shake him off it. The tenacity makes him a wonderful lawyer—and sometimes, a very frustrating friend. “You’re dating without having sex, you realize that?” he presses, biting off the end of another mozzarella stick. “Coming over all the time, clothes in your house, constant dinners out—”

“They’re not constant,” Bruce points out, to which Natasha snorts a laugh and signals the waiter for a second round.

“—and all without any naked time.”

“Except when he’s in your shower,” Natasha adds.

Clint nods. “Except then.”

Bruce wants to reply, wants to argue and shout, to tell the both of them that they are, collectively, the most ridiculous human beings he knows. He wants to sweep his plate off the table, throw down just enough money to cover his shitty light beer and soggy nachos, and storm home. He wants to bury himself in grading, or motion-writing, or the dozen files that’re piled in his passenger seat—

But he can’t.

He can’t, because as the waiter comes by with fresh beers and an extra bowl of marinara sauce for Clint’s cheese sticks, the voice in the back of his head that sounds very much like his conscience
reminds him that they’re . . . right.

Not about how he’s dating Tony. No, whatever almost-dance they’ve been stumbling through for the last few months—the last few years, he catches himself thinking—isn’t that. But about how he wouldn’t necessarily mind if, at some point in the future, they—

“Bruce,” Natasha murmurs, her voice soft and gentle. It’s strange, he thinks, that a woman who’s so powerful in the courtroom can morph into someone as sweet and quiet as this Natasha Romanoff, the one with the imploring eyes and the pursed lips. She turns her glass with long, graceful fingers, but her eyes don’t lift from his face. “It’s okay to want things.”

“Even,” Clint offers, “if that thing’s Tony.” When she levels a glare in his direction, he throws up his hands. “Look, I’m sorry, but this is still Tony Stark. Crazy, weird, emotionally-stunted Tony Stark.”

“Says the man who started his relationship under threat of disbarment,” she grumbles, and Bruce smiles around the rim of his glass.

“Hey, we were together before that,” Clint retorts. He licks marinara sauce off his thumb. “We just weren’t, y’know, together yet.” He shrugs and reaches for his beer. “Besides,” he continues, pointing the bottle’s neck in Bruce’s direction, “the guy’s way into you. How hard’s it to change your Friday night sushi-and-movie date into a sushi-movie-and-dirty-sex date?”

Bruce glances over at Natasha, who opens her palms noncommittally. “I didn’t tell him,” she defends, but there’s a twitch at the very corner of her mouth that suggests otherwise. They’re both still watching him, though, their drinks and greasy bar snacks ignored, and Bruce sighs. It’s a long, drawn-out noise, one that suggests he’s not emptied his lungs for the whole of this conversation. Then again, maybe he hasn’t. He feels a bit like he’s spent this whole time holding his breath. Like a Star Trek ship, conserving power in order to keep its shields intact.

He momentarily hates Tony for dragging him away from decent, thoughtful science-fiction.

“Steve has this saying,” he offers quietly, staring into his beer glass. It’s foamy but cool, and he helps himself to a greedy swallow. Liquid courage, he dubs it, except no amount of alcohol will ever chase away the bolus of nerves in his belly right now, or the tightness in his chest. He’s always struggled to admit to the quiet voices in the back of his head, and somehow, right now, it’s even harder. It shouldn’t be, not with good friends, good food, and good beer, but it is.

Two and three gulps later, they’re still both staring him down.

“He says that the true measure, of bravery, I guess, or maybe self-sacrifice, is to lie down on a wire. To throw yourself down, and give up what you— Well, what you are, I think, for someone else.” He watches the foam settle onto the surface of his beer, and then, watches it dissipate. “I know he uses it in a different context, but it feels the same. Like my choices are to keep my life the way it is, or to . . . ”

He shakes his head, trying to reassemble the words into some kind of sloppy sense, when a soft voice says, “Maybe throw everything you already have away on the off-chance you can do better.” He lifts his head to watch Clint toying with his still-full beer bottle. He tips it a few inches, balances it on the very edge of the base, and then walks the neck along his fingers. Anyone else’d spill, but somehow, not Clint Barton. “Trust the expert on the topic—I mean, if that’s a topic you can be an expert on. The uncertainty and everything, it fucking sucks.”

“Reassuring,” Natasha notes, shaking her head.
“No, wait, hear me out.” He sets his beer upright and spreads out his hands. “The waiting bit, that sucks. But when it all comes together, and the life you’ve always wanted is the life you get?” His sharp eyes pierce the distance between them and land, squarely, on Bruce. “There’s no better feeling in the world. None.”

Bruce’s always thought that Clint’s eyes—blue and steady, almost unwavering in their certainty about things—are as all-seeing as owl’s eyes. They’re careful and still, and even when Bruce snorts a half-laugh and forces himself to smile, they don’t drift away. “Thanks,” he says quietly, and the corner of Clint’s mouth twitches, “but it’s still a little hard to take advice from the guy who’s been suspended.”

It’s a low blow, but it’s one that cracks Natasha up every time. Clint’s lips quirk, and he fakes an overwrought eye-roll, but then he’s laughing too, as loud as the bad country music and the guys playing pool. Bruce drinks it in, the warmth and noise of his friends, and resolves not to spend another minute of his evening focused on Tony Stark.

But that night, lying in the silent dark of his bedroom, he reaches for his BlackBerry. It’s almost muscle memory at this point, the way he unlocks the screen and thumbs the wheel to his list of recently-sent text messages. The name he wants is never further down the line than third.

*Question.*

He presses send and rolls onto his back, staring at the familiar shadows cast by the curtains and the ceiling fan. It’s cool outside but not cold, enough that he keeps his window cracked. Drifting in on the breeze are all the familiar neighborhood noises; a dog barks, a car rumbles down the road, someone drags their trash out for morning pick-up.

He thinks he could nod off to all that, the sounds of a lazy Wednesday night, but then his phone buzzes against his belly. He plucks it up while the screen’s still glowing.

**Tony Stark:** you could be two-thirds of the way into a truly excellent porno and instead you’re texting me?

He bites down on a very tempting laugh, but he knows he can’t suppress his smile. *Who said I didn’t just get an early start?* he retorts.

see, i knew you were my favorite for a reason. what’s up?

Bruce knows with absolute certainty—the kind of certainty reserved for his own name or certain portions of the child welfare code—that Tony’s sent him at least a hundred text messages with that same general structure: a joke about Bruce’s place in his life, and then the actual content of their conversation. He’s been called the peanut butter to Tony’s chocolate (“Not jelly,” Tony insisted), the Miss Piggy to his Kermit (“It was that or Gonzo and Camilla,” Tony explained), and the Jamie Lannister to his Cersei (“No,” Bruce informed him the next morning). This, he knows, is how Tony functions, how his brain is wired, full of quips and teases that lack real meaning.

Bruce’s spent an inordinate amount of time trying not to imbue meaning into all that. The problem is just that trying and succeeding are two very different things.

His phone buzzes again, and he tips it until he can see the display. All Tony’s typed is: big guy????

Bruce snorts a half-laugh and taps the text box to reply. *Do you ever feel,* he spells out slowly, careful not to flub anything on the BlackBerry’s tiny keyboard, *like the only option you’ve left yourself is to lay down on a wire?*
He’s hardly lifted his thumb from the send key when the phone vibrates in his fingers. no, the reply reads, and another text immediately follows. cause i figure we should cut wires instead of laying down on them. save everybody and yourself.

Bruce shakes his head, a little, and wets his lips. Leave it to Tony, he thinks, to find the unspoken third option, the impossible outcome where everyone ends out on top.

He’s about to formulate that into a response somehow when his phone buzzes yet another time. or ourselves. i can’t figure out if its ourself or yourself. pls advise.

And even though he shouldn’t, even though he feels like his entire life’s come down to wires and ticking time bombs, he taps the text box. Ourselves.

thought so.

There’re no more texts, after that, the grammatical questions and—what did Natasha once call it? Existential angst?—receding into near-perfect silence. Bruce abandons his phone on the bedside table and rolls onto his side. But instead of closing his eyes to sleep, he catches himself staring at the picture he put there over a year ago, the one of him and Tony at Dot’s third birthday party. It’s a ridiculous picture, one that hardly deserves pride of place. He’s soaking wet from being thrown in Tony’s pool, Tony’s grinning while simultaneously flashing bunny ears behind his head, and the sun’s causing horrendous lens flare. But Steve’d snapped it on his brand-new camera and lovingly printed it on his brand-new printer, and Bruce—

Bruce wants to think it’s loyalty to Steve that caused him to keep the photo, not anything else.

Instead, he falls asleep staring at it and wondering when his house started feeling too-quiet without Tony snoring on his couch.

==

The next morning, Bruce’s BlackBerry chimes while he’s pouring a cup of coffee and chatting idly with Phil about upcoming felony cases. When he ignores it for more than the ten seconds required to set the pot back on the burner and reach for a sugar packet, it chimes again.

From where he’s leaning against the counter and nearly huffing the steam from his own mug, Phil shakes his head. “I told him to go back to bed,” he says. It sounds vaguely like an apology.

Bruce smiles a little. “Could be anyone,” he replies, but when he activates the screen, the display reads New text message twice over.

“It’s six more weeks.” And from Phil’s lips, it sounds more like a death sentence than a countdown. Bruce laughs as he wanders away, but also waits until he’s disappeared around the corner to open the messages.

Mostly because he already knows their content.

Clint Barton: you need to talk to him.

Clint Barton: you need to confess your sweaty stark love so the rest of us don’t have to watch you drool anymore.
Bruce supposes there are roughly a hundred possible responses to those two messages. They range from indignation to resignation, from ire to outrage to frustration, from snide witticisms to swift deletion. But instead of choosing a reaction and running with it, he stands there.

Phone in one hand, swiftly-cooling coffee in the other.

It’s not until he’s back in his cluttered office and standing over the file-folder topography of his desk that he presses the button to respond.

_I know_, he types, and puts his phone on silent before he sits down to work.

==

And yet none of that—not conversations over cheap beer, dryer sheets rescued from soft black boxer shorts, or hastily-typed morning text messages—can explain why, six hours later, a breathless Jessica Jones nearly knocks Bruce down in the hallway of the Union County courthouse. As it stands, she catches him by the forearm, squeezes hard enough that, were it not for his suit jacket, she might leave fingernail marks in his skin, and rushes, “I’m so glad you’re here.”

The Union County courthouse is an aging behemoth of a building, all white limestone, bronzed fixtures, and marble stairs. The stained glass windows that loom above the stairwell leave strange colored patterns on the floor, mixing with the mosaic of the state seal and leaving Bruce with the distinct impression that he’s trapped in a kaleidoscope. In another hour, when the sun dips below the tree line, the colors will die away as part of a secondary sunset.

He swallows while he stares at one of the red blotches of light. He’s known Jessica for eight years, almost the whole of his stateside professional life, and he still struggles to meet her eyes. At least, in this context.

He’s stared her down at conferences and, once, argued with her in open court. This is a little different.

“You sounded desperate,” he manages to respond.

“We are,” she promises, her voice entirely earnest. He lifts his chin just long enough to read the seriousness in her expression. She’s a sarcastic, strong, demanding woman even in the best of times, but he knows from experience how to gauge her level of worry by the tight set of her jaw.

Right now, it’s chiseled from ice. He suspects it could cut diamond.

A lump he’s familiar with, one he’s fought a number of times in the last eight years, rises in his throat. He coughs around it and then wets his lips. “Tell me what’s happening,” he says, and lets Jessica hold onto the cuff of his jacket as she leads him down the hallway toward Courtroom Four.

Bruce knows Courtroom Four. It’s burned into his memory, a permanent etching he’ll never erase: the overlarge tables in dark wood, the red velveteen cushions like you’d find in an old theater on the gallery chairs, the white-painted woodwork that, in its heyday, was perfectly hand-carved and probably beautiful. He’s never seen it without the layers of paint, or seen the room without the modern judge’s bench and jury box, because those things haven’t changed in the last three-plus decades.
They’re the same fixtures, he thinks to himself, as when he was five years old.

He forces himself to push the memories into the place they belong, the darkest recesses of his mind, and attempts to focus on Jessica. She’s gesticulating with her hands, wide sweeping motions that carry them down the hallway, and in a way, he’s thankful for the distraction.

“—his meal card the second day, they got suspicious,” she’s explaining. They pause in front of the heavy double doors to the courtroom, and she sighs. She tucks a strand of long brown hair behind her ear, but the next hand motion shakes it loose again. “The office called the apartment, tried all the alternate numbers, no luck. The listed emergency contact went to a disconnected number. Maybe an ex-neighbor or ex-girlfriend, I don’t know.” She shrugs. “They brought me in this morning. I tried to talked to the kid, I talked to his friends, I went around to the apartment and talked to the neighbors. Nobody’s seen this uncle of his in at least two days, and he’s not opening up to me.”

Bruce nods vaguely, watching as Jessica rolls her lips together. Nervously, he thinks quietly, which is—strange. He’s seen a thousand versions of Jessica Jones, but never one who’s shifted her weight as cautiously as this, or who’s worked to tuck her hair behind her ear a second time. “His parents aren’t in the picture?” he asks.

“They—passed away.” She says it like sharing a secret, and he understands why. He dips his head to fight against the twist in the deepest part of his belly, but it’s a losing battle. “Last January. It was a drunk driver, and the uncle was the only living relative. We kept him in care for a week while the uncle made arrangements, but he’s been there ever since.”

“Without incident?” Bruce’s own words feel—foreign, disconnected from his mind and mouth. He runs fingers over his face, a limp-wristed attempt to ground himself. When he glances back up, Jessica’s watching him sharply. He’s known dozens of child welfare investigators in his lifetime, but she’s one of the best. Nothing, not even the forced neutrality of an attorney, escapes her notice. “I mean,” he presses, studiously ignoring her stare, “the uncle’s never disappeared before?”

There’s a pause while she observes him—waits, he thinks, for a silent “tell” even he’s not aware of—and finally shakes her head. “Not that we know of,” she replies. Her shoulders lift in another half-hearted shrug. “Like I said, the kid isn’t talking to me, we can’t throw any services at him until the court finds emergency jurisdiction, and we don’t know where the uncle is.” She allows one rushed sigh to escape. “Like I said on the phone, Bruce, I’ve got nothing. No placement, no leads, no one who can—”

“We’re ready.”

Bruce isn’t entirely sure when the courtroom doors swung open or when a very pretty woman in a bright red pant suit ducked her head out, but he and Jessica both jerk around to stare at her. Her dark hair hangs halfway in her face, silky but mussed.

Jessica nods slightly and motions Bruce to follow. “He say anything?” she asks the other woman.

She shakes her head.

Walking into Courtroom Four feels distinctly like stepping into a memory, and Bruce swallows around the ever-present thick feeling in the back of his throat. There’s still chipped white paint and horrendous seat-covers, too-big tables with too-short chairs, but he manages to ignore all of it to focus on the individuals in the courtroom. There’s the assistant district attorney, a man in a dark suit and dark sunglasses that definitely don’t match his shock of red hair, and his young assistant who’s furiously typing notes into a laptop that’s hooked up to a portable Braille embosser. The attorney in the red suit is already standing over the other table, idly stirring a cup of coffee with a wooden stir-
And seated next to her is a—boy.

It’s the first word that pops into Bruce’s head when he sees him, but it’s immediately the best description he can assemble, because as tall and lanky as the kid is, he also looks—young. Unspakely young, with round, soft cheeks and full lips that are pursed into a permanent-looking frown. There’s a legal pad in front of him that obviously belongs to the attorney—guardian ad litem, Bruce mentally corrects—and a ballpoint pen, but he’s ignoring both. No, instead, he picks at the edge of the table while he uses one foot to push the chair in odd, uneven half-circles. His t-shirt is too big, his jeans and sneakers are dirty either with a lack of washing or simply age, and he looks—

Lost, Bruce thinks.

Caught in a world that’s a whole lot harsher than whatever he’s used to.

A hand gently touches his arm, and he jerks a little before he realizes it’s only Jessica. Jessica, who watches him with her usual carefulness before nodding in the boy’s direction. “Not a word since I showed up,” she says with a tiny head-shake. “Unless Jess got something out of him.”

He frowns. “Jess?”

“Jessica Drew, the guardian ad litem.” The woman in the red suit twists to glance in their direction, eyebrows raised. Jessica Jones shrugs before waving Bruce toward the gallery seating. He slides along the second row and tries to ignore the claustrophobic feeling that comes from the seats being so close together. He button his suit jacket, then unbuttons it; he’s considering removing it all together when he realizes there are eyes on him.

Not Jessica’s eyes, but the boy’s.

They’re dark eyes, a deeper brown than his skin but not yet as dark as his short-sheared hair, and they train in on Bruce like lasers.

“You tell him anything?” he asks quietly as he sits down, jacket still on.

“I called you after we got here,” Jessica replies. She’s scrolling through messages on her phone, her tone half-distracted. “And really, I don’t think he would’ve listened to me if I was naked and carrying a plate of cheeseburgers. He’s pretty checked out.”

He snorts lightly and moves to fish out his own phone. He used to be better at ensuring it was always on silent—perpetually, even at the times when he was expecting important phone calls—but Tony’d recently changed all his settings to include a variety of ridiculous and embarrassing custom tones. “Maybe he knows you’ve had a baby. Stretch marks.”

And it’s a testimony to eight years of friendship—or something like it, he mentally amends—that Jessica laughs while she elbows him in the ribs.

He’s in the process of silencing his phone when it vibrates in his hand. He glances down at the message and—

“All rise,” a voice cuts through the courtroom. Bruce pushes to his feet as the court reporter and judge file in through the secure door to chambers. The judge is a slight woman with sharp features and salt-and-pepper hair in a severe pixie cut. Her tone when she tells them to be seated is tight and polite. The anti-Smithe, he catches himself thinking, and bites down on his smile.
While she’s rearranging the files on the bench, Bruce hazards a glance at his phone.

**Tony Stark:** motion to dismiss as moot got denied. appellate court’s stupid. beers and burgers tonight, my treat.

He’s not sure what’s louder in his ears: the shuffling of the judge’s paperwork or the rush of his heartbeat.

*I can’t,* he types quickly. He feels a tremor in his palm as he sends the message.

Tony’s reply is immediate. *why?*

“There we are,” the judge says, and Bruce thumbs the lock button before shoving his phone into his pants pocket. “The court calls 12-039JW, In re Miles R. Morales.” She glances up from the files in front of her. “I understand this is an emergency hearing to establish jurisdiction?”

“Yes,” the assistant district attorney answers as he rises from his seat. For a moment, Bruce forgets he’s blind, but then, Bruce nearly always forgets he’s blind. “Assistant Union County District Attorney Matt Murdock appearing for the state, your honor. We have Jessica Jones of Union County Child Services here to proffer the investigation we’ve undertaken, and Ms. Drew is representing the child. We all agree that asserting jurisdiction is required in this case.”

The judge nods. “Is that correct, Ms. Drew?”

“Yes, your honor,” Jessica Drew answers. She flattens one hand against the tabletop and leans forward, her fingers idly flicking through her pad of notes. “I’ve attempted to conduct an independent investigation as required by law, but there’s not a lot I can do.” She raises her head to look up at the bench. “Ms. Jones will testify to this, but nobody knows where the child’s legal guardian is right now, and the child—Miles—isn’t really talking to anybody.”

As if cued, the boy—Miles, Bruce corrects himself, the twelve-year-old stranger with no parents and a missing uncle—flattens himself against the back of the vinyl chair. He shrinks down into it slowly, almost as though he expects to blend in with the ugly burgundy color. The judge watches this for a moment, her lips pursed into a frown. “I see,” she replies, and Bruce wonders whether she’s talking about Ms. Drew’s statement or the way Miles is attempting to disappear. Her dark eyes flick in the direction of the gallery. “Ms. Jones?”

Jessica’s seat-bottom clatters hard enough to shake the whole row when she stands, but she hardly seems to notice. “Ma’am, without rehashing too much of Mr. Murdock’s motion or what Ms. Drew just said, we’ve essentially got a kid who’s been left alone by a missing guardian.” Her hands are still this time, calmly folded together in front of her, and her attention’s trained expertly on the judge. Like she’s done this a thousand times, Bruce thinks—but then again, he knows for a fact she *has.* “Castle Rock Middle School phoned in a report to my office about a sixth-grader—Miles—who came to school two days in a row late, disheveled, and missing his meal card. Their attempts to contact his uncle and guardian, Aaron Davis, failed. Ours failed. As of right now, we don’t even know where Mr. Davis is.” Miles presses lower in his seat until only a sliver of his hair shows. Bruce’s stomach knots, hard, and he forces himself to watch Jessica, instead. “We’re strapped for placements here in Union County, but I’ve got a foster parent with an active license who now lives in Suffolk County and who’s willing to take Miles until we find someplace local. And I’m sure,” she adds, and Bruce wonders whether the other attorneys can hear the snide twist to her tone, “that his uncle will want to contest this whenever he’s found.”

“I am sure of that as well,” the judge agrees. Her head bobs like one of those dashboard hula girls. But unlike a dashboard character, her face is drawn and tight, focused into a severe frown. “Before I
“In order to establish jurisdiction in a child welfare proceeding, this court must find that the child will be in danger without court involvement and that it is in the child’s best interest,” the judge recites. “In this case, given that we have a missing guardian, a boy who’s been left alone by that guardian, and no idea when the guardian might return, I think it’s safe to say that Miles is in danger and that it is in his best interest that the court be involved.” Her eyes flick in the direction of Matt Murdock and his frantically-typing assistant. “Mr. Murdock, I suspect when Mr.—Davis, is it?”

“Yes, your honor,” Murdock replies.

“I suspect that when he is located, we will have a rehearing on this issue. You also will need to locate him for the purposes of moving forward in the child welfare case. The sooner, I think, the better.”

He nods. “Yes, your honor.”

“In the meantime,” she continues while Murdock sits down again, “I am placing Miles in the custody of Union County Child Services, where he will be residing at least temporarily with Ms. Jones’s Suffolk County foster parent. Hopefully, we can find his uncle soon, move him closer, and work on getting to the bottom of this mess.” She shakes her head slightly. “Court is adjourned.”

The court reporter asks them all to rise again, a command Bruce follows without really hearing it. He’s watching Miles the whole time—Miles, whose face is trained on the speckled courtroom floor and who only rises when Jessica Drew nudges him slightly. His shoulders are slumped in his too-big shirt, and Bruce—

Bruce might feel like the Grinch at the end of the story, the version of himself with a heart three sizes too big, except his heart’s always been too large for his chest.

Tony always wonders aloud how someone as soft-bellied as him could work in child welfare. Bruce always smiles and replies that some things are mysteries.

Or at least, mysteries to Tony Stark.
“I know your license expires next June,” Jessica Jones says quietly, their shoulders almost rubbing, “and I know you said last year that you didn’t want any more placements. But it’s maybe for the weekend, until something opens up here, and I just think—”

“I’ll take him,” Bruce says, and it surprises him how rushed his own voice sounds, how breathless and urgent an answer it is.

It must surprise Jessica, too, because she falls silent beside him. Bruce imagines he can feel her frown.

But he only imagines it because he’s still watching Miles.

Miles, slouch-shouldered and staring at the floor, who wipes his nose with the back of his hand.

“You’re sure,” Jessica says. It is, unequivocally, not a question.

He nods and answers, “Yeah.”

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The conference room outside Courtroom Four is a tiny shoebox of a space built seemingly out of thin air. Its walls are cinderblock on two sides and wood on two others, and it’s crowded with an odd mismatch of furniture: a round pressboard table that makes IKEA look glamorous, a half-dozen swivel chairs in a half-dozen different colors and styles, a square glass table in the corner that houses two pens, a phone book, and a dying bamboo plant. Bruce stares at the wilting brown thing in the corner, the husk of a once-proud shoot, and tries not to turn it into a metaphor.

Mostly because he’s waiting on Jessica.

The stack of paperwork in front of him, legibly filled-in but hastily signed, reminds him vaguely of the first packet he ever filled in for her. She’d dropped it on her desk like an anvil and thrown her hands up into the air. “I’m obligated at this point to tell you that you’re crazy,” she’d declared. She’d had shorter hair then, the ends pink-dipped, and a thousand wild mannerisms. Barely licensed in social work, Bruce remembers with an inner smile. At the time, he hadn’t smiled. At the time, he’d frowned at what’d looked like a half-ream of paper. “According to the licensing drive I read about,” he’d replied evenly as the worry crept up his throat, “you’re supposed to be encouraging me.”

“Count this as encouragement not to quit, then,” she’d informed him before she’d plopped into her chair. “My New Year’s Resolution was to stop signing foster parents who quit the first time the job gets sticky.”

He’d glanced up at her. “It’s April,” he’d pointed out.

“Late bloomer,” she’d returned, and then, tossed him a pen.

He’s fiddling with the pen, still, a cheap ball-point that leaks every third or fourth word, when his cell phone vibrates in his pocket. He jerks slightly, and the pen escapes his fumbling fingers and skitters under the corner table. The door’s still closed; Bruce knows because he checks, inspecting it before he even considers reaching for his phone.
But he hesitates anyway, just in case of—something. What, he’s not entirely sure.

Then, his phone buzzes again and he digs it out of his pocket to stare at the display. It promises two new text messages. He suspects they’re both from Tony enough that he rolls his eyes as he unlocks the keypad.

The first text, somewhat predictably, reads: *okay either i pissed you off enough to earn the silent treatment or something’s going on with you. don’t make me arrange a search party. buck’s got that distant army past, he’d do a great search party.* Bruce snorts at it momentarily and shakes his head, but when he opens the screen to reply—

**Well.**

It’s easier to wait until he sees Tony in person than to try to explain what’s happening in clumsy 160-character sets.

He thumbs back to the list of incoming messages to find the other new one, and catches himself halfway through another eye-roll.

**Clint Barton: call your boyfriend**

This, he has no problem replying to. *Last I checked, he’s not my boyfriend.*

*phil’s gonna tase him to death and then im gonna have to change clothes to hide the body with him. God forbid you extract yourself from your pajamas*, Bruce retorts.

And then, the door squeaks open.

It plays out in front of him almost in slow motion, the doorknob turning and the old hinges protesting loudly. He shoves his phone onto the table, ignoring the noise of Clint’s next reply vibrating through. Jessica stands in the hallway just beyond the threshold, a battered black duffel bag over her shoulder. She’s half-concealed by the door, displaying the curve of a hip and half of her soft black sweater, but her attention’s focused elsewhere.

Bruce feels his chest tighten around his racing heart. No, not *racing* as much as *jogging*; he can still breathe around the pressure. He watches Jessica gesture toward the door and her full lips press into a frown; when she gestures a second time, there’s barely-controlled exasperation pushing at her features.

When Bruce’d stepped out of the courtroom, laden down with the paperwork, both this Jessica and the guardian ad litem had been bent over Miles, trying to coax him out of whatever shell he’d retreated down into. Now, standing in the conference room and *waiting*, Bruce can’t help but wonder how successful the two women had been.

But he’s not allowed to wonder for very long, because on the third hand-wave, Miles appears in the doorway.

He’s taller than he looked in the courtroom, all long legs and gangly almost-teen arms that poke out of the too-big t-shirt. His steps shuffle him just past the threshold, but then he stops to survey the room. There’s not much to look at, no loud posters and piles of various toys like at the Union County Child Services office, but Bruce can watch the way he takes in every piece of furniture and chip in the off-white wall paint. Jessica squeezes in behind him and pulls the door shut; once it’s closed, he twists around to *check* it like he thinks the hounds of hell might’ve followed her in.
He’s wearing a black-and-white checkered backpack, but almost all the white checks have been colored in with markers. They bleed together in places, and Bruce can’t help the way he finds it endearing.

Miles is consummately twelve, he realizes as the boy turns back around, hands shoved deep into his pockets. He’s terrified and his eyes are red from stealthy crying, but he’s still twelve.

They stand there, mostly-still for long stretches of seconds, the quiet turning the room almost claustrophobically small. Jessica glances between the two of them and, after her eyes linger on Miles, shakes her head. Bruce nods, a half-second lift of his chin, but he finds it hard to break the silence.

He remembers this age clearly enough that the memories sit like stones in his belly.

The fear was only part of it.

When neither of them move for another few, tense seconds, though, Jessica rolls her eyes and brushes her hair over her shoulder. “Miles,” she says. Her fingers touch the back of his shoulder and he flinches as though he’s been burned; when she nudges him gently, he hardly sways. “This is Doctor Banner. You’re going home with him.”

Miles’s face crumples into a tight, silent frown. His eyes flick up, a vague glance in Bruce’s direction, but then, they keep moving. Analyzing him, Bruce thinks, studying his tweedy brown suit, his dark shirt with the open collar, and the hair he’s spent a half-hour running his fingers through. He wets his own lips to answer whatever question’s looming in the future.

Finally, the boy pulls in a breath. “I don’t need another head-shrink,” he challenges, and Bruce—at his better judgment, maybe, but Bruce bites back a tiny laugh. “I’m not— Well, okay, I am a doctor,” he says, holding up his hands, “but I’m not that kind. And I don’t practice. I’m actually a lawyer. Like Mister Murdock.”

The mention of the Union County assistant district attorney softens the line of Miles’s shoulders, and the two-second challenge against “head-shrinking” disappears. He shifts just enough to shove his hands in his pockets, his face dipping toward the floor.

Bruce glances at Jessica, who shrugs lightly. “You’ll be staying with Doctor Banner for a bit,” she explains. Her hand rests lightly on Miles’s shoulder, but without any further nudging. Without any real warmth, really, almost as though she’s afraid he might flinch away again. Bruce certainly doesn’t blame her for the caution. “Until we have a better idea of what’s going on, at least.”

“Sure.” Miles’s voice is nearly a whisper. He looks like he wants to disappear into the floor.

Bruce swallows around the thick feeling that’s coating the back of his throat, then shoves his hands in his own pockets. There’re no words—not from a social worker, from an attorney, from a stranger—that can close the aching hole Miles is trying to breathe around. Bruce learned that a long time ago.

But because he needs to say something, to fill in the silence that’s overtaking the mismatched room, he offers, “I’m a . . . friend.”

It brings this tiny, almost microscopic, shift in Miles’s posture. His jaw tightens, and his chin moves; his eyebrows rise, and then, his dark eyes follow. For a moment they stare at each other, separated by two ancient rolling chairs and the both of them absolutely silent except for the sound of their breath.

When Miles repeats, “Sure,” Bruce thinks it’s a half-degree warmer.
At least, he hopes.

Chapter End Notes

Child welfare proceedings differ greatly from state-to-state, but generally all jurisdictions require a hearing and order when a child is brought into custody on an emergency basis. Then, later on, there is a more formal hearing which determines whether the child needs to remain in custody. The timelines vary depending on the state. The state’s interest can be represented by any number of departments (the child welfare agency, another state agency, the county prosecutor’s office), and then each of the parents or guardians can receive counsel as well.

For the sake of Bruce’s jurisdiction, emergency hearings must occur the same day (or, on a weekend or holiday, the next business day) as the child is brought into custody. The state is represented by the district attorney’s office of the county where the child is in custody.

Additionally, in most proceedings, a child is assigned either an attorney, who represents the child’s wishes, or a guardian ad litem, who is not always an attorney and who represents the child’s best interests. Many times, even when the child is appointed an attorney to represent his wishes, that attorney is still called a guardian ad litem. In either case, the child receives separate representation.

A reader suggested that I include a bit of information on each of the new players in this chapter, given that they are members of the extended Marvel universe. I think this is a brilliant idea! Those I’ve lifted (at least, for this chapter) are as follows:

Matt Murdock ([Daredevil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daredevil))
Jessica Jones ([Jewel / Knightress / Power Woman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessica_Jones_(Marvel_Comics)))
Miles Morales ([Spider-Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_Morales))
Welcome Wagons

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce attempts to acclimate Miles to his home while still managing his normal everyday life. Tony, of course, has other ideas. To Tony’s credit, both versions involve zombies.

Chapter Notes

Inns of Court is a professional organization of lawyers dedicated to professionalism and ethics in the practice of law. They originated in England and Wales, but many American communities also boast Inns.

Many thanks to Jen, who beta-read this chapter as well as its previous inception, and saranoh, who provided inspiration that helped move this chapter from “messy” to “bearable.” Also, thank you to the tumblr Motion Practitioners who came up with and then embraced the “Steve loves his camera” headcanon; it definitely informed this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The house is cold and dark when they arrive an hour later, almost tomb-like in its silence. Silence—at least, private silence, the sort you create for yourself—is something Bruce’s intimately familiar with, but it’s . . . different, somehow, with a child. Every solemn minute feels like an hour, and Bruce finds himself replaying every detail of that afternoon as he fumbles his key into the lock.

He’d tried prompting conversation in the booth at the familiar Burger King near the Union County courthouse, but Miles’d only picked at his chicken sandwich and stared out the window. He’d flipped through a dozen radio stations in his car—all of them, it was worth noting, programmed by Tony Stark—and had been rewarded only by absolute quiet.

He’s watched children sob, deflect, chatter, and fight their way through the obligatory fast food snack and the twenty-minute drive. He’s never had one curl up inside himself like an armadillo.

But then, he reminds himself, he’s never brought home a twelve-year-old, either.

He props the door open for Miles and ushers him in, immediately aware of the myriad insufficiencies of what Tony and Clint have both occasionally called his “sad little townhouse.” There are shoes lying outside the hall closet and a stack of research balancing precariously on the table in the foyer; the overhead light flickers before it resolves to stay on, and the door predictably sticks as Bruce pulls
it closed. It’s a safe house, he knows, clean and well-kept enough to pass muster, but it’s the home of a single lawyer who rarely entertains.

Unless, of course, he’s entertaining Tony Stark, a man who once fell asleep on the bed in the guest room while it was covered with boxes of books he’d packed away for Goodwill.

“You can leave your shoes here,” he suggests, and Miles nods vaguely. He toes off the tattered sneakers on the rug, pauses, and then kicks them against the wall. It’s clumsy, like a half-lost muscle memory. There’s a hole in his left sock that his big toe peaks out of. Bruce forces himself to ignore the too-tight feeling that momentarily seizes his chest. “I’ve, uh, got streaming Netflix, if you want,” he limply offers as Miles toys with the zipper on his hoodie, “plus all the Dr. Pepper you can drink.”

That, of all things, brings those dark eyes up. They peer at him for a moment, and he thinks he catches a sliver of pink tongue darting out from between pursed lips. “You have Cherry Coke?”

He opens his mouth, realizes momentarily that there’s no utility in lying, and closes it again. “No,” he admits.

Miles nods and then falls silent again, waiting on Bruce to lead him through.

The lamps in the living room are dim, proof that he spends most of his evenings working at the dining table or in his office, or reading in his bedroom, but it’s enough to reveal the soft brown couch with the collection of throw pillows and blankets draped over it. There are children starving in American cities and diseases ravaging foreign countries, Bruce knows, but he struggles to feel real guilt over thick fleece blankets he can bundle up in when he reads. Or when he’s forced to watch truly awful horror movies with Tony, he thinks, and is somehow not surprised by the smile that finds the corners of his mouth.

He leaves Miles to stand in the doorway and moves through the room, closing the dark curtains and turning on another lamp. The lamp, then the television, and the streaming BluRay player—he owns exactly no BluRay discs and refuses to pay a hundred dollars a month for cable TV, but of course last year’s Christmas gift was a streaming video . . . thing—which immediately prompts him to choose between Netflix and the HuluPlus subscription Tony’s still paying for. He twists to pluck the remote off the coffee table to find that Miles’s slipped past him and is standing in front of the couch, staring at the photographs on the wall.

“Those are my friends,” Bruce volunteers. Miles jumps like a spooked rabbit and whirls on his heel. Bruce attempts a reassuring smile, as soft-cornered as he can manage, and gestures vaguely to the wall behind the couch. “My friend Steve, he’s sort of an amateur photographer,” he explains. “Last year for my birthday, they put all that together.”

He imagines, for a moment, that he can watch Miles thinking, tracking every rambling thought that filters through his head. Finally, he turns back to the display. His hands are buried in the pockets of his hoodie, and Bruce can’t read his posture.

“There’s a lot of them,” he says quietly.

Bruce isn’t sure whether Miles means friends or pictures, because the entire wall is a mosaic of his life displayed in an array of framed, matted snapshots. They range in size from eight-by-tens to Wal-Mart print-lab sized, and together, they tell the disorganized story of the last four years of Bruce’s life. There’s a photo from Dot’s baptism and each of her Christmases, from the housewarming at Jane and Thor’s fixer-upper to the party after Natasha closed her first big jury trial, from birthdays, holidays, and the disastrous Thanksgiving at Tony’s that’d required they order Domino’s. It’s a chronicle that hardly belongs to someone like Bruce, the quiet child welfare attorney who keeps to
himself half the time.

Of course, he can’t say all that to a twelve-year-old he’s just met.

So instead, he just answers, “Yeah.”

Miles nods precisely once, a half-distracted head-bob directed more at the photographs than anything else, and Bruce smiles slightly as he flicks through his Netflix queue. There’s a dozen documentaries, a cop show Clint recommended (and how a criminal lawyer enjoys badly-written police procedurals, Bruce will never know), a truly horrifying number of two-star “cult classics” Tony’d flagged, and—

“Put that on,” Miles interrupts. When Bruce glances over his shoulder, the boy’s still hovering near the couch. He’s focused on the television, though, not the momentary surprise on Bruce’s face.

He glances at the screen, and—“The Walking Dead?” Miles spares him one half-second glance and nods. It’s the most responsive he’s been since after court. Bruce wets his lips. “It’s, uh, kind of gory,” he warns, not because he’s personally seen it but because Phil’s read all the comics. “It’s all zombies and stuff.”

The withering look Miles sends him is barely a flicker, but it’s so absolutely teenage that Bruce almost smiles. Somewhere lurking under whatever that shell is, he thinks, is a secret ball of trouble. He wonders whether he’ll meet that version of Miles before Jessica moves him elsewhere. “Zombies it is,” he decides, and selects the first episode.

He leaves the remotes on the coffee table and steps out of the way while Netflix buffers, leaving Miles to stand awkwardly in front of the couch. He simultaneously looks five and fifty, young and uncertain while still too stubborn for any affirmative steps. He glances two or three times at Bruce and his encouraging half-smile, but never budges.

Finally, Bruce says, “I’m going to go take my jacket upstairs.” The show’s starting, all bleak post-apocalyptic scenery and ominous silence, and Miles—like all children, more or less—doesn’t pull his gaze from the screen. He leaves him there, flicks on the hall light, and trails up the stairs. He listens for any tell-tale sounds of trouble, but there’s none; the volume of the television doesn’t spike suddenly, there’s no resounding sobs carrying up the stairwell, and no doors open and then slam.

He hangs his suit jacket in his closet with the others and then stands there in the middle of his bedroom, staring at—nothing, really. It’s exactly as he left it that morning, unmade bed and stray sock lying next to the wicker hamper, three books piled on the bedside table next to a half-empty glass of water, but it feels suddenly foreign. He’s not brought a kid home in a long while—over a year, he reminds himself, a placement that’d broken the six-month hiatus he’d practically begged Jessica for. He’s wasted long hours of conversations on his slowly-expiring license and the renewal home study he’s not scheduled.

Refused to schedule, Jessica’d accused months ago. He’d rolled his eyes.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. There are a half-dozen waiting e-mails and as many texts, and he pulls it out and unlocks it to flip through them all. The e-mails are mostly work-related, clogging his mailbox with social work reports and therapist recommendations; he flags a few that need more immediate replies. There are two texts from Tony, variations on the earlier theme, and another three from Clint. He rolls his eyes at the last one—CALL ME, it reads, the urgency conveyed mostly through the fact that Clint bothered to capitalize the letters at all. He selects Clint’s contact information and presses the call button as he wanders downstairs, shaking his head.

Clint picks up on the second ring, breathless. Bruce sincerely hopes the man was just struggling to
find his phone. “Are you dead?” he says by way of an answer, and Bruce rolls his eyes.

“I remember the halcyon days when you said ‘hello,’” he replies. He pauses at the foot of the stairs, the noise from the television barely trailing in. He wonders whether checking on Miles after five minutes is too much or too little trust. “You were scared of us, then.”

“And you didn’t leave Tony all freaked out and trailing Phil around like a lost puppy,” Clint retorts.

Bruce stops in the middle of the doorway to the kitchen, one foot soaking up the cold from the tile through his sock, and frowns. “What?”

“Uh, I don’t think that really needs translation.” He sighs as he flips on the light, ignoring the mess of paperwork on the table and the stack of unread mail on the island to walk over to the fridge. It’s mostly-empty, just beer, Dr. Pepper, bottles of water, and Chinese food leftovers. He grabs two waters and sets them on the counter. “And since you’re not answering his calls and texts—at least, according to him,” Clint’s rambling, and Bruce realizes belatedly that he hasn’t been paying attention, “you’re probably dead.”

“Do I sound dead?” Bruce asks. There’s a televised gunshot in the living room, a sharp crack in the otherwise-quiet.

“I don’t talk to enough dead people to be sure,” Clint returns. Bruce snorts and leans against the counter, bottle of water clutched between his hands. “Look, just call the guy, okay? ‘Cause if he shows up here, Phil’s seriously gonna kill him.”

“I’m pretty sure Phil always wants to kill Tony,” Bruce replies with a half-shrug. “It’s how they show affection.”

“Okay, first, no talking about Phil showing Stark affection of, like, any kind. That goes down a dark, creepy road that’ll put me off sex for at least the rest of my life.” Bruce hides his smirk in a sip of water. “But second, the way Phil tells it, Tony stalked him through the office after you took off early ‘cause Gary wouldn’t tell him why you took vacation time in the middle of the day.’” When Bruce leans his head back, it lightly impacts the front of one of the cabinets. He lets it settle there and, slowly, closes his eyes. “I can read you the bitchy texts,” Clint offers when he stays quiet. “There’s a whole long exchange in there about—”

“No,” Bruce interrupts, shaking his head. “Thanks, but . . . no.”

He knows he should end the call—end the entire rambling non-conversation about Tony Stark’s strange ability to worry only at the most inopportune times—but he doesn’t. He stands in his kitchen, cold plastic against his palm, and listens to zombie noises trail in from the living room. He needs to return to Miles’s stubborn silence and averted eye contact, but right now, it’s hard.

He’s used to younger children, ones who can compartmentalize all the grief and helplessness away and just be kids for the few days they’re with him. This is new, and Bruce—

Bruce knows that broken silence better than most.

“Take care of your boyfriend, okay?” Clint says after a longer pause than’s strictly necessary, and Bruce rolls his eyes.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” he reminds him, and hangs up on Clint’s trailing laughter.

He stands in the kitchen for a few more minutes, silent phone teetering on the edge of the counter
while the muffled voices of the television characters drift in and out of his hearing. He needs to text Tony, he knows, but the problem is that he also knows Tony. There’s no lie plausible enough to guarantee him space, and the truth—

Last time he served as a foster care placement, Tony showed up on the doorstep at eight a.m. Saturday morning, both dogs in tow, and organized a full day of activities: parks, lunch at his ridiculous house, bowling, a movie.

Bruce can’t imagine Miles welcoming that kind of madness. At least, not in the next few days, and by the end of those few days, he’ll likely be up in Union County, settled into a proper foster home or returned to his uncle.

He leaves his phone on the counter and carries both the waters and a file from the kitchen table back through to the living room. The lamp not connected to the wall switch is now off, pitching the room into half-darkness that’s not helped by the night scene on the television. Sometime in the last handful of minutes, Miles’s moved from standing to sitting, tucked into the furthest—and darkest, Bruce notices—corner of the couch. There are throw pillows piled on and around where his toes are pressed between the couch cushions, and one of the thick fleece blankets is pulled up to his chin.

Bruce thinks his eyes flick in his direction when he wanders through, but he’s not sure. “I brought you a water,” he offers, holding it out. Miles watches it for a second, his lips pursed into a frown. “I’ll pick you up some Cherry Coke tomorrow.”

He nods briefly, and a hand snakes out of the blanket to take the bottle. Bruce steps back to the far end of the couch, reconsider’s, and moves to the armchair, instead. It’s next to the lamp, enough light to read by, and he opens the file on his lap.

He’s halfway through a long diatribe in a social work report when Miles murmurs, “Thanks.” He’s not looking in Bruce’s direction, entirely focused on the screen. If he’d been any quieter, Bruce thinks he might’ve missed it.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, and returns to his reading.

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“Is this how it works now? You disappear, dodge my texts, and leave me wondering if you’ve been, I don’t know, kidnapped by Russian mobsters and left half-dead on the side of the road with nothing but the cracked and mangled remnants of a phone you really should’ve updated three years ago?”

For lack of a better initial reaction—and he’s certain it’ll plague him later, the not having a better initial reaction in his arsenal—Bruce rolls his eyes. “I like my BlackBerry.”

Standing on the front stoop, Tony crosses his arms over his chest. He’s wearing a windbreaker over his work shirt and slacks, but it’s open, barely protecting him from the October wind. It musses his hair and lifts the end of his tie. “And I,” he retorts, his eyes narrowed and tone just bordering on the wrong side of humorless, “like receiving text messages back from my bestie, but hey, we can’t always get what we want.”

The night is crisp and breezy, the type of true autumn evening Bruce might ordinarily fill with hot tea and reading if his life weren’t more complicated, right now. Complicated by files he needs to review, by a practice hypothetical he needs to write for his law school class, and by the clump of cluttered
evenings (Inns of Court, Suffolk County Bar Association, book club meeting) looming over him in the next few weeks.

And complicated by Miles Morales, who’d dozed off during the third episode of *The Walking Dead* and who’s currently asleep on the couch while Netflix’s menu screen casts red light through the living room.

He’s balanced evenings like this before, even with strange children asleep in his house.

But somehow, the balance feels impossible with the sudden appearance of Tony.

“I thought you were harassing Phil,” he says, because there’s something in Tony’s seriousness that turns his stomach to stone.

“Clint threatened to call Natasha on me, which’d mean telling Pepper on me, and, well, some of us need our assistants in our good graces.” Even when Bruce glances down at his glasses—glasses he’d carried with him to the door, for some reason, like he’d known long before he got there that he’d need some kind of distraction—he can feel Tony watching him. “Seriously, big guy. One, two, four texts ignored, I can deal with that. I mean, you do things without me. Occasionally. Maybe.” Bruce snorts and shakes his head. “But this”—And Bruce glances up in time to witness a patented Tony Stark hand-wave, vague and expansive as it cuts through the distance between them. “—thing you’re doing, whatever you’re doing, it’s weird.”

“It’s not weird, Tony,” he replies. A bitter wind, colder than you’d expect even in October, rushes between the two of them, and he shivers slightly. He’s sure Tony notices—Tony somehow notices everything, spotting minute details in a way better suited to a profiler than an appellate attorney—but ignores the way the other man raises his eyebrows. He tucks his glasses in his shirt pocket, shoves his hands into his pants pockets, and wets his lips.

It’s hard to stand there under Tony’s scrutinizing gaze and remember how to breathe. His skin itches for a moment, urging him to flee.

Whereto, he’s not completely certain.

“Jessica called,” he finally explains, lifting his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. “I’m technically off the list, but they had a kid come in this morning and there wasn’t anybody local with the space. She figured she could call in the favor, and I—”

“Wait, wait, stop the monologue.” Tony raises both his palms, bare and white in the dim glow of the porch light. His tie and jacket move on the breeze, but Bruce is convinced he doesn’t notice.

“You’ve got a kid? Here? A kid right now and you didn’t call me in as the welcome wagon?”

He sighs and resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Tony—”

“No, okay, you can’t *Tony* me right now,” Tony retorts. “Cause it’s fine if you don’t wanna quit. Hell, I’ve been number one on that bandwagon, even Jess’ll tell you that.”

“You can’t call her ‘Jess’ when you’ve only met her twice.”

“But smoke and mirrors? Weird.”

Bruce sighs. “It’s not smoke and mirrors,” he says, a little surprised at the tension that curls its fingers around each word. It’s not Tony’s fault that he’s exhausted, or that his to-do list is no fewer than ten items long. Tony’s not the clerk who docketed back-to-back hearings on two days next week, or the social workers who’re proposing impossible solutions to equally-impossible problems. And Tony’s
not a sullen boy who’s spoken fewer than ten sentences to him and reminds him of—

He shakes his head slightly, a failed attempt to clear away the cobwebs. “He’s not a welcome wagon kid,” he continues when Tony stays silent. Their eyes meet, steady in the almost-dark of the front porch, and Bruce feels a familiar emptiness in the deepest part of his belly. He’s not thought about it all day, the hollow feeling that sneaks up on him when he’s too far from Tony, but now it threatens to suffocate him. He swallows. “He’s a little older, and I think that makes it—different.”

“Different how?” Ordinarily, the question would burst between them like a firework, bombastic and demanding, but not tonight. Tonight, Tony’s face and gaze are both soft, his voice treading the line between curious and considerate. It’s an expression reserved mostly for Dot, and, in rare times Bruce tries to not take to heart, for him.

He rolls his lips together. “His parents died,” he says finally. His stomach knots in a way he can’t entirely explain, and he pulls in a breath around it. “He lives with his uncle, but he’s disappeared somewhere, and it’s all . . .”

He’s shaking his head, trying to assemble words that mostly rattle around in the back of his mind, when something warm touches his forearm. It’s tentative for a half-second, then solid and steady. He’s felt Tony’s hand a thousand times—pressing to the small of his back, steering him around by the hips, ruffling his hair or prodding him in the side—but somehow, in that second, it’s unfamiliar. He’s filled with an urge to lean into him, to leech more than just casual warmth from his touch. At least he can blame the gooseflesh that prickles his skin on the cold, and not Tony.

They’re closer now, a foot apart at most. Bruce watches the white cloud of Tony’s breath float between them. He imagines, when he inhales, that it’s almost sharing breath.

“I can stick around,” Tony offers. It’s very nearly a whisper, words that barely touch Bruce’s ears before dancing away on the wind. “No welcome wagon, no full-tilt marching band or anything. Just an extra body. In case you need it, or whatever.”

His other hand punctuates the whatever, a fleeting, loose-fingered flap, and Bruce smiles. He’s not sure why it’s not Tony’s kindness but the hand-wave that brings the warmth to his cheeks and the spike to his heart rate, but he’s not sure he wants to analyze it, either.

They stand that way for a long time, Tony’s thumb brushing idly across the inside of his arm, until he shakes his head. “Not tonight,” he murmurs, and he wonders momentarily whether Tony can even hear him. “He’s not—I don’t want to overwhelm him.”

Tony nods, vaguely, and Bruce watches his throat and jaw move as he swallows. “Okay,” he says. “Okay,” Bruce answers, but he doesn’t step away until after Tony does, and doesn’t close the front door until the lingering warmth on his arm is gone.

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Bruce arrives an hour late to work on Friday, his tie missing and the top two buttons of his shirt still undone. He presses past the usual clump of people in the hallway—Darcy and Bucky arguing about a case file’s mangled cover sheet, Maria rushing toward her office with two interns in tow, Peggy carrying a dozen files in front of her while barking out orders to a clerk—to step into his office. His quiet office, one that’s cluttered but free of grumpy twelve-year-olds who adamantly do not want to
attend school.

He rubs his hand over his face, then swings his bag off his shoulder and onto his chair. His to-do list is at least two dozen items long and includes clearing the mountains of files off his desk, but he can’t accomplish any of that without coffee.

He nearly leaps out of his skin when he turns around. “You need to stop doing that!”

In the doorway, Natasha Romanoff rolls her eyes, a brief, efficient motion that seems to take only a minimal amount of human effort. When she steps into the room, Bruce realizes she’s carrying two coffee mugs: one her own, a gift from Clint in pitch-black and featuring the white outline and red hourglass of a black widow spider, and the Chemists do it periodically mug Tony bought Bruce years ago. She sets the latter on his desk and twists the arm in his direction.

“Thank you,” he says, but her lips barely twitch.

By the time he’s reached to pick up the mug, she’s shut the door behind both of them.

The Friday morning cacophony of sound disappears abruptly, leaving shouting trial assistants and frantic file-searches as someone else’s white noise. Bruce frowns, blinking at her. “Natasha?”

Natasha’s long fingers curl around her mug. Her nails are as red as the hourglass that adorns it, a tint that leaves “fire engine” for “blood,” and they click against the porcelain one precise time. Bruce swallows as he tracks the absolutely even way her eyes slide up and down his body. His hands are warm from the coffee, his tongue blisteringly hot when he sips it, but something in the pit of his stomach feels suddenly hard and cold.

He’s in the process of swallowing thickly when she finally asks, “What’s going on?”

The heat from the coffee warms Bruce from the inside out, and he swallows a second time at the lingering burning sensation on his tongue. Glancing down at his mug is nothing more than a stall, and he suspects they both know it.

“Nothing,” he answers, glancing up at her. She cocks her head to the side, curls bobbing. He knows he’s chosen the wrong response, but he’s not sure there’s a better one.

“You’re an hour late, you’re half-dressed, and I don’t think you combed your hair.” He lifts a hand to check and studiously ignores the way she raises her eyebrows. She’s already familiar with every one of his tells, thanks to the time they got snowed in at a domestic violence conference and spent a full day playing poker for mini-bar snacks. “And,” she adds once his hand’s dropped back to his mug, “Tony almost drove Phil to violence yesterday.”

He snorts a half-laugh. “Tony always drives Phil to violence,” he points out.

“You’re an hour late, you’re half-dressed, and I don’t think you combed your hair.” He lifts a hand to check and studiously ignores the way she raises her eyebrows. She’s already familiar with every one of his tells, thanks to the time they got snowed in at a domestic violence conference and spent a full day playing poker for mini-bar snacks. “And,” she adds once his hand’s dropped back to his mug, “Tony almost drove Phil to violence yesterday.”

He snorts a half-laugh. “Tony always drives Phil to violence,” he points out.

“Clint said you’d say that.”

“You’re ganging up on me now?”

And Natasha’s voice is absolutely, perfectly flat when she replies, “If we have to, yes.” He rolls his eyes as he raises his mug to his lips again. Even without looking, he can feel how sharp and tight her gaze’s gone. “You didn’t sleep with Stark, did you?”

Bruce inhales sharply and is rewarded with a lungful of coffee. He sputters, coughs, and nearly dumps the mug all over his desk. He barely manages to set it down before he demands, “What?”
Natasha stares at him as though he’s a complete stranger. She nearly trips on a chair when she backs away from him. “Oh god, you did, didn’t you?”

“No!” he barks. He’s not sure whether his voice cracks on hot coffee or on principle, but he sounds distinctly like a twelve-year-old. Like Miles, he catches himself thinking, but then he’s coughing up the remainder of the coffee. “No, no Tony. I absolutely did not sleep with him. Or anyone.” And he hopes—very sincerely hopes—that quietly falling asleep while thinking about Tony’s kind eyes on the front stoop doesn’t count. He shakes his head and wipes the tears out of the corners of his eyes. His lungs burn when he breathes.

Natasha’s still watching him, as eagle-eyed as ever. When he repeats, “No,” though, the word catches.

She frowns then, her pale brow crinkling into deep lines and her full lips pursing tightly. At her fiercest, she’s as terrible and awesome as a summer lightning storm, but Bruce can’t shake the thought that she’s more beautiful when her face softens. Like now, when she watches him with such careful eyes.

“But something happened,” she says quietly. It is in no way a question.

“I,” he starts, but the words escape, somehow. He reaches for his coffee cup, then worries his fingers along the handle and the one tiny chip in the rim. The steam rolls slowly off the inky liquid, languid but persistent. “Not with Tony. It, uh. It’s complicated.”

Without looking, he imagines he can feel the way she’s staring him down, the raised eyebrow and the press of her mouth, but he can’t actually look. No, instead he’s stuck swallowing around the thick feeling in the back of his throat and waiting for something. An interruption, maybe, the inevitability of Jane bursting through the door with a question or a social worker returning a four-day-old phone call. He’d even accept a frantic text from Tony (who’s arguing an appeal in the law school’s courtroom for some patriotic event today), an administrative question from Phil, or an unexpected visit from Fury. Anything to break the silence that stretches between them and the relentless heat of Natasha’s eyes.

“Bruce,” she says, one gentle lilt of a word that nearly bowls him over.

He pulls in a breath. “I have a foster child. Staying with me. I had to take him to school, this morning.”

The silence that sweeps over the room is almost oppressive, the type that Bruce can feel seeping into his pores and under his skin. He raises his mug, an attempt to casually sip his coffee, but he’s caught by Natasha’s expression. He’s seen her angry, he recalls, seen her desperate, disappointed, amused, and irate, but he’s not entirely sure he’s ever seen her surprised.

But right now, she’s wide-eyed, her lips parted into some vague facsimile of the usual cartoon “o.” He sets down his mug, then rubs his hands on the fronts of his slacks, but still she just gapes at him.

“It’s— It’s just something,” he finally informs her as he pushes his hands into his pants pockets, “that I do. From time to time, not often, and not long-term.”

“You take in foster children,” Natasha repeats. There’s something oddly distant about her, now, like she’s stepped back another hundred paces. Bruce can’t shake the way she’s watching him.

“Temporarily.”

She nods vaguely. From across his desk, it’s almost distracted. “From another county?”
“Union County,” he replies. His fingers trace over the change in his left pocket, his cell phone in his right. Distracted, tiny motions he hopes might ground him in the conversation. “I lived there all through law school, then when I started working here. They’ve had a shortage of foster homes almost as long as I can remember, I just . . . ” He shrugs loosely and shakes his head. “I wanted to help.”

Natasha nods again, and he watches the changes in her face as the seconds tick on. Her brow furrows, then releases; her lips press into a severe line, then plump again, red and full. She turns her mug in her hand, fingernails clicking against the black paint. She almost looks like she’s deciding something.

Maybe that’s why the smile—crooked but genuine, touching those serious eyes until they warm—surprises him so much. He frowns, watching as she shakes her head. “Only you,” she informs him, amusement creeping into her voice, “could work this job and then still want to take in another county’s foster kids.”

Despite himself, Bruce swallows a tiny laugh. “Like I said,” he replies, the heat crawling up his neck and onto his face, “it’s complicated.”

“Yeah, right.” And whatever the twist in Natasha’s tone is, the little lift to her words, she’s certainly not telling. Her fingernails dance against her mug again, clicking along in a measured rhythm. “How long have you been doing this?” she asks after a few silent seconds. Her eyes never leave his face.

He shrugs slightly. “A few years,” he answers as he reaches for his coffee mug.

“That think temporary?”

“I think the longest was two weeks, maybe?” He tries to sound light about it, almost gingerly. He remembers every minute of those two weeks like they’re burned into his brain, waiting by the phone every day after work to hear whether Eddie’s grandmother passed muster enough to take him long-term. He dismisses the memory with a shake of his head. “Agencies like to place kids with their relatives or in a family-like setting. A single guy from Suffolk County’s usually the last choice.”

He sips his rapidly-cooling coffee as casually as he knows how, but he’s acutely aware that Natasha’s hardly blinked. She watches him like prey, he thinks to himself, a hawk waiting to swoop in. Clint wins the award for most attentive eyes inside the courtroom, certainly, but Natasha is far more observant outside it.

It’s after his second sip that she asks, “And how long until one stays?”

This time, at least, Bruce has the wherewithal to swallow instead of sputter. It’s a question he’s fielded a dozen times from Jessica Jones—a talented social worker, certainly, but pushy when she decides she’s right—and at least as often from Tony Stark. Tony, who’d only discovered Bruce’s double-life as a temporary foster placement when he’d shown up one night, unannounced, with beer and pizza.

Bruce’d been comforting a sobbing, petrified eight-year-old.

It hadn’t ended well.

He stares into his coffee mug for a moment, his fingernail tracing the “y” on the engraving, and then shakes his head. “My license expires in a few months,” he responds. His voice is oddly quiet, like someone’s found a way to dampen him. “I’m already at the bottom of the list for Union County, I can’t be licensed in Suffolk County because I’m the child welfare attorney, and it doesn’t make sense
to spend all that time and money to help one boy a year.”

Natasha nods, but only once. Her eyelashes dip, gaze lingering on her fingers curled around her mug, and then rise again. “Do you really believe that?”

Bruce rolls his lips together. “Would you believe me if I said I did?”

“No.”

“Okay then.” His coffee’s nearly cold on his tongue, but he sips and swallows anyway, long gulps that break up the silence. He’s acutely aware of Natasha watching him the whole time, but he can’t find the words for what he’s feeling. Not for the knot in his stomach, and not for the quietly sad way Miles’d stared at the front of his school in Union County that morning.

He sets down his mug and forces a smile. “Thank you for the coffee,” he says, but it sounds empty even to his own ears.

“You’re welcome,” she answers, but her tone matches his. Even as he moves his bag to the floor and settles into his desk chair, she stands there. The full press of her attention is trained on his every movement—the motion of his wrist as he wiggles his mouse to wake up his computer, the twitch of his fingers as he reaches for a pen, the clumsy clacking of his fingers against the keys as he types in his password—and he feels a little like a sample under a microscope.

But then, in a flutter of red hair and black suit, she nods to herself, opens the door, and strides out. The office noises race back in, a flood of sound Bruce’d hardly missed, and he stares after her.

Nothing in your own life, he reasons, is ever as simple as it seems to people outside it.

At least, that’s what he tells himself for the rest of the day.

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“Y’know, I thought about sushi, but here’s the thing: he’s twelve. Twelve’s not really ‘raw fish’ territory. Twelve’s ‘greasy Brooklyn-style pizza driven in from Clarion County’ territory.” Tony lifts the enormous pizza box off the hood of his Audi and shakes it back and forth. “Good thing I deliver.”

Fall is, in many ways, Bruce’s least favorite season, one where the days grow progressively darker and colder and all the colors of summer fade to beige and brown. He’d stared out the car windshield on the drive up to Miles’s school and tracked the creeping progress of winter on the landscape: bare-fingered trees stretched into a grey sky, fields laid dormant in various shades of muddy brown, crunchy brown leaves drifted across the interstate. The wind’d shaken his Prius and snuck in under the collar of his coat when he climbed out of the car in the middle school parking lot, and he’d felt trampled, somehow, by the autumn weather.

It hadn’t helped, of course, that he’d spent his entire day buried in hearing preparation, combing through reports and case notes until the words all bled together. He’d attended a handful of review meetings for kids in the local truancy program, covered a juvenile probation revocation so Thor could tag along to Jane’s latest doctor’s appointment, and fielded three calls from three different counties regarding best practices in child welfare cases.
He’d skipped lunch and barely found time for a second cup of coffee, only to climb into the car at four-thirty to pick up Miles from his after school program.

Miles’d spared him one half-hearted smile as he stepped off the curb in front of the school, shrugging his way through the usual questions about his day. The only hint of a real grin came when Bruce tugged a twenty-ounce bottle of Cherry Coke out of his bag and handed it over. “We’ll stick to water or milk with dinner,” he’d said as Miles cracked the seal and chugged down three big swallows, “but I figured this wouldn’t hurt. Today.”

“Thanks,” he’d replied breathlessly. In that second, Bruce’d thought he saw a glimmer of the real Miles Morales, the kid trapped under all the baggage from the last few days.

Then Bruce’d started the car only to discover that NPR was running a special story on drunk driving deaths, Miles’s face crumpled, and the rest of the drive was spent in silence.

In retrospect, he should’ve expected to see the silver Audi—Tony’s winter car, because normal people absolutely kept multiple, expensive vehicles for their personal use—sitting in his driveway, engine running and bass boosted up loud enough that Bruce felt it in the back of his teeth. And, also in retrospect, he should’ve expected the way Miles sat up in his seat abruptly and stared at the flashy car with the ATTYSTRK license plate.

But hindsight, as they say, is twenty-twenty.

“C’mon,” Tony goads as Bruce rolls his eyes and reaches into the back of the car. His grin is thousand-watt bright, twice as warm, and absolutely impossible to ignore. It pools in Bruce’s stomach not unlike hot wax. “We were supposed to do sushi and a movie. Instead, we’re doing pizza and zombies. You should be thanking me.”

Bruce nearly smacks his head on the lip of the door. When he extracts himself, his bag and Miles’s backpack in tow, that Tony Stark grin is still blinding-bright. Over the roof of the car, he can see the boy staring. It’s a good stare, Bruce realizes, curious more than anything else.

“How’d you even know what we were watching?” he asks, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“How come your password to everything is still ‘password’?” Tony retorts, and that’s when Bruce catches the tiny ghost of a smile that’s starting to press at the corners of Miles’s mouth. He rolls his own lips together in an attempt to ignore the tug in his belly, but it’s a failure. The unexpected warmth in Miles’s expression and eyes, it overtakes him. At least, until Tony distracts them both by shaking the box a second time. “If this gets cold after I drove it all the way up here, special for this occasion,” he threatens, “you’re paying for it.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “I’m sure I’ll pay for it later somehow.”

“You know, I have a comeback, but some viewer discretion is advised and I have my hands full.”

“What a shame,” Bruce returns evenly. Tony scoffs and attempts to flip him off by curling his fingers against the pizza box—meaning he almost drops the whole thing in the middle of the driveway—while Miles—

Either Bruce is hallucinating from hunger, or the cloud of breath that rushes out from between Miles’s pursed lips is a swallowed laugh.

He thinks momentarily that he’d like to hear what Miles’s laugh sounds like before the weekend’s up.
They trip-stumble into the house together, Tony rambling about the herculean effort exerted in order to procure an actual Brooklyn-style pizza with decent pepperoni and sausage (all the emphasis, predictably, his own) as he kicks out of his shoes and sheds his coat. Miles watches, wide-eyed in something that’s one part reverence and three parts amused surprise. Tony sweeps through the house as he always does, a human whirlwind of toed-off socks (don’t ask) and abandoned personal effects (keys, wallet, cell phone, iPod), and the only real option is to follow.

Bruce stops listening to the content of Tony’s story-telling and lets himself fall into rhythm with the cadence of it as they move through the kitchen. He brings down the plates while Tony scares up packets of parmesan cheese and crushed red pepper; he gathers napkins and silverware while Tony provides beer and water from the fridge. Fleetingly, Bruce thinks how funny it is they can do this—slide past one another, steer each other away from the relevant cabinets with little more than a touch, snort at the careless way Tony lobs the bottle of water over at Miles—without any second thought. Because then, Tony opens the pizza box, Miles’s face lights up like it’s Christmas morning, and Bruce is forced to discourage him from taking three enormous slices to start.

But it’s a half-second’s musing, a hummingbird’s heartbeat that flutters once and disappears. Because then, Tony opens the pizza box, Miles’s face lights up like it’s Christmas morning, and Bruce is forced to discourage him from taking three enormous slices to start.

They wander into the living room and fire up Netflix, the red start-up screen the only light in the room until Bruce bothers to flick on a handful of lamps. Tony busies himself making truly inappropriate noises about the heat of the melted cheese and the fresh tomatoes in the sauce, and Miles grins through every mouthful. Even when the campsite on the show is attacked by a marauding horde of “walkers,” he keeps smiling at strange moments and casting his dark eyes over at Tony.

“I might’ve been wrong about the welcome wagon,” Bruce admits when Miles darts out of the room to help himself to another slice of ridiculous pizza.

Tony elbows him in the softest part of his side, the almost-ticklish spot that always makes him jump and wriggle like a child. Their shoulders knock together, and try as he might, he can’t hide his own tiny grin.

“Might?” Tony challenges.

“Might,” he repeats, and steals a chunk of sausage off Tony’s pizza just as Miles reappears.

They work through the episode with minimal interruptions, save Tony’s bathroom break (“Unpause it and I’ll cut you!” he threatens as he darts up the stairs, and Bruce laughs a little too warmly at the tell-tale crash of Tony tripping on the hallway rug the way he always does) and the text from Jessica that rumbles onto Bruce’s phone while the survivors are arguing about zombie apocalypse ethics.

i need to come over tomorrow and discuss the case, plus our uncle-finding efforts, the message reads. fiveish okay?

Bruce stares at it until he entirely loses track of the dialogue playing out on the television. We’ll be here, he types, sort of half-aware that Tony’s staring over his shoulder. He checks every word before he sends the reply, but the very second he does, a wide thumb presses between his on the keypad and starts mashing the tiny buttons.

He suspects the jumble of letters—tronbyt ssayuws hkii—is Tony’s purposefully-clumsy attempt to say hello. He plans to clarify with a follow-up text, honestly, but then Tony leans even closer to snatch the phone away, and his jaw nudges against Bruce’s. It’s rough from his goatee and the day’s stubble, and Bruce—
Well. Breathing is harder for a few seconds, to say the very least.

Tony turns off his BlackBerry and tosses it onto an empty chair, but he never really slips away. They finish the episode without either of them budging, Tony’s head practically on Bruce’s shoulder, arm thrown around him and breath dangerously close to Bruce’s neck. More than once, he thinks Miles is watching, his dark eyes flicking between the screen to where Tony’s tapping strange little Morse-code patterns on Bruce’s arm, but he never breaks the silence—or the gun-blast fight scene—to ask.

Which is for the best, really, because Bruce isn’t sure how to explain this strange thing to anyone, let alone a twelve-year-old boy. Most days, he’s not even sure how to explain it to himself. But Tony’s weight is warm and familiar, and his chest warms with something like comfort the longer they lean together. As explanations go, that should be enough.

It’s not, and Bruce knows it. It just should be.

Tony only untangles his body from around Bruce’s once the episode credits start to roll, and Bruce watches him wander into the kitchen. He’s barefoot, the ends of his suit pants just long enough to drag, all open-collared and half-disheveled. He’s not assistant district attorney Anthony Stark tonight, just Tony.

Tony, who returns with his third (fourth?) slice of pizza and two fresh beers. He hands one to Bruce and drops onto the couch hard enough that it bangs against the wall. Miles flashes them both another of his two-second grins, but Bruce rolls his eyes.

“So, tomorrow morning, here’s what I figure,” Tony starts to say, sucking pizza sauce off his thumb and index fingers. Bruce tries not to watch too closely. “I’ll swing by here, we all pile into your boring, fuel-efficient car—if you can even call it a car—then head out to the YMCA.”


“Right. For Dot’s recital.” When his frown deepens, Tony drops the slice onto his plate and dramatically—trust Bruce on this, it is incredibly dramatic—throws up his hands. “Please tell me you didn’t forget Dot’s recital. Eighteen four- and five-year-olds in leotards bouncing around and trying to remember what step comes after—”

“Tony.” He tries to keep his voice even, unaffected by the twist in his belly when he realizes how closely Miles is watching—and how curious and eager his face is. He pulls in a breath. “We can’t go to the recital tomorrow. You saw the text. Jessica’s coming by at five to talk about the case.”

“Bruce. Brucie. Big guy.” Tony’s hand lands heavily on Bruce’s shoulder. It settles there, warm and wide, another item on the list of things Bruce attempts not to concentrate on. “The recital’s at ten. I swing by at nine, we head out, watch her dance around, then grab lunch ‘till, what, three? You’ll be back here in time to hide your Twilight boxed set and everything.”

Bruce snorts. “You mean the Twilight box set you bought and left—”

“Uh.” The one syllable from Miles shatters the conversation like a wrecking ball through glass, and Bruce forgets the rest of his comeback. The boy’s halfway through his third (and last, Bruce mentally declares) slice, globs of sauce and cheese littering his plate. When he sets the whole thing down, he wipes his face on the sleeve of his hoodie. Bruce wordlessly offers him a napkin; he stares at it for a few suspiciously-long seconds before actually taking the thing.

After he’s wiped his face again and balled up the napkin, he asks, “Who’s Dot?”

Bruce opens his mouth to reply, but predictably, Tony beats him to it. “Dorothea Evelyn Rogers
Barnes,” he explains, and leans back on the couch to tap one of the photographs with his beer bottle. It’s a picture from last Halloween, almost a year ago. Dot’d desperately wanted to be a witch—specifically the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, but Steve’d refused to cover his daughter in green face paint—and Uncle Tony’d accompanied her as a flying monkey, complete with ridiculous vest and papier-mâché wings. Bruce’d spent the first week after Halloween picking bits of those wings off his countertops, table, and floor.

In the picture, Dot’s sitting on monkey-Tony’s shoulders, grinning like a lunatic. Her lips and mouth are blue from the one sucker she’d been allowed on their way around Steve and Bucky’s apartment complex, and tufts of blonde hair peek out from under her witch’s hat.

It is, in a word, adorable.

Tony swigs from his beer before he continues, “She’s our niece. Four. Almost four-and-a-half, if you listen to her and not her dads, who kinda don’t want to admit she’s growing up.”

“She’s not *our* niece,” Bruce corrects with the usual eye-roll and shake of his head. He’s said the same thing a hundred times now at supermarkets, birthday parties, frozen yogurt shops, and just about everywhere else they’ve taken her together. “She’s our friends’ daughter,” he explains to a still-staring Miles. “Tony’s her godfather, I’m just a friend.”

“I’m her godfather, she calls Bruce ‘uncle,’ she’s therefore both of ours.” Even though he’s speaking to Miles, Tony’s watching Bruce with lingering, considerate eyes. Bruce worries his lips together and, when Tony still won’t look away, takes a pull from his beer. It’s only then that Tony continues, “She does modified baby ballet or something. I don’t know what it is, but it’s pretty awesome.”

“It’s cute,” Bruce confirms. “She’s *really* into it.”

Miles nods slightly, but his gaze lingers like Tony’s, drifting between the two of them while he stays absolutely silent. When he looks away, it’s to pick at a crumbling bit of crust on his plate. “It might be kind of cool,” he says quietly. Bruce watches his dark eyelashes flutter as he steals a glance across the couch. “To do the recital and the lunch before Miss Jones comes.”

A radiant grin—and really, there’s no other word for it, it’s that absolutely *bright*—springs onto Tony’s face. He snaps and then points both index fingers at Miles. It’s ridiculously cheesy, but Bruce can’t contain his own smile. “See?” he demands, elbowing Bruce in the side. “Doughnuts, recital, lunch, home in time for Jess.”

“Doughnuts?” Bruce returns. “When did doughnuts become part of this?”

“Since the kid was on my side, that’s when.” And when Tony leans across Bruce’s lap to offer Miles a high-five, Miles beams and accepts.

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It’s past eleven when Bruce stands in the doorway to the guest room and watches Miles climb into last night’s rumpled sheets, but he will swear to god and Jessica Jones that it is absolutely *not* his fault. He’d tried to corral the kid up to bed after the parade of horrible events that *The Walking Dead* called episode five, but Miles’d flashed him the world’s most hopeful grin.

“One more?” he’d asked after Bruce’d shaken his watch out from under his shirt cuff and frowned at the time.
“C’mon, big guy,” Tony’d goaded. He’d met Bruce’s stern eyebrow raise with the world’s most ridiculous pout, pushing out his already-full bottom lip in all its pink glory. Bruce’d forced himself to take a hefty pull from his beer rather than answering. No good could come of the retort put that thing away. “One more. Finish out the season. Answer the mysteries of the CDC or whatever.”

“You mocked Phil when he recommended the series,” Bruce’d pointed out.

“Yeah, because a forty-something super-lawyer suit shouldn’t spend his weekends reading post-apocalyptic zombie comics.”

“But they should play through Mario Galaxy twice?”

“Look, I know some people don’t appreciate hundred percent competition, but—”

“I’m turning on the episode now,” Miles’d announced, and it’d been hard not to smile at his overwrought preteen eye-roll. Bruce’s heart had warmed at that, the little glimmer of kid under the stress of the last day, and then’d nearly overflowed when Tony’d tipped back his head and laughed. Settling back onto the couch’d been easier after that, and if Bruce’d smiled at Tony’s constant shoulder-bumps or Miles’s nervous wriggles during the episode—

Well.

No one needed to know whether he’d smiled or not.

The guest room is nearly dark, lit only by the lamp next to the bed, and aside from the noise of Miles settling under the covers, it’s quiet. Bruce is dimly aware of the noises downstairs, the tell-tale bangs of closing cabinets and rushes of running water from the kitchen that all suggest that Tony is, for the first time in documented history, cleaning up after dinner. It’s a comfortable collection of sounds—Miles’s breath and the shifting of the mattress, a car rumbling by outside, bottles rattling as the fridge is closed—and Bruce—

Bruce’s lived alone since before he studied in India. Silence is a familiar friend.

But he likes this, too.

“You good?” he asks Miles as he surveys the room for what feels like the thousandth time. It’s a hodge-podge collection of furniture, most of it left over from his law school days, a reminder that the room’s really only a temporary home. There’s a bookshelf filled with battered novels, old school texts, and some kids’ books (just in case), a bin filled with random toys that’ve mostly been claimed by Dot (and usually are scattered all over the floor, if he’s honest), a perpetually-empty dresser, an almost-empty closet that mostly contains his old shoes and one truly nice suit (a Tony Stark purchase, unsurprisingly), and then, Miles. Miles, his duffel bag, and the laundry basket Bruce’d set up for his dirty clothes.

Miles rolls over enough to glance at him and then, slowly, nods. He’s quiet for a few seconds, but then, Bruce is, too. They watch each other, separated by ten feet of floor and just as much silence.

At least, until Tony breaks into a rousing rendition of Journey’s “Any Way You Want It” down in the kitchen, and they both break into grins.

“I’ll make sure he shuts up,” Bruce assures him, shaking his head a little.

Miles lets out a tiny snorted sound that Bruce suspects is another of his swallowed laughs. “He doesn’t have to,” he offers.
“If I don’t stop him, he’ll move on to ‘Don’t Stop Believing,’ and then, you’ll be sorry.”

He’s not sure whether he imagines the chuckle from Miles or not—Tony’s drumming *something* against the counter to the beat of his singing, Bruce is laughing to himself, and, after he flicks the wall switch, the room is plunged into enough darkness that he can’t see Miles’s face—but the sound is warm and new. It fills his chest in a way that feels distinctly like drowning, and he’s left trying to breathe around it. When he says, “Good night,” it’s more strangled than he’d like.

The strangled feeling only intensifies when Miles says, “Hey, Bruce? I really like your boyfriend.”

And it overwhelms him when his knee-jerk response is to quietly reply, “Yeah, me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Recently, I created a map of counties in the Motion Practice universe, as well as waxed thoughtful on the actual setting of these stories. That information can be found [here](#).
Decision-Making

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce tries to stand his ground on a number of important issues. One of these involves acceptable dictionaries for Scrabble challenges. Another involves where Miles will go when he leaves Bruce’s—because he will leave Bruce’s, certainly.

Chapter Notes

Every state’s child welfare agencies work differently. Generally speaking, however, each individual agency—be it a state-wide agency, a county-wide agency, or an agency that operates within a certain district—as well as the state requires that certain parameters be met when placing a child in foster care. This may include the requirement that a child be placed in a foster home that is licensed solely with the governing agency, that the child be placed within that county or district, or that the child be not be placed in certain other facilities (such as group homes, shelters, et cetera) due to age or other considerations. Oftentimes, failing to follow these parameters can come at an added cost to either the agency, the state, or both.

Many thanks to Jen, beta-reader extraordinaire, and saranoh, who helps check my words for other kinds of nonsense.

Bruce stands in the hallway for a few minutes after he’s closed the guest room door, listening to the beat of silence that sweeps in to surround him like a whirlwind. He’s used to the familiar quiet in his home, broken only by the rumbling of cars down the street, and for a moment, that’s all there is. But then Tony starts moving through the kitchen again, whistling an AC/DC song that Bruce hardly recognizes and filling the house with a heartbeat all its own. He trails slowly downstairs, listening to every settling creak of the steps and scratch of tree branches against the siding, and finds Tony washing the dinner dishes. The sink’s half-filled with suds that cling to Tony’s arms as he whistles his way through the work, and Bruce can’t help his smile even as he shakes his head. It surprises him, in a way, how easily he falls into the spot beside Tony and, dish towel in hand, dries and stacks the plates, glasses, and silverware. Their hips bump, then their elbows, and when Tony switches to a song Bruce knows, he hums along.

Tony isn’t his boyfriend, he reminds himself quietly. In fact, Tony belongs to no one.

And whatever Miles’d noticed as they watched Netflix together—or whatever Natasha and Clint keep noticing—is, at best, imagination.
After the dishes are finished, Tony grabs the kettle to start a pot of tea, and they tumble through their usual kitchen dance together. Tony’s hand presses between Bruce’s shoulder blades as he steps around him to set the kettle on the stove, their fingers brush when they simultaneously reach for the teabags, and Tony bumps their hips together with a grin as he reaches for the mugs.

Tony isn’t his boyfriend, Bruce knows, but he can’t stop a single, traitorous thought from circling back into his mind, a buzzard looming over the rotting corpse of his normality: this is what his life could be with Tony.

Or maybe it’s what his life should be.

They migrate into the living room, mugs in hand and arms occasionally jostling. Except here at Bruce’s, there’re no video game systems hooked up to the television, and the Netflix queue’s cluttered with random documentaries on global warming (which Tony mocks) and equally-random horrible movies (which are Tony’s additions). Tony hunts for the pack of cards he’d brought over six months ago but can’t find them—“Given that they involved bikini models, I might’ve thrown them out,” Bruce admits—and declares that he’ll find them another game to play.

He disappears into the foyer, leaving Bruce to laugh into his tea at all the rustling and swearing echoing against the tile. When he returns, there’s dust in his goatee, his hair’s a mess, and he’s holding up—

“Really?” Bruce asks as Tony unfolds the ancient Scrabble board on his coffee table.

“It’s this,” he retorts, handing over a letter tray, “or Trivial Pursuit.”

Bruce shakes his head. “No,” he says simply, and bites down on the warm smile that’s desperate to accompany Tony’s laugh.

Except Scrabble with Tony is not unlike gin with Tony (“Aces aren’t wild”), Uno with Tony (“You can’t hoard cards if you’re able to play”), and Monopoly with Tony (“Did you just palm an extra hundred from the bank?”). Words like sexism, asscan, and eggscuse appear on the board, and each time, Tony only collects the letters after an argument—and after consulting at least three different online dictionaries. The frustration is playful, yes, but also still frustrating, because god alone knows how much time they waste wrestling over Tony’s phone and bickering about which online dictionaries are “legitimate” (“Not wiktionary!” Tony shouts, and nearly pulls Bruce onto the coffee table in an attempt to snatch his phone back).

But Bruce can’t help thinking that these things are worth how much they smile together the rest of the time—and how hard he laughs when Tony finally completes is “life-long goal” of playing penis on a triple-word score.

“Y’know,” Tony comments halfway through their third round, pressing a tile to the corner of his mouth, “the kid likes you. Not that it’s a surprise, really, but just FYI.” His eyes dart up from his letter tray. They’re wide and dark enough that Bruce feels a little like he’ll drown.

Bruce rolls his lips together and drops his eyes to the board. His letters are promising—an R, two Es, and an L, to name a few—but he’s suddenly incapable of arranging them into words. There’s a twist in his belly he can’t explain, and it’s not chased away with a sip of tea, either. “Thanks.”

“Just saying,” Tony replies with shrug. His attention darts back to his letters, and he plays eagle on a dangling L. Bruce watches every inch of his body except his face: his fingers around the pencil as he tallies up the score, his knuckles as they disappear into the opaque letter bag, the shift of his weight on the sofa. “I mean, I get what you’re saying about him being quiet and everything,” he continues
after a few seconds, “but for what it’s worth, he seems—okay, here.”

Bruce nods half-dumbly and rearranges the letters on his tray. “Thanks,” he says again, and pretends that his voice doesn’t catch.

The conversation lapses into long moments of silence then, the letters swimming in his vision while he attempts to string them into a word. He imagines he can feel Tony’s attention burning into his scalp, tracking the way he worries his lips together or picks at the edge of a tile with his thumbnail. He feels his cheeks start to warm, and wonders whether he’s turning slowly pink under the force of Tony’s stare.

He plays the first letters of lager off Tony’s A around the same time Tony says, “You could keep him around past the weekend, if you wanted.”

Bruce’s thumb slips, impacts the E, and sends it skittering onto the floor. Tony twists to watch it skid along the hardwood until it impacts the leg of the coffee table—and then turns right back to Bruce. There’s hardly even a breath between those quick, half-graceful movements.

The spacious living room suddenly feels very small.

He wets his lips and, perhaps stupidly, plays the other E from his hand. “Temporary placement,” he reminds Tony. His throat sounds almost as dry as it feels.

“You’re always talking about how hard it is to place kids his age. And you said yourself they didn’t have anybody up in Union County who could take him, never mind the fact that his folks are dead and his uncle or whoever’s MIA.” Bruce nods weakly and reaches for the letter bag, but Tony catches his hands. His fingers are warm and broad, callused in unfamiliar places. Bruce wonders whether they can feel the way his pulse picks up at the unexpected touch, or whether Tony can hear the breath he pulls in as he jerks his head up. “You know whatever place they find by Monday isn’t gonna be an actual house with actual people. It’ll be a shelter, or a group home, some—crappy stopover before they can place him with a family.” His other hand flutters, the start of one of his expressive gestures that he aborts halfway. He drops his arm and wets his lips. Bruce stalwartly ignores the way his pulse won’t stop jumping. “You know how bad that is for a kid.”

Bruce nods and forces himself to swallow. “That’s maybe true, Tony—”

“Is true.”

“—but I . . . Even if I didn’t work ‘till after five, even if I thought I could—” He shakes his head. He swears he can feel the words jumbling around inside his skull, syllables clumping into disorganized nonsense he can’t control or order. He swallows again against the thickness in the back of his throat, but to no avail; his free hand, the one not caught in Tony’s too-warm grip, picks at the piping on the edge of the couch. “Union County wouldn’t want to spend the extra money to keep him out of the county. There’s mileage costs, services to shuffle back and forth, and once his uncle turns up—”

“And how many thousand times have you bitched at a social worker for those same kinds of excuses, huh?” Tony challenges. His grip on Bruce’s hand tightens almost angrily, and Bruce feels his lungs clenched along with Tony’s fingers. “I’ve seen you convince Smithe to order a kid to stay out-of-county when it’s better for him. You’ve said it, what, a million times: if it’s a great foster home that’s further away instead of a shitty shelter here, the extra cost’s worth it. Taking care of the kid is worth it.” His thumb strokes over Bruce’s wrist. It’s intentional, lingering, a sharp contrast to the force in his voice. “It’s worth it for Miles, too.”

“That’s not my call.”
“Probably not, but I bet you can make the argument to the folks up in Union County. Give Miles the kinda place he deserves, instead of some twenty-five person home where he’s lucky if the workers remember his name.” His face is almost stoic, a mask of something Bruce can’t name. Except every passing second makes it just a little harder to breathe.

“Unless,” Tony adds, shrugging, “you don’t want to.”

Bruce can’t move for a moment, pinned by Tony’s hand and, somehow, the ever-growing lump in his throat. When he lifts his eyes from Tony’s fingers—and he’s not entirely sure when, exactly, he focused in on Tony’s fingers—Tony’s watching him. The next few seconds tick by, simultaneously too quick and stretching on for a lifetime, but then the moment fades. Tony’s fingers track warmth across his wrist and palm, then release, and the movements that follow are tight and half-mechanical; he bends to collect the errant E, body almost too rigid, and Bruce—

Bruce can’t stop thinking about how cold his wrist feels without Tony’s fingers wrapped around it, or how full his brain feels with all of Tony’s words packed inside it.

It’s well into the wee hours of the morning when they finish up, the game back in the closet and the score sheet pinned to the refrigerator—“Three wins in a row just isn’t fair,” Tony’d groused, using the magnet from Bruce’s dentist to memorialize his three fairly dismal losses. Bruce rinses out their coffee mugs while Tony shoves on his shoes and socks, little noises in the hall and foyer he never realized he’d become accustomed to until now. He can track Tony’s progress through the jangle of keys and the slide of the closet door, and trails into the foyer only after he hears the deadbolt slide open.

Tony steps onto the stoop and Bruce, almost automatically, follows, until they’re both stuck in the autumn chill. The wind whips around them, catching the ends of Tony’s windbreaker and tossing Bruce’s hair. He feels gooseflesh rise along his arms, and shoves his hands almost guiltily into his pockets.

The space between them isn’t heavier, necessarily, but it feels somehow wider and darker. Their conversation loops back through Bruce’s mind like a broken record, snippets he can’t escape. He’s still sorting them out when his mouth, almost entirely without his permission, formulates words and tosses them into the air.

“You could stay.”

He blinks at the syllables, ones he’s only ever strung together on nights when they’d tripped back to his house and split a bottle of reasonably inexpensive wine. For a half-second, he thinks he catches surprise on Tony’s face; his eyebrows rise, his lips purse, and he’s absolutely, perfectly silent. The smile that follows doesn’t touch his eyes. “Dogs,” he points out, shrugging lightly. “Dogs, pissy cat, and I think I technically still have a houseplant.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “It’s bamboo.”

“See? Plant. I kill it, you’ll probably call the eco-police on me.” Bruce shakes his head, clamping down on the corners of his own smile, but he can feel Tony’s eyes on him. “Besides, last I checked, I’d emptied out your drawer of emergency back-up skivvies, and nobody wants me going commando to a dance recital. Actually, check with Hill, that might be felony.” He winks, cheesy and overblown, and Bruce snorts a laugh. “Next time.”

There’s a certain definiteness in those two words, a halo of absolute certainty that Bruce can’t really shake. He shivers when he inhales, as though the world’s suddenly turned a thousand degrees colder.
“He’ll be moved by Monday, Tony.”

“See, you keep saying that,” Tony retorts without ever blinking away, “but me, I think I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Bruce opens his mouth to respond, but the words never come. He’s left standing there in the cold, his hands in his pockets and the weight of that steady, dark-eyed stare rooting him to the stoop. At least, until Tony reaches out, squeezes his arm, and says, “Night, big guy.”

Because then, Bruce is at least able to trip through a quiet, “Goodnight, Tony.”

He drifts through the house once the silver Audi’s zipped out of his driveway and disappeared around the corner, flipping off lights and picking up what other debris he can find. The rooms are all quiet again, but the silence no longer feels familiar. It’s oppressive, instead, and weighs heavily on Bruce’s shoulders as he climbs the stairs up to his bedroom.

Miles is fast asleep when he peeks in on him, his limbs thrown across the bed like he’s a much younger child. Bruce is envious, in a way. He misses the days when he slept that soundly.

Especially since, even under his covers, he can’t quiet his mind.

Sleep, he discovers, is several hours away.

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“God, are you sure you two aren’t secretly married?” demands a very sweaty Clint Barton the next morning. “’Cause I swear to Christ, you’re secretly married.”

As far as Bruce is concerned, Day Break Doughnuts is absolutely the worst doughnut shop known to humankind. The tiny storefront is perpetually understaffed, always crowded, and home to the worst coffee in Suffolk County, if not the entire state. Pressed into the corner, away from the crowd, Bruce feels claustrophobic—and fairly certain that the nearby window sill hasn’t been dusted in his lifetime.

But Tony’s at the counter, debating the relative merits of cake versus yeast doughnuts with the exceptionally flirty teenage cashier, and Miles is two inches short of mashing his face to the display case.

And all while Clint wipes his face on the end of his t-shirt and flashes the entire shop an eyeful of his ridiculous abs.

Miles’d already been awake and dressed when Bruce’d stumbled out of bed after two angry slaps of the snooze alarm, tucked into the corner of the couch and watching—

“Is that Phineas and Ferb?” Bruce’d asked as he’d run his fingers through his hair.

Miles’d leveled him a glance that, at least momentarily, suggested Bruce might just be the biggest idiot in the known universe. “Tony said it was good.”

Bruce’d rubbed his face with his hand. “Of course he did,” he’d replied, and promptly decided he needed to drink an entire pot of coffee.
The bell on the door clatters against the glass, and Bruce blinks twice at the sight of a sweat-stained Phil Coulson slipping through the crowd. He, like Clint, is in a t-shirt, sweatpants, and sneakers, but unlike Clint, he looks—strange in them. Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, Bruce thinks, and bites down on the corners of a smile. He stalks single-mindedly over to the window, wiping his brow on the back of his arm and then leveling a glare at Clint. “Do you pace yourself just to beat me in the last quarter-mile?” he demands.

Clint’s grin is the very definition of smug. “Loser buys,” he replies. His tone suggests that this is a conversation they’ve worked through a dozen times, and Phil pauses in his panting to roll his eyes. “Or, we go double-or-nothing like last week, and—”

“I am not explaining to my neighbor why you are puking sprinkles into her rosebushes. Again.” Phil shakes his head, almost as though clearing away exercise-related cobwebs—and then catches sight of Bruce. He blinks exactly once—a momentary lapse in recognition, maybe, or simply a need to catch his breath—and then dries his temple on the shoulder of his t-shirt. “For the record,” he says, “this arrangement was not my idea.”

Clint laughs, hearty and loud; several people in the line twist around to investigate exactly who it’s coming from. “What he means,” he translates, rocking back on his heels, “is that this is one of our strategies to keep me from driving him crazy. Run me like a border collie, reward me with treats, ’cause otherwise, I might con him into sex.”

The comment’s promptly punctuated by Phil rolling his eyes. Bruce frowns as he asks, “And sex is—bad?”

“I was late to work three times last week,” Phil reports.

And that earns an eye-roll of Clint’s own. “You weren’t complaining at any of the times.”

“Do you want to see all the morning meetings I’ve rescheduled? I can pull out my calendar.”

“Hey, I’m never gonna complain about you whipping it—Uh.”

The syllable pierces the middle of their conversation like an arrowhead embedding in a straw target, and Bruce follows the line of Clint’s glance right over to Miles. The boy’s standing all of two feet away and staring at them, a grease-marked paper bag clutched in his fist. There may well be a thousand different things in the shop worth focusing on—conversations, scents, a very cute girl around Miles’s age who keeps side-eying him—but somehow, the whole of Miles’s attention is focused on Clint.

Bruce suspects his interest isn’t due to the man’s bare arms, either. No, the only people interested in those are a middle-aged woman who’s waiting in line—and Phil.

“You guys see the kid, right?” Clint asks after a few awkward seconds. He spares one darting glance toward Bruce before, once again, zeroing in on Miles. “’Cause it’s kinda staring. Why’s it staring?”

Bruce purses his lips together, his brain fumbling too-slowly for a sensible response, but he’s robbed of the chance. Because right then, Tony jostles his way through the crowd. He’s balancing two enormous paper take-away cups of coffee, one stacked on the other and held in place with his chin, toting a bag of his own and flashing his million-dollar grin at every impatient, glaring stranger. Bruce wonders momentarily how much money he’s just dropped on mediocre doughnuts.

“Extra cream and sugar so you forget how bad it tastes, just the way you like it,” he announces,
nudging Miles’s shoulder as he steps into the group. Miles promptly grins and nudges back. “The kid tried to con me into powdered sugar, which I think was a trick, but then he spotted one of those chocolate filled you like, and—”

He freezes then, his chin raised so Bruce can take his coffee and his monologue effectively stalled, and Bruce watches as his attention drifts slowly between Clint and Phil. His expression of confusion lasts exactly a half-second before he tips his head in Phil’s direction.

“Didn’t know they let you out of your pod on the weekends, Coulson.”

“He’s trying to socialize me,” Phil replies. His tone is the one he saves for cut-throat plea negotiations, a sharp chill with just the smallest hint of humanity creeping underneath. Beside him, Clint makes a none-too-subtle gagging motion. “Something about flies and honey.”

“Well, you’d know about flies.”

“Could we pretend to hate each other in a different venue, please?” Bruce suggests. He reaches for his coffee, but Tony twists away. “Tony.”

“Nope. You’re being a traitor. Traitors don’t get coffee.” When Bruce reaches forward a second time, Tony darts away in a series of quick bounces. He ducks behind Miles and firmly presses his chin back onto the plastic lid. “Miles can have it.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “We’re not loading him up with sugar and coffee.”

And that’s precisely when Clint asks, “Who the hell is Miles?”

Actually, it’s precisely when a number of things happen in rapid succession, but the sequence is spear-headed by Clint’s question. It’s followed by Miles raising a hand and saying, “I am,” Tony declaring for the entire shop to hear that Bruce is, and he quotes, a “traitorous traitor who’s gone over to the Coulson side,” Clint demanding to know why “the kid” (Miles) is with the two of them, and Phil asking whether he can drink Bruce’s coffee.

In other words, it all spirals a bit out of control, building into a head-swimming cacophony of noise that’s magnified by exactly how many people in the line are watching their comedy of errors. It’s only a few at first, but the longer the conversation bounces around them, the larger the number grows.

And it culminates, predictably, in a blanket assertion from Tony:

“Miles is Bruce’s foster kid.”

Clint’s half-formulated sentence curls in on itself, transforming into a strangled sound that in no way resembles human speech. Phil, to his credit, presses his lips together in absolute silence, but Bruce can see the confusion crawling into every one of the lines on his face. Miles glances at the floor, his shoulders half-slumped under his too-loose hooded sweatshirt, and Tony—

Maybe Tony deserves the benefit of the doubt more often than Bruce grants it. Because when the hush sweeps over them, he lifts his chin and, wordlessly, hands over the coffee.

“It’s—temporary,” Bruce offers when the silence’s stretched out further than he’d otherwise like, and he watches the way Miles’s shoulders loosen even further. He remembers that feeling, the urge to dislocate all his joints and sink into the grout between tiles. Truthfully, he’s never really outgrown it. He picks at the seam that runs along the paper cup. “Just for a few days.”
“You’re a foster parent,” Clint murmurs. The words slip out molasses slow, sliding and then settling between them. Bruce nods slightly, unsure whether he trusts himself to look up or speak.

Luckily, he’s not required to. “He’s done it for a while,” Tony says. It’s full-voiced, no surprised murmur or lingering quiet, and Bruce detects a hint of—Well, of confidence. Not the variety he saves for himself, bombastic and overwhelming, but one a softer, more contained version.

He’s always surprised, somehow, at how much faith Tony reserves exclusively for him. When his chin does lift, however reluctantly, it’s to look at Tony.

“Temporary placements,” Tony continues, his eyes catching and then holding Bruce’s own, “from Union County. Always boys, always under ten—well, except Miles here—always awesome.” He raises his eyebrows. “I miss anything?”

“No,” Bruce answers quietly.

“No,” he says, nodding to himself, shifting his coffee cup into the same hand as the bag—and then presses the other to Miles’s shoulder. “Anyway, I’ve got a goddaughter with a dance recital, Miles’s got three cake doughnuts with sprinkles desperately waiting to be eaten, and you have to—” He waves the bag idly. “—go sweat on something, or whatever you’re doing. I’m going to have nightmares about this, Coulson, I promise.”

“My life’s mission, complete,” Phil deadpans, but even after Tony snatches the keys out of his jacket pocket and leads them all out of the shop, Bruce can feel the lingering of heat of his eyes.

They’re two or three blocks away before Tony remarks, “We have got to invest in less-nosy friends.” Bruce’s only retort is to roll his eyes and offer Tony one of the six (six) doughnuts in their grease-stained paper bag.

(They’re eight or nine blocks away before Bruce’s BlackBerry chimes in his pocket.

Clint Barton: i wouldve done just about anything to have a foster parent like you)

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“If he lives with Uncle Bruce and Uncle Tony,” Dot asks, resting a chicken strip against her cheek, “does that make him my fairy godbrother?”

Were Bruce a medical doctor or a religious man, he just might consider recommending the healing properties of cake doughnuts and under-five dance recitals based on their morning alone. Whatever silence’d slumped Miles’s shoulders at the doughnut shop’d been chased away by two doughnuts (and one optimistic bite of the third that’d turned him a little green) and six troupes of dancing pre-kindergarteners. Dot’d graced the first group, decked out in a purple leotard and flowing purple dance-skirt-thing, gliding across the stage with only the minimum number of mess-ups and pouts. Groups two through six were less successful, and Bruce’d watched as Miles grinned and snickered at tripping toddlers and one very frustrated college-aged dance teacher who’d muttered audibly about not appreciating the art.

The lurking ghosts of that morning’d faded so far away by the end of the show that Bruce didn’t regret agreeing to a lunch at Applebee’s.
He’d nearly changed his mind, however, when he’d realized how busy and loud the restaurant was during the Saturday lunch rush.

And he definitely regrets it after Dot’s question.

They’re seated at a table in almost the exact epicenter of the restaurant, a place where their chairs are continually jostled by rushing servers or just-arrived patrons on their way to be seated. The table top’s littered with glasses from sodas, the remnants of their appetizer sampler platter (including the spinach dip that Bruce and only Bruce touched), and their oversized lunch plates. Everyone’s mostly-finished except for Dot, who spent the first twenty-five minutes in the restaurant recapping the dance recital (complete with in-chair demonstrations) and the second twenty-five chattering about preschool, friends, and the latest episode of My Little Pony. Her energy is sweet, but exhausting. Bruce wishes he’d ordered a coffee, because he can feel the doughnut shop sludge wearing off.

Except now, in minute fifty-one, all of Dot’s irrepressible energy is focused on Miles, who’s sitting across the table and working his way through an enormous bacon cheeseburger.

Bruce, meanwhile, nearly chokes on his taco salad.

“He’s not staying with Uncle Tony,” Steve clarifies, smiling gently. On the whole, Steve is a gentle person—soft-spoken, considerate, mildly naïve—but his natural instinct toward kindness is ratcheted up to eleven, today. It’s almost as though shaking hands with a bashful, icing-stained Miles switched on a secondary paternal instinct that even Steve didn’t realize he had. “He’s only staying with Bruce.”

“And not forever,” Bucky adds as he sets down his soda. “Like when— Uh. Well, when we . . . Huh.” He frowns. “We don’t really have house guests stay with us, do we?”


“You mean the one where we hosted a party because your house had to be fumigated for fleas?” Steve returns.

“Right. Phenomenally delicious food and drink catered by yours truly, itty bitty party space.” Across the table, Bucky nearly snorts mashed potatoes. “I think I caught Sitwell, Hill, and Rhodey having a conversation in the bathroom.”

“An aspirational goal of Jasper’s,” Bucky mutters, and Bruce can’t sip his iced tea for laughing.

“Daddy.” And, not for the first time in her life, Dot sounds utterly exasperated with her parents. It’s a tone Bruce’s watched develop in the last few months as her tolerance for adult conversation’s evolved from riveted reverence to abject boredom. She drops the chicken strip into her basket and leans forward, her elbows on the table.

Steve smiles indulgently. “Dot?”

“If Miles isn’t my fairy anything, then what is he?”

Across from Dot, Miles stops chewing, and Bruce’s eyes drift slowly around the table. Steve and Bucky are carrying on a conversation told entirely through raised eyebrows, pursed lips, and a minute head-shake from Steve. Bruce suspects they’re trying to formulate some response to the impossible question laid out before them, but there’s no answer in the world to placate a curious,
demanding four-year-old.

Next to him, Tony settles into his chair, reaching to rest his elbow on the back of Bruce’s. In his own way, he’s as curious as Dot.

Bruce swallows, a futile attempt to fill in the growing blank between the six of them, but it’s Miles who reacts first. He places his burger on his plate, finishes chewing, and then meets Dot’s big blue eyes.

“I think I’m just kind of your friend,” he offers.

The words are tentative, almost too-careful, and they capture the whole of Dot’s attention. She brushes loose blonde wisps of hair out of her eyes, but never actually breaks eye contact. “But not my fairy-anything.”

Miles shakes his head. “No.”

“And you’re gonna go home soon?”

The change in Miles’s expression then reminds Bruce of a conference he once attended in Nebraska during an especially-stormy summer. He’d watched a thunderstorm roll into town from his hotel window one night and observed the way it gradually blotted out the sun and left only gray and gloom. It’s gloom that creeps across Miles’s face, half-lost and helpless.

He drops his eyes to his plate. “I think so.”

“With your mom and dad?”

The innocence of the question is ruined somewhat when Steve sighs and murmurs, “Dottie, let Miles eat.” He nudges her basket of chicken strips toward the edge of the table, but Dot glowers at him and shoves it right back. Even a quirked eyebrow is powerless to stop the full force of Dot’s curiosity.

Across the table, Miles stares down at the last quarter of his burger. Bruce tracks every second of uncertainty in his little tics and tells: the way he picks at the corner of his napkin, the way he presses his lips together.

But seconds before Steve speaks up to admonish Dot, Miles says, “No, it’s okay,” in a caught little half-whisper. He doesn’t lift his head. “My mom and dad are—gone. They have been for a while.”

In the time it takes a normal person to blink, Dot’s entire face crumples. “Oh no.”

“He lives with his uncle,” Bruce explains. It’s that or watching Dot’s lip tremble. Beside him, Miles nods, but says absolutely quiet.

Their table falls silent, leaving the restaurant to fill the heaviness between the six of them. There’s laughter at the bar, a howling baby at a nearby booth, and somewhere, a plate shatters against tile. The sounds of life, Bruce thinks, of worlds beyond their little circle. He wonders what other people must think of them, this strange family-looking clump of mismatched men and children who currently can’t look at one another—or really breathe.

At least, until Dot offers, “My family’s different, too.”

She says it with a shrug, almost, a casual declaration from a girl who’s simultaneously four and fourteen—and sometimes, simultaneously a Rogers, a Barnes, and a Stark—but it brings Miles’s head jerking up. His face is a snapshot of surprise more than anything else, and he gapes at Dot
while she returns to her chicken strips. “Some kids have a mom and dad, some kids have no mom and dad, some kids have two dads or two moms or both. Different families aren’t bad families.”

“Hell, different families aren’t even different,” Tony interjects. His arm presses against the back of Bruce’s shoulder as he leans across the table, palm raised above all of their heads. “Up high, kiddo.”

Dot twists, reaches, stretches, and half-jumps in her chair before she’s finally able to touch his hand, laughing the whole while. Tony feigns a dodge, and her tiny fingers wrap around his for a few seconds, squeezing before she releases him. Steve holds onto his laugh, but not his grin, Bucky rolls his eyes, and when Tony settles, his arm is inexplicably all the way around Bruce’s shoulders.

Bruce shakes his head.

But next to him, Miles is smiling, all the storm clouds of the last few minutes miraculously chased away.

Bruce suddenly regrets nothing.

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“Look,” Jessica Jones says, holding up her hands, “all I’m saying is, it’s not good.”

Bruce’s quiet townhome feels more like the primate house at the zoo by five that afternoon, but that’s not Jessica’s fault in the least. No, he and Jessica are at the kitchen island, each of them armed with steaming mugs of coffee while Tony, Miles, and Dot play history’s loudest game of hide-and-seek. Upstairs, something thumps heavily on the floor and Dot shrieks with laughter; before Bruce can draw in enough breath to holler at Tony for whatever destruction he’s raining down on the place, Miles thunders down the stairs and disappears into the foyer.

Jessica raises an eyebrow.

“Don’t,” Bruce replies, and sips his coffee.

In Tony’s defense, the after-lunch plan’d remained consistent all morning and early afternoon: they’d finish their meal, part ways with Steve, Bucky, and Dot, and return home in sufficient time to meet with Jessica. Except as their lunch entrees into ridiculous chocolate-smothered desserts, two things became remarkably clear: one, that Dot didn’t want to be separated from Miles under any circumstance, and two, that Miles fell eerily silent every time Jessica’s name wandered into the conversation.

It didn’t surprise him when—while they stood in front of the hostess station and waited for Steve, Dot, and Miles to return from the bathroom together—Tony glanced over at Bruce and Bucky and asked, “Play date?”

No, what surprised Bruce then and now is the fact that he’d shrugged and said, “Sure.”

Dot thunders down the stairs next, hot-pink knit pants over her leotard and blonde hair sticking up in a thousand directions. She glances into the kitchen, panting. “I’m it,” she explains.

Jessica smiles. A few years ago, Bruce might’ve caught a hint of uncertainty behind it, the awkwardness of an adult who works with children but doesn’t always enjoy it. But Jessica’s a
mother now, and there’s something warm in the way she nods at Dot. “Go find him.”

“Kay,” Dot agrees, and disappears into the living room.

“Sorry,” Bruce apologizes for what feels like the thousandth time, his thumb toying with the handle of his mug. It’d taken the combined persuasive efforts of he and Tony to coax Miles into the kitchen long enough to say hello to Jessica, a two-minute stilted conversation in which everything about the last two days—Bruce’s house, school, meals, what they’d all done together—was “fine.” Jessica’d rolled her eyes as he scurried off, but Bruce could read something like apprehension flashing across her face. When she’d accepted his coffee, he’d known where the conversation was headed.

Bruce presses his lips together and pretends to ignore all the noise from Dot banging through the living room. “Any word from his uncle?”

Jessica sighs. “No, and that’s half the problem. I’ve been in contact with everybody I can think of, Bruce. Law enforcement, hospitals, the military, some crazy great-step-aunt of Miles’s who lives in Cleveland. And, terrify story about bedbugs from Aunt Crazy aside, there’s no sign of the guy.” When Bruce glances up, she’s shaking her head. He watches her long hair sway to a stop. “There’s literally no other family besides the aunt,” she continues, settling her hands around the mug, “and at this point? Even if the uncle materilazed today, Judge Rees would never release Miles to him. Not after he’s been in the wind this long.” She lifts the mug. “We have to place him.”

He nods. He watches the line of Jessica’s throat as she sips the hot coffee, then the way she worries her lips together after she’s swallowed. Dot reappears in the hallway and rushes back upstairs, oblivious to the fact that Miles is still hiding somewhere in the foyer. Probably the closet, Bruce reasons. Or, hopefully, some other dark corner where the conversation with Jessica is muffled into murmurs. “What options are you looking at?” he asks finally.

“We just opened up a new shelter six months ago,” she replies, shrugging slightly. “It’s twenty beds—ten boys, ten girls—with round-the-clock staff. It’s been doing pretty well.”

“But?”

“But.” She pulls her lower lip between her teeth. Bruce watches her chew on it, half-nervous. “Facility policy says that the shelter’s only for kids thirteen and up.”

“He’s twelve.”

“I know. The director’d be willing to give it a shot, but—” Jessica shakes her head and helps herself to another sip of coffee. He suspects it’s a stall, but he keeps his mouth shut. “If we can’t place him in the shelter, or if it doesn’t work out,” she says after a few more seconds, “we have some beds in a group home in Warren County that—”

“Warren County?” And for all Bruce’s long-practiced self-restraint, he’s momentarily tempted to throw his coffee cup at something. He clenches his hands around it until his arms tremble, but refuses to let go. “That’s— Jessica, that’s a six hour drive.” He hates, for a half-second, the way his voice trembles along with his wrists. “He’d have to switch schools, therapists, and when his uncle does show back up, he’d—”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Bruce,” Jessica interrupts, throwing up her hands. “I spent half my afternoon yesterday combing through all our licensed foster homes with the intake staff, and then? I had my supervisor do the same thing. There’s nothing local.” She drops her palms onto the countertop. “I don’t know if it’s the economy or what, but we’ve lost more homes than we’ve gained in the last couple years. Even people like you are quitting.”
Bruce snorts lightly. “Bachelor lawyers who live a county away?”

“Good, stable placements I can always count on.” He drops his eyes to the countertop and watches the way Jessica curls her fingers against the Formica. “You’re in this business,” she says quietly. “You know the statistics. Placing boys five and up is hard. Placing them when they hit puberty is harder.”

He pulls in a breath, but it feels sharp and tight. Uncomfortable, Bruce thinks, and not in a way he’d prepared for. “He’s just inching out of his shell now,” he replies. He’s forced to swallow around the thick feeling of coffee and uncertainty rising in the back of his throat. “He needs the routine to stay the same. School, friends, everything you can give him—”

“I know.” When he looks up, Jessica’s watching him evenly, her lips pursed into a soft, humorless frown. “But I can only give him what we have, Bruce, and that’s not much.”

Bruce suspects his exhale sounds more like a heaving sigh than anything else—if Jessica’s even able to hear the whole thing, which is doubtful. Because as he breathes, Miles comes flying out of the foyer and runs past them, a blur of dark skin and darker sweatshirt. His feet pound up the stairs, every step echoing through the house, and it’s hard to shout for him to slow down when Tony’s call of, “Hey, kid, watch it!” is barely audible over all the noise. One of the bedroom doors slams, Dot yells out Miles’s name, there’s a small collection of irregular pounding noises, and then—

Nothing.

A heavy silence slips down the stairs and settles into the kitchen. Bruce feels it pressing down on his shoulders; when he glances at Jessica, she nods her head in the direction of the stairwell without another word.

By the time he gets there, Tony’s already halfway down the steps, Dot resting on his hip and half-draped across him. She picks at the fabric of his shirt like a much younger child. Bruce thinks she might’ve been scolded in the last minute and a half, because she hides her face from him. “What’s going on?”

“I think maybe some little element of your secret social work language translated itself into teenage boy,” Tony answers. They’re nearly chest-to-chest when he steps off the bottom stair, and even though Dot’s hiding, Tony doesn’t hesitate to meet Bruce’s eyes. “Either that, or there’s a ghost hiding out in your hall closet.”

Bruce frowns. “What?”

“Miles was sad,” Dot explains. It’s more a murmur than anything else, half-muffled in Tony’s shoulder. “He told us to go away.”

“And what’d I tell you?” Tony asks, craning to look at her.

“That he’s just being cranky like Daddy and he’ll be better tomorrow.”

“Right.” Bruce presses his lips together and watches Tony swing her down onto the floor. He crouches then, whispering something into her ear that finally causes her to crack a smile. Bruce’s fairly sure the whisper involves some sort of toddler bribery, but her eyes do light up. Tony then fishes his iPhone from his pocket and hands it over, and she disappears into the living room.

“Did you just buy her off?” Bruce asks as they walk into the kitchen.

“Bribery? Me? Bruce, please. I uphold the law, I don’t break it.” He sweeps out his arms, dramatic
emphasis, and Jessica glances up from whatever message she’s reading on her own phone to roll her eyes. “All I told her was that I had some new games I’d downloaded and that I’d be more than happy to buy any she likes for her iPad.”

Jessica raises her eyebrows. “You bought your niece an iPad?”

Bruce snorts and shakes his head. “Over objections,” he clarifies. He reaches for his coffee cup, ready to take a sip, but Tony snatches it right out of his fingers. He only returns it after three greedy swallows and an unnecessary hip-bump.

“There’s an entire pot on the counter,” Bruce points out.

“And an entire mug you don’t mind sharing,” Tony retorts, and this time, it’s Bruce’s turn to roll his eyes. “And,” he adds, holding up a finger, “it was over strenuous objections. But I don’t mess around on childcare. Speaking of which, big guy, we haven’t finished the part of the conversation where you fill me in on whatever social work voodoo caused the kid to run up to the guest room and hide out.”

“Wait, what?” Jessica asks, putting down her phone. She glances between the two of them, and Bruce casts his eyes down at his coffee mug. It’s still warm enough to tolerate, but he suddenly wants to sink inside the dark liquid, not drink it. “Oh, no,” she says. “You need to go fix that. He wasn’t supposed to hear, and I am not—”

“C’mon, Jess, don’t you remember being twelve? Twelve-ish? Whatever?” When Bruce glances up, Tony’s hands are pressed to the countertop. He leans forward slightly, flexing his shoulders under his dark t-shirt, and then shrugs. “Like, I get not letting him cry himself to sleep up there and everything, but the best way to turn that little hissy fit nuclear is by poking the beehive with a stick.”

Bruce bites down on a laugh. “I think you’re mixing your metaphors,” he cautions, but he can’t hide the tiny smile that creeps across his lips.

“Metaphor, schmetaphor,” Tony returns, stealing the coffee cup a second time. “Point is, this isn’t like when you’ve got a six-year-old who goes all wibbly-lipped every time the cold reality of this foster care thing sets in. He’s twelve, he knows his uncle’s missing in action, and he’s gonna need more than thirty seconds to process whatever crazy plans you two hatched before he bares his soul.” He swigs the coffee, and then shrugs again. “And besides, Bruce’s pep-talks are only half-decent after you’ve sorted out the demons on your own, not before.”

He empties the mug in another greedy swallow, sets it on the counter, and squeezes Bruce’s shoulder before he wanders out into the living room. Bruce shakes his head as he hears the TV go on and, seconds later, the My Little Pony theme start to play. He’s considering when he’ll drive Dot home—and it’ll have to be him because Tony doesn’t own a sensible car—when he feels Jessica watching him.

“What?” he asks, frowning.

“You and Stark.” She jerks her head in the direction of the living room. “I never thought I’d say this about him and anyone, but you two are pretty good together.”

He sighs. “We’re not together,” he says for what feels like the hundredth time in the last three or four days. “He’s my friend, and he’s too nosy to leave something like a strange twelve-year-old alone.”

“Nosy, but maybe right,” Jessica replies. She shrugs and finishes her coffee in a quick sip; once she sets down the mug, though, her face hardens. Bruce knows this version of Jessica Jones, the serious
social worker he’s spent hours strategizing with. He immediately misses her easy smile. “I can come back tomorrow and explain the change in placement. It’s technically my job, anyway. But I think, if he’s got a rapport with you and Tony—”

Bruce forces a small smile. “Mostly Tony.”

“—he should hear it from you.” Her shoulders soften into what’s very nearly a slump. “They’ll hold the place at the shelter for him in the meantime. Unless we get a runner, or another emergency, we should be able to—”

“How long?”

Bruce’s voice sounds strangled and unfamiliar when the words escape, and he swallows around the sudden feeling that they’re not his words at all. Jessica frowns and blinks, uncomprehending. He wishes, suddenly, he had more coffee. Instead, he curls his fingers around the cool, empty mug. “You said that, right now, it’s the shelter or Warren County. But, I mean, are there any local foster homes that are just a few weeks from releasing a kid? Any chance he’d be in the shelter short-term?”

He’s watched hundreds of social workers testify in cases far more difficult than Miles’s, ones with junkie parents or parents suffering from mental illness so profound that they’re unable to function, so he’s familiar with the expression of regret that sweeps across Jessica’s face. Her eyes soften, her lips press together, and slowly, she shakes her head. “Nothing’s on the horizon, Bruce,” she informs him softly. “And the last thing I want to do to this kid is play musical homes with him for the six or eight weeks it takes for a full-time placement to open up. If I’m placing him somewhere, he’s staying put until the end of the case.” When all Bruce can do is nod dumbly, she adds, “And you know that’s good social work practice, too.”

“I know,” he echoes, and then moves away from her to go refill his coffee mug.

He knows, but knowing and believing are two separate beasts.

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He hands Tony his car keys ten minutes after Jessica leaves and watches his Prius pull out of the driveway, windows rolled down and music loud enough to shake the windowpanes. Tony honks as he zips away, and when Bruce catches Dot waving frantically in the backseat, he raises a hand and waves back. They disappear around the corner in the encroaching autumn darkness, but still Bruce stands there, soaking in the last few rays of October sun.

His feet on the steps remind him of a drum line, heavy bass beats that echo through the entire house, and the squeak of the hinges on the guest room door are like the opening blast of a bugle. The room’s mostly-dark, lit only by the dying light that filters in through the window and the lamp on the bedside table. There’s a dirty sock in the middle of the floor, separated from both Miles’s duffel bag and the laundry basket, but the room’s otherwise as he left it.

It’s silent, though, even as the door swings all the way open and lightly impacts the wall.

Bruce raises a hand and raps his knuckles on the doorjamb. “Mind if I come in?” he asks quietly.

“Sure,” says Miles.
He’s stretched out on the rumpled bedcovers, his head at the foot of the bed and his eyes trained on the plain white ceiling above. Bruce’s forced to take a handful of steps inside the room before he notices that there are books surrounding him, old astronomy texts snatched off the bookcase and opened to random pages. Constellations, Bruce realizes, and star charts, the chronicles of the thousand ways humans learned to recognize their universe.

He hesitates for a moment at the side of the bed, uncertain, and Miles flicks his dark eyes away from the ceiling and directly at Bruce. They’re red-rimmed, almost as though he’s been crying. The thought lodges itself in Bruce’s stomach like a red-hot knife, but he ignores it. He crosses the room, snags the desk chair, and drags it over. When he sits beside the bed, Miles faces the ceiling again.

He’s nearly through fighting with his words, constructing the perfect start to the world’s most imperfect conversation, when Miles asks, “They don’t know where Uncle Aaron is, do they?”

Bruce presses his lips together and swallows. “No.”

“No clue?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

For a half-second, Miles nods, leaving Bruce to watch his face. His cheeks are still soft and round, a child’s cheeks in stark contrast to the gangly limbs that are stretched all over the bed. When he blinks, his dark eyelashes flutter; they linger closed longer than is strictly necessary, and Bruce wonders for a moment what it’d be like to climb inside someone else’s head—or to have a voice other than self-doubt lingering in the back of his own.

“This isn’t going to be like last time, is it?”

The question’s soft, almost a whisper, and Bruce blinks away from his thoughts to catch Miles staring at him. There’s something innocent and open in his expression, a sort of fearlessness about the answer that Bruce envies—and feels impossibly guilty about.

“Last time?”

“After my parents died, Uncle Aaron—He was in Mexico on a business trip.” Miles presses his cheek against the blankets and casts his eyes to the floor. “I stayed with a family for a week while he came back and got his apartment ready for me, but then I went home with him.”

Bruce leans forward in the creaky wooden chair. He tangles his fingers, then releases them; he rubs his hands on his pants, and then stares at the floor. “It won’t be like last time, no,” he says quietly. “When your uncle gets in touch with Jessica, there’ll be a lot of things he has to do. Explaining where he was, for one, but also following steps to make sure this won’t happen again.”

When he glances up, Miles is watching him. “Do you think he’ll come back?”

“I think . . .” Bruce starts, but then he stops. He presses his palms together lets his gaze drift to one of the open books on the bed. It’s one of the dozens from his parents’ house, books that’d lived in boxes in his aunt’s basement until he’d cobbled together enough money for his first apartment. The chart of constellations is marked up with messy pen circles. He remembers in a vague, dreamy way when he circled each one of them after a night of star gazing with his mother.

It feels like a thousand lifetimes ago.

“I, uh, I lost my parents, too.” He glances back to Miles. “I was younger, it—was a long time ago. And I remember being sad, one day, because I didn’t understand how . . .” He shakes his head,
trying to clear it of the rushing memories until there’s no one but he and Miles in the bedroom, but it’s hard. It’s nearly impossible, and the more he swallows, the harder it becomes. “I didn’t understand why my parents were gone,” he continues once he can breathe again, “and I remember my aunt saying that when parents leave, they never do it because they want to. It’s always something—bigger.” He forces his face into some sad facsimile of a smile. “I think that’s the same for your uncle.”

Miles worries his lips together for a few seconds, then wets them with a sliver of pink tongue. “Your parents died?”

“Yeah,” he replies, and it’s not a lie.

“Do you miss them all the time?”

Bruce forces that same sad smile and drops his face to the floor for a moment. “Some days more than others,” he admits, and leaves it at that.

They sit in the near-dark and the quiet for a few minutes longer, Bruce watching the floor with a sort of distracted awareness of the way Miles’s eyes linger. He wants to say a thousand other things, but the words all shrivel up before they reach his tongue and only leave his mouth as air.

But then the front door opens, and a bellowing voice announces, “Come downstairs, losers, we’re having pork chops!” Bruce snorts a half-laugh and glances up just in time to catch Miles’s grin, and he can’t help but shake his head at the ridiculousness that’s become his life.

“I’m going to have to help,” he warns, “or he’ll burn the house down.”

Miles chuckles, this swallowed little laugh that rushes through Bruce’s body like electricity and fire. The grin he flashes is the warmest one yet. “You pick weird friends and boyfriends.”

“Don’t I know it,” Bruce returns, and waits for Miles before he heads downstairs.

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Bruce loses track of the evening after that, lost in a world of preventing kitchen disasters—

“Why,” he asks Tony while he sweeps shake-and-bake breadcrumbs up off the floor, “do I repeatedly subject myself to this torture?”

“Because you love my face,” Tony retorts, and hip-checks the oven shut.
—policing appropriate after-dinner games—

“I draw the line at poker,” he says, holding up his hands, and both Miles and Tony flash their very best dramatic pouts.

—and, inevitably, another episode of The Walking Dead. Miles and Tony fall asleep within the first twenty minutes, Miles curled up in an overstuffed armchair and Tony with his cheek pressed against the couch cushion. Bruce switches off the episode and watches the two of them by the dim light of the Netflix preview screen. In the silence, Miles stirs for a few seconds and then burrows himself further under the throw blanket he’d claimed during his very first night at the house.
It takes Bruce full minutes to remember that Miles only arrived there two days earlier. It somehow feels like whole weeks’ve slipped through his fingers.

He climbs off the couch and moves into the kitchen, collecting abandoned dinner dishes from the table and stacking them quietly in the sink. He adds glasses and silverware, then the pot from the rice cooker, staring at the mess when he’s finished. He wonders whether running water would wake them, and then, whether he should wake them. Miles belongs in a bed, not an armchair, and Tony—

Bruce nearly leaps out of his skin when Tony’s hand touches the middle of his back. It’s warm and certain, a steadying touch, and he digs his fingernails into the countertop to keep from shouting in surprise.

Tony’s face is red from the weave of the couch cushion, and his eyes are heavy with sleep. Bruce smiles a little at the sight—the celebrity billionaire lawyer Tony Stark, rumpled after an accidental nap—and then, at the way Tony’s hand flattens against his shirt.

“I’m gonna head out,” he says, and Bruce blinks back into reality. For a second, there’s a strange, half-expectant silence between them, the kind where Bruce forgets to breathe and Tony’s gaze is absolutely, unerringly even.

Bruce swallows before he replies, “The offer from last night still stands.”

Why that makes Tony smile, he’s not sure. It crinkles his eyes, and that familiar hand rubs a tiny pattern against Bruce’s spine before it releases. “And my response stays the same, too,” he retorts. His index finger touches Bruce’s nose, and Bruce promptly rolls his eyes. “Next time.”

He snorts. “You’re running out of next times.”

“Seeing is believing!” Tony says again, and leaves Bruce watching as he wanders into the foyer and out of sight.

Bruce stands at the sink for a long time after that, staring at the collection of dishes and silverware that don’t belong in his life. His life consists of a dirty plate, fork, and coffee mug every evening. It’s the files he’d moved from the table to his office so the three of them could eat dinner, the collection of documentaries in his Netflix queue, and the book he’s not cracked since after he’d left Natasha and Clint Wednesday night. His life is solitary and quiet, the same way it’s been—

Well.

For a very long time.

It’s somewhere around eleven p.m. when he finishes washing the dishes and sits down at the kitchen table. Steam curls out of his cup of tea, wisps that bloom and then drift away, and he watches as they thin and disappear. When he unlocks his BlackBerry, he finds a handful of uninteresting work e-mails and one lonely text message.

James Barnes: For the record, my kid loves your not-kid. Know any children’s books about how the foster system works?

Bruce stares at the words for a long time before he closes the message and pulls up another conversation. The last text from Jessica is her traditional on my way from just before she’d shown up that afternoon. It’s marked as unread, mostly because Bruce’d been refereeing the hide-and-seek game at the time, not checking his phone.

He thumbs the reply box, but it still takes several seconds of watching the blinking cursor before he
types anything.

*Miles deserves better than the shelter or Warren County,* he enters, his thumb slipping and entering errant letters every other word. He tries to ignore the tightness in his chest and the way his heart feels almost like it’s double-beating, but he can’t. Not right now. *I can’t let him live somewhere like that for months or longer.*

Jessica’s reply, speedy as always, chimes through while he’s sipping his tea. He sets the mug down heavily. He already knows, more or less, what the message says.

**Jessica Jones:** *you have to actually say it, bruce. no implying allowed.*

Somehow, the next breath is easier than the hundred before it. *I want to be his foster placement. I want him to stay here.*

And somehow, he’s not all that surprised when Jessica replies: *i know, that’s why i e-mailed intake about him staying there when i was still standing in your kitchen.*
Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce is reminded by several people that his keeping Miles means something. He would respectfully like to disagree. The problem is that actions—and unstoppable gut reactions—sometimes speak louder than words.

Chapter Notes

The usual thanks to Jen and saranoh. I am running out of ways to adequately express how fantastic they are, so let me just assure you: these ladies are boss.

On Monday morning, Tony kicks off the weekly staff meeting at the D.A.’s office with an announcement that causes Bruce to spill coffee all over his legal pad:

“No, don’t everybody bum-rush me at once or anything, but I’ve bought a box of it’s a boy cigars, and I expect them to be smoked.”

Bruce swears under his breath and reaches for a stack of napkins, but in a way, the damage is already done—and isn’t exactly limited to the 70-some sheets left on the yellow pad, either. No, Tony tosses the box of cigars into the middle of the conference room table hard enough that it slides into and then overturns a box of coffee stir sticks, and the room erupts into chaos.

Well, maybe chaos is a bit unfair. Chaos implies that weekly Suffolk County District Attorney Office meetings are usually orderly; in truth, they’re anything but. Even before Tony threw open the conference room door, everyone’d been buzzing with the usual level of manic energy. There were two different boxes of doughnut holes circulating in two separate directions, Bucky and Darcy were arguing about whether Darcy’s job description included changing the defendant’s name on a pre-fab motion to dismiss, Pepper was complaining about the lack of non-powdered creamer while Natasha smirked, and Bruce was trying to review one last report before a hearing at nine.

In short, it was business as usual.

Was.

At least eight of the dozen or so voices in the room rise up in unison, demanding at least eight different things in a clash that, frankly, makes Bruce’s ears ache. He’d dragged himself out of bed an hour early to shower, dress, and start the coffee maker before waking Miles up for school.
resulting grousing, grumping, begging for five more minutes, and absolute refusal to eat cereal
“because I could sleep instead, Bruce” had been a little draining.

Watching the downtrodden way Miles’d trudged up the steps at his school, dragging every step like
his feet were coated in lead . . . That hadn’t helped, either.

Someone shouts at Steve to start passing around the cigars while someone else (Phil, Bruce suspects,
because it’s said with the kind of eerie calm only Phil Coulson is capable of) asks who, exactly, the
cigars are for. Maria mutters a dark insult about Tony’s actual ability to “knock someone up”—Bruce
only realizes that he’s frowned at the comment after Natasha shoots him a puzzled glance—and
Peggy appreciatively observes how expensive the box is.

Bruce makes a concerted effort to push his frown away as he returns to sopping up coffee, but a foot
taps his under the table. A cursory glance around the room reveals that Steve is staring him down, his
eyebrows raised and his head tilted a half-degree to one side.

He reminds Bruce momentarily of a nosy golden retriever.

Rather than say anything, he collects a few more napkins.

“Wait, wait— Hold up!”

Darcy’s whistle screeches over the noise, and everyone in the room, Bruce included, stops to stare at
her. At least, Bruce realizes, everyone who isn’t Tony. No, Tony is standing at the corner of the table
and very calmly pouring himself a cup of coffee, seemingly unbothered by Darcy’s attempt to split
everyone’s eardrums.

Not, of course, that Darcy notices Tony’s disinterest. The only thing she’s interested in is draping
herself across the table to grab at the box, leaving Bruce to watch Tony. He’s fixated, somehow, on
the too-collected way the other man sets down his paper cup and fills another—and on how he
studiously refuses to raise his eyes.

“There’s only one person in this room these could belong to,” Darcy insists, and Bruce forces
himself to shift his attention back to her. She’s clutching the box to the ridiculous ruffles on her
sparkly teal top so tightly that the term “heaving bosom” is an understatement. “Which is kind of a
dick move on the best-friend-o-meter, because, hi—I’m practically the Odinbaby’s godmother or
whatever.”

Within seconds, everyone’s focus shifts directly onto—

“Oh. Oh, no.” Jane raises both her hands and pushes her chair back away from the table as though
adding a few extra inches between herself and the suspicious stares might improve the situation. She
shakes her head hard enough that her hair, earrings, and necklace all move with her. “We don’t
know. We can’t know. It’s too early.”

She gestures vaguely to her still-flat stomach to punctuate the point. When Bruce drops his eyes
away to add one last napkin to the sodden pile, there’s a paper cup of coffee sitting next to his pen.
It’s a soft chocolate brown, a hint it’s perfectly creamed.

Three seats down, Tony sips his own coffee and flicks through something on his phone.

“And even if we could know,” Thor adds as Bruce reaches for the cup, “we have decided that we do
not wish to find out.” He thumps his fist on the table like he’s declaring law. “We want the sex of our
child to be a surprise.”
Next to him, Jane drops her hands into her lap and frowns. “We do?” she asks.

“Yes!” Thor replies. His grin is brilliant, a thousand watts of pure Thor Odinson joy until he attempts to flash that joy in Jane’s direction. Her frown registers on his face a bit like that second at the top of a roller coaster—that is, he stares and blinks twice before reality rushes up to greet him—and all the light drops swiftly away. “Don’t we?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Oh.” And there is something distinctly sad about a large Scandinavian man staring at his fiancée like she’s killed his puppy. “We will not be surprised,” he amends, his second fist-thump less enthusiastic, “but we still do not know.”

Jane squeezes his hand, but the gesture is lost in the midst of Darcy’s logical follow-up question. “If they’re not your cigars, then whose are they?”

Her head starts to swivel toward her left—a vague twist, really, nothing concrete—and, immediately, Bucky throws up his hands. “No,” he states. It’s full of lawyer-authority, a sort of resounding heat that belongs more in court than in a conference room. When Natasha very subtly lifts an eyebrow, he waves his hands in front of his face. “We talked to Santa, and she’s getting a big girl bike, not a brother. Firmly established. Not us.”

“Definitely not,” Steve echoes. His eyes drift in Bruce’s direction again.

Bruce sips his coffee and says absolutely nothing.

The box rattles as Darcy huffs and blows wavy hair out of her face. “Not the preggos, not the marrieds,” she recites, and the members of each group nod dutifully along with her assessment. She tips her head in Tony’s direction, but Tony is ignoring her. Really, Tony is ignoring everyone, his attention focused on his phone and—

Bruce’s BlackBerry buzzes in his pocket. He rolls his eyes as he fishes it out, acutely aware of the way Steve’s still watching him. He’s lucky that not a single person besides his husband—who’s joining in on the funny look, actually—is observant enough to notice his stare.

“Don’t,” Natasha warns when Darcy glances in her direction. Across the table, Pepper chokes on a doughnut hole.

**Tony Stark: ten bucks says you get congratulated.**

He snorts and quickly types back, *Please tell me you didn’t call Jessica.*

“Clint’s too much of a child for us to have any,” Phil reports as he flips through one of the half-dozen files he’d carried in with him.

In his seat, Tony lets out a little noise that’s either a cough or a laugh. Bruce is betting on the latter. His BlackBerry buzzes again as Maria complains, “When do I have time to get laid?”

**Tony Stark: not called, texted. she was pretty good about giving up the goods to the guy she thinks you might be dating. double or nothing: thor hugs you.**

Bruce misses Peggy’s defense. He claims, at least to himself, that it’s because he’s cobbling together a reply, and not because his heart’s jumped into the back of his throat. He coughs—subtly, he thinks, except it just intensifies the way Steve’s watching him—and starts stumbling through a response.
The words he wants to say, the aspirational goal of the text message, is *Thor hugs everyone, and I’m pretty sure we’re not dating*, but he realizes after typing the A in *and* that the room’s gone suspiciously quiet. When he glances up, everyone’s attention is trained precisely on him.

He accidentally sends the message as-written, no reference to dating in sight.

“Uh,” he attempts, but his voice cracks in the back of his throat. Against his heart, he thinks, and follows it up with an unhelpful sip of hot coffee. He swallows thickly and sets down the paper cup. “Hi?”

“Oh holy shit,” Darcy blurts, and drops the box of cigars back onto the conference room table.

Bruce expects an explosion, because that’s how his friends react to news. They clap, cheer, boo, or blow raspberries (well, Tony does). They most certainly don’t sit silently and gape at him as though he’s grown a conjoined twin. Except, apparently, for right now, because he’s pretty sure you could hear a pin-drop.

You can certainly hear his thumbnail picking at the rim of his paper cup.

He’s still trying to assemble his thoughts into actual sentences—order out of chaos, he thinks, the sort of science-centered reasoning that used to comfort him—when someone breaks the silence by saying, “Took you long enough.”

The problem, however, is that the voice in question belongs to Tony Stark. Tony, who’s leaning all the way back in his faux-leather conference room chair, legs spread and hands folded, surveying the room like a lord looking out on his fiefdom.

Maria nearly snorts coffee. “You’re kidding,” she intones in a way that’s not entirely complimentary. Worse, though, is the way Peggy, Jane, Darcy, and Phil all glance swiftly at the tabletop like they’d been thinking the exact same thing. “This is a prank. This year’s ‘Crystal Light in the water cooler.’ Right?”

“No,” Bruce says quietly, because he feels the need to say something. And *that* is when the room explodes into chaos. Again.

Bruce tries, futilely, to process the questions that zip past him, but they all butt into one another and pile together until he can’t answer one without answering all of them. Darcy wants to know who his girlfriend is—a question he’d find funny, really, in any situation aside from this one—Peggy asks whether it’s a pregnancy or an already-existent kid, and Maria maintains, loudly, that the entire thing must be a prank. Phil asks if it’s “the boy from the doughnut shop,” which only leads to a half-dozen new questions: what boy, how’d Phil find out about it first, is it a relative, was Bruce adopting?

He lets the voices all blend into one, but not purposely or vindictively. They blend together because when he glances three seats down, past a still-gaping Maria and a frantic Darcy, he finds Tony.

Tony, who watches him steadily with this almost imperceptible smile touching the corners of his mouth.

Tony’d spent all Sunday in the office, Bruce knows, piecing together oral arguments he’ll be delivering at one historic courthouse or another in nearby Monroe County. He’d texted a handful of times, mostly asking for *The Walking Dead* updates and offering to help Miles with his math homework (*You do remember I have a PhD in physics, yes?* Bruce’d asked at one point), and Bruce
He’d not missed Tony, exactly, but it’d changed the tone of the household. Miles smiled, but he didn’t grin, and their conversations sometimes lumbered into prolonged bouts of silence. His first question after Bruce’d explained the placement situation—well, one of the first, after asking whether they’d pick up the rest of his clothes from his uncle and if it meant he’d have to switch schools (the answers being yes and no, respectively)—was whether Tony’d stay at the house now that Bruce was his full-time placement.

“Tony doesn’t live here,” Bruce’d said. They were finishing a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. Bruce’d realized all of five minutes earlier that he’d have to learn to cook more than his usual ten staples if he was going to have a kid for a few months. “You understand that, right?”

Miles’d nodded, but Bruce could see the uncertainty creeping across his face. He’d picked at his crusts for a few seconds before he’d added, “But, I mean, he stays over, right? Like my uncle’s girlfriends, sometimes?”

It’d taken a massive amount of self-restraint not to ask for more information about those girlfriends. Instead, Bruce’d forced a small smile. “Sometimes, sure.”

“And now that I’m staying here—” And he’d wondered whether it was intentional, the way Miles’s head had lifted up to consult Bruce’s expression after the words now that I’m staying. “—it won’t get you in trouble with Jes—Miss Jones. If he stays.” Bruce’d sipped his water instead of responding, and Miles’s face had creased into a frown. “Right?”

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Bruce’d replied, and promptly changed the subject to their after-lunch errands.

Now, he wonders briefly how he’ll explain Tony’s continued refusals—well, two, he reminds himself, and two events are not hardly continual—to stay overnight. Or whether they’ll keep being refusals at all, because something in Tony’s tiny smile suggests otherwise.

He smiles back, an involuntary quirk of his mouth he’s powerless to actually stop. At least, until a voice from the doorway shouts out over the noise:

“What the fuck is wrong with you people today?”

The room immediately pitches into a grave-dark silence as District Attorney Nick Fury sweeps into the room. He’s wearing his usual black suit with a black shirt, the collar open exactly one precise black button. He drops his equally-black portfolio on the table hard enough that it shakes all the cups and doughnut hole boxes. “I come in here expecting to run a staff meeting,” he chides, “and end up in a room full of goddamn monkeys.” His eye tracks around the room. Bruce drops his gaze to the floor. “Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on here?”

They’re treated to five blissful seconds of silence before Darcy blurts, “Bruce has a kid.”

“Foster kid,” Bruce clarifies. The words sound stuck in his throat.

And Natasha, proving once again that she is as much an enemy as an ally, narrows her eyes at him from the next chair over. “Still a kid,” she observes, and as pushy as her tone is, Bruce knows she’s right.

Fury freezes for a half-second, his entire body stock still as he levels his eye in Bruce’s direction. Bruce swallows around the tight feeling in the back of his throat, and, when his own stillness fails, nods. Just once, but it’s firmer than the words a few seconds earlier, almost accidentally confident.
Fury nods back. “Well, congratufuckinglations to Doctor Banner,” he drawls, pointedly rolling his eye as he turns his attention back to the rest of the office. “Now can we please pretend we’re representatives of this fine state for all of ten minutes?”

The next half-hour flies by the way it always does, Fury leading them through the usual agenda with his usual ruthless efficiency. They discuss cleanliness in the break room—“I don’t know what used to be in that Tupperware, but it wasn’t food by the time I found it,” Darcy explains with a grimace—the perpetually-flickering light in the men’s bathroom—“Reminds me of the eurotrash clubs my buddies used to drag me to when I was stationed in Germany,” Bucky comments, and Steve’s frown is as puzzled as it is mildly disapproving—and Maria’s upcoming evidentiary hearing which features, among other things, two frat boys, a goat, and a kiddie pool filled with Jell-O. Fury ends around a quarter to nine with his usual backhanded praise about how they can hopefully keep the county from imploding for another week, and everybody scatters to their corners; Bruce and Phil are each expected in their respective courtrooms, Thor’s day is packed with meetings, and there’s an hour drive to Monroe County with Tony and Pepper’s names on it.

Except even with the time constraints, Tony presses close enough to Bruce to squeeze his arm just below his elbow. Bruce starts, nearly dropping his portfolio, and is momentarily blinded by a too-bright Stark smile.

But then, Pepper hustles Tony out of the room, leaving Bruce with the lingering warmth on his arm—and the unwanted attention from one of Natasha’s knowing looks.

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When Bruce returns from his hearing, Nick Fury is standing in his office and looking out the window.

“Doctor Banner,” he greets without turning around.

“Sir,” Bruce replies, and watches Fury’s eyebrow quirk in the reflection from the window.

The hearing in Judge Smithe’s courtroom—a review hearing on a truant seventeen-year-old who’d recently run away to hide out from school and her parents at her boyfriend’s college dorm—had lasted a blessed half hour, and Bruce’d felt endless gratitude to escape the open space and disappear. He’d felt scattered and unfocused the whole time, rambling through questions and his proffer like he’d just received a tongue implant. Twice, Judge Smithe’d quirked an eyebrow in his direction before asking him to repeat himself; both times, Bruce’d swallowed around an apology and corrected whatever misstatement’d stumbled out of his mouth.

But when he’d sat at counsel table and listened to the girl’s attorney promise the girl would never run again (unlikely, given her file), he’d caught his mind wandering back through that morning’s events. He’d focused on expensive cigars in ridiculous boxes, too-bright smiles, teasing text messages, and the stunned silence of his colleagues. And, when those images’d inevitably faded into the back of his mind, he’d thought of other things: the pile of dirty laundry in Miles’s room, the upcoming meeting with Miles’s truancy intern, the list of groceries and supplies on the door of his fridge, the fact that he now thought of the guest room as Miles’s room.

As he’d packed up his things to head upstairs, Judge Smithe’d remarked, “You have a good weekend?” When he’d blinked up at her, she’d smiled. “I’ve seen you in a lot of different moods,
Doctor Banner, but I think ‘dreamy’ is a new one.”

“Uh,” he’d half-grunted. He’d intended to stammer through some other half-cast apology, but she’d laughed.

“It’s a good look on you,” she’d insisted, shaking her head. “You can’t be serious all the time. You’ll turn into Mister Coulson.”

Bruce’d chuckled a little as she disappeared behind the secure courtroom door, but his smile’d slipped in the empty hallway. He’d never let life interfere with a hearing before, never forgotten how to formulate a decent question while standing in open court. At least, not multiple times.

By the time he’d reached the sixth floor, he’d resolved to grab a cup of coffee and spend his whole day working through the files for his Tuesday and Wednesday dockets.

And then, he’d found Fury standing in his office.

Fury turns away from the window slowly, a man who’s never been forced to rely on quick, punctuated motions. A man who’s nothing like Tony, Bruce catches himself thinking. He clamps down on the thought and wills it into some dark recess of his brain. When he closes the door, the room feels almost claustrophobic; Fury, with his tight posture and broad shoulders, seems suddenly larger-than-life.

Bruce swallows. “I guess you’re here about this morning,” he says uncertainly.

“I meant what I said about congratulations being in order,” Fury replies with a half-shrug. His hands are folded behind his back, a picture of military order. Bruce feels conspicuously slouchy stepping around him in his slightly oversized suit coat and well-worn shirt. Someday, he’ll cave to his friends’ peer pressure and buy a few new suits.

Today is not that day.

“Uh, thank you,” he tells Fury as he strips out of his coat. He hangs it over the back of his chair and then stands there uncertainly.

When he glances up, Fury’s watching him with unerring precision. “I wasn’t sure you’d get there,” he says with a small nod, “but I’m glad to see you did.”

Bruce frowns. “I’m—sorry, I don’t—”

“You’ve been at this for almost as long as I’ve known you, Doctor.” He watches as Fury unfolds himself, his shoulders relaxing slightly, and steps over to one of the chairs in front of his desk. It’s covered with the usual flotsam and jetsam of Bruce’s cluttered life—there’re two statute books with various pages tabbed, plus a state case reporter and two half-finished briefs Tony’s asked him to proof. Fury lifts them, unbothered, and places them on the floor before sitting down. Bruce wants to drop his eyes away—whether in embarrassment or just uncertainty, he’s not sure—but Fury’s attention never wavers.

“You’ve been at this for almost as long as I’ve known you, Doctor.” He watches as Fury unfolds himself, his shoulders relaxing slightly, and steps over to one of the chairs in front of his desk. It’s covered with the usual flotsam and jetsam of Bruce’s cluttered life—there’re two statute books with various pages tabbed, plus a state case reporter and two half-finished briefs Tony’s asked him to proof. Fury lifts them, unbothered, and places them on the floor before sitting down. Bruce wants to drop his eyes away—whether in embarrassment or just uncertainty, he’s not sure—but Fury’s attention never wavers. “You’ve acted as temporary placement for how many lost boys since you first started this?”

Bruce shrugs. “A handful.”

“No, not a handful.” He shoves his hands in his pockets, but Fury leans forward, his elbows on his thighs. “Cause I approved every last hour of time off for emergency hearings up in Union County, for transport and kids who didn’t sleep a wink for crying, and I don’t forget those things.” Bruce glances down at the carpet to combat the tight feeling in the back of his throat. “And by my count? 
“We’re edging around number twenty.”

“Twenty-two,” Bruce corrects quietly.

“What’s that?”

“I— In the last eight years.” He’s not sure why his voice wavers. It’s a statistic, a fact he should be able to cite with the same easy certainty that comes to him in court. Except in court, Nick Fury isn’t staring him down with a blank expression on his face. He forces himself to drag his eyes away from popcorn crumbs and the balled-up post-it note on the carpet, one he’d flicked at Tony and then never thrown away. “Counting this one, Miles, it’s been twenty-two.”

“Twenty-two, then,” Fury replies, nodding. “Twenty-two kids, and you’re finally letting one stick around. Like I said, wasn’t sure you’d get here.”

“He’s not—” Bruce starts to say, but the words slip through his fingers and escape before he can settle on any of them. He tugs his chair out and sinks into it, but as much as his eyes wander over the topography of his perpetually-disorganized desk, they always return to Fury. That’s the inexplicable thing about the district attorney, he thinks, the mystery of the man who he’s literally never seen in a color other than black: no matter how ridiculous you feel in front of him, you want to explain. You want to summon the honesty that lives in the bottom of your belly and force it to the surface.

He pulls in a breath. “He’s not like most the other kids,” he says finally, swiveling his chair in Fury’s direction. “Older, in part, but— He lost his parents a year ago, all he has left is his uncle, it’s . . . ” He shakes his head. “It’s different, I guess.”

Fury nods, once, and folds his hands between his legs. “Is the kid the one who’s different, or is it you?” Bruce snorts, a tiny ghost of a laugh, but Fury’s expression never wavers. “Or maybe it’s not you. Maybe it’s Stark. I mean, never thought I’d see the day when two of my three orphans were bringing up one from foster care.”

“It definitely isn’t— I mean, Tony’s not—” Fury’s eyebrows raise while his eye narrows, and all the words that are teetering on the tip of Bruce’s tongue die before he can stammer through them. He’s reminded momentarily of Natasha’s glance from the conference room, one filled with skepticism as much as knowledge. The only difference is that Fury’s isn’t accompanied with an eye-roll, or a dark mutter of just screw already when they press past one another in the doorway.

At least, not yet, it isn’t.

He swallows around the decaying words in the back of his throat and tries again. “He’s twelve,” he says quietly. His thumb slides along the lip of the desk, catching scrapes and scratches from the last nine years of his life. Nine years in this office, eight years as a temporary foster placement, and now this.

Nick Fury watching him struggle through an explanation he’s not sure exists.

“He’s twelve,” he repeats, this time with more emphasis, “and he’s lost his family. If he’s not with me, he’ll be in a shelter or a group home, probably at the other end of the state by the end of it, and I can’t do that to him.” He meets Fury’s gaze, momentarily surprised when some of the harsher lines soften. “I’m not great at this, but I think it’s better than the alternative. For him to be with me, I mean.”

“And with Stark.” It’s not a question.
And try as he may, Bruce can’t control the way his head bobs, or the contraction of his throat as he
swallows. “And, in some form, Tony,” he admits.

“Not like you’d have much luck keeping Stark away once he sniffed the kid out, anyway,” Fury
comments as he pushes to his feet, and for the first time, Bruce thinks he reads something like
amusement tipping into his tone. “He gave Rogers, what, twenty-four hours to enjoy that girl before
he banged down their door?”

“About twelve,” Bruce replies, the tightness in his jaw abating and allowing him, finally, to smile.
“He pretends he didn’t slink around the hospital that same night only because of his reputation.”

“Yeah, ’cause when I think Stark, I don’t think shameless busybody bent on driving all of us crazy.”
He stops in front of Bruce’s desk and, just once, knocks his knuckles against a closed case reporter.
“I think, in the end, he might just be good for the two of you.”

Despite everything, Bruce rolls his eyes. “I’m not sure about that,” he admits, watching as Fury pulls
open the door and allows the usual rush of white noise to come drifting in. “Tony might be a good
distraction for now, but I think his magic’ll wear off eventually.”

Fury pauses with his hand on the doorknob. When he glances back at Bruce, he catches his eyes one
last time. “I meant the kid’s effect, not Stark’s,” he replies, and holds Bruce’s gaze for one too-long
second before he strides out.

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The day rushes by after Fury’s visit, a blur of file-review and e-mail correspondence that Bruce can
hardly track with any accuracy. Of course, he’s not really trying to track his day, but rather settle his
brain into some semblance of normalcy, and work is oddly good for that; the more reports he reads,
the more questions social workers answer and witnesses he confirms for Wednesday’s adjudicatory
hearing, the more at peace he feels.

He falls into the routine, checking off items on his to-do list and
exchanging files with Jane in the usual, practiced rhythm.
This, he thinks more than once, is his life:
the children of Suffolk County, his helpful trial assistant who smiles fondly every time they swap out
folders, the dozens of social workers whose phone numbers he knows by heart.

He agrees in a text to meet Natasha for lunch at the café down the block, and he isn’t exactly
surprised to find Clint Barton waiting for them outside. The other man bounces on the balls of his
feet as they approach and whines, briefly, about the weather. “If you’re late when it snows,” he
threatens, “I’ll kill you both in your sleep.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Natasha challenges, and Bruce can’t help but laugh at the flint in her voice.

The café’s pleasantly warm and serves a frankly terrifying selection of breakfast foods, all of which
Clint claims to have sampled at some point. The waitress refers to him by name and asks where Phil
is while she passes out mugs of hot coffee. He shrugs when she walks away. “We like this place,” he
half-explains.

“Natasha rolls her eyes. “This is the epicenter of all the unresolved sexual tension, he means.”

“And who worked with her girlfriend for years before they hooked up through, what, speed dating?”
Clint retorts. Natasha’s lips snap open for what Bruce can only assume is a razor-sharp reply, but
Clint holds up a hand. “We’re not here for that,” he interrupts. There’s something murderous in
Natasha’s eyes, but, eventually, she presses her red lips back into a tight line. “We’re here because Bruce has a kid now.”

Bruce sighs. “I don’t have a kid, he—”

“Phil grabbed me one of the cigars,” Clint retorts. “You have a kid now.”

“I’m a foster placement, not a parent,” Bruce corrects with a shake of his head. Across the table, Clint lifts an eyebrow, a welcome pause from the worrying amount of cream he’s dumping into his coffee. “He stays until his uncle gets his life back together, then he goes home.”

“You mean if his uncle gets it together,” Clint retorts. Bruce stops ripping open his sugar packet to meet his eyes, and he watches as Clint’s shoulders rise and fall in an easy shrug. “I was that kid, and I grew up with a bunch more of them. I know how it works.”

“Then you know it won’t last forever.”

“Stop saying that.” Natasha’s voice is quiet but cool, honed into a sharp, trusted blade. Like a chef’s, Bruce thinks, or a swordsman’s, only the flint is in her eyes and the steel in her jaw. She watches him unflinchingly, her hands folded over her closed menu. “The time limit doesn’t change what this is,” she presses, and Bruce drops his eyes to focus on stirring sugar into his coffee. “It doesn’t change the fact that him being with you means something. It’s okay that it does.”

He nods, vaguely, and his reach for a creamer cup is interrupted by the soft impact of a foot against his under the table. When he glances up, Natasha’s lips press into a tiny, private smile. He snorts and shakes his head, but the damage’s been done; the smile’s become a shared secret, something for the two of them alone.

“It’s okay to want things,” she says.

“Hell, it’s more than okay,” Clint adds. His broad, worn hands are clasped around his coffee mug, but his fingers dance against the ceramic. “Take it from me: sometimes, wanting’s the first step to getting.”

“Which has worked in everything except your personal life,” Natasha observes.

“Tasha, in my personal life, I get it all the time,” Clint returns. He raises his mug in a mock-toast, complete with ridiculous eyebrow waggle and corny grin. When the waitress wanders by a few seconds later, they can’t order through their fit of giggles.

The day settles again after a lunch of eggs over easy and crispy hash browns, and Bruce buries himself in the rest of the day’s work. When he steps out of the judicial center a few hours later, he finds the October afternoon sunny and bright. It’s warm enough to shed his coat and leave it in the trunk with his bag and the last few files he needs to review before his first morning hearing, and he drives to Union County with the car windows rolled down. There’s a crispness in the air, brightly-colored leaves on the trees lining the highway, and a series of not-terrible classic rock songs on one of the Tony-programmed radio stations. It all bubbles together, filling him until he feels—

Well.

A lot of the words that spring into his head at first are over-broad. He’s not complete, certainly, and he’s hardly content, but he’s—something.

Happy, maybe, is the best adjective in his arsenal.
The after-school program at Castle Rock Middle School is just finishing up as Bruce swings into a parking spot, and he watches the kids filter out of the red brick building and disperse. Two busses idle at the curb, ready to spirit students back home in time to meet their families for dinner. The kids shout and wave at each other, most with their coats open and grins for the weather, and Bruce catches himself smiling when he notices Miles.

He’s standing on the bottom step outside the school, chatting with two other boys. One’s tall and even lankier than Miles, a string-bean with a dark complexion, curly hair, and thick glasses; the other is about Miles’s height but stocky, with a mess of dark hair he can’t pat down and an enthusiastic grin. His hands wave while he talks, and the tall boy rolls his eyes while Miles laughs. Bruce considers honking the horn or climbing out of the car, not to interrupt so much as to involve himself, but he ends up just watching.

At least, until Miles looks away from the other boys, spots Bruce’s Prius parked in the lot, and smiles.

The smile’s as warm as the October day, and he waves hastily. Bruce raises a hand to wave back and pretends he’s not stupidly proud of Miles’s bright moment of glee. Seconds later, Miles is trotting across the bus lane and jerking open the passenger-side door.

“Hi,” he says. His jacket’s unzipped and his face is half-ruddy from jogging over. “Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

“I wasn’t here long,” Bruce replies. Miles flashes him another grin and then starts fiddling with the seatbelt. “Those your friends?”

He nods. “Ganke and Judge.”

“Those are their names?” The resounding click of the seatbelt is perfect punctuation to Miles’s dubious glance in his direction. “Okay then,” he says, and he’s immediately distracted by the way Miles’s lips twitch into an almost-smile.

He’s not a teenager yet, Bruce thinks. There are cracks in which he can see the kid shining through.

As he starts the car back up, he tries not to take too much stock in that.

They meander through a half-conversation on the drive back to Bruce’s, covering the usual ground about school, work, Miles’s after school program, and all the court hearings Bruce needs to cover in the morning. The conversation ebbs into quiet a few times, but it’s not the tense, tight silence of their first handful of car rides. It’s almost comfortable.

As they pull off the highway, Miles asks, “Is Tony coming over tonight?”

They’re the only car on the wide off-ramp, and Bruce steals a quick glance in Miles’s direction as they slow to a crawl. He’s not smiling, but it’s a near thing, and his eyes are painfully hopeful. Bruce wets his lips. “Probably not,” he admits, turning back to the road. “He had oral arguments—the kind of hearings he does—in Monroe County today. I don’t know if he’s even home yet.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Miles nodding. “Okay,” he says, and leans back in his seat. “That’s cool.”

Except he leaves Bruce with the feeling that a night without Tony is anything but “cool.”

They dump their respective bags in the foyer once they’re back at the house, Miles leading the way into the kitchen with Bruce only a few steps behind. He tries to steal a half-full bag of potato chips
and is handed a banana, then tries to snatch a can of soda and is rewarded with a bottle of water. “Go watch something,” Bruce encourages, and Miles rolls his eyes. He spends a little time at the kitchen island, hovering while Bruce starts assembling dinner. He’s not sure whether Miles is lonely or just finally starting to adjust to this new version of his life, but he likes the change.

Eventually, the boy disappears into the living room, and Bruce listens to the television babble while he cooks. He drifts around the kitchen while things simmer and sauté, convincing himself that he’s organizing his life while he does. He adds things to his grocery list (healthy snacks, for one, and drinks besides soda and water), he finally recycles old circulars and flyers so there’s room to eat at the table, he checks his phone for messages from Jessica. But every action is a reminder that he’s not organizing his life so much as the one he’s just volunteered for, the one where Miles will only leave when his uncle’s back and ready to parent a twelve-year-old again.

In the meantime, he’s parenting a twelve-year-old.

Not a parent, he reminds himself. Parenting, the verb.

Bruce forces Miles to turn off the zombies and actually eat dinner at the kitchen table. He inhales everything on his plate except the cauliflower (“It doesn’t taste like anything,” he complains when Bruce raises an eyebrow) and explains exactly what’s happening on Hershel’s farm. They trade theories before Bruce says, “Our friend Phil has all the comic books, if you’re interested.”

Miles stops chewing to stare at him. “He’d lend them to me?”

“Well, probably to me, as a proxy-lender.” Bruce can’t decide how to term Miles’s expression. It’s somehow less than hopeful, but more than surprised, like he’s unfamiliar with people trusting him. Either that, or he’s never quite learned how to trust in people besides himself. Bruce sets down his glass. “I can ask,” he offers when Miles stays very quiet. “And if he refuses me, he won’t refuse Clint.”

“The guy from the doughnut place?” Miles asks. He’s suddenly more interested in the conversation than his dinner.

“Yeah. Actually, they’re both from the doughnut shop. Clint’s the one who accused you of staring, Phil’s his boyfriend.” Bruce can’t help but smile when Miles releases a noise that teeters between laughing and snickering. “What?”

“Are all your friends gay?” It’s not a question as much as it’s a demand, and it’s accompanied by Miles setting his silverware down with a clank. “Because your friends with Dot are married, the doughnut shop guys are a couple, and you have Tony.”

“In Tony’s defense,” Bruce offers, “I’m not sure he’s gay.”

“He’s with you.”

It’s the world’s simplest retort, presented as absolute truth, and Bruce is forced to smile around the place where his heart’s now living in his throat. He should correct Miles’s misconception, he knows, but he’s suddenly afraid of the thousand questions that are bound to follow.

Instead, he gestures across the table. “Eat your cauliflower,” he says, and Miles rolls his eyes before studiously eating around it.

After the table’s cleared and the leftovers shoveled in the fridge between cases of soda and half-finished six-packs of beer, Bruce steers Miles into the living room to do his homework. Math and social studies books end up spread over the coffee table, and Bruce watches as Miles scribbles down
answers in messy handwriting. His lap’s filled with his own files, reports he needs to squint at one last time before he’s committed tomorrow’s questions to memory, but he’s constantly distracted by the boy who’s an arm’s length away.

The distraction only increases when, at about seven-thirty, the front door flies open with a bang. Bruce nearly leaps out of his skin, files falling to the floor as he hops to his feet, and Miles breaks the tip of his pencil against his math notebook.

Except then, a call of “Who wants froyo?” fills the foyer and echoes outward. It settles in the living room, and Bruce somehow finds the strength to roll his eyes over the race of his heartbeat. He’s still trying to remember how to breathe when—after the slam of the front door and the tell-tale smack of shoes against the hallway wall—Tony Stark saunters into the room.

Tony Stark, barefoot and armed with both his laptop bag and a plastic grocery sack. He’s somehow lost his suit coat and tie, his shirt open one button too far and his sleeves rolled up. He’s tired, rumpled, and—

Gorgeous.

The thought jumps into Bruce’s head before he can quash it. When he glances over at Miles, the kid’s grinning like he’s about to meet the frozen treat Messiah.

“Do not,” Tony threatens, pointing between the two of them, “make me eat this on my own. ‘Cause I will. I will, and then the lactose intolerance will kick in like a mofo and— Big guy, help me out here.”

Despite all his better instincts, Bruce can’t help his stupid little smile, or the way his head shakes without him necessarily meaning it to. “He will,” he confirms, “and we’ll regret it.”

“See? What’d I tell you?” Tony jerks his head in the direction of the kitchen, and Miles scrambles to his feet. It’s the fastest Bruce’s seen him move, barring the incident during Saturday’s game of hide-and-seek. “C’mon, we’ve got sundae fixings with our names on them. Or we can write our names with them. Whatever.”

They’re halfway into their ridiculous bowls of frozen yogurt—expensive, premium frozen yogurt from the all-natural grocery store, the kind that, one time, Bruce mentioned was his favorite—topped with chocolate sauce, nuts, whipped cream, and sprinkles, when Bruce thinks to ask, “How’d today go?”

“Today,” Tony replies, waving his spoon in an abrupt circle, “was good before I got here, and is now officially awesome.” He leans forward, dips his spoon into Bruce’s bowl, and helps himself to a heaping mouthful. When he asks “Miss me?”, there’s whipped cream on the corner of his mouth. Bruce rolls his eyes. “Desperately,” he replies, and reaches over to catch the blotch of white on his thumb. Tony’s jokingly sticks his tongue out as though he’s going to lick the offending sticky spot, and when Bruce snorts a laugh at him, he breaks into a glowing grin. It fills Bruce’s belly with warmth and turns the tips of his ears red-hot, but he can’t hold onto his own laugh. “Child,” he mutters, but he hears the fondness in his own tone.

They move into the living room with the remnants of their frozen yogurt, then abandon the bowls to their respective work. Bruce, after all, needs to finish flipping through his files, Tony has another day of oral arguments in Monroe County the next morning, and Miles is still twenty math problems away from finished. They clump together in the living room, mostly-silent, and Bruce can’t help but think how idyllic it’d all look from the outside: two men and a preteen, gathered together in a
companionable, working silence.

Like a family, he realizes. The thought fills his chest until he can’t breathe, and suddenly, he finds it impossible to focus on his reports. He watches Miles, instead, his pink tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth as he works through a particularly frustrating pre-algebra problem. He squints at his answer, erases part of it, grunts in frustration, and erases the rest.

He’s a normal kid, just then, one with annoying homework and people who care about him.

Bruce is still combatting that murmur in the back of his head when he glances up and catches Tony’s watching him. Dark eyebrows quirk, lips purse into a knowing little half-smile, and Bruce—

Bruce rolls his eyes and pointedly knocks his knee against Tony’s. “Shut up.”

“Pretty sure I’ve gotta say something in order to shut up,” Tony replies, and presses their knees together for a few long seconds before he returns to work.

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“Please tell me you have five minutes to talk to me,” Jessica Jones’s voice rushes through Bruce’s office phone at lunch on Wednesday. “Bonus points if you’re sitting down.”

Docket days in the child welfare world are a bit like trying to control a bag of cats, because everything is absolute chaos. Parents arrive late, child services transport vans break down, attorneys double-book with hearings in other courtrooms and, inevitably, some party in some case bursts into uncontrollable tears. That last honor, today, belonged to fifteen-year-old girl whose mother, in open court, declared she wanted to “be done” with her daughter; when Bruce’d slipped out of the courtroom, the girl’d already cried a damp spot on her social worker’s shoulder.

Bruce will never claim his job is easy.

He does, however, send a mournful glance in the direction of his still-unwrapped sandwich and yet-untouched potato salad. He drops his glasses onto the desk and rubs the bridge of his nose. “I know I haven’t replied to your e-mail,” he apologizes as he tries to sort through the message slips Jane’s left on his desk. “Judge Smithe’s scheduling’s a mess, and the docket’s crowded. But I think if we schedule Miles’s therapy for Tuesday nights, I can—”

“Yeah, this isn’t about the e-mail,” Jessica interrupts. Her tone is clipped and urgent, almost hyper-focused, and Bruce drops the message slips back onto his keyboard tray. “This is about Aaron Davis.”

He only really realizes he’s dropped heavily into his desk chair once he’s there, staring at his own reflection in the inky blankness of his computer screen. He blinks, just once, a futile attempt to clear his head. “Miles’s uncle?” he asks.

“Right.” On the other end of the line, he can hear Jessica sigh. “Davis got arrested last night. He’s currently in county lock-up for possession of stolen merchandise.”

For all of Bruce’s training, all the countless hours he’s spent in trial advocacy classes and advanced advocacy workshops learning to think on his feet, he can’t formulate a complete sentence. His jaw moves, sure, and his lips press together, but the only word that pops out of his mouth is, “What?”
“I’ve been having the other social workers swing by his apartment complex if they have time between appointments,” Jessica explains. There’s something tight in her voice, balanced between frustration and worry. The more Bruce listens to it, the more his own stomach knots. “One of them spotted lights on, but when she walked up, nobody answered the door. She called the police for a welfare check, and they found a bunch of stolen equipment from a lab that was robbed a couple months ago. Murdock said he’d call as soon as he knows what the charges are.”

Bruce exhales, a rush of breath he can’t necessarily control, and leans back in his desk chair. There are four hearings scheduled for that afternoon, twenty proposed paper topics submitted by his students that he needs to vet before class tonight, and he’d promised Miles they’d run to the grocery store together. Miles, who’d grinned when Bruce’d informed him that he and Tony’d get some alone time while Bruce taught.

Miles, who is suddenly the only person in the world Bruce wants to see.

His BlackBerry buzzes suddenly in his pocket, and he flinches at the sensation. “One second,” he tells Jessica. He knows that checking his phone’s unnecessary, especially right now, but he needs the beat of silence to clear his head. To chase away the nerves that are twisting in his stomach, he thinks to himself as he unlocks the keypad.

But there’s no chasing away anything when the waiting text message reads: *tell the kid we’re doing legos tonight. ’cause we’re totally doing legos tonight.*

He snorts slightly and texts back, *The Harry Potter ones?*

*star wars,* Tony replies, and Bruce hates that he can’t even fake a smile.

“Bruce,” Jessica’s voice murmurs around the same time he abandons his cell phone on the desktop, “he’s asking about Miles. He wants to see him. Murdock’s going to explain the process once this charging thing’s figured out, but he’s still the legal guardian.”

He nods slightly. He feels as though the breath’s trapped in his lungs, unable to escape. “And?”

“And we’re scheduling a rehearing for Friday, in case we need it.”

The sound that escapes from between his lips, the bastard child of a snort and a cough, it’s bitter. A bitter, half-wounded thing that Bruce hates himself for, but he can’t control it. He thinks of Natasha’s little speech and Fury’s, of the cigars and Tony’s constant presence, and he suddenly hates Aaron Davis.

He hates people who drift in and out of children’s lives like tumbleweeds, and who never pause to think that their actions can have permanent consequences.

Permanent, scarring consequences.

“We’ll need it,” he hears himself say. His voice sounds soft and helpless.

“Yeah,” Jessica replies, “we probably will.”

==
It’s just past ten p.m. when Bruce pulls into his driveway after his class, feeling bedraggled and not quite like himself. The whole three hours of lecture, he’d felt a little like he was drifting in and out of consciousness, listening only half-heartedly to the discussion and, once, repeating verbatim what a student’d already said. He’d apologized to his usual group of stragglers when he excused himself to rush to his car; on the sidewalk in front of the building, he’d nearly bowled over one of his former students, a third-year who’d passed his class with flying colors.

“You okay, Doctor Banner?” she’d asked after he’d stammered through an apology and, belatedly, recognized her face.

“Not really,” he’d replied without thinking, and then, kept walking.

None of the blame for this, his distraction or inability to focus, belonged to his students. And it certainly didn’t belong to Miles, either, who’d grinned all the way through the drive home from school. It didn’t belong to the Thai food Tony’d brought over for dinner and forced both Miles and Bruce to eat, the careful instructions about homework and showering (yes, Miles, *showering*), or the way Tony’d clasped him on the shoulder before ushering him out the door. No, his mind’d wandered all night because of the three-word text he’d received from Jessica as he’d walked into the law building.

*the rehearing’s on*

He’s still thinking about that text as he climbs onto the stoop and unlocks the front door. He’d decided not to mention Aaron Davis or the potential hearing to Miles until Jessica’d passed along the details, but now, it’s all he can think about. His brain’s a whirligig of thoughts he can’t control, spiraling through questions he can’t answer and information he lacks until he can’t actually think straight. He abandons his bag, coat, and shoes in the foyer and wanders blindly toward the kitchen. He needs a cup of tea and an hour of silence, some brainstorming about how to explain this to Miles, and maybe—

He doesn’t notice anyone standing in the hallway until there are hands catching him by hips. He jerks back at step, or at least attempts to; the whole-body flinch would work a lot better, he thinks, if the palms flattened to his hips didn’t *stay* there. He blinks at the nearness of Tony’s face, the warmth of his hands, and the way they’re all of a foot from being pressed flush together.

For a half-second, all higher mental functions refuse to start firing, leaving Bruce with nothing but the traitorous thought that he wouldn’t mind being pulled against Tony’s chest right about now.

“Oh, usually you’re pretty useless without your after-class tea, I get that,” Tony’s saying, and Bruce shakes his head in an attempt to clear the cobwebs, “but we’re bordering on bad-movie-meet-cute here. Probably the kind where we’re each convinced the other doesn’t want him and our friends in common have to work behind our backs to hook us up.”

It’s the usual tease, full of Tony’s infectious energy and incorrigible grin, but Bruce can’t bring himself to smile. He tries, the corners of his mouth creasing, but he knows it never meets his eyes. Tony’s own grin falters, then fails, and the usual jokes fade away into silence.

He’s always wondered how much of his worry he wears on his face. Thanks to the way Tony’s face falls, he knows the answer is *all of it*.

They’re still frozen in the hallway, Tony’s fingers pinning him in place, when he asks, “Is Miles asleep?”

“What’s that got to do with—”
“Is he?”

The beat before Tony’s shrug feels like it lasts an hour. “Yeah, sure,” he answers, and Bruce watches the way his eyes sweep over Bruce’s face, attempting to read whatever expression is trapped there. “Sent him to bed twenty minutes ago, just like you ordered. He’s probably snoring his head off, dreaming of cute zombie-hunting—”

“His uncle’s requested a rehearing. It’s set for Friday afternoon.”

Bruce knows there’s an unmeasured, unrestrained response percolating its way through Tony’s brain, but he steps away before he can hear it. In the kitchen, there’s a kettle of hot water and an empty mug waiting, and he stares at the dishes like they’re not his own. Like he’s suddenly confused by yet another example of unexpected Tony Stark kindness, he thinks. In truth, he can’t count up the instances surprise decency anymore because there are so many.

Usually, he brushes them off with a private, half-shy smile.

Right now, he wants—

“The kid doesn’t know?” The question interrupts all the muddled thoughts still tangling in his head, and he twists to see Tony standing in the doorway, his shoulder against the doorjamb. When he shrugs, the expensive fabric of his button-down shirt catches against the wood there. “I mean, if I had to guess, and all that.”

Bruce shakes his head. “I didn’t want to tell him until I had all the details,” he admits quietly. “Which makes sense, since the whole point of the ‘parent’ part of ‘foster parent’ is, you know, acting like the kid’s actual parent would.” When Tony frowns, Bruce is forced to restrain himself from counting all the fine creases on his face. “I maybe used ‘parent’ a few too many times there.”

Bruce snorts. “Maybe,” he replies, and reaches for a teabag.

“But you get my point. And anyway, let’s be lawyers for a second, because here’s the deal: the guy’s not gonna win.” There’s something in Tony’s voice, some edge of certainty, that causes Bruce to stop with his hand on the kettle and just listen. Not only to the words, either, but to the thousand sounds that he’s become used to over the last handful of years: the slap of Tony’s bare feet against the kitchen tile, the cadence of his breath, the way his slacks whisper against the countertop when he hoists himself onto the kitchen island. “There’s no way,” he continues, “that the judge is gonna say, ‘Hey, you’re home, we’re all good now.’ No, she’s gonna say, ‘No way in hell that kid’s coming home with you,’ and when she does, Miles’ll have you and me and Jess Jones all there to pick up the pieces.”

Bruce shakes his head slightly. Steam curls out of his mug as he pours the hot water, and he watches it dance into the air and dissipate. “You don’t have to be there,” he says, setting down the kettle.

“See, and that’s where you’re wrong.”

Sighing, he twists to look at Tony. He’s sitting on the island, his legs swaying idly and his elbows on his thighs. Bruce worries for a moment that, if he leans forward any further, he’ll fall right off. But that doesn’t prevent him from tracing the shape of his legs in his slacks, or the skin of his forearms from where he’s rolled up his shirt sleeves.

Tony raises an eyebrow, and Bruce sighs. “He’s not your responsibility, Tony,” he says. He’s surprised at how hesitant the words sound in his ears. “You’re not the person who took this all on.”
“He’s not— Okay, listen.” Tony hops off the island and lands gracefully at the very outer bounds of Bruce’s personal space. He lingers there, not quite crowding as much as hovering, but Bruce swears he can feel him. It all radiates outward: his heat and his presence, the flex of fingers that are against his sides instead of pressed to Bruce’s hips, the curl of warm breath when he exhales.

Bruce isn’t a tactile person, but Tony is, and in this moment, he almost misses the touch.

“This isn’t some black-and-white thing, what you’re doing here,” he presses. When he steps forward, Bruce pulls in an inadvertent, too-sharp breath. He feels like he’s suffocating when their eyes meet.

“Your responsibility, my responsibility, Jess’s responsibility, his uncle’s responsibility, they’re all stacked together. The sum’s bigger than the whole of the parts.” He shrugs. “But what is my responsibility, separate from all that, is this: the second he became yours, he became a little mine, and I don’t let my things suffer in silence.” He pauses. “Well, except for maybe my cat.”

The last comment, the diversion, dances between them, fading away like the steam from Bruce’s cup. The problem isn’t the joke, though, but the sentences before it.

Bruce swallows around the thick feeling in the back of his throat before he asks, “He became a little yours?”

And for all the glib witticisms that constitute the Tony Stark that Bruce’s grown to know and care about, there’s absolute silence between them in that moment. Silence, and the slow track of Tony’s dark eyes across his face. Bruce follows them, watching every little dip and rise. His mouth feels parched, but wetting his lips does nothing to solve the problem; the harder he swallows, the tighter his throat feels.

“He became part of you,” Tony says after what feels like an hour. When their eyes meet, Bruce somehow forgets how to breathe. “I care about things that are a part of you, try to make them a part of me. End of story.”

Bruce’s voice sounds foreign and distant—a murmur that belongs to someone else entirely—when he asks, “Do you succeed?”

“I like to think so,” Tony replies, and his fingers slide along Bruce’s hip and side before he wanders into the living room and turns on the TV.

Chapter End Notes

In most jurisdictions, if one of the parties in a child welfare proceeding—that is, one of the parents or guardians—is not present for the emergency hearing, he or she can demand a rehearing. This safeguard insures that those parents (or guardians) cannot be stripped of their right to parent without a chance to tell their side of the story.

In the comics, Miles Morales’s uncle is indeed named Aaron Davis; he is also called the Prowler.

A reader, KayQy, found the perfect Permanency theme song. I listen to it at least once a day and have approximately all the feelings about it. You can listen here.

Additionally, a newly-updated posting schedule for this and other Motion Practice stories can be found here.
Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce is reminded that the word “hearing” has multiple definitions. One is a court action, and he’s certainly familiar with those. The other involves the human ear as it processes information. Whether it’s information Bruce is ready for is another question altogether.

Chapter Notes

Child welfare agencies are ultimately the ones responsible if anything happens to a child who’s in state custody. Therefore, they often require some sort of clearance for anyone who is either living with or regularly interacting with the child. Individuals subject to this requirement include the spouse or significant other of the foster parent, a daycare provider, extended family to the foster parent, or others. The clearance generally includes a background check and interview.

In Bruce’s jurisdiction, the clearance is called an “intake.”

Additionally, even though child welfare proceedings are not criminal in nature, courts will generally not force parents (or other parties) to answer questions that might be incriminating in open criminal cases.

Jen and saranoh continue to be my heroes. You might as well get used to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“My client to the stand, please,” says Aaron Davis’s lawyer.

The lawyer—Anton Vanko, Bruce reminds himself, a criminal defense attorney of moderate repute in both Suffolk and Union Counties—is a broad man, wide without necessarily being heavy. Bruce imagines that the seams of his suit strain as he walks toward the podium, the expensive fabric hardly able to contain the musculature of his shoulders. It’s a pricey suit, the type with a name Bruce can’t himself pronounce, and the fabric flows like water as he unbuttons his jacket and waits.

Davis straightens his button-down as he walks toward the witness stand. He winks at Miles when he passes, and Miles grins.

Bruce feels guilty for disliking the man on principle, but really, it’s difficult not to.
Courtroom Four in the Union County courthouse is as stuffy and uncomfortable today as it was last Thursday; the tables are still too tall, the chairs are still too short, the gallery still feels claustrophobic and outdated, all at once. There’s sunlight streaming in through the windows, a reminder that the sun’s not completely abandoned them to autumn quite yet. Were the judge not swearing Davis in while Vanko leans on the podium, Bruce thinks he could mistake the whole tableau for last week’s.

Well, except for Miles.

Seated at counsel table with his guardian ad litem, Miles watches the proceedings with the same intent curiosity he usually saves for The Walking Dead or one of Tony’s ridiculous and half- untrue courtroom victory stories. He’d smiled at Jessica Jones when they’d arrived at the courthouse, actually chatted with Jessica Drew when they’d settled into their vinyl chairs at counsel table, and waved unsubtly at Davis when he’d walked into the courtroom with his lawyer. He’s halfway to a different kid, his demeanor not fully repaired but certainly better after the last eight days, and Bruce is weirdly proud of the way he sits up and pays attention to what’s happening around him. Weirdly proud, and then amused, because Miles reaches up to tug at his shirt collar for about the fiftieth time since Bruce’d collected him from school a half-hour ago.

The black-and-red striped polo shirt’d been a surprise gift from Tony the previous evening, materializing out of a Macy’s bag Bruce hadn’t remembered him bringing into the house.

“For your big day tomorrow,” Tony’d insisted after Miles’d extracted the offending garment. It’d been promptly followed by two Angry Birds t-shirts that’d lit his face up in the world’s most adoring smile. “Gotta look your best, impress the pants off the court so they don’t throw the book at you.”

Bruce, for his part, had rolled his eyes. “He’s not a criminal defendant,” he’d pointed out.

“Naked people,” Tony’d cited, his index finger drawing a circle in the space between them, “have very little influence on society.” Then, he’d stolen Bruce’s coffee mug and wandered out of the room.

Tony’s yet to arrive at the hearing, leaving the seat Bruce’d saved conspicuously empty, and he catches himself glancing toward the door as Vanko instructs his client to introduce himself to the court. The last forty-eight hours of Bruce’s and Miles’s lives have been colored by Tony, the man who’d stuck around until after midnight on Wednesday night, forcing Bruce through the worst season of Lost. He’d followed Bruce out of the judicial center Thursday afternoon, too, and dropped the Audi off at Bruce’s townhouse before spending the rest of the day as part of some confusing blended almost-family; they’d picked up Miles from school in Bruce’s Prius, stopped off at the grocery store for staples and snacks, and visited a coffee shop for coffee, hot chocolate, and an explanation of the rehearing. Miles’d accepted the news easily, but then, Bruce suspected the new clothes and infectious Tony Stark smile had helped.

That, and the enormous cupcake from the coffee shop.

Bruce is trying not to miss the infectious Tony Stark smile in the courtroom now, forcing himself to focus on the testimony in front of him. If he glances at his watch in the meantime, well, that’s just coincidence.

Honestly.

“Can you take the boy home?” Vanko’s asking. He’s standing next to the podium instead of in front of it, his elbow resting lazily against the wood. His hair, still more pepper than salt, hangs down his back in a limp ponytail.
On the witness stand, Davis nods emphatically. “Absolutely,” he answers. He turns in the swiveling vinyl chair—this one almost the same blue as the button-down shirt he wears over black jeans—and looks up at the judge. “What happened was a real mess, I know that. I’m sorry it went down the way it did. But Miles is my blood, and he belongs back home with me.”

Vanko nods. “And will this happen again?” he asks. His accent is thick, and it darkens his voice almost to a rumble.

“Never.”

“Thank you, Mister Davis.”

The attorney moves like molasses back to counsel table, measured steps that leave Davis the opportunity to sit comfortably on the witness stand and to smile placidly at the judge and the rest of the players in the courtroom. There’s something like a smile on Vanko’s face, too, but it’s—sharper, somehow. It’s rough, almost shark-like in its ferocity even though the man shows no teeth.

Bruce feels acutely uncomfortable, looking at that non-smile.

But then Matt Murdock’s rising to his feet, his hands braced on the counsel table before he pushes back his chair and starts drifting gradually toward the podium. Starts being the operative word, because he’s hardly three steps into the motion before the door to the courtroom swings open. Everyone in the room, Murdock included, turns to face—

“Sorry, sorry,” Tony says. He uses the heel of his foot to catch the door before it slams shut, his hands raised like twin white flags of surrender. “Accident on the interstate plus sub-par cell phone GPS directions equals an inadvertently-tardy Tony Stark.”

Bruce suspects the tiny twitch gracing the corners of Matt Murdock’s lips might just be a smile.

“Your honor, let the record reflect that Mister Stark has entered the courtroom.”

“So noted,” the judge responds, but Bruce hardly hears her. No, he’s instead embarrassingly focused on watching Tony scoot his way through the too-narrow row of gallery seating to plop down next to him, and then on the way Miles swings his chair around to grin at him. There’s delight on his face, delight that only ebbs after Jessica Drew forcibly turns his chair back around.

“Since when do you use GPS?” Bruce murmurs once Tony’s settled in next to him. Their elbows bump and press together, an attempt to share the too-tiny armrest between their seats.

Tony shrugs. “Since I pulled off the highway to make sure I showed up on time and managed to get super lost instead,” he retorts, and bumps Bruce’s shoulder with his own.

“I need your help in understanding this situation, Mister Davis,” Matt Murdock says just then, and Bruce jerks his attention back to the well of the courtroom. The assistant district attorney is standing in front of the podium, his hands loosely resting on its sides. For a moment, he reminds Bruce of a red-headed, sunglasses-wearing Clint Barton. “Because it seems you left your nephew alone for over a week.”

“Not a week,” Davis corrects. He leans forward and rests his arms on the desktop portion of the witness stand. “I left him alone for a couple hours one night, and it all just got out of hand.”

“Out of hand,” Murdock echoes.

“Yeah, I didn’t plan it, I’m sorry it happened, but I really only meant to leave him alone for a couple hours.”
“But you didn’t.”

“No,” Davis wets his lips, and Bruce catches himself shifting his weight in his own seat. He’s not a criminal prosecutor like Clint or the others, not an expert at reading body language the way most his colleagues are, but in that moment, he swears there’s something—insincere about Aaron Davis. Maybe it’s the way he holds himself, shoulders squared and fingers laced loosely together, or the way he stares down the blind attorney in front of him. Bruce can’t put his finger on it, but something’s off.

He doesn’t like it.

At the podium, Murdock shakes his head. “Then what happened, Mister Davis?” he asks, one of his hands lifting in a lazy half-shrug. “Because in order to release Miles to your care, the court has to be sure he’s not in danger, and you left him alone for a pretty long time.”

“What happened was business, Mister Murdock.” There’s something sharp in Davis’s tone as he sits back in his chair. “I am broke up inside about what happened, I am. I had to take care of some things, and they didn’t go according to plan. That happens sometimes, with business, and—”

“Let me stop you for a moment,” Murdock interrupts.

“Sure.”

“What business kept you away from your nephew for several days?”

Davis folds his hands in front of his stomach. His shoulders roll back, almost aggressively casual, before he shakes his head. “I’m afraid that’s personal.”

“Personal?” Murdock asks.

“Personal, and none of your business, yeah.” Davis shrugs. “It happened, I’m sorry, but it doesn’t matter what I was doing.” He tips his head momentarily in Vanko’s direction. Bruce can’t see the attorney well enough to read his expression—from where he’s seated in the gallery, he only catches the way Vanko pauses to scratch the side of his neck—but it’s enough to make Davis nod to himself. “And given the criminal charges your office is trying to pin on me,” he adds, turning back toward the podium, “I think it’s in my best interest to keep my mouth shut.”

“And your nephew’s best interests?” Murdock presses, raising his eyebrows. “What about those?”

“That’s argumentative, judge,” Vanko drawls without even attempting to rise from his seat.

“I withdraw the question,” Murdock says. “Nothing further, your honor.”

Bruce watches as the assistant district attorney turns to make his way back to counsel table in even, measured, familiar steps. Still in the witness box, Davis leans far back in the vinyl chair and flashes a charming smile at Miles, and Bruce couldn’t miss the warmth radiating off the kid if he tried. He’s not sure why his stomach tightens into a stupid, uncontrolled knot, just then, or why he twists to glance over at Tony, but both things happen within seconds of one another.

The other man’s still next to him, his elbows on the armrests and his fingers steepled almost under his chin, but there’s something thoughtful trapped in his expression. It creases the corners of his lips and finds fine lines around his dark eyes. For a moment, Bruce blames the quiet frown on Davis’s testimony, but it remains even after Jessica Drew declines to question Davis and the man steps off the witness stand.
If Bruce didn’t know better, he’d say Tony was frowning at Anton Vanko, not Aaron Davis.

But then, Davis settles into his chair, and Tony’s shoulders relax again.

“Mister Murdock stated the standard for this hearing correctly,” the judge says after a few seconds, her eyes lifting from the file before her to stare down at Davis and his attorney. “And last time we were here, I found that Miles was in danger because his guardian was missing. Now, that guardian is no longer missing, and he assures this court that he’s ready to step up and be a proper guardian for Miles.”

Bruce’s stomach twists a second time, hard enough that his lungs feel tight. Next to him, Tony shifts almost imperceptibly. Their shoulders brush, then their arms; when he steals a glance, it’s just in time to watch Tony settle his hand next to Bruce’s on the end of the armrest. It’s almost too-warm, familiar in a way the half-touch shouldn’t be, and Bruce feels momentarily overwhelmed.

“But I’m extremely bothered by Mister Davis’s attitude about this ‘business’ that kept him from his nephew,” the judge continues. She folds her hands on top of the bench. “This isn’t a situation where powers beyond the parties’ control kept them apart, and I don’t think it’s appropriate to release Miles to his uncle’s care until we get to the bottom of what kept him away—and whether this will happen again.”

Bruce knows, at least intellectually, that his first and foremost concern should be Miles’s response to the news. He should be craning his neck, trying desperately to gauge the boy’s reaction. But his initial instinct, the one that seizes him by the belly and refuses to let go, is to close his eyes and exhale.

To breathe again, for the first time in what feels like an hour—and then, to glance over at Tony. Tony’s smile is soft but genuine, filling his face with an almost all-encompassing warmth.

The feeling’s about to overwhelm him, to make him stammer through something he might regret in another ten seconds or so, when he hears Anton Vanko say, “Judge.” The attorney’s on his feet at counsel table, his hands flattened to the tabletop. Bruce can only see a third of his face, but his expression is suddenly as dark as his voice. “My client would ask that, if the boy must be out of his home, he be in Union County.”

The judge frowns slightly, her lips pursing into a thin pink line, but Murdock’s on his feet before she can even formulate a response. “Your honor,” he explains quickly, “as I understand the situation, the only Union County placement available at this time is at the shelter. Miles is still too young to qualify for a bed there. It’s clearly in his best interest to stay in Suffolk County for the time being.”

Bruce is so intent on watching the judge’s curt nod that the press of warm skin against his hand causes him to flinch. When he glances over, Tony’s attention is focused wholly on him. Bruce isn’t sure how still and silent he’s gone, but he knows from Tony’s expression that it’s at least as still and silent as he feels.

“Miss Drew?” the judge asks.

The guardian ad litem is halfway to her feet when Miles’s hand sneaks out and grabs her by her suit jacket. She pauses to glance at him, and he gestures frantically for her to lean down. “One moment, your honor,” she says. She bends toward him, dark hair swept behind her ear, and Miles scoots in close. There’s a moment of murmuring, too quiet to reach the gallery. Then, Jessica nods and rises.

Bruce thinks for a moment that Miles twists to glance back at he and Tony. But then, maybe that’s
his imagination.

“Your honor,” Jessica says, her lips curving into the slightest of smiles, “Miles just informed me that if he can’t go home with his uncle, he’d like to stay with Doctor Banner and his partner, Mister Stark.”

The statement’s so innocuous, so absolutely simple in its presentation, that Bruce hardly notices what’s been said. But when his mind processes that handful of words—Doctor Banner and his partner, Mister Stark—they rush up to greet him like the recoil from a shotgun, and the seconds suddenly blur together. He’s aware of Tony choking on air next to him, and Jessica Jones snapping to her feet quickly enough that the row of gallery seats shake; across the courtroom, he notices Vanko twisting violently around in his chair to gape at the two of them, while Bruce himself—

Bruce feels suddenly light-headed and unbalanced, like he’s just downed an entire bottle of NyQuil. Like reality’s slipped out from between his fingers, he thinks, leaving his cheeks red and too-warm as he drops his eyes to the speckled tile floor.

He’s vaguely aware of Jessica Jones’s voice explaining, “Your honor, the court should be aware that Mister Stark and Doctor Banner don’t in fact live together,” and of the judge thanking her.

But more acutely, he’s aware of the nearness of Tony: the press of his arm against Bruce’s on the armrest, the heat of his eyes burning a hole in the side of Bruce’s head, the steady cadence of his breathing.

That nearness is almost suffocating, suddenly, and yet Bruce isn’t sure he wants to be anywhere else.

It takes another handful of seconds for Bruce to reassemble his brain into a semblance of order; once he does, the judge is speaking, her eyes trained not on Davis and his attorney but rather on the gallery. “I’m never comfortable disrupting a successful placement in favor of the unknown,” she says. Her eyes linger first on Bruce, then on Tony next to him. If Bruce didn’t know better, he’d think Tony might’ve sat up a little straighter under her scrutiny, and maybe even smiled. “Miles is in a stable family-style placement. Unless a similar placement like that opens up here, and all the agencies working with him feel it’s in Miles’s best interest to be transferred, he should stay with—Mister Bantam?”

“Doctor Banner,” Jessica Drew corrects.

“Doctor Banner and his partner. Court’s adjourned.”

The court reporter, as she did the time before, instructs them all to rise, and Bruce follows the order half-mechanically. He can feel his ears and face burning, caught in an uncontrolled, clumsy embarrassment he can’t quite shake. He can’t twist toward Tony or meet Jessica Jones’s eyes, and he certainly can’t swallow without fighting against a bolus of guilt.

He feels like he’s seventeen again, a victim of vicious rumors at high school. The only difference is that this rumor is one of his own creation.

“If he’s sleeping there,” Jessica Jones chides, “we need to schedule a full intake for him. Background check, interview, the whole nine yards.” When Bruce jerks his head up, it’s to watch her scrolling through something on her cell phone. He thinks, but isn’t sure, that she’s fighting down a smirk. “Unless you’re still trying to convince me you’re not together.”

“We’re not,” Bruce replies. His response is urgent, a tight burst of words he can only half-control, and Jessica lifts her eyes in surprise. “Tony’ll tell you, we’re just—”
But when he glances over his shoulder, Tony isn’t there.

“You’re not a particularly good boyfriend-keeper,” Jessica observes. There’s a playful smugness in her expression as she jerks her head toward the well of the courtroom. “Glad we never gave you a toddler.”

Bruce rolls his eyes, exasperated and still embarrassed by Miles’s now-public misconception, but he follows the gesture anyway. Without the judge and court reporter, the room’s still a bustle of activity; Murdock and his assistant are chatting as they pack up the computer and Braille embosser, and nearby, Miles and Jessica Drew are engaged in a conversation with Aaron Davis. Bruce focuses on the three of them for a second, clumped together just in front of the bar and laughing companionably. Davis’s hand rests heavily on his nephew’s shoulder while Miles leans into the familiar touch. The boy’s grinning from ear to ear, his attention darting from one adult to the other as they talk. When his guardian ad litem nudges him in the shoulder, he blushes and glances at the floor like she’s just unraveled a secret.

But then, Davis wraps Miles up in a half-hug that’s readily returned, and the jolt of jealousy in Bruce’s gut forces him to look away.

That, and Tony’s laughter.

It’s not Tony’s genuine laughter, not the rush of warmth and joy he’s used to hearing. No, as his eyes drift toward the last counsel table, he’s suddenly aware of how forced and almost unpleasant the sound is. It’s laughter reserved for uncomfortable board meetings and unfunny jokes presented by Urban Ascent donors. It’s laughter that Bruce’s only heard a handful of times in the years he’s known Tony Stark.

But then, he realizes it’s because Tony is talking to Anton Vanko.

At first blush, it looks almost friendly, two lawyers in expensive suits conversing quietly in the well of the courtroom. Bruce drifts toward them, assuming not for the first time that Vanko’s just another individual listed in Tony’s impossibly full rolodex, but after a few seconds, he suspects he’s not witnessing a conversation at all. Vanko’s jaw is set almost aggressively tight, his lips pressed into a frown at whatever Tony’s saying; when Tony’s hands still at the end of a sentence, he straightens up a little taller, his shoulders squaring under his suit jacket. This man, Bruce knows, is not the Tony Stark who seriously discusses zombie apocalypses and brings enormous pizzas in from Monroe County. Instead, the man standing next to Vanko is Assistant District Attorney and millionaire playboy Anthony Stark, the heir to a fortune who’s never lost at oral argument.

“I’m just saying, buddy,” Tony remarks, his shoulders lifting in a shrug that is somehow anything but casual, “it’s all water under the bridge. Am I right, or am I right?”

He nudges Vanko’s arm lightly with the back of his hand, and Bruce watches as the other attorney’s entire body tightens. He draws himself up to his full height, his jaw clenching and eyes narrowing. Very slowly, he shakes his head. “Not water,” he replies, his voice thickened as much by anger as by his accent. “There is no water under our bridge.”

“Hey, no, listen, I get it,” Tony replies, opening his palms. “The situation sucked. But that was a long time ago, now, and—”

“You did not deserve what you got.” The words are clipped and sharp, spitting like fire into the relative silence of the room. “You were joke. You still are joke. The fact you are attorney at all, it brings shame on what we—”
“Tony?”

Bruce hardly recognizes the sound of his own voice, or the clumsily needy way that the familiar name trips off his tongue and into the emptiness between the three of them. Vanko jerks violently in Bruce’s direction, and suddenly, he can both see and feel the full measure of the fury that’s radiating off him. Beside him, Tony looks—not surprised, exactly, Bruce catches himself thinking, but almost alarmed. His eyes are wide, eyebrows raised and lips hanging open, and it all leaves Bruce with the distinct expression that Tony’d forgotten he was even in the room. They stare at one another for a few beats, Tony’s eyes searching Bruce’s before he breaks into a stunning grin.

“Hey, big guy!” he announces. Vanko rolls his eyes as he reaches for his briefcase, muttering something in a language Bruce isn’t sure he recognizes, but Tony reaches for Bruce. He slings an arm around Bruce’s shoulders and squeezes until the tension breaks away. Anthony Stark the appellate advocate fragments and then disappears, and Bruce is left with Tony: warm, familiar, too-handsy Tony.

“What was that?” he asks once the courtroom doors swing shut behind Vanko. He’s half-tucked under Tony’s arm, an uneven hug that’s simultaneously too tight and not tight enough.

Tony shrugs. “Oh, you know, the usual,” he replies casually, and Bruce doesn’t miss the way his eyes travel across the whole of the room but avoid his face. “Just making friends and influencing people.”

“I think he wanted to punch you.”

“And he wouldn’t be the first.” His hand slides along Bruce’s shoulder, rubbing gently, and Bruce tries to ignore the way his belly tightens at the touch. At least, until Tony releases him and grins right in his face. “So,” he drawls, leaning back on his heels. “I’m your partner.”

It’s a statement not a question, so over-full of teasing and play that Bruce feels his entire face flush. He tries to glance over Tony’s shoulder for help, but the courtroom’s now empty; when he drops his eyes to the floor, he swears he can feel Tony watching the top of his head. He seriously wonders whether he could squeeze into the cracks between the floor tiles and disappear.

“Tony,” he starts to say, “Miles just—”

“No, no, I like it,” Tony interrupts, and Bruce glances up for a half-second just in time to be swept away by the brightness of Tony’s grin. “It’s very 1999 social progressive of the two of us. Just tell me: are we partners, or life partners?” Despite the heat still clinging to his cheeks, Bruce rolls his eyes. “Nice commitment ceremony on the beach before gay marriage was actually legal? Platinum ring with a tiny diamond, or is that too traditional?”

Bruce sighs. “Tony—”

“I’d wear your letter jacket, you know.” And for all the sarcasm and allusions to the impossible, there’s something suddenly sincere in Tony’s tone. When Bruce raises his head again, Tony’s watching him carefully. Not for the first time, those dark eyes track across his face, and not for the first time, Bruce forgets how to breathe. “You could pin me, and I promise, I’d never date another member of the football team or anything.”

Bruce wets his lips, a futile attempt to try and assemble some kind of reply, but then the door to the courtroom swings open.

“We need to schedule visitation times,” Jessica Jones says, jerking her head back toward the hallway.
“Remind me what your schedule’s like?”

“Sure,” Bruce replies, and honestly, he’s not really surprised when Tony follows after him.

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It’s almost midnight when Miles says, “I think my parents would be pretty pissed off at him.”

Bruce flinches when his train of thought’s violently derailed, and the highlighter in his hand leaps from his fingers and lands on the floor. He’s halfway through editing a law review note for one of his former students. The prose is imperfect, the footnotes are a mess, but the premise is sound enough to keep Bruce awake; his mind runs through suggestions and counter-arguments as he works his way through the clunky writing.

The living room is dim, this late at night, lit only by the lamp on the end table; in the half-dark, Miles looks almost like a shadow. He’s in SpongeBob pajama pants and one of the too-big t-shirts from his bag, too slender to really fill out either garment. His bare feet rub one another under the trailing ends of his pants.

Bruce takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose.

The afternoon after the hearing had been filled with a level of chaos and activity that, more than once, Bruce’d caught himself considering normal. They’d picked up Dummy and Butterfingers at Tony’s (leaving Miles to gape at the size of Tony’s ridiculous house and equally-ridiculous backyard) and taken them to the dog park to run; after they’d returned the dogs to the house, they’d headed out to dinner together at a local restaurant and then returned to Bruce’s for leftover frozen yogurt and the last few episodes of The Walking Dead. Miles’d remained in good spirits the whole time, grinning at the dogs and relating entire conversation he’d had in the half-hour he’d visited with his uncle at the courthouse. At a few points, Bruce’d worried that the euphoria of seeing Davis again would be followed by a crash, but by the time Miles’d high-fived Tony goodnight and climbed the stairs up to bed, he’d assumed any potential crisis had been averted.

Now, with Miles hovering in the doorway to the living room in the dead of night, Bruce realizes he was wrong.

“Your uncle?” he asks when he lifts his hand away, and Miles nods uncertainly. He shifts his weight from one foot to another, absolutely silent and staring at the floor.

“Because, I mean— They wouldn’t’ve ever done that.” He shoves his hands in his pockets before he wanders into the living room. His eyes drift around, surveying the familiar furniture and photos in the darkness but never once landing on Bruce. Bruce isn’t surprised when he steals the usual fleece blanket off the arm of the couch, or when he climbs into the armchair in the corner. “They used to get freaked out when I walked home from school. Don’t talk to strangers and everything, you know?”

Bruce nods. “That’s what parents do,” he says quietly, but he hears the catch in his own tone. When he bends to pick up the dropped highlighter, he imagines Miles’s eyes following the motion; when he places his pile of papers on the coffee table, he’s almost certain the boy is watching. “I’m sure your uncle worries about you, too.”

“I guess.” Bruce glances over in time to watch Miles tuck his legs up on the chair. He’s a blob of
dark t-shirt and darker blanket, and he maneuvers around until only his head is peeking out. “When’d your parents die?”

The question is somehow expected and unexpected at the same time, and the rush of pushed-away memories momentarily threatens to suffocate Bruce. He pulls in a breath and reaches for his mug of half-cooled tea. He sips it mechanically, a three-second stall while his lungs loosen. When he sets it back down on the end table, he’s acutely aware of how closely Miles is watching him. “My mother died when I was six,” he answers carefully. “My father, when I was—older.”

“How old?”

He presses his lips together and stares down the stack of half-edited papers on the coffee table. “I don’t remember,” he admits without looking up. “When I was living with my aunt, so I was maybe—thirteen or fourteen?” He shakes his head. “It’d been a few years since I’d seen my father.”

Miles is silent for a few seconds after that. Bruce considers glancing over, but he’s not entirely sure what’ll happen if he does. He can count on one hand the number of people he’s discussed his family situation with: Tony, certainly, has heard the most of it, and Clint and Natasha have each received choice selections at some point. He knows, or at least suspects, that Steve wonders about his lack of rousing stories about elderly parents, but Steve’s too polite to ask. If he and Bucky have private theories, they’ve at least kept them to themselves.

He wonders how many of those unspoken questions Miles will ask, and whether he can answer any them.

“My dad and my uncle didn’t really get along,” Miles says, his voice hardly above a murmur. When Bruce finally looks over at him, he’s focused on the blanket, his eyes half-hooded. “My dad always said he was a bad influence, that he wasn’t a good person. And I thought he was awesome, so I kept going over there even when my dad told me not to.” He sighs quietly and shakes his head. “I kind of think maybe this is what my dad meant.”

“My aunt never liked my father,” Bruce replies. Miles’s face lifts a few inches, and Bruce forces a rueful little smile. “I don’t know the whole story, exactly, but when I was very young, my aunt sort of—washed her hands of the whole situation. Said that if my father—her brother—wanted to live the way he was, then he was on own.” He shrugs slightly. “Years later, after my mother’s death and my father’s— After they were both gone, she ended up taking me in. Family’s something you can’t really replicate, I think.”

Miles nods briefly, but this time, he doesn’t look away. “Do you have any more family?” he asks. “Besides Tony and Dot’s dads, I mean.”

Bruce snorts half a laugh. “Not immediate family, no,” he replies. He thinks there’s the ghost of a smile touching Miles’s lips. “My aunt and uncle, plus my cousin Jennifer, all live in California. We see each other once or twice a year, maybe. I tend to stick to the family I’ve chosen.”

“Like Tony.”

He resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Like Tony,” he confirms, “and the other people I’m close to here.”

Nodding, Miles shifts around under the blanket, repositioning himself until he’s half-seated, half-lying in the armchair. His legs stretch out and find the ottoman, and he reclines there, the bare toes of one foot sticking out into the air. He’s still watching Bruce, though, his face cautious and curious in a way Bruce can’t quite pin down.
At least, until he asks, “Do you ever want kids?”

As much as Bruce thinks he should’ve expected the question, the words curl into a fist around his stomach. He lifts a shoulder, a sort of noncommittal shrug, and picks up his tea. The mug’s cool to the touch, but he wraps his fingers around it anyway. “I don’t know,” he admits.

“What about Tony?”

“Yes.” The answer jumps out from between Bruce’s lips without permission, and he blinks at the suddenly unfamiliar sound of his own voice. When Miles raises his eyebrows, he shakes his own head. “I don’t think he’d admit it if anyone asks,” he clarifies, his fingers lifting momentarily as though to sweep away Miles’s next question. “He and his father, their relationship wasn’t very good. I think sometimes he worries he’d be the same.” He glances down at his half-finished tea. “But I think he’d be a good father.”

There’s a long stretch of silence between the two of them before Miles replies, “I think you’d both be pretty good dads.” When Bruce glances up, the boy’s watching him carefully. He smiles slightly, and Miles smiles back. “Weird,” he adds, “but pretty good.”

Bruce isn’t sure what the flutter in his chest is, or whether it’s necessarily bad. “Thanks.”

Miles’s grinning reply is interrupted by a massive yawn. He stretches under the blanket, toes curling, before he settles back down into the chair. “Can I stay down here while you finish whatever you’re doing?”

“Sure,” Bruce answers, and watches as he wriggles just enough that he can comfortably rest his head against the back cushion of the chair and close his eyes.

When Bruce finishes editing his student’s piece an hour later, Miles is asleep in the armchair, blanket skewed and one leg nearly falling off the ottoman, his mouth open in tiny, half-silent snores. Bruce extracts another blanket from the basket in the corner and drapes it over his bare limbs. When he nudges the ottoman closer so Miles’s leg won’t drop off the side of it, he snorts and presses his face against the chair, and Bruce can’t help his smile.

He stands there for a few moments, just watching the unworried, peaceful expression on Miles’s face. And then, as much as he knows he shouldn’t, and as much as it feels ridiculous, he presses his lips to his own fingers, his fingers to the top of Miles’s head, and murmurs, “Goodnight” before he heads upstairs himself.

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“You don’t have a costume,” Princess America informs Miles the next afternoon. “You have to have a costume.”

Steve and Bucky’s apartment, nestled on the second floor of their complex and overlooking the play area in the courtyard, is a veritable shrine to Halloween. Every previously-bare surface is decked out in the finest decorations that two government attorneys paying for full-time daycare can afford: there are light-up ghost garlands strung around the windows and doors, homemade construction paper pumpkins with a variety of ghoulish expressions stuck to bare spots on the walls, tchotchke witches, black cats, and bats littering various tables and shelves, and a trick candy bowl with a disembodied hand that snaps down on your fingers when you reach inside. Miles swears under his breath when he...
nearly loses his thumb in pursuit of a miniature Snickers bar.

Holidays with a toddler, Bruce thinks for the fourth Halloween in a row, are far different from holidays without.

Miles, for his part, rubs his newly-bruised hand while the mechanical voice from the bowl cackles at him. “Costume?” he asks.

“It’s Halloween,” Dot insists, wrinkling up her nose. “You have to have a costume on Halloween.” She’s wearing a frilly blue dress that’s embellished with a red-and-white striped belt and a star on the front, and it sways when she puts her hands on her hips and shoots the preteen a disapproving look. Her leggings and ankle-socks are white and lacy, her shoes are classic Mary Janes with double-knots, and her hair is a mess of waves. It’s held back by some contraption that’s half-headband, half-tiara. The bedazzled “A” in the center of it sparkles when it catches the light from outside.

Two weeks earlier, Bruce’d walked into Steve’s office at lunch to find Bucky sprawled out in a chair and groaning audibly. “Princess America,” he’d complained. When Bruce’d raised an eyebrow, he’d lulled his head back against the edge of the chair. “Our daughter wants to be Princess America for Halloween. I’m pretty sure that’s not even a thing.”

“It’ll be a thing,” Steve’d replied gravely. “Our happiness depends on it.”

“No,” Bucky’d retorted. He’d sat up and jabbed a finger in Steve’s direction. “My happiness depends on stuffing her full of candy at the yearly complex Halloween party. You’re the one responsible for themed holidays. Princess America is up to you.”

Princess America sways in the middle of the fully-decorated living room now, peering up at Miles. Outside, the shouts and laughter of other children from the apartment complex echo up from the courtyard. There are carnival games, face-painters, raffles, and even a bounce house set up, all for the cost of carnival tickets. “And of living here,” Bucky’d complained the year before after Dot’d insisted her entire family—Tony and Bruce included—suffer the indignity of face paint.

Face paint is, clearly, no longer her biggest concern.

“Tony doesn’t have a costume,” Miles attempts after the steely blue glare of the four-year-old’s become too much.

“Hey, hey, no besmirching my good name and dedication to themed holiday events,” Tony retorts. He straightens his black suit jacket, then his black tie, and strikes a square-shouldered pose. “My name is Agent Agent, the head of Princess America’s secret service. I protect her from harm.”

“And dress like Phil,” Bucky mutters. Behind him, Steve stops emptying bags of candy into a wicker basket and bites back a grin.

“Secret service agents are bland and deadly. Coulson’s one of those two things.” Tony breaks his pose to drop his hands to his hips. His expression reminds Bruce of one of Dot’s more challenging looks. “What’re you supposed to be, anyway?”

“He’s the bad guy!” Dot crows. Her grin’s halfway to blinding as she clasps her hands together. “And once Miles has a costume, he can protect me, too!”

Miles, who’d been smirking at Tony’s whole “Agent Agent” routine, glances around the room. He looks momentarily spooked, like he’s just woken up from a dream that involved him naked in front of an auditorium full of other kids. “Uh,” he says, and shoves his hands in his pockets as he shrugs. “I guess I can go as me. Like, a superhero not in his costume yet?”
Dot scowls at him. “No.”

“Told you he needed a costume,” Tony remarks casually. Bruce frowns as he glances over, but the other man just shrugs and steals a sucker out of Steve’s basket. Steve rolls his eyes. “Yesterday,” he clarifies. “I warned you. Twice, actually, now that I think of it.”

“Tony, you texted ‘yes, our teeth and ambitions are bared, be prepared.’”

Next to Tony, Steve snorts. “From The Lion King.”

“What?” Bruce asks.

“The song. It’s when Scar and the hyenas are”—When Steve lifts his head, everyone else in the room, including Dot, is staring at him. The only one who’s smiling is Tony, and he twirls the sucker between his fingers before popping it in his mouth. Steve sighs. “I’m going to pretend I don’t know all the words, now.”

“Good idea,” Bucky comments, but there’s something incredibly warm about his tone and the way he presses his shoulder against Steve’s when Steve rolls his eyes again. Then, his elbow impacts Miles’s arm, and Miles jerks his head up. “C’mon, kid. I need to change, and I have an idea for you.”

There’s a half-second when Miles hesitates, his eyes drifting across the room not to Tony but to Bruce. Bruce raises his eyebrows and offers the boy a little half-nod, encouraging without trying to advertise his nerves, and Miles nods back. Whether Bucky catches the tiny non-conversation or relies solely on his parenting instincts, Bruce isn’t sure; either way, he launches into a ridiculous story about all the games down in the courtyard, and Miles grins as they wander down the hallway together.

It’s only after the bedroom door closes that Steve looks up from the basket of candy. “It’s going okay?” he asks. The question’s careful, as though he’s afraid of breaking some delicate balance.

Bruce shrugs slightly. He reaches to steal a miniature candy bar out of the trick bowl, knowing full well that the snapping hand and mechanical laughter’ll serve as a momentary stall. There’s obviously an answer to the question—aside from the hiccup the night before, Miles’s is in good spirits and settling into a routine at home with him—but he can’t help but feel the looming specter of the rehearing the day before.

It’s not Miles’s fault that he’s self-conscious. He knows that.

But it is Miles’s fault that Tony’s stuck closer than usual, that he’d fixed Bruce’s collar an hour ago on their way out the door, and that he’s watching extra-closely right now.

He drops his own eyes to the candy bar and unwraps it. “I think seeing his uncle threw him for a loop, a little,” he admits. He shakes his head. “It’s a lot to take in, as a kid, knowing that your relative disappeared or maybe didn’t want you right then. But once they start therapy and visits, I think he’ll be okay.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Steve nod. “I grew up living with my Nana as much as my parents,” he replies. “It was a big deal to me that she was always there. I can’t imagine if she wasn’t.”

“I think that’s Miles’s problem,” Bruce says, nodding idly, “just turned up to eleven.”

When he looks up from the wrapper, finally, he’s surprised to catch not only Steve watching him, but Tony as well. The sucker stick’s hanging out from between Tony’s pursed lips, his attention evenly
and expertly trained on Bruce’s face. The room suddenly feels very small.

It feels smaller still when something impacts Bruce’s hip. When he glances down, Dot’s chin digs into the softest part of his side. “Will you get a new boy?” she asks.

Bruce frowns. “Uh, what?”

“After Miles goes home. Will you get a new one?”

He swallows around the thick feeling in the back of his throat. Dot peers up at him, wide-eyed and curious, and he can’t chase away his urge to lie and tell her “yes.” Or, even worse, to admit to the traitorous voice he’s struggling to chase away, the one that wishes for impossible things.

He forces a tiny smile. “No,” he tells her gently.

But in nearly the exact same instant, Tony breaks the silence and says, “Maybe.”

Bruce’s head springs up, away from the tiny girl with the sudden, enormous frown, and he can’t stop himself from staring at Tony. The sucker’s still in his mouth, his lips cherry-red from the candy, and he looks—normal. Unbothered, Bruce amends, like he’s not just said something absolutely ridiculous. When Bruce opens his mouth to correct him, Tony raises his eyebrows.

He drops his eyes to the floor instead.

“What no?” comes the voice from his hip, and Bruce glances over to meet Dot’s incredibly dubious squint. “The kitty in the book stayed with the ducks forever,” she explains, as though she’s secretly hoarding all the answers. “But Daddy said sometimes the kitties go home and then new kitties come.”

“We spent two hours trawling bookstores for a picture book on the foster care system,” Steve fills in with a shrug. He sets the candy basket down and then leans against the back of the couch. “We ended up with a book about a kitten raised by geese and . . . supplemented.”

Bruce is still struggling with some kind of answer when Tony snorts audibly. It’s like a laugh, but sharper, and when Bruce glances over, he catches the other man pointing the sucker at Dot. “For the record,” he says, using the half-finished candy like a conductor’s baton, “the book’s right. And, actually, your dads are right. The only person who’s wrong here is Uncle Bruce.” And if he flicks his gaze away from Princess America to shoot Bruce a withering half-second look, it’s lost somewhere in the seriousness of his expression. “But Uncle Bruce currently doesn’t want to think about the whole ‘potential forever family’ part of the deal he signed up for.”

Bruce suspects that Dot’s far too young to follow Tony’s mini-rant, but that doesn’t dissuade her from asking, “Why?”

He sighs and shakes his head. “Because Miles has an uncle who loves him,” he says, “and that’s where he belongs.”

“Because feelings are hard,” Tony supplies, and there’s something akin to disappointment in his tone.

Bruce wants to argue with him, but the words stick in the back of his throat. Not that Tony’s right, exactly, but because Tony’s over-simplifying the situation. He’d never signed up to be anything more than a temporary placement, a holdover for kids who needed a friendly face for a few days, and to jump from that to—
“May I present Princess America’s captain of the guard!” Bucky announces suddenly, and when Bruce lifts his head, he finds it hard not to burst out laughing. Miles is decked out from head-to-toe in a set of Bucky’s old military fatigues. They’re warn out and faded, creased from years of sitting in the back of a closet or the bottom of a drawer. Even the most cursory glance reveals that Bucky’s folded and pinned them in places so they won’t entirely hang off the skinny twelve-year-old.

But it’s adorable. Adorable enough that when Bruce rolls his lips together to keep from grinning, Miles flushes in embarrassment and stares at the floor.

Dot breaks away from Bruce in a bolt of excitement and launches herself at Miles. She grabs him by the arm and immediately starts jumping up and down in delight, the frills on her dress bouncing with her. “You’re the Halloween soldier!” she declares shrilly, and Miles works to roll his eyes.

“KGB,” Bucky corrects. He’s wearing a black t-shirt with the arms cut off, black jeans, and a black face mask. He looks, for lack of a better word, absolutely ridiculous. “And we’re forever banning your dad from his Tom Clancy novels.”

“And from Clint’s wardrobe,” Tony says. When Bucky and Steve both frown at him, he gestures vaguely to Bucky’s black-on-black ensemble. “C’mon, with the critical lack of sleeves and the crotch-hugging jeans? You’ve gotta see the resemblance.”

Dot abruptly abandons her enthusiastic bouncing to peer between her parents. “Does that mean Clint’s coming?” she asks.

She only misses Bucky’s exaggerated eye-roll because of Steve’s gentle smile. He reaches down to smooth her hair. “They had other plans, sweetheart.”

“Of course our,” Tony declares. Before Bruce can stop him—before Bruce can even decide whether he wants to stop him, actually—there’s an arm around his shoulders, too. He jerks his head up and is graced with a half-second glance at Tony’s face before Tony nuzzles Bruce’s hair. He can feel the shape of Tony’s nose and lips against his scalp, never mind the scratch of his goatee and the heat of his breath. It feels momentarily like he’s surrounded by Tony, drowning in his warmth and the scent of his aftershave, and he completely forgets how to breathe.

All the blood in his body pools in either his cheeks or his belly. Every coherent thought flees from his brain and leaves him with stupid lizard instincts, ones that tell him to flatten his hand against Tony’s back and to press closer. He’s aware of Tony talking, of the words, “We’re partners in all
things, right, honey?”, but only in the vaguest, most disconnected sense.

It’s ridiculous that he’s overwhelmed by what is, effectively, a very affectionate hug. But when Tony steps away, he feels breathless and flushed, like he’s just run a marathon.

Dot and Miles are both grinning, and when Bruce hazards a glance at Tony, he’s rewarded with split-second wink and another infectious smile.

Steve and Bucky, on the other hand, are staring at them like they’ve just been replaced by pod people.

The silence only cracks when Bucky says, “Okay, this face mask is making me hallucinate.” He cards his fingers through his hair and shakes his head. Bruce suddenly can’t meet his eyes. “Shall we, Princess?”

The transition is thankfully brief. Dot grabs Miles’s hand and drags him out the front door without a second thought, and Bucky follows, pausing only to exchange very confused looks with Steve. Tony squeezes Bruce against his chest, almost an encore to the earlier performance, and steals another sucker out of the candy basket before joining Princess America’s entourage. When the door slams, only Steve remains in the apartment.

Well, Steve and Bruce himself, but Bruce hardly feels human enough to count as a full person.

He stands in the middle of the living room for a long time, his brain slowly starting to fire on the appropriate number of cylinders again, and he’s acutely aware of the fact that Steve’s staring at him. He tries to pat down his hair, aware that it’s mussed and sticking out from Tony’s drive-by affection; when that fails, he shoves his hands in his pockets. He’s analyzing the splatter pattern of an old juice stain on the carpet when Steve starts to ask, “So, are you two actually—"

“Miles thinks we’re together.” Bruce hardly recognizes his own voice, caught like it is in the back of his throat. He swallows and draws in a breath, but he knows it won’t actually help. “The first night Tony came over, he just assumed that we were a couple, and I—"

“Didn’t correct him,” Steve finishes.

There’s something soft in his voice, not concern as much as curiosity, and Bruce purses his lips while he nods. “I didn’t really have a chance,” he justifies, but he’s fairly certain it sounds like a lie. Because it is, he reminds himself. He lifts his shoulders in some semblance of a shrug. “I was working up to it, trying to figure out how to explain the relationship without sounding ridiculous. Then, at the rehearing, he mentioned it to his guardian ad litem, and it ended up on the record, and —”

He shakes his head.

“And Tony’s playing along?” Steve asks. Bruce glances up to find careful eyes studying his face. He nods limply and watches the tension in Steve’s shoulders unspool as he exhales. “Because now he knows that you’re letting Miles think you’re a couple,” he surmises, “and he can get away with it.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “Because he thinks it’s funny.”

“Or because he likes having the excuse.” Steve leans his full weight against the back of the couch, and, when Bruce frowns at him, raises his eyebrows. His broad arms settle across his chest. “Even you aren’t this blind.”

“To what?”
“To the fact Tony wants to be with you.”

Steve says it simply, like it’s a universal truth known to everyone except maybe Bruce himself, and Bruce—He wants to snort, wants to dismiss the whole concept with a grin and a laugh, but the sounds all stick between his teeth.

Instead, he shakes his head. “He— It isn’t—”

“Bruce.” And for all of Steve’s kindness, for all of his enormous heart and his love of the people in his own found family, there’s something deathly serious clinging to the very edges of his tone. “I’ve known Tony for a long time. Longer than you, longer than Clint or Natasha. The only person who’s known him longer is Pepper.” Bruce drops his back to the carpeting. “I was his intern at Cramer and March, remember? I’ve seen the person he was before he started at the office, and that’s not the person he is today.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with me,” Bruce points out.

“But it doesn’t have nothing to do with you, either.” When he hazards a glance back in Steve’s direction, his blue eyes are steady and absolutely unblinking. He thinks he can hear his heart thudding from where it’s caught in the back of his throat. “And I don’t believe for a second that you don’t have some of the same feelings.”

For a split second, he feels like the wind’s been knocked out of his body. He forces his chest to expand, his lungs to fill and empty again, but he swears he can feel the effort of each muscle contracting. “It’s complicated.”

“You sound like Clint.” There’s absolutely no humor in Steve’s voice. He shakes his head. “Love’s only complicated when you make it complicated.”

Bruce snorts what could be either a laugh or a trapped sob. “That’s not always true.”

“Maybe.” Steve shrugs and then, slowly, unfolds his arms. He rests his hands on the back of the couch for a second and levels a long, knowing look in Bruce’s direction. “But you’ll never actually find out unless you try.”

Bruce wants to reply, wants to somehow correct Steve’s ridiculous Disney-movie picture of love—the one where you fall for your high school sweetheart, marry him, and end up with an adorable daughter all before you’re thirty—but the words don’t form quickly enough. Because there’s a knock at the door, followed by a cry of “trick or treat!”, and Steve’s too busy sweeping up the basket of candy to wait for Bruce’s defense. Or his rationalization, he thinks, and shakes his head at himself.

Out the window, he can see where the courtyard’s filled with children running around between face-painting sessions or attempts to bob for apples. Princess America’s hard to miss in her bright blue get-up, and Bruce keeps watching her even as the trick-or-treaters run past the window and onto the next apartment. She darts back and forth between Bucky, Miles, and Tony, lingering and laughing with each of them.

A few seconds later, Miles laughs, his face lighting up at something the little girl’s done. Then, she drags him toward the face-painting table and effectively out of sight.

Bruce remembers, not for the first time, the lecture from Natasha about how it’s okay to want things. He wonders whether there’s a size limit on what he’s allowed to want.
They end up at Tony’s after their rousing afternoon with Princess America, collapsed onto the various living room furniture with a crappy Halloween movie playing on the enormous TV. They’re stuffed full of pizza (Steve and Bucky’s treat), Halloween candy, and the homemade carrot cake that Tony’d won in one of the raffles, too tired and full to actually do much more than lounge. More than once, he thinks he catches Miles starting to nod off where he’s tucked up on an oversized chair; every time, though, the boy jerks back awake, rubs his face with a hand (marring his American flag face paint), and goes right back to watching the movie.

Then again, Bruce’s eyelids feel heavy, too.

He’s not sure how much time passes there on the couch—maybe minutes, maybe hours, maybe some conservative estimate in the middle—but he’s only aware he’s fallen asleep once he wakes up. His cheek’s cushioned on something that’s warm but not entirely soft, and when he shifts, the warm thing shifts with him. Sleep clings to him, its tendrils curling around the edges of his consciousness and trying to pull him back under, but he stirs just enough to realize where he is:

Tony’s living room, on Tony’s couch, with an infomercial playing on the television and his face pressed to Tony’s shoulder.

Tony’s asleep too, halfway propped up in the corner of the couch and breathing quietly. One leg hangs off the couch, the other sprawls out along the cushions, and somehow, Bruce is tucked in the middle. Using Tony almost as body pillow, he realizes drowsily, with Tony’s arm wrapped around his back and holding him close.

In the oversized chair, Miles is still curled up and blissfully asleep, face paint smeared down his cheek. There’s a blanket draped over his legs and a strange ball of something tucked up by his feet. In the mostly-dark of the living room, Jarvis looks more like a blotch of black and white fuzz than a cat; Bruce only recognizes him when his fluffy tail flicks idly.

For a moment, he considers climbing off the couch and moving elsewhere—the usual guest room, maybe, or the other oversized chair that’s currently occupied by Butterfingers. Tony’s a heavy sleeper, not easily disturbed by any amount of jostling or noise. If Bruce moved, he’d probably just resituate himself and be no worse for wear.

But Bruce is exhausted, and Tony’s body is both warm and calming, somehow. The feel of his cheek against Tony’s shoulder and Tony’s firm arm around his back are certainly things he can tolerate for a single night.

They might, he thinks very quietly, even be things he could get used to.

He shifts slowly, as carefully as he’s able, and presses his hand to the back of the couch. It’s easier than he suspects to grab the cheap throw blanket that’s draped there and pull it down over both of them. The whole production’s sloppy and graceless, every motion marred by sleep and caution, but somehow, they end up covered.

And somehow, he ends up even closer to Tony, the two of them pressed together like they’ve never spent a night apart.

He’s almost all the way asleep again, almost completely oblivious to the world around him, when he feels Tony pull him closer. Tony shifts under him, then settles with his face nearly in Bruce’s hair.
When he sighs, Bruce feels the rush of his breath against his scalp; he can’t control the gooseflesh that rises along his arms, or the way he shivers.

He’s not certain whether it’s imagination or reality that he feels Tony’s fingers sliding along the plane of his back, or Tony’s lips pressing somewhere near his hairline.

Either way, they’re the last things he’s aware of before he drops off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Dot’s Halloween costume is based on Tiny Princess Captain America.

The book Dot discusses, which I have never read, is Zachary’s New Home. Because Steve and Bucky are the kind of parents who will buy their daughter a book to explain impossible things.

I picture Jarvis the cat looking mostly like this.

The wonderful dr-kara on tumblr created a bit of Permanency art that may well be my favorite thing in the universe.

Saranoh has been putting together photosets about her favorite fanfictional co-parents and you can now read about her love of the Rogers-Barnes family and the Permanency trio.

Also, if you have any thoughts on fanfictional goods, purchasable through online vendors, she (and I) would like to hear them, and there is a tumblr post about it here.
Actions Versus Words

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce discovers three things: first, that Natasha Romanoff forges dangerous alliances; second, that Miles likes science almost as much as he likes Bruce’s cell phone; and third, that he needs a better term for his relationship with Tony than the one he’s presently using.

Chapter Notes

A reintegration plan is, essentially, a child welfare plan with the goal of returning a child to his parents’ custody.

Child welfare proceedings are beholden to a federal statute called the Indian Child Welfare Act. The details of the statute aren’t important, but the following is: “Indian child” is a term of art in child welfare and adoption law. Saying “Native American” in that specific context is actually not accurate. (An Indian child, just for your knowledge, is a child who is either enrolled or eligible to enroll in a federally-recognized tribal nation. Fun facts!)

I know nothing about astronomy and may misstate where stars are in early November. I declare this creative license.

As always, vastly improved by the hard work and dedication of Jen and saranoh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Either Bucky dropped his phone halfway through a text message,” Natasha says Tuesday morning, “or you and Stark are dating.”

Bruce, predictably, sighs and puts down his pen. “You two are dangerous allies,” he replies instead of answering the obvious non-question.

“We bonded over having significant others who are inexplicably fond of Tony Stark.” She raises her phone, screen still glowing, and jerks it vaguely in his direction. He watches as the side of her thumb accidentally changes the menu screen. “And don’t change the subject. Bucky says you two are officially dating.”

Bruce can’t help the hand that raises to remove his glasses, or the fact that he massages his forehead once the offending spectacles are gone. “Officially, yes,” he admits with a shake of his head, “but not
“You’ve certainly got the Stark-brand double-speak down,” she informs him, and he does his very best to roll his eyes.

He’s halfway through what promises to be a bugbear of a day. The scattered mess atop his desk proves it; when he tosses his glasses onto a file, they cause a small avalanche that leaves him scrabbling to save all his paperwork from certain death. He’s bogged down with half-finished motions to revoke informal supervision, unread social worker reports, and illegibly-scribbled case notes from at least a dozen different cases, and that’s just what he can see. Underneath, he knows, are unrelated files for upcoming hearings, proposed exhibits for an upcoming parental rights termination trial, updated reintegration plans, and witness lists for the next two months.

Never mind the untouched sandwich that’s meant to be his lunch.

He’s spent the morning either in Judge Smithe’s courtroom or standing outside it, corralling attorneys and social workers in the right direction in a valiant—and mostly-failed—attempt to keep the trains running on schedule. He’s already argued with two parents’ attorneys and one guardian ad litem, an all-time pre-lunch record, and that’s without counting the painful half-hour of testimony from a tribal representative in an Indian child case. He’s exhausted and, admittedly, a little overwhelmed—and he still needs to read two different reports before he’s back in court at one.

And that’s not counting the rough draft of a brief Tony sent him while he was in court, marked urgent and with a subject line reading *I WILL BUY YOU A PRIVATE ISLAND THAT ONLY YOU AND I HAVE ACCESS TO IF YOU GET THIS DONE TONIGHT.*

Plus, of course, sixteen exclamation points. He’d counted.

“Bruce,” Natasha says, and he pulls his head up from his piles of papers. There’s a quiet tension in her voice, one he wouldn’t catch if he didn’t know her so well. Her personality’s a bit like Clint’s, complicated and layered, but Bruce can see through most of it. He can certainly see through her tone enough to catch the worry underneath.

He’s about to tell her not to worry and to explain as best he’s able (because there’s no way to make the situation sound sane, really) when Jane ducks her head in the doorway. “Fandral’s on the phone,” she says, and Natasha’s attention jumps immediately away from Bruce. “Something about rescheduling, I didn’t—”

“I’ll be right there,” Natasha interrupts. She’s very nearly in the hallway when she whirls on her heel and points her phone back in Bruce’s direction. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Bruce raises his palms in surrender. “Where would I go?” he asks, gesturing to the stacks of reports in front of him. She at least manages to roll her eyes before she stalks off after their shared trial assistant.

The normal din of the office turns to white noise as Bruce plucks the first social worker report off the pile, but as used to it as he is, he somehow can’t concentrate. He’d spent most of Sunday in a perpetual state of distraction, ignoring the upcoming docket to spend time with Miles—and Tony. The dogs’d woken them up early Sunday morning, and after a pit-stop at Bruce’s for fresh clothes, they’d spent the day drifting around town. Tony’d treated them to a truly massive breakfast at IHOP, and then they’d all headed to the forest preserve, letting the dogs off their leashes and wandering around the lake there. Later, back at Tony’s, Bruce’d found himself shouting his way through a Mario Kart tournament which, thanks to the wonders of the internet, had somehow included Darcy and Thor. Every time Bruce’d considered begging off to go home and work, Tony’d pulled out
another video game or dragged them out bowling for no other reason than they could.

“It’s Sunday,” he’d argued at one point, hands on his hips as they stood outside the bowling alley. “Sunday rhymes with Funday, and I believe Belinda Carlisle had a number of thoughts on the topic.”

“The Bangles,” Bruce’d corrected with a shake of his head.

“What?”

“‘Manic Monday’ was the Bangles, not Belinda Carlisle. And no,” he’d added as a smirk started to twitch at the corners of Tony’s mouth, “I don’t know why I know that.”

Miles, who’d been standing very quietly between them while biting down on what Bruce suspected was a pretty enormous grin, had picked that moment to ask, “Who?”

“God, okay, no,” Tony’d announced. “No almost-kid of mine or almost-mine is allowed to live a life deprived of all the 1980s greats. That’s just not okay.” He’d slung an arm around Miles’s shoulders and dragged him in close. “We’ll fix this. Bowling, then iTunes, and maybe Rock Band. You should hear Bruce’s ‘Hit Me With Your Best Shot.’”

Even rolling his eyes couldn’t keep the smile off Bruce’s face. “You thought it was Belinda Carlisle,” he’d reminded.

“And you corrected me. See? This is why we work.” And Bruce’d had to admit that, when Tony slung his other arm around Bruce and pulled him close, he didn’t mind the touch.

He’s remembering that touch, and the thousands that’d come after it—hands on his hips as they maneuvered around each other at their lane, the heat of Tony’s breath against his face when the other man’d insisted on a chest-bump, the lingering tickle of fingertips on his hand and wrist even when Miles wasn’t paying attention to them—when Natasha stalks back into his office.

Her jaw is tight, her lips pressed into a particularly severe frown, and she’s clutching her phone like a talisman.

She draws in a breath to continue their conversation when Bruce volunteers, “Miles thinks we’re a couple.”

The words drop between them like shrapnel from a bomb, and Natasha freezes in the middle of his office. For a split-second, her face slackens, and there’s surprise written across all her delicate features. Bruce’s only rarely seen her façade crack, and he’s unsurprised when it immediately snaps back into place. She steps back far enough to push the door shut, and then stares him down.

He’s reminded, just then, that she’s actually terrifying in the courtroom.

“He what?” she asks.

“He thinks Tony and I are dating,” Bruce repeats, setting down the report. He forces his voice to remain as level and as matter-of-fact as he’s able, but he can hear the catch in the back of his tone. “I —misspoke, and I’ve sort of . . . lost control of his misconception.”

He twirls his fingers in a rough circle, but Natasha’s not focused on that. No, her full attention is trained unblinkinglly on his face.

“And?” she prompts.

“And I—” He’s not certain why it’s now, of all possible times, that his throat feels dry, or why his tongue suddenly feels so clumsy. He swallows a mouthful of air, then sips his mostly-cool coffee, but
neither helps. When the words finally sort into sentences, he’s staring at his uneaten sandwich, unable to meet her eyes. “I’m starting to forget why it’s such a bad idea.”

There’s a soft sound, almost like a cough, from Natasha, and when he glances up, he catches the mirth on her face. It dances around her eyes and plays on the corners of her lips. She rolls them together, tries to hide it, but she can’t stop the half-second jump of her shoulders, or the way her curls bounce when she shakes her head.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Natasha answers, but it’s certainly not nothing. She drops into the chair across from his desk, but she’s still half-chuckling to herself. “Months ago, Clint said he thought there was something—” Her long fingers flutter, almost like air quotes. “—between the two of you, and I thought he was crazy. But once I saw it, and started watching myself, you two turned into the crazy ones.”

Bruce snorts. “Now I know how bad an influence Clint is, if somehow he’s the sane one and I’m—”

“Bruce.” And for all her talent in the courtroom and the full steely force of her glare, there’s something incredibly gentle in the way his name plays across his tongue. “I don’t believe in letting the people I care about compromise themselves. I wouldn’t let you do that. But this isn’t the same thing.”

He’s tempted for a moment to snort again, to let out the tiny bark of near-laughter that’s sitting in the back of his throat, but he can’t, somehow. He’s left swallowing around it and, slowly, shaking his head. “I’ve always thought that this thing with Tony, whatever it is, would be short and messy and then over,” he says after a few seconds, quiet even to his own ears. “I never thought I’d want to—”

He shakes his head again, tries to clear the cobwebs that are threatening to cloud all his better judgment, but he somehow can’t. He stares at his hands, curling them into fists until his fingers stop twitching; when he raises his head, Natasha’s eyes are still on him. “And then, there’s Miles,” he admits, “and I don’t know anymore.”

He watches Natasha nod slowly. He swears he can hear her every breath in his otherwise-silent office. “Is it just about Miles?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bruce—”

“Honestly,” he interjects. As uncertain as he suddenly feels, he can’t break her gaze. “I honestly don’t know.”

The way his day’s been going, he expects an argument, some sharp-tongued accusation about the fear he feels in his belly, but there is none. Instead, Natasha watches him for a few more seconds, and then nods. There’s something soft in her expression that he can’t pin down, thoughtful in a way he’s only seen a handful of times; her eyes only drop away from him when she stands.

“I thought dating a coworker would be a catastrophe,” she says after a few seconds. She runs her fingertips along a file that’s dangerously close to falling off his desk. “I used to bookmark jobs in other counties, just in case it all went wrong and I needed to get out of here. It took Pepper telling me ‘things only live up to your worst expectations when you let them’ before I stopped.”

Bruce smiles a little and glances up at her. “That sounds like Pepper.”

At the corner of his desk, Natasha’s smiling too. It touches her eyes when she says, “She said it
because, a couple hours earlier, Tony’d told her the same thing.”

She taps the edge of the teetering file with her fingertips and then walks away. The dull roar of the office rushes in through the open door, and he sits for a moment and lets it wash over him. He feels like a pinball, pinging in every direction but settling nowhere, and his muddied mind won’t focus in on individual thoughts. He thinks of Tony pressing against his side and Miles’s irrepressible grin when he’d beat them both at bowling; he remembers watching Princess America drag her Halloween solider around the courtyard, and the warmth of Tony’s body under his own when he’d woken up Saturday night. The emotions he can’t catalogue clump and collect, and no matter how hard he tries, he can’t sort out any of them.

He’s about ready to abandon all hope when his computer chimes with a new e-mail message. When he unlocks the screen, he discovers that Tony’s forwarded him the rough draft a second time, the all-caps subject line still shouting at him.

Smiling slightly, he opens a reply screen. *Miles will be pretty disappointed to know he’s not allowed on our island,* he types, and then minimizes the program.

He’s hardly allowed enough time to put on his glasses before his computer chimes a second time. He stops rooting around for a highlighter and opens the new e-mail.

*foster kids are always allowed on their dads’ awesome private island. pretty sure that’s federal law or something.*

Bruce stares at the message for a long time, re-reading it until the words blur in his vision. When he clicks reply, he hardly trusts his fingers to type the right words.

*I’m not sure how many foster parents have private islands.*

The reply that zips through a moment later reads, *then we’re the first,* and Bruce lets it sit open on his monitor before he finally returns to work.

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“I like science,” Miles says that night, his breath crystallizing around them on the cold night air.

It’s after eight, and Bruce knows, at least intellectually, that he and Miles should be inside the house, bundled in pajamas and half-watching whatever zombie shows they can find on Netflix and Hulu. But Bruce’d spent the afternoon and evening feeling as though his skin wasn’t his own, an itch that’d somehow transferred to Miles. Once homework was finished and Bruce’d sorted through his files for the morning, he’d caught both himself and the boy drifting through the house aimlessly, each of them at a loose end.

He’d tried for hours not to blame it on Tony’s absence. The other man’d sent a long, apologetic text ranting about the half-dozen motions and briefs due into the court of appeals by the end of the day Monday. He’d promised to buy dinner tomorrow, and to spoil Miles rotten over the weekend.

*I’m not letting you spoil him,* Bruce’d chided. He’d leaned his elbows on the kitchen island while the water for spaghetti’d boiled. It’ll just turn you into the cool one.

*already the cool one, big guy,* Tony’d retorted, and Bruce’d forced himself not to smile as he went to
stir the pasta sauce.

Either way, it’d been the silence in the house and the dull ache of loneliness in Bruce’s stomach that’d caused him to toss Miles’s coat at him and drag him out into the cool of the evening. Four blocks later, they’re standing in the middle of the park, eyes trained on the night sky. Miles still has the old astronomy books littering the empty half of the guest bed and parts of the floor, after all, and Bruce remembers his stars.

Well, most of them, at any rate.

The night’s windy and cold but clear, and Bruce glances down as Miles cranes his neck even further back. The Big Dipper is almost directly above their heads, and since Miles’d spotted it ahead of Bruce, he’s hardly looked away. “Before they— Before everything, my parents were talking about sending me to a magnet school,” Miles says, half-distracted by the sky. “Like, one where you live there and then they teach you advanced science. And math, too.”

Bruce nods a little, but he’s mostly caught up in watching the boy beside him. In the dark and shadow of the November night, he looks like a child in a Hallmark Christmas commercial: head tipped up to the sky, eyes wide with wonder, lips parted as his breaths rush out in foggy clouds. There’s something special, he catches himself thinking, in that amazement coming from far-distant stars instead of fat men in red suits.

“You could still go to a school like that,” he offers after a few seconds. When Miles glances over, he shrugs. “Your uncle could send you, once this is all sorted out. There are scholarships if you need them, and summer programs if you wanted a trial run before the real thing.” Miles frowns, slightly, a slow press of lips. It brings his head down toward the grass, and Bruce can’t help the twist of guilt that overtakes his belly. “If you wanted, of course.”

“I don’t. I never really wanted to.” He shakes his head slightly, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. It’s protective, tucking himself up smaller than he really is, and Bruce can’t blame the tightness in his chest on the cold. “My dad, he always talked about how he and Uncle Aaron never got good chances. How hard everything was for them, how bad their schools were, how they didn’t have good lives. I think he thought I could turn out better than him if I went.”

Bruce smiles. “Parents do that,” he offers, and Miles snorts quietly. His frown stays trained on the ground, though, intent enough and miserable enough that Bruce can’t help the twist of guilt that overtakes his belly. “Ask Tony about his dad, sometime,” he suggests. “Tony spent a lot more time and energy than anyone I know trying to live up to what other people wanted out of him. I think sometimes it took a lot for him to just become . . . Tony.”

He hears the uninvited fondness in his own voice, warm in the chill of the night, but Miles just leans over to nudge him back. They linger like that for a long time, quiet in the middle of the park and almost touching.

At least, until Miles asks, “What about you?”

It’s a murmur, almost lost on the wind, and Bruce drops his own eyes to the grass. It’s still green, he knows, but it won’t be for much longer, not once winter sweeps in and turns the occasional spitting rain into snow. When he wets his lips, all they feel is cold. “I think part of the reason why I went into physics was because it was what my parents loved,” he admits with a small shake of his head. “I don’t really know, though. I just know that it wasn’t for me.”

“I was so mad at my dad,” Miles says after a few seconds. His head lifts, tilting first toward Bruce
and then back toward the sky. He leans back too fast, though, almost overbalancing himself, and catches Bruce’s arm. Bruce expects him to let go, but instead his fingers curl in his jacket sleeve and stay. “All my friends were going to Castle Rock, but he kept dragging me around to look at the fancy schools. We were having stupid fights about it every day, pretty much, and then . . . ” His fingers disappear back into his pocket. “It was stupid.”

Bruce watches him for a few seconds, content with listening to the wind rattle the naked tree branches. “It’s okay to want things,” he murmurs. Miles keeps his eyes away, trained on the sky, but Bruce can see how heavily they’re blinking. Carefully, he rests a hand on the boy’s shoulder. His thumb traces the piping on his jacket for a moment, an aimless wander. “And wanting something different from someone you love doesn’t mean you don’t love them.”

He watches Miles swallow thickly. Even in the dark, Bruce can tell his eyes are wet. “I miss when things were all okay,” he whispers.

Bruce nods. “I know.”

They stand in the dark for a long time after that, Bruce’s hand on Miles’s shoulder and their eyes sweeping over the night sky. Bruce stares at the stars and constellations he can’t name. He wonders whether his mother really knew all of them, or whether it’d been another invented distraction.

He wonders what his mother would say if she saw him now.

That fleeting, half-innocuous thought follows him home, whispering on the wind as he and Miles trek the four blocks back to the house. He heats milk for hot chocolate while Miles changes into his pajamas and a pair of bright red socks Bruce suspects are actually Tony’s; after he swaps out his own slacks and button-down for checkered sleep pants and an old t-shirt, they settle together on the couch to watch Phineas and Ferb and laugh together.

Around nine-thirty, Bruce’s BlackBerry buzzes on the coffee table.

**Tony Stark:** goodnight to my first and second favorite boys and no I am not telling you which one is which.

Bruce swallows a laugh before tilting the screen in Miles’s direction. Miles’s grin shows off his budding hot chocolate moustache. “Can I text him back?”

“No state secrets,” Bruce warns, but he hands over the phone anyway. The last ten minutes of the show are interspersed with snickering, frantic typing, and the repetitive buzzing of Tony’s usual split-second response times. It takes Bruce turning off the television after the end credits to break Miles’s stride.

He screws up his face into a scowl when Bruce says, “Bed.” There’s a few seconds of eyebrow-raising and preteen posturing before Miles finally relinquishes the phone. Bruce thinks maybe they’re verging on their first disagreement, but then something sparks in Miles’s eyes and he grins.

“If Tony put you up to the staring contest, your new babysitter is my friend Natasha!” Bruce threatens after him, and Miles’s laughter echoes down the stairwell.

He’s setting the empty cocoa mugs and milk pan in the sink when his phone vibrates in his pocket. When he unlocks the screen, he’s greeted with what might qualify as the world’s most confusing text message:

**Tony Stark:** a big fat wet one! for me!
It takes a few seconds to realize that the text is actually meant for Miles, a continuation of whatever they’d been discussing while Candace shrieked about her brothers’ inventions. He scrolls up through the texts in an attempt to establish some kind of content for the “fat wet one” from Tony.

A handful of messages later, though, his mouth dries out.

Me: *i think he misses u*

**Tony Stark:** *of course he does, have you met me? I’m awesome.*

Me: *u shld stay tomrw nite*

**Tony Stark:** *first, you type worse than our friend clint and that’s pretty bad. second, no can do, this work’s not gonna finish itself. but third, you can do something to fix the big guy’s tony-less blues*

Me: *what*

**Tony Stark:** *give him a goodnight kiss on my behalf*

Me: *ew no hes not my bf!*

The last message in the stream is the most recent one from Tony, specifying that the goodnight kiss be a “big fat wet one” (horrendous grammar and all).

Bruce reads the series of texts once and then again, trying to make sense of the ridiculous, impossible words in front of him. Upstairs, he hears Miles moving between the bathroom and bedroom, clomping footfalls serving as punctuation for the wind against the windowpanes and the dull thudding of Bruce’s own heart.

He’s halfway up the stairs when he finally replies to the last errant text.

*Goodnight, Tony.*

It’s only a matter of seconds before Tony’s reply buzzes through.

*nacht, bruce*

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Tuesday night’s texts remain with Bruce all day Wednesday, feeling a lot like shadows of someone else’s life looming and lingering in the back corners of his mind. Tony’s still swamped by his piles of motions and briefs, a coffee-seeking ghost of a man who drifts from his office to the break room and back again. Usually, Bruce might drag him down the street for lunch—or, if not for lunch, for a ten-minute walk—in an attempt to unfurl the tension Tony carries between his shoulder blades. Right now, Tony’s too busy and Bruce too caught up in his own thoughts to even consider the time together.

In some small way, though, Bruce is grateful for the breathing room. It’s an opportunity to calm the thoughts that keep rushing around in his head. At least, it’s an opportunity to try. Because every time he sits down at his desk, he’s overwhelmed with the feeling that his life is transforming into something new right before his eyes, and he’s reminded that he’s on a roller coaster he can’t really
The third or fourth time he sits down, though, there’s an e-mail from Tony waiting. The full text reads: *indian for dinner, don’t tell the kid about the taste adventure* and is signed with a winking emoticon.

Bruce wonders whether he actually wants to stop the roller coaster at all.

“Be a man of action,” Clint whines over Skype at lunch that day. He’s eating what appears to be cold lo mein out of a cardboard Chinese food carton, and Natasha scowls at the way he fumbles with his chopsticks. “Just grab him by the Gucci—”

“Is that a euphemism?” Bruce interjects, glancing at the laptop balanced on the corner of Natasha’s desk.

“—and get it over with.”

“This from you,” Natasha chides for what Bruce suspects is the hundredth time in recent history.

“It took straight speed dating to hook you up with your girlfriend,” Clint retorts with a wave of his chopsticks, “which puts us on at least the same—”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “Because ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ are my only options.”

“Hey, you told me early on that you don’t play for my team—”

“Is this actually circling back to whether I’d sleep with you, Clint?”

“I’m just saying—”

Bruce holds up his hands, an attempt at peacekeeping that causes them both to stare. He wonders whether his years of pseudo-adversarial coworkers are what qualified him to parent a twelve-year-old. “I appreciate the concern,” he informs them both, “but could my personal life be personal for a brief period of time?”

“No,” they answer in unison, and jump right back into their argument.

Bruce carries the conversations along with him for the rest of the afternoon, through hearings, a truancy meeting, and the car ride home from Miles’s school. Miles excitedly clues Bruce in on his research project on poisonous animals—“And then,” he presses, his fluid hand gestures not unlike some of Tony’s, “there are all the scorpions and spiders . . .”—and Bruce feels oddly warm. He asks questions in the pauses and jokes about Natasha’s spider mug, which makes Miles laugh; he suggests a handful of different titles Miles can try out for an upcoming book report, and promises a Barnes & Noble run on Sunday.

“We should bring Dot,” Miles volunteers as they pull off the main roads and into Bruce’s neighborhood. It’s such a non sequitur that Bruce nearly drives through the first stop sign. The car jerks when he hits the brakes, and he’s left to look over at the boy next to him. “I mean, she’s fun,” Miles continues with a half-hearted shrug. “She gets really into things. And my friend Judge said there’s a lot of kid stuff at the book store on the weekends.”

“He did,” Bruce says dumbly.

“Yeah. His sister and her baby—he’s two—live with them. They do kid stuff together.”
He swallows. “And you told him about Dot?”

“Yeah.” Miles glances up at him, and Bruce is surprised to see he’s frowning. His eyebrows pull in toward one another in either disappointment or confusion, Bruce just isn’t sure which. “Is that okay?”

There’s no term for the rock that churns in Bruce’s belly or the way his heart leaps into his throat. He looks back out the windshield and checks the intersection before driving through, acutely aware of Miles’s eyes on the side of his face. There’s vertigo rushing up to meet him, like he’s teetering on the apex of something bigger than himself.

“It’s absolutely okay,” he says finally. If it’s rushed, Miles doesn’t notice; instead, he grins at Bruce, and the momentary feeling of crisis is averted.

They spend all of a half-hour at the house before Tony arrives, rumpled from a day of frantic writing and laden down with grocery bags. They heap their plates full of Indian Palace and eat together at the kitchen table with a minimal amount of preteen grousing about green things and mystery meat. The conversation ebbs and flows, moving from poisonous frogs (Miles) to legal standards of review (Tony) and onto upcoming teaching evaluations at the law school (Bruce’s own contribution). Miles retells a science joke he heard from his friend Ganke that has Bruce groaning while Tony laughs, and Bruce aborts two of Tony’s bawdier college stories before allowing the one involving the turbo-boost remote-control Humvee he’d engineered in his dorm room.

Bruce is still laughing hard enough that his belly hurts—it’s hard not to when the ultimate conclusion to the story is “And then, it caught fire!”—when he realizes he needs to leave for his class. He wipes the tears from the corners of his eyes and catches his breath, but he feels almost drunk from the headiness of it all.

As he stands and reaches for their empty plates, Tony catches his wrist. “We’ve got this,” he promises. His hand is broad and warm against Bruce’s soft skin, and Bruce is momentarily caught up in the full effect of his dark-eyed gaze. “Go edify the masses, inspire them to save helpless babies from burning buildings or whatever it is you do every Wednesday night.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “It’s juvenile law seminar, not superhero school.”

“But then, Tony ducks his head for the express purpose of pressing his lips to Bruce’s wrist before letting go.

Bruce feels his face flare, red-hot from the collar of his shirt to his hairline. He’s rendered absolutely speechless for a few seconds; his jaw flexes, but no sound escapes between his half-parted lips. When he wets his mouth and then swallows, he only feels clumsier. Tony stands with his usual easy grace, collecting their used plates in practiced silence. He’s expedient and efficient, a far cry from the man who usually bangs around when he wants to help, and Bruce ends up staring after him.

He’s barefoot and without his tie, two buttons of his shirt undone and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The line of his back could render most people—male and female alike—breathless, and Bruce can still feel the fullness of his lips against his pulse point.

He’s still a little in awe when Miles says, “You don’t have to go all weird.”
enough to realize that the boy is standing next to the table, empty plate in one hand and the other on his hip. He suddenly looks more twenty than twelve. “My uncle has girlfriends. They kiss around me.”

“Girlfriends? Plural?” Tony throws a toothy grin over his shoulder. “Think he could gimme some pointers? I mean, asking for a friend, of course.”

And Bruce thanks his boundless stores of mental self-restraint that he can sigh at the both of them instead of just standing there like an idiot.

Class goes as well as ever, full of the usual curious students and thoughtful questions. Tonight’s topic is alternatives to adoption—permanent living arrangements in and out of state custody, guardianship, custodianship, mutually-agreeable temporary care—and for the first time, the subject feels too close for comfort. He leans against the table in the front of the room, listening to his students’ stories: a bright girl named Katherine—Kitty to her friends—discusses a cousin who ended up in the legal custody of an older half-sibling, and another young man talks about the apartment-style independent living facility he’d worked in when he’d studied adolescent psychology in undergrad. Bruce thinks first of his aunt, then of Miles’s uncle and Steve’s grandmother. Ultimately, though, he shares the story of his “good friend” James whose parents moved around enough that they ended up placing him in his aunt’s custody in order to keep him in a stable home.

“That sounds shitty,” Sam offers from the front row. He’s slouched back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest. “I mean, you had us read that article about how kids do better with awful parents than in the best foster home. It seems like they kind of set him up to fail by sending him off.”

“I think his law degree might disagree with you, there,” Bruce replies with a shrug. “I know the guy he met three months after he moved and who he’s now married to definitely would.”

The whole class, Sam included, laughs, and Bruce can’t hold down his own grin.

He wraps up class a few minutes early, building in buffer time to spend with his usual group of stragglers before he heads home. Kitty hashes out a handful of ideas for her upcoming research paper, a behemoth on special education law and potential resources for students and their parents when the law as-written provides insufficient remedies. Two of her friends stick close, mostly for the purpose of mocking her passion for the topic.

“Don’t listen to them,” he says extra-gently, trying to hide the tiny grin that’s pushing at the corners of his lips. “They don’t really need good grades in here.”

They sputter, Kitty grins, and Bruce himself laughs. All in all, he decides, it’s a pretty good night.

In the hallway outside his usual classroom, he runs into a frizzy-haired, wild-eyed Darcy Lewis. She’s clutching a literal mountain of Westlaw printouts and tattered legal pads against what appears to be a threadbare Superman t-shirt. Bruce stares at her sweatpants and flip-flops—certainly a far cry from her usual garb—in surprise.

“Law review,” she explains. The two words, strung together, sound more like a curse than anything else. When Bruce starts to grin at her, she narrows her eyes over the tops of her glasses. “You laugh, I’ll make you read it,” she threatens.

He holds up his hands. “Ask Clint, not me,” he dodges. “He has the free time, and I have to go home.”

“To your kid.”
He nods. “And to Tony,” he adds without thinking, an automatic tag-on because, in truth, Tony is at his house. But Darcy blinks and then gapes at him, her mouth hanging open and her dark eyes wide as dinner plates, and he knows he’s made a grave error.

At least she doesn’t recover enough to start sputtering until he’s wished her a goodnight and walked away.

He arrives home just before ten to a house with the drapes still open and all the lights on, a glowing beacon on an otherwise dark block. He parks beside Tony’s Audi and sits in his car for a few seconds, the quiet settling all around him. He can’t remember the last time he felt like returning to his house after teaching meant coming home. He’s not even sure why it’s now that he feels the shift.

Or whether it’s Miles or Tony who deserves the credit for it.

Inside, shoes litter the foyer, the rug’s askew, and Miles’s backpack lies open and half-spilled in the middle of the mess. One of Tony’s socks is in the hallway, the other in the doorway to the living room, and his fall jacket is strewn over the back of a chair; the coffee table boasts pencils and balled-up loose-leaf paper from what Bruce can only assume are Miles’s homework endeavors, and one of the sofa pillows is lying in the middle of the floor.

But all the dinner plates and silverware are drying in the dish drainer, mugs and teabags are waiting on the counter, and the kettle on the stove is cool but full of fresh water. The kitchen’s clean, the leftovers are stacked in the fridge alongside what looks to be a container of brownie cheesecake, and it’s—

It’s home, Bruce catches himself thinking. It’s a newly-familiar chaos he’s glad to walk into.

He abandons his wallet, keys, and BlackBerry on the counter and flicks on one of the stove burners before he heads toward the stairs. The house is pin-drop quiet enough that he assumes Miles is asleep, but he’s unsure about Tony. He half-suspects he’ll find the other man asleep in the armchair in Bruce’s office—it wouldn’t be the first time—or poking through some half-forgotten box in a closet. (Sadly, that also wouldn’t be a first.)

He’s surprised, then, when he starts to hear quiet voices drifting down the stairwell. They echo through the upstairs hall, bounding off the hardwood floors until they reach his ears. Two steps later, and he’s able to make out actual words instead of just the vague shape of sounds.

He’s seconds from bursting in and chiding Tony about the time when he actually starts processing what they’re saying.

“See, here’s the thing: the big guy’s gonna waltz in that door down there any second, and if you’re not in bed, I’m the one in trouble.” Bruce suspects that Tony’s trying to sound stern, but that’s not really in his skill set. He mostly sounds like he’s trying not to laugh. “And I don’t have the whole big-eyed-cuteness thing going for me. Therefore, it’s time for you to sleep.”

“Why do you call Bruce ‘big guy’?” Miles asks after a half-beat of pause. “He’s not big.”

“Not physically, maybe, no. But he’s mentally big. Actually, mentally gargantuan, but that’s a lot to say to a guy.”

“Mentally?”

“Sure.” Tony sighs just loud enough that the sound carries, and Bruce can suddenly picture the whole exchange: Tony standing next to Miles’s bed, hands dancing while he speaks, his face warm and expressive while Miles stares up at him. “Here’s the thing, right? There’re a whole lotta people
out there who never use their brains for anything that matters. Sure, they’ve got great brains, and they
do okay stuff with them, but they don’t fight to help other people or to make the world a better place. They just have the brains.” He draws in a sharp breath that echoes down into the stairwell, and Bruce —

Well.

Momentarily, Bruce himself forgets how to breathe.

“Bruce, on the other hand, he has this big giant brain that earned him a PhD and could probably be, I don’t know, solving those weird unsolvable math problems or whatever, but he’s using it to make things better. And not just better for you, or for me, but for a ton of people. It’s pretty awesome, and it makes him a big guy.” There’s a few heavy seconds of silence. “Now, seriously, go to bed. ‘Cause if Bruce gets home and catches you still up, all those good parts of his brain’ll turn off and he’ll go cranky rage monster on me, and nobody wants that.”

Miles laughs, a spike of warmth that fills the empty hall and stairwell. It rushes into the center of Bruce’s belly, fighting against the tightness there, and Bruce is suddenly torn between two impossible options. Because there’s the first choice, the one where he beats feet downstairs and hides out in the kitchen, and then there’s the other.

The one where he stands on the stairs and waits for Tony. The one where he admits to eavesdropping on a conversation that’s left him feeling light-headed, and lets the chips fall where they may.

He’s still balancing the choices when he hears Miles ask, “Hey, Tony?”

The creak of Tony’s footfalls against the bare wood floor halts suddenly, and Bruce imagines he can see just the hints of the other man’s silhouette in the upstairs hallway. The quiet of the house is broken only by a nonchalant, “Yeah?”, and Bruce is left wondering a thousand different things at once: if the light’s off, if Miles’s eyes are bright and curious, if Tony’s smiling.

“Do you—” Miles starts, but then he stops in the middle of the sentence. For a few seconds, they’re blanketed in silence, and Bruce wonders whether the question’s escaped his clutches. “I mean, you and Bruce,” he resumes, voice quieter than before. “You like him a lot, right?”

“Pretty sure you know the answer to that.”

“No, I know,” Miles presses, and Bruce can hear the confusion seeping into his tone. “I just— You never say it, and I just wondered—”

“Kid, I know the question you’re trying to ask.” There’s something gentle in Tony’s interruption, a softness that Bruce might not believe if he wasn’t hearing it first-hand. “And like I already said: I’m pretty sure you already know the answer. ‘Cause you wouldn’t ask me if you didn’t.”

“You don’t say it,” Miles says again.

“Not everything needs to be said for it to exist,” Tony returns. “Sometimes, just having it be there, between two people, that’s enough.”

In that moment, Bruce is aware of a thousand different feelings all sweeping through him: the rush of air into his lungs when he pulls in a breath, the thrum of his heartbeat in his chest and his temples, the hard wood of the bannister under his fingers as he grips onto it, the way his stomach churns and chest tightens. But none of those things really compare to the sudden, high-pitched shriek of the kettle on the stove. He flinches at the noise, the whistling feeling more like an alarm than anything
else, and the blood pounding in his temples pools suddenly in his face and neck. He slips down the stairs as quietly as he’s able; when he’s safely back in the kitchen, he flicks off the stove burner and tries to focus on why he’d boiled the water in the first place. But the countertop suddenly belongs to a stranger, as do the Game of Thrones-themed mugs (a gift from Tony) and the sharply-spiced cinnamon tea. He presses his palms against the Formica and tries to breathe in evenly, but all he can really think about is Tony: Tony’s presence in the house, Tony’s voice replaying in his ears, Tony’s kindness spread out in front of him, Tony’s footfalls on the stairs behind him.

In some small degree, his life is already half Tony’s. He’s just never really paused enough to notice, before now.

“Okay, so, before you ask, the kid went to bed an hour ago, and we absolutely did not have brownie cheesecake for dessert. The fact that there’s a slice in the fridge that wasn’t there when you left is just coincidence. Dropped off by the cheesecake Girl Scouts or something.”

Bruce twists around just in time to catch Tony swanning into the room as usual, his arms outstretched and a toothy grin playing across his face. It’s something Bruce’s witnessed a thousand times in the last five years, but somehow, this time, he can’t look away. Tony’s swapped out his work clothes for well-worn jeans and a comfortable Pink Floyd t-shirt—proof positive that he and Miles escaped to some other location in the last three hours—and he looks—

Well, he looks entirely like Tony, living, breathing, thrumming and thriving. He looks like the man who’s slowly seeped into every corner of Bruce’s life.

Bruce spends a few appreciative seconds tracking Tony’s progress across the kitchen before he asks, “Cheesecake Girl Scouts?”

“Always said they should branch out,” Tony says with a shrug. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I am counting down the days until Dot puts on her little Brownie Batter—”

“Daisy.”

“—uniform and starts supplying me with a record-breaking number of Thin Mints, but can you imagine if they sold other kinds of delicious baked goods? Pie season, cheesecake season, maybe a turnover season?” Bruce snorts a half-laugh as he reaches for the kettle. “I could single-handedly keep those girls in business from here until the year— Oh, hey, no.”

His fingers are gentle when they curl around Bruce’s wrist and keep him from filling up the second mug. He blinks and jerks his head up, aware not only of Tony’s proximity, but of the intensity of his gaze. His brain leaps back to the half-second touch after dinner, and the way Tony’s index finger is now pressed against the same place his lips had been.

“The stack of work’s still not getting smaller,” he explains, thumb smoothing along the edge of Bruce’s shirt sleeve. “Thor sent me a couple thoughts on the juvenile appeal I’m working on, and if I don’t get it to Pepper for a good, thorough edit first thing tomorrow, I’m gonna be murdered by a Russian.”

Bruce frowns. “Do I want to know how many hours Pepper’ll be in the office this weekend?”

“Because you’re buddies with her girlfriend? No.” He squeezes Bruce’s wrist gently before he releases; Bruce can still feel the shape of his fingers when he sets the kettle back down on the stove. “Raincheck, I promise.”

“More for me,” Bruce replies with a tiny shrug, but he hears the way his voice catches in the back of
his throat. Tony quirks an eyebrow, and he shakes his head a little, trying to clear the cobwebs. He wants simultaneously to confess his eavesdropping and to pretend it never happened; he’s tempted to grab a handful of Tony’s t-shirt and reel him in, but he’s not sure what would happen after that.

The heavy, half-awkward silence between them stretches and lingers. Bruce can’t calm the way his fingers want to tap against the countertop—or, worse, how they want to reach for Tony. He picks up his mug and forces himself to smile. “How was your night?” he asks, by way of a conversation-starter.

It immediately breaks the tension, sweeping it into corners and away as Tony’s face blooms into an enormous grin. He moves through the house, collecting his belongings as he summarizes how he filled the last three hours of his and Miles’s lives: a walk with the dogs, a trip to the grocery store for “things that definitely were not brownie cheesecake, that came from the Girl Scouts,” a phone call with Dot about their Sunday bookstore plans, and a pile of sixth-grade homework that may or may not have involved looking at pictures of spider bites online. Bruce trails him from the kitchen into the living room and then into the foyer, sipping his tea and chuckling at the right times. He surveys the line of Tony’s back under his t-shirt, the stripe of bare skin that reveals itself when he crouches to tie his sneakers, and the way his eyes light up when he grins.

He’s not sure why, when Tony opens the door to let himself out, he abandons his mug on the table in the hallway, but he does; and he’s not sure why, after Tony says goodnight, he follows it up with, “Wait, Tony.”

Tony’s halfway out the door when the words spring from his lips, jacket on but open and face still bright with a grin, and Bruce suddenly can’t help himself. He closes the distance between them in two steps, then reaches out and grips Tony’s arm. He feels like he doesn’t recognize his own fingers, like they belong to a stranger, but the warmth and strength of Tony’s musculature under his jacket—That, Bruce knows.

He curls his fingers into the fabric, probably harder than his necessary, and Tony twists around to look at him. There’s surprise etched on his expression; it parts his lips and widens those unmistakable dark eyes. “Big guy?” he asks. His voice is almost a whisper.

They’re all of inches apart, standing there in the doorway, and Bruce is momentarily aware of every last stimulus in that tiny space: the rush of the November wind pressing in around them, the flex of Tony’s arm against his hand, the thud of his own heart behind his ribcage, the heat of the breaths that he and Tony are very nearly sharing. He can’t remember stepping this close to the other man, but here they are, nearly pressed together in a foyer that’s never felt so small.

He wonders whether it’s possible to run out of air while standing in an open doorway. He can’t wonder it for too long, though, because then other thoughts are interrupting. Thoughts about how Tony’s goatee scratches in the world’s most pleasant burn when Bruce closes the gap between them, for instance, and then, thoughts about how warm and full his lips are when Bruce kisses the corner of his mouth. It’s just the corner, just a clumsy, chaste, uncertain fumble, but it’s enough. Because Tony sighs against his mouth and tips his head just far enough so Bruce can taste the full swell of his lower lip, and suddenly, Bruce’s heart and mind have never felt so full.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, close enough to Tony’s mouth that it’s practically another kiss. With his eyes closed, he feels like he’s swaying, but he can’t bring himself to open them. “For everything.”

He’s vaguely aware of Tony’s hand flattening itself against his side, rooting him to the spot, but he’s
too caught up in the way they’re pressed together, Tony’s nose against his cheek and their lips millimeters from something much deeper than a clumsy half-kiss, to really pay attention. When Tony sucks in a breath, their chests brush, and Bruce is momentarily seized with the urge to press him against the nearest flat surface. It’s an urge they apparently share, too, because Tony’s mouth catches his squarely, warm and wet and not entirely unfamiliar, and Bruce’s world narrows to include only that touch.

Except leaning in for more only causes Tony to flinch back a half-inch.

“I am leaving this at this,” Tony says. He sounds breathless, and Bruce swears he can taste his lips where they’re still brushing his own. “Not because I want to, but because it’s working tonight or working all weekend, and I suddenly feel like there are better things to do this weekend.”

As much as he can feel the blood rushing through his head and also lower, the only word that stumbles out from between Bruce’s lips is, “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Tony says, and his facial hair rasps against Bruce’s cheek for just one half-second before he steps away. It’s cold in the doorway once he’s not there to block the wind, but Bruce stands with the door open anyway, and watches the silver Audi dart off into the darkness.

He’s almost asleep a half-hour later when his cell phone buzzes on the bedside table. After a moment of groping, he’s able to drag it over and unlock the screen.

**Tony Stark:** *I literally would’ve stayed on your doorstep all night and I am not even sorry for admitting that.*

Bruce isn’t certain about the flutter in his chest, but he spends a few seconds swallowing around it.

*You’re not alone in that,* he replies, and falls asleep with his phone in bed with him.

==

Tony barely leaves his office the next day.

They exchange hastily-typed e-mails while Bruce prepares for next week’s hearings, almost all of which involve a good deal of swearing about unnecessary motions and frivolous appeals. Twice, a frazzled-looking Pepper pauses in his office doorway and slashes a finger across her pale neck, and twice, Bruce presses his lips together to keep from laughing. He moves through his morning with as much of his usual efficiency as possible, but more than once, his mind wanders.

He swears he can still feel the shape and heat of Tony’s mouth against his own, the scrape of his facial hair against his bare skin. At one point, in the bathroom, he checks for stubble-burn, afraid that there’s more to his distraction than a phantom touch.

His skin’s clear, of course, it’s just his *mind* that isn’t. He’s grateful in some small way that Tony’s too busy for them to spend any time together.

Not because he doesn’t want to see Tony, but because he isn’t sure he trusts himself with the gift of proximity, right now.

Except when he’s in the break room around noon and heating up his lunch of leftovers (and he can count on one hand how often he’s brought in actual, homemade leftovers), someone invades his personal space from behind. He rolls his eyes at the uninvited familiarity—or at least, he tries.
Because Tony’s murmured, “Hey,” is caught somewhere around the back of Bruce’s neck, near enough that he can feel the puff of breath against his shirt collar.

Because, before Bruce can twist around, Tony plants a hand on each of Bruce’s hips and presses his nose into Bruce’s hair.

The break room is suddenly a vacuum, pulling the breath from Bruce’s chest.

“Here’s the deal,” Tony whispers, his breath tickling the fine hairs and sensitive skin behind Bruce’s ear. “I work hard tonight, I spend Friday through Sunday with you and the kid, no interruptions. Which means no dinner and zombies tonight, but extra dinner and zombies all weekend.”

The timer on the microwave chimes, but Bruce ignores it. He presses his palms to the edge of the counter, but his entire body is desperate to reach for Tony.

He swallows. “Okay.”

“All weekend,” Tony promises. “Just the three of us. Is that a song? It should be a song.”

“I don’t think it is,” Bruce manages.

“It should be.” And Tony’s lips are warm when he presses them against the soft skin under Bruce’s ear.

He’s gone a second after the contact, though, no hands or heat left to distract Bruce. In fact, when Bruce turns around, the only person in the break room with him is Natasha.

She tilts her head and raises both her eyebrows in what Bruce suspects is the world’s most dubious expression. “You’re not dating?” she asks, and he can’t tell whether it’s amusement or annoyance that’s edging into her tone.

He can tell that there’s color creeping up into his cheeks, and that his chest feels oddly tight. “I don’t know anymore,” he admits. “Maybe.”

“That was more than maybe,” she retorts, and he can’t hide his little smile as she walks away.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I just want to thank everyone for reading, for commenting, for enjoying, and for investing feelings in this story. I wasn't scheduled to post today, but I'm ahead enough to manage the extra chapter--and I’m so continually touched and flattered by all the love that I couldn’t help but share more.

In short: thank you.
The Rate of Falling

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, there are a number of bad decisions made: some by Miles, some by Tony, some even, arguably, by Bruce himself. But bad decisions are almost a scientific constant in Bruce’s life—along with a few other things.

Chapter Notes

Continued gratitude and praise to my betas, Jen and saranoh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bruce is ten minutes into his one Friday hearing when his phone starts buzzing in his pocket.

The entire ordeal is what Tony would unreservedly call a “shit show,” a collection of unfortunate events so outrageous that Bruce can feel the start of a tension headache even as he listens to the guardian ad litem question the witness. The children in question are four siblings under six years old, the mother is battling post-partum depression so serious that she attempted to kill herself in the bathroom during naptime, and the father is so detached from the situation he might as well be absent altogether. It’s meant to just be a review, a status update on how the mother’s psychological treatment is progressing, but it’s turned into forty-five minutes of “roast the social worker.”

And to think, he’s not even the ringleader.

In the uncomfortable faux-leather chair at counsel table, his phone is wedged between his thigh and the cheap fabric, creating an unholy vibrating sound that echoes through the courtroom. The guardian ad litem—a young man named Danny who attended undergrad with Jessica Jones—pauses in the middle of a sentence and Judge Smithe raises an eyebrow. “Sorry,” Bruce murmurs, and everyone waits until he pulls the offending BlackBerry out before they continue.

The number’s unfamiliar. He declines the call and leaves his phone atop the desk, but, predictably, there’s no message.

A wrong number, he assumes, and focuses back on Danny’s questions.

Five minutes later, as the mother’s attorney steps up to the podium, Bruce’s phone starts buzzing a second time. “Sorry,” he apologizes, louder this time, and reaches for the damn thing. He’s tempted to turn it off before he catches a glimpse of the display:

**Incoming call: Jessica Jones**

He snaps his mouth shut and drops his phone into his lap. It’s precarious to balance it on his knee, but he figures it’s better than ignoring the whole thing outright.

Two minutes later, he’s rewarded with a single-line text message.
Jessica Jones: 911

It’s a text he’s seen a few dozen times before, a boy-who-cried-wolf attempt to goad him into replying. He’s suffered through past “emergencies” involving missing paperwork (that Jessica later found in a different folder), last-minute check-ins on his temporary placements (though he blames most of those to Jessica’s truly terrifying case of pregnancy brain), and invitations to symposia on child welfare law. But even this doesn’t prevent him from opening a new text and typing in a hasty reply.

_in a hearing call you after_

The social worker on the stand is rambling through an inane question about the mother’s therapy when Jessica’s reply buzzes through. He glances down, expecting her usual one-word answer of “okay.” Instead, though, his focus narrows until the only thing he’s aware of is that single line of text.

Jessica Jones: _its about miles you need to call me_

Bruce’s on his feet within seconds, an almost knee-jerk reaction that immediately launches him into the center of attention. His fingers are tight enough around his phone case that he can hear the plastic creak; he only realizes that his chair’s spinning when its arm impacts the back of his thigh. The social worker on the stand blanches, Danny frowns, and both parents’ attorneys stare at him like he’s suddenly transformed into a stranger.

On the bench, Judge Smithe’s brow tightens almost imperceptibly. “Doctor Banner?” she asks, and there’s caution in her tone.

“I, uh, I’m sorry for interrupting,” he says. The words fight against the sudden tightness in the back of his throat. He sort of waves his phone vaguely, but they all just keep staring.

“We’re in the middle of a hearing,” the judge interrupts. She watches him intently, the way she watches witnesses and some of the sneakier parents’ attorneys.

“I know,” he answers quickly. “I’ll be brief, but I need to take care of this. Please.”

For a few seconds, the judge is absolutely silent, her entire face creased into a tight, imperfect frown. When she nods, it’s a tiny jerk of her head. “I’ll allow a ten-minute recess,” she decides, “but then _we have_ to get this hearing done. All rise.”

Bruce hardly waits for the secure door to close behind her before he’s pressing out of the courtroom and into the nearly-abandoned hallway. Friday afternoons are usually quiet, save for an errant misdemeanor hearing or a handful of plea settings, and it’s even worse when there are no major felonies on the docket. He bypasses a couple chatty judicial assistants on his way to the back stairwell, his finger hovering above the call button the entire way. He can’t stop the rush of unfriendly thoughts that bob and weave through the back of his mind, creating ridiculous worst-case scenarios he can’t actually _stop._

Like the one where Aaron Davis swept into Castle Rock Middle School, collected his nephew, and disappeared into the night.

Or the one where Miles’s suffered some kind of breakdown and needs acute psychiatric care.

Or ones involving school fires, traumatic gym injuries, relatives requesting placement, another ugly
He’s struck momentarily by the thought that his parade of horribles mostly involves either Miles being injured or Miles moving elsewhere. He tries not to consider all that as he steps into the stairwell and connects the call.

Halfway through his third loop of the tiny space, Jessica picks up. “Okay, so, you have to go get Miles from school,” she says instead of a greeting. “I’m in Franklin County, I can’t get out there, and I’m pretty sure—”

“Wait, wait,” Bruce interrupts. He holds up a hand as though she can see it and tries to ignore the way his heart is racing in his chest. “What’s happened? Is he okay?”

“Oh, no, he’s fine,” she replies. There’s something tight and frustrated caught in the back of her voice. “Well, depending on how much you kill him for getting suspended for the rest of the day.”

“He what?”

The question echoes against cinderblock and steel, louder and more urgent than Bruce ever intended, and the budding tension headache returns with a vengeance.

The night before, he’d noticed an edge to Miles’s attitude, a sort of moody disinterest that’d seeped into all their conversations and then poured over into the morning routine; Bruce’d chalked it up to hormones and the unusual lack of Tony, and left it at that.

Now, he’s filling in the blanks with other natural inferences, ones involving sixth-grade school drama and preteen fist-fights.

“I don’t have all the details yet,” Jessica’s explaining, and he forces himself to listen as he drops to sit on one of the cold concrete steps. “I guess he was acting up a little and it all culminated in him shoving another kid during science lab. They have a zero tolerance policy over there, automatic out-of-school suspension for the day.” She sighs. “They said you didn’t pick up.”

“Because of court,” he offers, but he knows the reason hardly matters. He pinches the bridge of his nose, a attempt to chase away the stress in his brow and jawline, but he knows it’s pointless. “He shoved a kid?”

“His lab partner, I guess. Like I said, I don’t have all the details.” There’s noise in the background, unfamiliar shuffling, and Bruce closes his eyes. “I’ve got an intern who can pick him up in a couple hours,” she continues after a few seconds, “but the school wants him out right away. I think they figure the weekend’ll cool the drama down. I can call around, but if you head out there after your hearing—”

“Can Tony pick him up?”

Bruce hardly recognizes his own question at first, voice ringing in his ears as it carries through the stairwell. He can’t remember formulating the thought and certainly can’t reason why that’s the very first alternative that jumps into his head, but it’s all he has. Because as much free time as Clint currently operates under and as ruthlessly warm as Steve can be, Tony’s the only person he really trusts.

And he knows, without even a second thought, that Tony’ll do it.

“Tony?” Jessica repeats.

“Yeah.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “He and Miles have a good relationship. If I can’t be
the one there, it might as well be—"

“Tony’s fine,” she interrupts, something like amusement touching the edges of her tone. “I just didn’t hear you. I’ll call the school and clear it.”

Bruce nods into the emptiness. “Thanks.”

“No problem. And, if you’re interested, I can tag him on the school information too. Second line of defense even if you still swear he’s not your boyfriend.”

He snorts softly, a chuckle that doesn’t quite creep past his lips. “Maybe I need to stop denying it,” he replies with as much lightness as he can manage.

“You think?” Jessica retorts, but hangs up before he can really reply.

Bruce lingers in the stairwell for a few more minutes, exchanging a series of disjointed text messages with Tony that include phrases like depends on whether I get more doorway action and Tony, please don’t reward him for the physical altercation. He assumes his chest and stomach’ll unclench once he’s arranged for Miles’s pick up, but instead, he everything winds up tighter.

He feels distinctly like a teenage girl when he thinks about how much the last twenty-four hours’ve plagued him. He’s filled to capacity with weekend plans ranging from slightly mundane to anything—but, and every last one involves Tony.

If he’d spent a half-hour the night before fighting against his urge to send an I miss you text, no one needed to know.

And if he’d woken up just enough to answer Tony’s belated goodnight message with one of his own, well, no one needed to know that, either.

Everyone else is waiting when Bruce steps back into the courtroom, and he forces a tiny smile as heat creeps up his neck. He knows they’re expecting some kind of explanation—their faces almost scream for one—but instead, he just says, “Thanks.” He moves back to counsel table, and when Judge Smithe returns, the hearing resumes as expected.

After all the questioning is finished and the social worker is admonished for slightly-sloppy management of the children’s health needs, Judge Smithe announces that they’re adjourned for the day. “And Doctor Banner, if you could approach,” she adds in a tone that leaves no room for argument, “I’d appreciate it.”

Danny shoots him a sympathetic look and mouths good luck, but Bruce just shakes his head. He deserves at least a ten-second scolding after he interrupted a hearing for a random phone call. Still, that doesn’t stop him from packing up his file as carefully as possible, or capping up his pen before he tucks it into his jacket pocket.

The social worker and mother are still both in the gallery when he steps in front of the bench. “Your honor?”

“I have to admit, I was just assuming new girlfriend,” Judge Smithe comments with a tiny lift of her shoulders, and Bruce frowns. “The distraction, the extra rambling, the usual bar rumor mill, it all added up.” She glances down at him over the rim of her glasses. “Now, with the phantom phone calls, I’m a little worried.”

Bruce swallows. “Worried?”
“About you. Are you all right? Because the last time I saw the smoke-and-mirrors routine from an attorney as good as you, I ended up with his job after he resigned. Due to cancer.”

There’s something simultaneously so honest and so pointed in her expression that Bruce can’t bite back the tiny laugh that bubbles out from the back of his throat. Smithe scowls, and he shakes his head in lieu of an answer; when he casts his eyes at the floor, he’s certain there’s red in his cheeks. “I’m not sick,” he promises. “I’ve just had a little upheaval, that’s all. And today, he got suspended from school.”

“Your upheaval did,” she repeats. He steals a glance at her quirked eyebrow and half-twisted little grin. “I’m going to need to corner you at the next bar association meeting to get the whole story, aren’t I?”

“Probably,” he admits.

Her grin brightens, this wicked little thing, and she gathers her files together. “As long as you’re not disappearing on us, I’m fine with a little interruption. I just cannot survive another two days a week of Thor Odinson.” She pauses before adding, “Or, worse, two days a week of Tony Stark.”

And if Bruce laughs just a little too hard, no one but he and Judge Smithe really need to know that.

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“I guess you want to talk about this.”

Miles is waiting in Bruce’s office when he wanders up from court a little after two in the afternoon, sitting in one of the chairs across from Bruce’s desk with his backpack between his feet. His grammar book’s spread across his knees, but Bruce hardly needs to glance to see that he’s made absolutely no effort to start that particular set of homework problems; there’s a spiral notebook tucked beside Miles in the chair, sure, but not a pencil in sight.

Bruce’d still been in the endless hearing when Tony’s text buzzed through on his phone, informing him that Miles’d arrived at the judicial complex. Actually, the text’d read the eagle has landed in your office and has homework, a little twist that nearly coaxed Bruce into a smile. Nearly, though, because his mind’d immediately flickered back to why he’d sent Tony out in the first place. Then, the only twist was the one clenching deep in his stomach.

Secretly, he wants a calm weekend, filled with fun activities for Miles and exploration of—well, of whatever he and Tony are developing. Now, he’s pretty sure the weekend’ll start with Miles’s first grounding. He’s not certain how to deal with that.

He sets the case file atop a stack of three others and steps around his desk, acutely aware that Miles’s watching him. When he settles into his chair, he stares at his own reflection in the blank computer monitor. He wants to say the right thing, to be an appropriate parent, but he’s never exactly seen that modeled.

Steve and Bucky are wonderful, but their daughter’s only four. Natasha can terrify witnesses and victims into compliance, but that’s not really the right tactic for dealing with a twelve-year-old. Clint’s an orphan, Phil’s entire family belongs on the cover of Better Homes and Gardens, and
Thor’s adopted brother was angry enough at their upbringing that he changed his last name at eighteen.

Tony’s grew up with a father, for the most part, but Bruce knows that Obadiah Stane, the current president of Howard Stark’s company, was really who raised him after his mother died. And the only person in their office with a less-involved parent is Bruce himself.

He unlocks his computer and checks Outlook before he finally glances back at Miles. The boy’s face is tipped toward the grammar book. The longer Bruce remains silent, the further his shoulder slouch.

“We need to talk about it, yes,” Bruce says finally. Miles nods weakly but refuses to glance up. Or maybe it’s not refusal as much as fear, that juvenile wait for Bruce to blow a gasket. He sighs and rubs his hand against his forehead. “Jessica said you pushed your lab partner during science class.”

“Judge.”

“What?”

“Judge’s my lab partner.” Miles shifts, one tennis shoe nudging against his bag. “It used to be Ganke, but he never followed the directions right, so now he does all the experiments with the teacher and I’m with Judge.”

Bruce snorts softly. He’s reminded momentarily of what it means to be a teenager surrounded by petri dishes and science tools. His aunt’s still not forgotten the time he started a fire in his advanced placement chemistry class. “Judge, then,” he amends, and then frowns. “Wait, you pushed Judge?”

Miles’s head bobs.

“He’s your friend, isn’t he?”

The boy’s shoulders lift slightly. “I guess.”

“But you pushed him,” Bruce repeats, because emotionally-stunted as he knows he can be, there’s something that doesn’t quite add up.

“He’s telling the whole thing in the wrong order,” Tony’s voice offers from the doorway, and both Bruce and Miles glance up in time to watch his hip land against the doorjamb. He’s obviously spent most of the day working—his hair’s sticking up from running fingers through it, his shirt collar’s unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up unevenly, and there’s a cup of coffee clutched in his hand—but he’s somehow still a sight for sore eyes. Bruce attempts a smile, but it flickers and dies like an old light bulb. In the chair, Miles drops his face back down to his book.

“‘Cause just like in law, the procedure’s the easy part: he pushed his friend, he mouthed off to his teacher—”

“You mouthed off?” Bruce repeats, his head jerking to stare at Miles.

“—and he got kicked out for the day. Something that the principal wants to talk about with the on-paper-foster-dad, by the way.” Tony shrugs, pausing just long enough for a sip of his coffee. “What we need here is the substance.”

Miles stares resolutely at his book. He hardly blinks.

“You want us to start making up scenarios?” Tony questions after a few too-long seconds. Bruce is momentarily grateful for Tony, and not just as a designated driver of moody twelve-year-olds or a warm body in a Wednesday night doorway, either. No, he’s grateful for Tony as a master of words, the man who can always find the right phrase when Bruce is convinced there’s no such thing. “I
mean, we can, but it’ll be worse than the usual. We’re way past the whole girl-thing, boy-thing, insulted-his-mom thing, here, and the way I see it—”

“He was just being a douchebag.”

It’s barely a murmur out of Miles’s mouth, a half-whisper that hardly breaks through Tony’s usual rambling. Tony nods and drinks his coffee, but Bruce watches the boy in front of him. There’s something tremulous in the back of his tone and the way he holds his lower lip; when his fingers curl against the book, they’re nearly white in their tightness.

“That’s it?” Bruce asks, and Miles nods jerkily. “I, uh, know we don’t know each other that well, but I find it pretty hard to believe you pushed someone for being a douchebag.” The word’s clumsy in his mouth—he prefers idiot and waste of oxygen over the kinds of insults Clint might use. He catches a tiny quirk gracing the corners of Miles’s lips. “If something else is going on, if you need to switch lab partners, I can—”

“No!” Miles’s head shoots up like a spring’s been snapped, and Bruce blinks in surprise. The boy’s eyes are wide and shining-wet. “He was just being a douchebag. It’s what he does. He made a stupid joke, it pissed me off, I didn’t think Miss Dalton even—”

“What joke?” The words leap from Bruce’s mouth before really realizes it. Miles promptly stares at the floor. “Miles, Jessica’s going to need to know all of this. You either tell Tony and me, or you tell her.”

“And before you decide,” Tony says, “think long and hard about the fact that Bruce had to skip out on court and I had to skip out on work to bail you out of this thing.” He steps more fully into the office and sets his coffee mug down on the edge of Bruce’s desk. “Kind of a lot of drama that would’ve been avoided if you hadn’t shoved your buddy in the middle of class.”

“No.” Bruce adds, spreading his hands out in front of him, “that doing our job with you is a problem, but—”

“What job?”

The question’s directed more at the floor than either adult in the room, and Bruce casts his eyes up to Tony. Tony shrugs, a little non-committal shuffle of his shoulders, and Bruce finds himself swallowing a tight feeling in the back of his throat. “The one where we take care of you the way you should be taken care of,” he offers after a few seconds. The words feel stuck, like he can’t quite formulate them individually. “Jessica explained how this works, that you’re staying with me like you would your uncle, and part of that’s the part where I take care of you.”

“With help.” Tony adds.

Bruce nods. “With maybe more help than the average person would need, yes.”

Tony rolls his eyes at that, a big, showy gesture of unnecessary disapproval, but Miles only shakes his head. Bruce studies his slumped shoulders and serious expression until he stills, then watches as his fingers curl around the edges of his grammar book again. “That’s what Judge was a douche about,” he says finally.

“About—my needing help?” Bruce asks.

“No,” Miles returns, and there’s a tiny hint of preteen derision in his tone. “He—Ganke told him about Uncle Aaron in a text or something, I guess. Judge can be kind of a tool, and he—”
He shakes his head again, but Tony raises an eyebrow. “He?”

“He asked about the weekend, and I told him how I’m visiting Uncle Aaron tomorrow and then we’re going to the bookstore with Dot and everybody on Sunday, and he said how I sounded happier to hang with you guys than see my uncle.” He grips the book hard enough to crinkle the pages. “And I’m not, but he kept saying it, and it just pissed me off so bad that—”

Bruce suspects that he’s the one who notices the first hard shake of Miles’s shoulders and the first hot tear on his cheeks, but Tony’s a half-dozen steps closer. By the time Bruce’s out of his chair, Tony’s hand is clutching Miles’s shoulder, and by the time Bruce’s around the desk and standing beside them, the tears are heavy and real. The boy leans into Tony’s touch until Bruce is close, and then presses his face against the side of Bruce’s shirt.

Bruce freezes, empty-handed and lost at what to do with twelve-year-old who’s crying hard enough to tremble, but when he glances up, Tony smiles. It’s warm and full, the type of smile usually saved for hare-brained plans and private moments. Bruce grips Miles’s other shoulder and, when the boy presses closer, cups the back of his neck, instead.

“Judge is wrong,” he says quietly. “You know it, I know it, Tony knows it.” Tony nods in immediate agreement. “You can like spending time with us and still want to see your uncle. They’re not mutually exclusive.”

“I hate this,” Miles mutters against the soft cotton of Bruce’s rumpled work shirt. A tiny glance in Tony’s direction reveals that he’s still holding onto the boy’s shoulder, his thumb stroking idly against his t-shirt.

The entirety of Tony’s attention is focused on Miles, but somehow, Bruce can’t stop studying Tony. His whole body is turned in toward Miles, his face serious but soft.

He’s always been attractive, even if that attraction started on a purely physical level.

But in that second, Bruce is certain that the most attractive of all Tony’s features is his kindness.

They stand together for longer than is strictly necessary, both of them holding onto Miles while Bruce’s fingers twitch in a need to hold onto Tony. Jane steps into the doorway, pauses, and then immediately retreats; over the next five minutes, Darcy, Thor, Natasha, and Bucky all wander by in a series of shamefully-orchestrated “accidents.” Bruce considers rolling his eyes when the sixth visitor is Phil, but then Miles is snuffling and pulling away.

He wipes his nose on the back of his hand. His face is tear-streaked, eyes swollen from crying, and neither thing can be chased away by what Bruce considers to be the world’s most stubborn frown. “That sucked,” he decides.

Tony laughs. “Welcome to the constant rotation of suck and non-suck we call life, kiddo,” he declares. He shoves Miles’s shoulder a little, Miles elbows him back, and within a few seconds, they’re both grinning.

Occasionally, Bruce misses the good parts about being twelve.

“Now, here’s the deal,” Tony continues, complete with the usual sequence of careless hand gestures. “All my little detours and side-trips to Union County middle schools—not complaining, but just saying—means that I’m now a couple hours behind on the work that’s piling up on my desk. And just in case you think I should procrastinate on it the way you’re doing on the homework I told you to start an hour ago—” He pauses to wave vaguely at Miles’s textbook. “—I am now officially
informing you that my assistant is terrifying. Plus, she has a girlfriend who can murder you with stiletto heels.”

Bruce nearly laughs at the way Miles gapes up at the other man. “Your girl assistant has a girlfriend?”

“Yes, but you are way too young for details.” Miles snorts and is promptly rewarded by Tony poking him in the nose with his index finger. “So, here’s the plan—take notes, big guy, ‘cause it’s a change from yesterday: I work, I bring dessert by a couple hours after closing time, and we kick back for the rest of the weekend.”

“Kick back?” Bruce repeats.

“Are you doubting my street cred? I hear cred-doubt in your voice, Banner, and I’m not sure I like it.” Bruce bites back a smile as he rolls his eyes, but Tony waggles his eyebrows anyway. “So, deal or what?”

Miles grins. “Deal,” he decides. As tear-sticky as he still is, there’s delight poking around the edges of his tone.

Bruce stops biting down on his smile. “Deal,” he agrees. Tony’s face lights up too, as bold and bright as Miles before the tears. He claps Miles on the shoulder, then snags his coffee to leave.

Bruce assumes he’ll simply step through the doorway and disappear, back to the salt mines of appellate briefs and reply motions, but he doesn’t. No, instead, he stops just a step inside the door. His shoulders square momentarily, and Bruce wonders whether he’s forgotten something.

He’s about to ask, too, when Tony abruptly twists around and comes back toward them. His steps are quick and efficient, his brow tight and eyes narrowed in the kind of single-minded focus he usually reserves for his work. Bruce parts his lips, Tony’s name already on his tongue, but he’s robbed of the chance to say it.

Because Tony abandons his mug on the corner of the desk, plants his still-warm palm on Bruce’s side, and squarely kisses him. It’s gentle but demanding, Tony tilting his head to slot their mouths together and Bruce—

Bruce’s fingers curl around empty air. He wants it to be Tony—his shirt, his belt-loop, his arm, something—but they’re also in his office.

His open-doored office, the one with a twelve-year-old sitting only an arm’s length away.

The kiss lasts all of two seconds, which is simultaneously too much and absolutely not enough.

“I’ll see you tonight,” Tony says when he steps away. His lips are parted, his breath just tip-toeing away from his usual control, and Bruce feels all the blood in his body rush to either above his collar or below his belt.

He swallows around that heady rush. “Right,” he replies, and Tony smiles as he walks off.

It’s several seconds before Miles observes, “You’re so weird about PDA.”

Bruce recovers just enough to shake the cobwebs from the corners of his consciousness. “Do your homework.”
Bruce and Miles spend an hour working in tandem, Miles’s grammar text book spread across his thighs and Bruce poring over two different applications for emergency jurisdiction. They’re both close-call cases, toeing around the edge of what Bruce knows to be Judge Smithe’s personal interpretation of the statutes, and he ends up in a long e-mail conversation with one of the social workers. He’s still waiting for the latest reply when he glances over to check on Miles—and is forced to bite down on a tiny grin.

There’s a different textbook across Miles’s lap, now—history or geography, if the pictures are any indication—but it’s failing to hold any of the boy’s attention. Instead, he’s staring out the office door, watching the usual Friday afternoon activity bustle by. Bruce’s office is on the direct path to the break room, filling the hallway with strangers, shouts, and shuffling; Thor’s booming laughter drifts in through the door, as does Bucky’s yell for Darcy to bring him a file before he’s late for court.

The noise is familiar to Bruce, of course, as comforting as one of those clock-radios that play wave-crashing sounds until you fall asleep, but to Miles, it’s an unfamiliar thrum. He’s just about to comment on the boy’s distraction, too, when Outlook chimes with a new message.

Miles flinches away from the door, catches Bruce watching, and immediately drops his eyes back to the textbook. Bruce snorts a little laugh and shakes his head before he opens the message.

The social worker’s asking for an hour to investigate the answer to Bruce’s latest question. He consults his watch, then assures her that there’s enough time left in the day for both her follow-up and any decision he might make. He listens for the rushing “sent e-mail” sound before he locks the computer.

“Want a tour?” he asks.

Miles raises his eyes but not his head, a valiant attempt to look intently studious. Bruce can see that the worksheet that’s half-tucked under the book cover is blank of everything except Miles’s name. “Now?” he asks cautiously, like he suspects a catch.

Bruce shrugs. “It’s not going to quiet down,” he admits, gesturing slightly toward the door. “I’m waiting on an e-mail. Might as well kill a little time and show you around.”

“It is kind of hard to work,” Miles offers. There’s a quiver of excitement in his tone that suggest he’d been waiting for Bruce to make this very offer. Bruce smiles at him, watching his expression shift like he actually needs to consider the offer. “Let’s go,” he finally decides, and hops to his feet.

Bruce bites down on a laugh. “Okay, then.”

They spend the next hour wandering through the District Attorney’s office, peeking their heads into all the different offices. Miles shakes hands, laughs at the appropriate places, and—somewhat unexpectedly, at least from Bruce’s standpoint—absorbs everything. He happily listens as Bruce explains each attorney’s role, the significance of the different folder colors for different crimes, and the myriad responsibilities of each trial assistant. Miles grins at the multi-colored collection of pillows on Clint’s window ledge (“It’s really a nest, at this point,” Bruce offers), admires the museum-quality collection of Dot Barnes originals that clutter up Steve’s office walls, and helps to rearrange Darcy’s Doctor Who action figures into a Dalek-murdering tableau.

“Bruce only knows what a Dalek is because of Tony,” Darcy informs Miles in the least-
conspiratorial whisper of all time.

Miles snorts a derisive pre-teen laugh. “Tony’s the cool boyfriend,” he confides, and Bruce nearly chokes on his coffee.

They spend a good ten minutes discussing *The Walking Dead* with Phil, and Miles’s entire face lights up when Phil offers to lend them the complete comic collection right up through the most recent issue.

They’re standing at Pepper’s cubicle, surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam that comes with having close to a dozen projects all due in the next 72 hours, when Natasha strides up. She steals a cinnamon candy from Pepper’s “bowl of wonders” (a name that, unsurprisingly, came from Tony), pops it into her mouth, and then narrows her eyes in Bruce’s direction.

Bruce frowns. “What?”

“Learn to close your office door.” She clicks the hard candy against her teeth. Seated beside her, Pepper’s lips curl into a secretive smile. Secretive and wicked, actually, and Bruce can feel his brow crease. “A suggestion,” she adds, her tone riddled with mock innocence.

She nabs another candy and walks away, her hips swaying in a way that reminds Bruce of a Cheshire cat. He’s still staring after her when Miles remarks, “She’s really hot.”

The comment jerks Bruce’s attention right back to the boy, who glances up sheepishly. “She is,” he says with a shrug. “I mean, Darcy and the other girls are cool, too, she’s just—” He shrugs again, a half-lost gesture, and drops his eyes to the carpet.

Still at her computer and still typing, Pepper smiles again. “She’s something special,” she confirms, and Bruce can’t help but chuckle at Miles’s flabbergasted expression.

They loop back around to Bruce’s office in time for the follow-up e-mail he’s waiting on, and settle back down into a working routine. Bruce fills out the documents for emergency jurisdiction and sends Jane down to Judge Smithe’s office for a signature, and Miles furiously fills in the answer blanks on his worksheet. At five, they pack up their respective bags and wander out to the elevators. Steve and Bucky are waiting there, too, Bucky loaded down with files for his Monday docket while Steve carries both their bags.

There’s something familiar and almost cute about it, Bruce thinks, and he’s not even surprised by the momentary twist of envy buried in his chest.

He is surprised when, as they’re stepping into the elevator, Bucky says, “We’re going to have to teach her to read a calendar at this rate.”

Bruce glances over and is rewarded with a warm smile. “Dot?” he checks, slightly confused.

“Of course Dot,” Bucky retorts. “Who else?”

Steve holds up his hands in some semblance of peace-keeping. “We told her about the Sunday bookstore idea,” he explains, “and now she keeps asking whether it’s Sunday yet.”

“It doesn’t help that we told her because she wanted to know when she’d see Miles next.” Bucky shakes his head. “You’ve opened a whole case of worms, Banner.”

Bruce momentarily considers apologizing—because he knows from experience how invested Dot can become in otherwise innocuous ideas—but then, he catches a glimpse of Miles’s face. Specifically, he catches the grin that’s playing across Miles’s features, and how much warmth comes with it.
Instead of apologizing, then, he smiles. “Historically, Tony’s amped her up for a lot worse than playdates,” he replies, and both Bucky and Steve laugh.

After wishing Steve and Bucky a good night (and a baby’s-first-calendar, which causes Steve to laugh and Bucky to roll his eyes), Bruce and Miles make their way back to the house for dinner. In the car, Miles is quiet, his head lolléd back against the back of the seat and his eyes trained out the window, and Bruce realizes at the second or third stoplight how tired he looks. With all the laughter and introductions, he’d easily forgotten the school incident and the crying jag, but it rushes easily back thanks to the overwhelming silence on the ride home. At the house, Miles flops down on the couch and flicks on Netflix, and every time Bruce steps out of the kitchen to check on him, he catches his half-hooded eyes flickering close to sleep.

Steering Miles into the kitchen only leads to fantastically subdued dinner where neither of them really talks. Twice, Bruce wonders whether the boy’ll fall asleep into his pasta; as it stands, Miles spends most his energy pushing it around his plate rather than eating.

“You know,” Bruce comments as he clears the table and watches Miles rub his face in exhaustion like a much younger child, “you can nap if you want to. I’ll go up and work, maybe check on you in a couple hours, and you—”

“Tony’s still coming, right?” It’s a jolt of a question, and Bruce blinks. Miles stares up at him, suddenly focused.

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Then I’ll stay up.” As though attempting to prove a point, Miles stretches his arms above his head and twists around. An attempt to wake himself up, Bruce thinks with a tiny smile. When the boy stands, though, he’s overtaken by an enormous yawn. He wipes his eyes and then blinks a little at Bruce. “At least ‘till dessert,” he amends.

Bruce smiles. “If you’re up to it,” he says, hearing the amusement in his own voice, “then sure.”

But Tony never makes it for dessert.

Bruce assumes he will, of course, a thought that pervades his mind as he settles in the living room with Miles. He drifts between reading through court reports and half-heartedly watching the next episode of *Phineas and Ferb*, but his attention wanders continually to the window, waiting for the silver Audi to arrive.

It’s a farce, in a way, a sort of teenage optimism, because every flash of headlights halfway down the street forces Bruce to sit up a little straighter. His chest seizes as the cars each rumble by, drifting lazily toward destinations unknown, and each time, he catches himself exhaling far too hard. He’s worse with his cell phone; the vibrations of text messages cause him to jerk and jump in his seat. He reads each name—Clint, James, Natasha, Steve—like a devotional, but none belongs to Tony.

Miles loses the battle with sleep and nods off around 8:30, his face mashed against the arm of the couch. He hardly flinches when Bruce turns off the television; by the time he’s switched off all the lamps and covered Miles with his favorite blanket, the boy’s snoring quietly. He lingers in the doorway for a few minutes, studying his face in the half-light from the hallway; then, he feels decidedly uncomfortable, almost anxious, and forces himself to focus on something else.

He drifts from room to room, filling both silence and time with idle activities: washing the dinner dishes, sorting through a few days’ worth of mail, trekking down to the basement to start a load of laundry. But his traitorous mind, the one that won’t settle in what used to be comfortable silence,
keeps drifting toward the emptiness of the house and the stillness of his phone. Around nine, he sends Tony a message that reads *Everything alright?* and receives no answer. Around 9:15, he scrolls down a few names and opens a new text. *Have you heard anything from Tony?*

Steve texts back all of ten seconds later. *The current king of workaholics?* he asks, complete with a winking emoticon. *I think the last time I saw him was during his last coffee break. Why?*

Bruce spends a few long seconds just staring at the answer. He presses the back button and checks the greater list of texts, convinced there’ll be a new message waiting under Tony’s name.

There isn’t. *No reason,* he replies to Steve.

Before he can lock the screen, a new text buzzes through. *Bruce, what’s going on?*

He shakes his head. *Nothing, Steve. Thank you.*

The phone vibrates again after he’s locked it and set it down on the countertop, but he refuses to even glance at it. He drums his fingers against the edge of the Formica, suddenly convinced that the saying about idle hands is in fact accurate, and then sets to work in the kitchen. He plucks the dishes out of the drainer and dries them by hand before stacking them away in the cabinets, then decides the whole room needs a wipe-down. Once the counters are clear and the sink’s gleaming, he carries the trash out to the garage and spends a few minutes organizing the recycling.

He absolutely does not check the clock every three minutes, or pull out his laptop to check for e-mails from Tony. Not at all.

He’s back to reviewing court reports, his fingertips tapping idly against a mug of hot tea as he sits at the kitchen table, when Miles wanders in. There’s a cross-hatch pattern from the couch cushion pressed into his cheek, and his eyes are still heavy with sleep. He rubs his face, a futile attempt to wake himself up, and Bruce can’t help but smile as he says, “Hey.”

Except without the report to distract him, he also can’t help glancing at the wall clock and reading the time.

It’s 10:30.

He fights to hold onto his smile, and loses when Miles asks, “Did I miss Tony?”

There’s disappointment in his voice, a timid thread that tangles around Bruce’s heart and lungs and then pulls taut. He inhales harder than he means to, acutely aware of how closely Miles is watching. “He texted about an hour ago,” he lies, the guilt joining Miles’s disappointment in an attempt to suffocate him. “He ran into a problem with one of the briefs and needed to work late again.”

He watches Miles roll his lips together. “Oh,” he says quietly. He casts his eyes at the floor for a few seconds, his shoulders slumping, and Bruce tightens his hand into a fist around his highlighter. “Is he coming at all?”

“I don’t know.”

Miles nods slightly but never raises his head. His brow crumples, mouth creases into a frown, and
Bruce—Bruce suddenly can’t name the emotions pooling in his belly. Because before now, the stillness and emptiness of a house without Tony’d bothered him on a selfishly personal level, one that’d expected touch and—

Well.

One that’d expected a replay of Wednesday night on a much grander scale.

Now, the feelings that threaten to force the breath from his body revolve entirely around Miles: Miles’s expectations, Miles’s disappointment, Miles’s relationship with Tony, Miles’s need for a constant in his life. If Miles is a satellite, Bruce reasons, then he and Tony’ve somehow become the planet around which he orbits, the gravitational force that allows his disjointed life some measure of meaning.

He simultaneously appreciates and hates that it’s both he and Tony at the center of Miles’s orbit. Because he can control his own behavior and ensure he’s a good influence, but Tony—

No one will ever control Tony Stark.

“You want to watch a movie?” Bruce suggests after a few seconds, and Miles’s head lifts slowly. He caps up his highlighter while he shrugs. “We could jump in the car, head down to a Redbox, pick out something you’d like to see. You’ve slept for a few hours, it might be good to—”

“Isn’t Jessica picking me up pretty early?” Miles interrupts, and Bruce’s heart drops into his stomach. He’d forgotten somehow about the scheduled visit between Miles and his uncle. He forces himself to nod, and Miles’s lips twist into a weak facsimile of a smile. “I should probably just go to bed.”

“Probably,” Bruce echoes. He glances helplessly at his hands. He wonders whether he should offer something—hot chocolate, tea, more time on the couch, a hug—but every thought slips out of his mind as quickly as it slips in.

He wants to find Tony and shake him. He wants to postpone the visit just long enough for Miles to cheer up.

He wants—

“Sleep tight, okay?” he says finally, his voice catching somewhere in the back of his throat. He glances over at Miles and forces a smile. “If I can drag you out of bed in good time, maybe we’ll do doughnuts again.”

Somehow, that coaxes a tiny grin from the boy. “Are Saturday doughnuts a thing with you and Tony?”

Bruce snorts what he hopes sounds like a laugh. “Maybe they’re our thing,” he suggests. When he hazards another half-second glance over at Miles, his grin’s no longer tiny but rather full and bright. Bruce reaches out long enough to nudge his shoulder a little. “But that means actually sleeping,” he warns.

Miles pushes his arm, but his grin doesn’t waver. “I’m going,” he promises. Bruce reaches out again, but he ducks out of the way and darts toward the kitchen doorway.

Bruce is highlighting a relevant passage in his court report when he hears Miles say, “Goodnight, Bruce.”
Despite all the conflict and hurt still churning in the pit of his stomach, Bruce can’t entirely help his smile. “Goodnight,” he replies, and listens to Miles’s footsteps thud up the stairs.

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“Okay, I get it, you’re pissed,” Tony says an hour later, his hands held up in front of him and his fingers spread wide. “I’d be pissed, too, but if you’d just let me explain, we could move past the ‘pissed’ and onto the ‘I show you how sorry I am,’ and this could all be—”

The word “over” is swallowed by the sound that bursts out of Bruce’s mouth without permission, a half-snort, half-laugh that surprises him in its absolute ire. He feels like his stomach’s been replaced with a bubbling lava pit of anger, one that’d opened up as soon as he’d heard Tony’s car in the driveway and that is now resolutely refusing to cool down. He’d nearly snapped the pencil he’d been using to take notes when the door opened, nearly knocked his cup of tea off the kitchen table in his haste to put it in the sink so he wouldn’t have anything to throw, and now he’s here:

Standing in the middle of the living room, laughing in Tony’s face.

Tony stares at him like they’re strangers. Bruce’d changed into his pajamas after Miles wandered up to bed, soft, warm cotton sleep pants that managed to be comfortable without qualifying at all as comforting. He’d apparently not been alone in his need for slouchy, well-worn clothes, either, because Tony’s wearing a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. Bruce wants to admire the way it clings to his shoulders and arms, too, but every time he glances in Tony’s direction, he’s overtaken by another sharp jolt of anger.

It’s very nearly midnight, and Tony’s standing in his living room. He’s standing in the living room, there’s a plastic grocery sack with cupcakes sitting in the doorway, and Bruce—

“Big guy,” Tony says for what feels like the hundredth time in the last three minutes, and Bruce grits his teeth to keep from snapping at him about the suddenly-stupid nickname, “I told you. I went home to finish a couple things up and I lost track of time. That’s it. No nefarious purposes, I just didn’t pay attention to the clock.”

Bruce shakes his head and forces himself to stare at the wall. If he looks at Tony, he thinks, he’ll scream. He’ll scream, or break something, or shove him out of the room. There’s irony in the fact that their—Miles shoved someone he cared about all of twelve hours earlier.

There’s irony still in the way Bruce’s hands hurt from clenching into fists.

“I mean, how long’ve we known each other? Five years? Seven if you count when I presented you with that Urban Ascent award that, by the way, looks awesome in your office?” Tony opens his hands again, this big, half-helpless gesture. It fills Bruce with a momentary pang of guilt, enough that he twists and starts to walk toward the nearest wall. He’s not sure why he picks there—he could walk right out of the room instead of backing himself into a corner—but he knows from both sense and experience that no amount of pacing will stop Tony’s excuses. “This isn’t the first time I lost track of the clock, right?” the other man asks, and Bruce clenches his jaw to keep from interrupting. “I mean, do you remember the Hansen appeal? ‘Cause I remember the Hansen appeal, I remember that I stopped eating for, what, three days, that you and Pep had to drag me out of the office and I
He apparently can’t clench his jaw tightly enough. “That’s completely different,” he interrupts, and
the momentum of his words spins him back toward Tony. “You know it’s different.”

“Is it?” Tony retorts, his eyebrows rising. “‘Cause what happened then’s what happened here, where
I got wrapped up and—”

“There wasn’t a kid then, Tony.”

There’s venom in the back of Bruce’s tone, acid that spits and sizzles, and when he finally hazards a
glance at Tony, he’s staring. Wide-eyed, blank-faced staring, staring with a complete lack of
recognition, and somehow, that’s the bridge too far. Because he’s fought with Tony before,
bellowed at him in his office about cases and cacti, but this—

Tony’s never greeted his logic with emptiness, and somehow, that’s what causes the lava pit to boil
over.

“We expected you here,” he presses, his feet closing the distance between them without any real
permission. “I did, Miles did, and— And maybe you forgot, Tony, but he cried this afternoon. He sobbed
over what’s happening in his life, and tonight, he needed both of us to be here. Not just me, but you, too.”

He raises his hand, tempted to jab his fingers into Tony’s chest as some kind of juvenile punctuation.
In front of him, Tony’s jaw works, his features softening, and the only gesture Bruce can summon up
is to clench his fingers back into a fist and drop it to his side.

“Bruce—”

“No,” he snaps, and the acid somehow sharper than even a moment ago. “You let him down. The
only constant that he has right now is us, and half of that was missing. And you—”

He shakes his head in an attempt to clear it, but the thoughts and emotions keep colliding together in
miniature starbursts. He’s angry, he’s hurt, he’s betrayed, he’s upset. His jaw aches from clenching it,
but it somehow aches worse when he finally lets the tension go.

“You didn’t even stop to think about how many people’ve let him down,” he continues, fighting to
keep his voice even. “You didn’t even take a breath to think about how much of his life’s revolved
around the people he cares about nor being there. Because that’s what he’s had, with his parents
dying and his uncle not wanting him, and then you didn’t show up.”

There’s silence when Bruce finishes, lead-heavy and all-encompassing, and he watches as, slowly,
Tony’s lips press shut. He expects a comeback, some meaningless question to break through the
quiet, but the only noises are ordinary ones: the furnace clicking on to combat the November chill, a
car driving down the street, the wind in the trees.

They watch each other through that white noise, Tony’s dark eyes nearly unblinking in their focus
and Bruce’s own face unable to tip away—at least, until the hourly alarm on Tony’s watch beeps.
It’s the perfect distraction, the stupid reminder that it’s finally midnight, and Bruce snorts another
laugh.

It’s midnight, and they can’t find a single word to say to one another. Not about Miles, not about this
—thing that’s they’d almost fallen into, not about the optimistic cupcakes or worse, optimistic
weekend plans.
Bruce shakes his head. “Go home, Tony,” he says, and then steps around the other man to head for the stairs.

He makes it halfway before Tony asks, “Were you talking about him, just now, or about you?”

It’s full-voiced question, almost shameless in its strength, and Bruce nearly trips on his own socks as he twists around to face Tony. “What?” he demands, scowling.

Tony holds up his hands in the international sign for surrender. “The way I see it, right now, there are two orphans we could be talking about: the kid, or you.” Bruce rolls his eyes, for all the good it does; Tony’s approaching him slowly, the kind of loping steps he usually reserves for his amateur dramatics. He considers storming away, but something about the other man’s expression—its earnestness, maybe, or just the unwavering attention of those big brown eyes—roots him to the floor. “And it’s fine if we’re talking about the kid, or even if we’re talking about both of you,” Tony continues, moving to stand not two feet in front of Bruce, “but given that you just mentioned his uncle not wanting him instead of ditching him, I wanna make sure I know which one we’re talking about.”

Bruce opens his mouth, ready to argue—and then stops. He’d thought he’d mentioned Davis by name, thought he’d accused the man of disappearing on his nephew, but suddenly, he’s not sure. He watches as Tony quirks an eyebrow, but then drops his own gaze to the floor. He tries to sort through the hundred things he’s said in the last few minutes, but all the words slip through his fingers.

Finally, he shakes his head again. “This isn’t about me, Tony,” he says, but his voice is quiet now. Like the lava’s all poured out of him, cooling into stone. “It’s not about you, or me, or even us, it’s about—”

“Us?” Tony repeats. For all his usual shamelessness, the word’s surprisingly cautious. “So, there’s an us?”

“I—don’t know.” When he raises his head, Tony’s still staring him down, but it’s different, somehow. His face is soft and open, almost lost, and in the half-dark of the room, Bruce can’t chase away the traitorous thoughts that tumble around in his brain. Suddenly, it’s not about Miles but about the three of them, the gestalt of two clumsy men and damaged boy.

They’re more than the sum of their parts, Bruce realizes. They’re an accident waiting to happen, a time bomb, but he can’t imagine a life without them.

He swallows around the weight in the back of his throat. “Maybe,” he says, his voice tripping over the one word, “there shouldn’t be, I don’t know, but—”

“Bruce.” Even standing this close together, his name on Tony’s lips sounds more like a whisper than anything else, a puff of breath that he can nearly taste. When he draws in a breath, Tony steps closer, leaving mere inches between them. “I’ve got a zillion things filling up my head and one of them distracted me. Same as always. The fact it happened doesn’t mean that I don’t wanna be here for Miles, or that I’m not gonna be here in the future. And it also doesn’t mean that I’m not gonna be here for you.”

His hands slide forward, settling carefully on Bruce’s hips. Carefully, then solidly, and Bruce fights against the urge to press their bodies together. He suddenly wants to demonstrate the all the things he can’t say, because words inside a courtroom are easy but words about himself never are.

He watches Tony wet his lips. A flash of something like uncertainty touches his expression, then
releases.

“I’m here,” Tony says, and Bruce feels like the air between them is swiftly evaporating. “Okay? I’m here for Miles, and I’m here for you. And now that everything’s done, this is the only place I’m gonna be.”

“Tony,” Bruce attempts, hardly recognizing his own voice.

“Here, big guy.” Tony closes the inches between them in one tiny shuffle, and for a half-second, Bruce can feel everything: the warmth of Tony’s breath, the flex of fingers against his own hips, the thrum of each of their hearts. “Nowhere else. Okay?”

For a few, long moments, there’s—nothing. Bruce opens his mouth in an attempt to string together a response, but all he can really do is exhale; when he rolls his lips together and attempts to swallow around the lump in the back of his throat, the only thing he can really think about is the way Tony watches his mouth.

Tony’s not human, Bruce thinks as the silence settles around them. He’s not a friend, he’s not a colleague, he’s not an attorney or the brilliant child of an equally-brilliant businessman. Those adjectives are all too insignificant for a man like Tony Stark. They’re all woefully inadequate.

Because, somehow in the last few weeks—in the last few years, Bruce realizes, in all the months building up to this exact moment—Tony’s become a scientific constant, a proven and unalterable law of nature. He’s 9.8 meters per second squared, the rate Bruce’s been falling at since the first time they spent a whole night laughing together.

He’s the center of Bruce’s orbit as much as Miles’s, the gravitational pull that keeps him moving.

But try as he might, he can’t actually say any of those things. The words stick in his throat and refuse to assemble into sense.

Which is why, in the end, Bruce kisses him.

It’s meant to be soft, a brush of lips to stand in for all the emotions that are rushing around his head and heart, but somehow, a brush isn’t enough. Because the brush causes Tony to sigh and slide his hands up Bruce’s sides, and Bruce, he wants—more. He wants to slot their lips together, to stumble into the wall, to drag his fingers through Tony’s hair and lose himself in the descent he’s spent too long fighting.

It’s not really a surprise, then, when his arms reach up to thread around Tony’s neck or when he can’t help but tip his head enough to properly taste Tony’s mouth.

No, the only surprise is when Tony drags their bodies together and kisses him back.

Tony kisses like he lives, needy and demanding, full of noises that’ll haunt Bruce for a hundred lonely nights, and Bruce can’t help but be swept up in it. He can’t stop himself from moaning as Tony urges him to open his mouth, from threading his fingers through Tony’s hair as their bodies press together, or from stumbling like a teenager into the nearest flat surface. The photographs rattle and a lampshade shakes from impact, but Bruce can’t bring himself to care, not now.

Not when Tony’s hands are under his t-shirt and their shared, hungry panting is the only sound filling the room.

Not when he can scratch his fingernails along Tony’s scalp and draw out a groan so filthy that Bruce’s hips rock forward.
And definitely not when he can feel the rough fabric of Tony’s jeans through the thin cotton of his pajama pants, all the pent-up heat and need radiating through until they’re rutting together like teenagers, Bruce’s fingers clawing at Tony’s shirt and Tony’s fingers flexing against his skin.

They kiss until they’re gasping for breath and then try to keep kissing, stolen brushes between greedy breaths. When Tony finally releases Bruce’s lower lip, he buries his face in the crook of his neck. The burn of his goatee and stubble cause Bruce to gasp and roll his hips.

Even pinned to the wall, he clings to Tony like they’re either flying or falling. When he closes his eyes, he can imagine that the only thing in the world is the man pressed against him, propping him up as he kisses a nonsense pattern against his throat.

Unsurprisingly, Bruce is still panting when Tony breaks the silence.

“Before you tell me what a bad idea this is,” he murmurs, his breath hot against Bruce’s neck, “know that I think this is the best collective idea we’ve ever had, and also that I’m way too turned on to argue with you.”

“I noticed,” Bruce replies, and Tony’s laugh is a puff of breath against his throat. A puff of breath followed by a grind of his hips, and Bruce’s head smacks against the wall when he leans back. He’s in the process of remembering how to breathe when Tony finally lifts his head, and their eyes meet in the near-darkness.

Tony’s neck and cheeks are flushed, his mouth red and kiss-swollen and his eyes nearly pitch-black. When he wets his lips, Bruce can’t actually look away.

He’s one of the most beautiful people Bruce knows, and somehow, he’s partially Bruce’s.

“It’s not a bad idea,” he finally says. Tony’s eyebrows shoot up in either surprise or a mockery thereof, and Bruce ducks his head. He can feel the little blood that’s not pooled elsewhere rushing into his cheeks. “I . . . ”

When he lifts his eyes, Tony’s watching him, his face soft and open even in the half-light.

“I want this,” he says.

Bruce is fairly sure that there is no light in the world brighter than Tony’s smile in that instant—and no better feeling than being the one to transform that smile into another hungry kiss.

Chapter End Notes

First, foremost, and absolutely vital for all: KayQy created amazing "Permanency" art that's made my life. I smile every time I look at it. In fact, I'm smiling right now.

Also, I updated the posting schedule through the end of "Permanency". I will post faster if I feel I'm ahead enough, but like I say on tumblr, I don't want to promise things and then fall through.

Lastly, if you commented on Chapter 7, please know that I plan on replying to the comments this weekend at some point. I'd planned to today but ended up putting out some unexpected school-related fires instead. I will use comment replies as a reward to myself as I write a paper this weekend! (Or, more likely, I will use them as a method of
procrastination.)

Edited to add: I have belatedly declared today [Motion Practice Friday, the day where I answer real questions from real Motion Practitioners](#). If you have any questions, now is your chance to poke my tumblr and ask them! And if you don't, hey, that's okay too.
**Scale of Ten**

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce wakes up Saturday morning to find his life both dramatically different and substantially the same. But the problem isn’t with the change as much as it is with the past—and with the ever-growing uncertainty about the future.

Chapter Notes

You know how the President can’t appoint people without the advice and consent of the Senate? Yeah, I can’t post things without the advice and consent of Jen and saranoh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first sound that greets Bruce the next morning is technically a shout:

“Are you guys seriously still asleep?”

Accompanying the shout is the kind of urgent pounding that reminds Bruce of a bass drum rather than a knock, and he groans as he buries his face into his pillow. Except his pillow is warm, solid, and smells like a combination of sweat, sex, and Tony Stark’s expensive cologne; when he presses his nose and mouth against it as a greeting, it first shifts and then grumbles in approval.

“You make promises you can’t keep, I’m gonna get grumpy,” Tony warns. His voice is dark and clumsy from sleep, and Bruce wants to sink into the rumble of it.

“I’m allowed to say good morning,” Bruce retorts.

“Say, yes. Mouth it against my skin so you get me all riled up, not so—”

Bruce suspects that the next word in the sentence is much, but the bang of the bedroom door swinging open and impacting the wall clips the end right off.

The next ten or so seconds are almost farcical, a flurry of activity that Bruce can’t really control or stop. Because Miles’s standing in the doorway, arms spread out in front of him and face captured in a triumphant grin that swiftly drops to embarrassment when he actually sees Bruce’s bedroom.

Or, more specifically, when he notices the clumps of abandoned pants, shirts, socks, and underwear that are littered all over Bruce’s bedroom floor.

Miles’s face flushes, cheeks darkening as he stumbles through an uncontrolled attempt at an apology.
and reaches to close the bedroom door. But Bruce is already moving, too, grabbing at the sheets in an attempt to cover himself while simultaneously moving toward his forgotten pajama pants, and—

Well.

The end result involves a blanket too tangled around Tony’s legs to move, a lot of bare hip and thigh as Bruce nearly falls out of the bed, and Miles squeaking before he manages to drag the door shut.

Still in the bed, Tony spreads out his limbs like a Cheshire cat. “Good morning to us,” he declares, and Bruce briefly considers smothering him with a pillow.

Briefly, though, because he can’t actually drag his eyes away from the sight of Tony stretched across his bed, gloriously and shamelessly naked. The dark bed sheets are pooled around his waist, a stark contrast to the paleness of his chest, arms, and shoulders. He shifts slightly, stretching and settling, and Bruce watches every one of those muscles flex and move.

He forgets, momentarily, that he’s naked, too, or that he’d spent the night pressed against all that pale skin and trying not to moan Tony’s name.

“You need clothes,” he manages after entirely too long, and Tony grins as he rolls out of the bed.

They’re both halfway-decent—Tony in the pajama pants Bruce’d worn the night before, Bruce in a pair of sweatpants—when Miles knocks again, a timid rap of knuckles against the mostly-closed bedroom door.

Bruce finishes tugging an old college t-shirt over his head and spends a guilty split-second admiring the line of Tony’s naked back before he calls for Miles to come in.

The boy’s already dressed for the day, fresh jeans with one of the polo shirts Tony’d brought over the night before the rehearing. He’s obviously chosen his clothes carefully, as well as showered; when he crosses the threshold and walks into the bedroom proper, Bruce can see that he’s even picked out plain socks without holes.

His momentary swell of something akin to pride is interrupted, however, by Tony flinging a pillow in Miles’s direction. Miles dodges, laughing, and the makeshift projectile ends up atop Tony’s crumpled jeans.

“Next time, ten second pause between the knock and the dramatic entrance,” Tony declares, flopping back onto the bed. He’s languid and boneless, his arms stretched out over the rumpled covers and the pajama pants riding down on his hips. Bruce is momentarily driven to distraction by the cut of his hipbones and the fine trail of hair under his navel. “We could’ve been having sex.”

The rush of warmth to Bruce’s cheeks threatens to incinerate him from the outside in. He runs a hand through his hair, unsurprised at the rat’s nest that it’s become overnight, and warns, “Tony.”

“What?” Tony retorts. He props himself up on his elbows to level a challenging look across the

Still holding his ground just inside the doorway, Miles rolls his eyes. When he crosses his arms over the front of the black polo shirt, he looks more twenty than twelve. Long-suffering, Bruce thinks, and bites down on the corners of a smile. “You weren’t really going to,” he declares. “And even if you were, I knew you weren’t yet.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tony retorts. He props himself up on his elbows to level a challenging look across the
bedroom, all raised eyebrows and pursed lips. “How’d you figure that one out?”

“How’d you figure that one out?” Tony lifts one hand off the sheets and gestures vaguely in Bruce’s direction; Bruce feels the color sneak back up his throat and toward his cheeks. “Listening just means what you’re bursting in on is silent sex. Or the kind where one or both of our mouths is otherwise—”

“How’s that going?”

Bruce spreads out his hands in front of him as he interrupts, a futile attempt to pull the conversation back before it barrels over the Rubicon. Tony tips his head back to flash him a truly ridiculous grin complete with bared teeth and crinkled laugh lines, and Bruce works to roll his eyes. Except the lingering warmth in his belly, the one that started eight or nine hours ago and is still catching his breath at inopportune times, flares up with the force of Tony’s smile. It’s a flare he felt during every kiss and breath the night before, too, but now—

Now, even in the harsh light of morning and with Miles in the room, it’s still there.

He can’t help but duck his head to avoid being swept up in the joy that is Tony Stark’s smile.

“It’s too early for me to police this—topic,” he defends after a moment, shaking his head. “I need at least a cup of coffee and a shower before I can referee.”

“It’s already eight-thirty,” Miles points out. When Bruce glances at him, the boy’s peering at him in a way that’s almost paternal. Bruce wonders whether he’s employed that same expression on Miles himself. “You don’t have time for all that and doughnuts.”

“In our defense,” Tony informs him, “we were up pretty late.”

“Tony,” Bruce says again, and Tony laughs before he slips out of the rumpled bed sheets.

The next few minutes are spent as most mornings with Tony are, scattered between conversations about doughnuts and fumbling toward humanity. Bruce takes advantage of the fact that Tony’s abandoned the bed and starts making it, tugging sheets that’ve never seen such enthusiastic sleeping back into some semblance of order and listening half-heartedly to the discussion of whether Miles—fully-clothed and showered—will trek into the shop on Tony’s behalf, or if he needs a chaperone to “make sure he doesn’t flirt too much with the pretty girl behind the counter.” He knows that if either of them catch him smiling to himself, he’ll never live it down, but it’s hard not to.

Especially when, completely devoid of fanfare, Tony grabs him by the hips and forcefully spins him around. Their chests collide, then their bellies, groins, and thighs, and it takes ten full seconds to realize that Miles is no longer in the room.

“What—” Bruce starts to ask, still caught but surprise, but the question is promptly cut off when Tony’s mouth finds his. There’s no tentative brush, no finding their footing with timid half-kisses like the night before, and Bruce can’t help but sigh as he unspools in Tony’s grip. His hands find Tony’s still-bare back, fingers curling against his skin as he becomes reacquainted with Tony’s mouth.

He leans forward when Tony pulls away, suddenly interested in more than a lingering good-morning kiss, but in the end he only succeeds in nudging Tony’s cheek with his nose and catching the half-moon of a tiny smile.

“Can’t,” he murmurs, close to Bruce’s mouth, and ducks Bruce’s attempt to catch his lips a second time. “Your kid wants doughnuts.”
Bruce’s next pursuit is aborted by the immediate hard tug of the razor wire of reality winding its way around his heart. He pulls in a breath that’s some measure too sharp, his eyes lifting to meet Tony’s. “He’s Aaron Davis’s kid,” he says quietly, every syllable catching behind the backs of his teeth. “Not mine.”

“He’s yours ‘till Jessica gets here, and he’s yours when Jessica brings him back.” And for all the light dancing around the edges of Tony’s words, his gaze is even and serious. “That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”

The only retort that Bruce can close his fingers around is, “You would.” But it revives Tony’s incorrigible grin and earns him a half-second reward kiss, wet and urgent against his frowning mouth, and he rolls his eyes as the other man ducks away. He tracks Tony’s progress out of the bedroom, the way he snags his forgotten t-shirt off the floor and bellows for Miles as he steals Bruce’s slippers, and somehow, Bruce can’t help his smile.

Miles thunders up the steps to meet him in the hallway, shoes and jacket already on. “Doughnuts?” he asks, and Bruce can hear the wariness of a twelve-year-old who’s convinced his caretakers just changed their minds about breakfast.

“Doughnuts,” Tony confirms, and hugs him around the shoulders before they head downstairs.

From where he’s still standing in the bedroom, his heart tight but still thrumming and his lips too warm from kissing, he hears Miles ask, “Where’d you get the scar, anyway?”

And he can’t help but smile and shake his head when Tony’s immediate, laugh-soaked answer is, “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

Bruce waits until after the front door bangs shut and the Audi’s engine roars in the driveway to move from his spot in the middle of the bedroom. He collects Tony’s jeans and underwear and tosses them both on the bed, adding socks when he finally locates them from under the bed skirt. The book that used to be on Bruce’s bedside table is recovered from the trashcan—Bruce can’t remember who, exactly, knocked it there—and the other debris from the evening before is quietly discarded.

Once his bedroom looks at least presentable, Bruce ducks into the attached bathroom to run a shower, waiting until the water is pounding against the glass door of the shower stall to strip out of his sweatpants and t-shirt.

The steam fogs the mirror over the vanity, slowly encroaching on Bruce’s reflection until all he can really see is his own silhouette. But no amount of steam can blot out the angry red-purple mark Tony left on his collarbone, or the pink rash of stubble-burn against the softest part of his belly.

He ducks under the hot water, convinced it’ll wash away the lingering scent of sweat from a night trapped between the sheets and Tony, but somehow, the spray kicks up as many memories as wisps of steam. He mentally replays the night before, every moment captured in strange, imperfect detail that he absolutely cannot shake. He remembers tripping up the stairs, Tony’s hands roaming along his body and divesting him of his t-shirt before they even made it into his bedroom, and how they both swallowed down laughs and moans as they tumbled into his bed, half-naked and bucking against each other like teenagers under the bleachers.

He recalls the way his fist pulled bleated gasps of need from between Tony’s full lips, and how Tony’s eyelashes fluttered as he curled his fingers around Bruce’s arm and pleaded in whispers for more. He remembers carding fingers through soft hair, his own hips lifting off the sheets as he bit his lip to hold back a cry—and drew blood.

And he absolutely can’t forget the feel of Tony’s body under his hands, afterwards, the tactile reward
of skin and bone under his palms as he traced his thumb along the scar on Tony’s chest.

He leans his shoulder against the tile wall of the shower stall and sighs into the spray, his eyes drifting shut as he remembers his own voice whispering, asking Tony to stay.

No modifiers, no limitations, just a plea that’d poured from his lips like a mantra. *Stay*, he’d murmured again and again, punctuations to the one-word promises that Tony’d offered in the dark.

Because for every *stay*, there’d been a whispered *okay*.

When the showerhead’s dripping idly into the bottom of the stall and the bathroom fan’s attempting to clear out the steam, Bruce wanders downstairs in his pajamas, his feet still bare and his hair still wet. The house is quiet without Miles and Tony, but the evidence of their presence is scattered across the empty rooms: the forgotten cupcakes are now on the kitchen island, the coffee pot’s burbling, and Miles’s left a half-finished glass of orange juice on the kitchen table. When he opens the cabinet for a coffee mug, bringing down a second is as automatic as breathing; when he opens the fridge for cream, he drags out the milk for Miles.

He’s still rinsing out the orange juice glass when he hears the tell-tale rumble of Tony’s car pulling into the driveway next to his Prius, and the slam of both the driver- and passenger-side doors.

In forty minutes, Jessica Jones’ll show up to take Miles to his visit, and Bruce’ll spend three hours worrying about what happens next.

Until then, he can keep both Tony and Miles.

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They spend the first hour after Jessica spirits Miles away reenacting the night before atop Bruce’s freshly-made bed, this time with the bedroom door standing open and their voices unmuffled by caution and uncertainty. Tony bites down on the bruise he’d left on Bruce’s collarbone and Bruce forgets momentarily how to breathe; Bruce drags his fingernails down the bare plane of Tony’s back, raising angry red tracks while Tony palms him roughly. Curses, like prayers, pour out from between Tony’s lips, echoing as he pulls at Bruce’s hair, and Bruce coaxes him into bonelessness and swearing with his wordless mouth.

It occurs to him at one point, somewhere between Tony’s first desperate gasp and last shuddering buck of hips, that he’s spent entire weeks and months running from two things: his own terrifying emotions, and this exhilarating feeling of being both physically and psychically surrounded by Tony Stark.

For most of those weeks and months, running felt sensible.

When Tony shouts his name loud enough to echo in the hallway, Bruce isn’t sure what’s sensible, anymore.

After they’ve finished and showered (an exercise in steam-tinged kisses and several groan-worthy jokes about back-washing), Bruce slides into the passenger seat of Tony’s ridiculous car and watches as the scenery between their homes zips by the windows. The dogs howl in excitement as soon as Tony sets foot inside the house, and once they’re out of their kennels, they race circles through the living room, tails whipping empty air, Bruce and Tony’s thighs, and, at one point, the cat. Bruce
laughs as Jarvis attempts to retaliate by eating Dummy’s tail, but then Tony’s catching him by the waist and pulling Bruce’s chuckle into his own mouth.

“Fresh clothes and a word-that-rhymes with caulk,” he murmurs against Bruce’s cheek, but Butterfingers catches the vowel sound and immediately rushes to sit in front of the back door. Dummy joins him within seconds, and their high-pitched whines fill the room.

Tony groans. “They need to be dumber.”

“Funny how often I say that about their owner,” Bruce retorts, and then yelps when Tony pinches his ass before disappearing up the steps.

Once he returns in fresh jeans—“I’m bronzing the other ones as my ‘first sex with Bruce jeans,’” he declares from the stairway, and Bruce rolls his eyes—and a soft black sweater that’s fit for the November chill, they leash up the dogs and walk them down to the nearest park. It’s too cold for families and too late in the day for the early-morning jogging rush, so Tony releases both greyhounds to let them run. They’re lean, majestic animals, awkward-looking when still but pure grace when unbridled, and Bruce watches as they kick up dead grass and leaves in their run across the park.

He allows himself a few minutes to be mesmerized by their loping before he glances over to Tony. The other man stands beside him, hands in his jacket pockets and hair swept up by the wind. The dogs’ leashes hang around his shoulders, the brightly-colored nylon almost like some sort of avant-garde accessory, and he looks—

Effortless, Bruce thinks.

Comfortable and casual, lost in their usual shoulder-to-shoulder companionship like absolutely nothing’s changed between them.

Which is why Bruce is surprised when Tony suddenly asks, “Scale of ten, how freaked out are you about this visit thing?”

It’s the first he’s spoken of the visit, short of running his hand over Miles’s short-cropped hair and yelling have a good time! out the door after him, and Bruce rolls his lips together before he even attempts to answer. Tony’s still focused forward, watching Dummy chase his brother through second-year saplings like some sort of dog slalom, but Bruce can see the quiet apprehension that’s caught in the lines of his face and mouth.

He pulls in a breath. “I don’t know if I can pick a number,” he admits. After he shrugs, he shoves his hands in his own pockets. “It’s part of the process of getting him home, it’s necessary, so I can’t—”

“Seven.” There’s certainty in Tony’s voice, even if his jaw works when he turns to meet Bruce’s gaze. “‘Cause I know all that, and I know that even if Uncle Douche-vis—”

“Davis,” Bruce corrects, biting down on his smile.

“—is a model citizen, he won’t go home tomorrow, but I don’t totally like the thought that, after this, he might want to.” His shoulders lift in a rough approximation of a shrug. “It’s like that time Dot spent the weekend, you know? Sure, she was supposed to get sick of me and start missing her parents, but it still stung a little once it started happening.”

Bruce nods a little, unable to fully shake the honest worry that’s trapped in Tony’s expression. “The system kind of works against itself,” he admits after a few seconds. “It demands that these kids settle into their placements like a home, fit in like they belong there—and also that they spend as much time getting ready to leave.” He shakes his head. “It’s complicated. Especially when you never really
know what ‘home’ will look like in the morning.”

“Or whether you’ll get to go home?” Tony presses. When Bruce drops his eyes back to the dogs, he can feel Tony’s gaze tracking him, indexing the way he clips off the end of a sigh and turns it, somehow, into a half-hearted snort. “Scale of ten,” he says again, and Bruce nearly smiles as their shoulders brush, “how much of little tiny Bruce do you see in this kid?”

Bruce forces an eye-roll and shakes his head. “No more conferences in California,” he half-threatens. He’s somehow unable to raise his head long enough to look at Tony.

“You mean no more conferences in California where one Jennifer Walters unwinds after her presentations with a half-dozen vodka tonics,” Tony retorts. Their shoulders knock again, this time with more purpose. When Bruce finally lifts his eyes, Tony’s staring him down. “Last night wasn’t just about Miles,” he says quietly. He leans into Bruce, and Bruce, for some reason, actually leans back. “Maybe I pushed it, with the whole ‘you get what you pay for’ thing—”

“Maybe?”

“—but there was as much you as him in what was going on in here.”

Bruce suspects he’ll rely on the usual meaningless gesture to indicate his mind—a hand mussing his hair, maybe, or two fingers pressed to the middle of his forehead—but instead, Tony lightly knocks their temples together. They stand like that for a few seconds, leeching heat as much as touch, and Bruce is suddenly reminded of how shocking Tony’s handsy habits used to be—and how much he’s grown to enjoy it. He can’t really remember what started it, or how they’d moved from arm-nudging to hip-bumps and hands on one another’s backs, but he likes that the evolution happened.

He likes that he can stand here, pressed against Tony’s side in an empty park, and that it can feel natural.

“I didn’t understand it, either, when I was his age,” he says after a few minutes. He focuses purposely on where Butterfingers’s chasing a leaf on the breeze, rather than all the hallmarks of Tony’s nearness—and Tony’s attention. “I went back and forth between wanting nothing to do with my aunt and practically crying my way through our visits. And that was without any bad acts on her part, that was just from her reluctance to take me after my father—”

The words catch in the back of his throat and he swallows around them, effectively cutting them off. When Tony’s hand finds the middle of his back, he draws in a sharp breath; the cold air ices his mouth and lungs, and for a moment, he can’t really speak.

“I know what it’s like to feel unwanted,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “And, unlike Miles, nowhere I stayed in the interim ever resembled a home.” He shrugs, his shoulder rubbing against Tony’s, and isn’t entirely surprised when Tony presses a few inches closer. “I remember the group home and the horrible, stilted visits before my aunt actually agreed to take me. I was angry all the time, angry and lost, and I—”

He feels Tony’s thumb brush a small circle against his back. When he glances up, the only place he can really look is into those big, dark eyes. “I couldn’t do that to Miles. Not when I know the only thing that kept me from diving off the deep end was moving from that place into a home.”

“You wouldn’t’ve dived off any deep ends,” Tony says immediately, and Bruce grits his teeth to hold back a derisive sound. It escapes as a snort, though, and Tony jostles him lightly. “You wouldn’t’ve,” he repeats. “Your aunt didn’t race to take you in, and that sucked. And the system apparently lacked foster homes that were desperate for adorable six-year-old science geeks, and that
sucked too.” Bruce rolls his eyes. “But you wouldn’t’ve turned into some rage monster of a human being just ‘cause you spent one semester too many at the school of suck.”

Bruce shakes his head. “You don’t know that.”

“Yeah, I do.” The hand on his back lifts and, before Bruce can even consider flinching away, Tony uses it to catch his chin. “‘Cause here’s the thing: I’m pretty sure I would’ve wanted to meet you regardless of the letters after your name or what kind of good you were doing—kid-saving or world-saving or, I don’t know, large-Hadron-colliding.” Bruce tries to duck his head, but the rough pad of Tony’s thumb pins him there, a foot apart and sharing the same foggy breaths. “And once I’d hunted you down, I would’ve snapped you out of it.”

“You might not’ve liked that Bruce.”

“Of course I would’ve liked that Bruce. I like all Bruces.” He shrugs, an easy lift of his shoulders, but he never so much as blinks away. When he wets his lips, Bruce traces the sliver of his tongue; when his thumb brushes along Bruce’s chin, Bruce forgets momentarily that there’s a world outside the both of them—or that they’re in a public place at all. “Because all the Bruces are one Bruce, and that one Bruce—damage, no damage, jerk aunt who couldn’t get over her grudge enough to cuddle her poor nephew, no jerk aunt—is my Bruce.”

Bruce braces himself for the usual rush of warmth flooding his face, but somehow, it never arrives. Instead, he’s frozen in time, staring into Tony’s too-deep brown eyes and attempting to remember how it felt to breathe evenly. But then again, Tony’s habit of stealing his breath isn’t exactly new, even if the fingers on his chin are.

“Tony,” he murmurs, his voice nearly swept off by the wind.

“No,” Tony returns with a tiny shake of his head. “Listen, okay? I grew up with a dead mom and a dad so distant, he might as well’ve been dead, too. And once he did die, I spent fifteen years trying to prove I could beat him at any game he played—and a whole bunch he didn’t.” His fingers slip away from Bruce’s chin, but don’t entirely disappear; Bruce tracks their warmth along his jaw, down to his neck, and finally along his upper arm. “I know what it’s like when, every day, your demons try to beat a ghost.”

Bruce presses his lips together, but for some reason, he can’t bring himself to duck Tony’s eyes. Rather than moving, he spends a few seconds memorizing the length of Tony’s eyelashes and the soothing rub of his thumb along the fabric of his sleeve, and studying all the fine lines that’ve come from a lifetime of laughing at his own jokes.

“Sometimes, there are a lot of demons,” he admits quietly.

He expects Tony to smile, transforming the comment into a joke, but instead, he leans forward. Their foreheads brush, and for a too-long moment they stand together that way, facial features blurred into non-recognition by proximity.

“And sometimes,” Tony finally replies, his voice a whisper in the November wind, “there’re a lot of ghosts.”
“On a scale of one to ten,” Jessica Jones says, sinking into the couch, “we’re in the negatives.”

Bruce stands at the bottom of the stairs as she says this, his attention trained halfway on the conversation in the living room and halfway on the closed doors at the top of the steps. Miles’d barely looked at either him or Tony when he’d banged into the house ten minutes earlier, Jessica on his tail. Once his shoes and coat had landed unceremoniously in the middle of the hallway, he’d charged up the steps, slammed his bedroom door, and refused to come out.

Bruce’d spent a few minutes out the door, coaxing Miles to say something, but the best he’d gotten was a shouted, “I want to be alone!” It’d taken Tony wrapping his fingers around Bruce’s wrist and tugging him away to actually convince him to leave the boy alone.

Now, even with a mug of fresh-brewed coffee in his hands (and if Bruce is grateful for one thing, it’s that Tony’s solution to every problem involves coffee), he’s still as invested in Miles’s absence as in the conversation about it.

“The visit didn’t go well, then?” he asks when he finally drags his eyes away from the stairwell. Jessica’s tucked into the corner of the couch, a throw pillow on her lap, and Tony’s stretched out in the armchair next to the lamp, his House Stark mug resting on his thigh.

“The visit went fine,” Jessica reports with a small shake of her head. “Aaron’s not a bad guy, even if he’s not exactly parent of the year.” If she hears Tony’s derisive little snort, she at least decides not to mention it. “But at the end, when Miles asked about the next visit, it turned into a discussion about hoop-jumping.”

Bruce drops his eyes to stare into his coffee and then shakes his head. It’s a complaint he’s heard from dozens of parents over the years, but repetition really doesn’t make it easier to swallow.

“Hoop-jumping?” Tony demands. There’s venom trapped in the back of his tone, the kind he usually saves for particularly outlandish appellate arguments. “He really thinks that showing up to visits with the kid he ditched for two days is hoop-jumping?”

“That won’t be the only thing he’s expected to do, Tony.” Jessica nods as Bruce trails back into the living room. When he steps between the armchair and the coffee table to move to the couch, Tony nudges the back of his ankle with his bare foot, and Bruce is grateful to have a two-second excuse for a smile. “There are social worker conferences, evaluations, probably releases to look into his employment and what’s happening with his criminal case—all to make sure Miles is safe to go home with him.”

“Right,” Jessica says. “And he basically said—in front of me and Miles, by the way—that he doesn’t plan on doing any of those things, which turned into a big discussion about why he has to—”

“From Miles?” Tony asks.

She nods. “It all just kind of blew up in our faces,” she admits, and tucks her hair behind her ear as she reaches for her coffee.

The room’s silent for a few seconds, aside from their breath and a car driving past the house, and Bruce spends a few seconds watching as Tony leans further back in the armchair, his expression dark. The furrows of his brow gather like storm clouds, and he plays with his mug rather than drinking from it. Bruce catches his attention and tries to raise an eyebrow about it, but Tony just shakes his head.

“The real problem I’m having,” Jessica continues with a wave of her hand, “is that Davis really
wants to burn this candle at both ends. Until the hoop-jumping thing, he was a model parent, but he’s not interested in the rest of the process.” She leans back into the couch, her fingers spreading over the fabric of the pillow. “Murdock informed me that he’s got his attorney filing all sorts of motions: to rehear the rehearing, to dismiss, to do informal supervision, to move up the adjudication by a couple weeks, to disqualify Judge Rees and Matt himself based on the pending criminal charges . . . ” She snorts and shakes her head. “And Jessica Drew texted me last night to let me know she got a nasty e-mail demanding she remove herself as Miles’s guardian ad litem, too.”

Bruce frowns and sets down his coffee. “Why?”

“Because she knows Tony Stark.” Jessica shrugs. “I reminded her that pretty much everyone in this state who’s involved with needy kids knows Tony Stark.”

“I’m a little hard to un-know.” As light as Bruce thinks the comment’s meant to be, there’s no humor in Tony’s voice. His broad fingers turn the mug around in tiny circles on his thigh, but he’s otherwise silent—and frowning.

“I’ve been saying that for years,” Jessica replies, but then, she sighs. “He dodges meetings and phone calls, he won’t schedule a parenting evaluation because of the criminal charges, you name it. I think this attorney’s sold him on a dismissal that’s never going to happen.” She reaches for her coffee again. “But it’ll take a lot more non-compliance before we can even make an argument for a dissolution.”

“A dissolution of what?” Tony asks, scowling. “Because unless you’re considering his body in an entire vat of lye, I don’t really see how dissolving anything’s gonna—”

“Of the guardianship,” Bruce interrupts. He attempts a small smile, a futile reassurance that the tension in the room need not climb through the roof, but he knows it’s pointless. His own stomach’s turning in on itself, churning and gnawing until he can’t really breathe around the rising tide of his own, unstoppable worry. When he leans forward, it’s in part to pick up his coffee mug and in part to knock his knee lightly against Tony’s even though he knows it won’t help. “It’s not like terminating parental rights, when you have a legal guardian,” he explains, acutely aware of how carefully Tony’s watching him. “Instead of the laundry list of grounds to find a parent unfit and terminate their rights, every guardianship has its own specific criteria that lay out how it came into being and what conditions will dissolve it.” He shrugs slightly. “The court’s powerless until those conditions are met.”

“And the boilerplate on these things are pretty broad,” Jessica picks up. “We’re talking ‘unwilling or unable to act as guardian’ broad.”

“And being a monumental asshole to the folks who’re trying to keep him and the kid together isn’t grounds for ‘unwilling’?” Tony demands.

“Assholes,” Bruce says quietly, “can still be parents.”

It feels momentarily like a low blow, a reminder of the ghosts from that morning, but Tony’s lips twist in a tiny smile before he presses their knees together. When Bruce breaks his own tiny smile to sip his coffee, he’s not particularly surprised to catch Jessica watching them.

She raises an eyebrow, and Bruce shrugs.

“Anyway,” she says, leaning hard on the word, “Murdock’s handling all the— What do you lawyer-types call it? Motion games?”
“Motion practice,” Bruce offers.

“Right. He’ll handle that, I’ll keep throwing services at the uncle and hope he starts figuring out that ‘hoop-jumping’ is the only surefire way the kid’s coming home.” Jessica sets down her mug on the coffee table and leans forward, elbows on her thighs. “And then, there’s you.”

The half-second flush of heat that threatens to creep up Bruce’s neck is interrupted when one of Jessica’s slender fingers points directly at—

“Me?” Tony asks, complete with the big, overwrought hand gesture fluttering over his chest. Jessica rolls her eyes. “What? Is this about my level of awesome? ‘Cause last I checked, awesome’s not a finite resource and the state gets it free, so—”

“Oh, trust me, your ‘awesome’ is not subject to debate,” Jessica cuts him off, and Bruce bites down on a smile at her finger quotes. “But it seems to me that you’re about one unsanctioned sleepover away from an intake.”

The mouthful of coffee playing across Bruce’s tongue turns immediately to ash, and he nearly chokes in his attempt to swallow. This time, the blood rushes into his face all at once.

In the armchair, Tony leans as far back as he can, more preening cat than human being. Bruce shakes his head and drops his eyes to the murky dark inside his mug while Tony challenges, “Says who?”

“Says the pajamas you were wearing when I came to get Miles—and the fact that the kid ratted you out.”

“That traitor!”

“Look.” For all Jessica’s easy sarcasm and terrifying realism, something very serious slips into her expression. Bruce watches as she threads her fingers together between her knees and then, slowly, shakes her head. “If this were an ordinary case, I’d hardly bat an eyelash. I mean, my instincts aside—and they’re pretty good at this point—I don’t think Bruce’d put up with you if you had some secret child-abusing past.”

“I wouldn’t,” Bruce immediately assures her.

Tony’s knocking their knees together again when Jessica nods. “Right,” she echoes. When she raises her head, her focus’s trained entirely on the two of them: Bruce at the end of the couch, Tony in the chair next to him, the juncture where their knees meet, the comfortable fit of the coffee mugs (purchased and, technically, filled by Tony) in their hands. “But my instinct also tells me that, in this case, Davis and this Vanquish guy—”

“Vanko,” Tony grumbles.

“—are going to fight this the whole way through. The last thing any of us needs is the yelling and screaming that’ll come when they find out how foster dad’s boyfriend is corrupting the kid with conversations about silent sex after unapproved sleepovers.”

Bruce closes his eyes and resists the rising urge to cover his face with a hand. Nearby, he can hear the sound of Tony’s half-frustrated sigh. “We can’t trust him with anything,” he decides.

“We weren’t both involved in the conversation,” Bruce points out.

“No, but you were there.” When Bruce glances over, it’s just in time for Tony to wave a dancing finger in his general direction. “Accomplice liability, big guy.”
“Liability or not,” Jessica interrupts before Bruce can launch the retort that’s pooled in the back of his mouth (and reminds Tony that he’d stopped the conversation that morning, not encouraged it), “the result’s the same: if you want to protect Miles, you fill out the forms.”

“I don’t live here,” Tony challenges, throwing up his hands. “Pretty sure intakes are for the live-in boyfriends.”

It’s hard, in a way, not to focus on effortless way the word boyfriend drops off Tony’s lips and into the air between them. Bruce feels it tug at some soft place between his stomach and his heart; he’s still trying to breathe around it when Jessica shakes her head. “Pretty sure Jessica Drew knowing that you exist shouldn’t be grounds to disqualify her as guardian ad litem, either, but it’s enough for Vanko.” She reaches for her coffee mug. “Fill out the damn paperwork, Stark.”

Tony’s long-suffering sigh and exaggerated eye roll, both signs that he’s about to protest in his normal, too-loud way, is met with the full force of Jessica’s razor-sharp glare. The two of them stare at one another for a moment, Tony’s brow creasing into a series of deep valleys and Jessica’s lips pursing into a tight, colorless line. Her fingers curl around her House Targaryen mug, nails clicking as she raises an eyebrow in challenge.

Finally, Tony presses his mouth shut.

“Fill out the damn paperwork,” Jessica says again, and then finishes her coffee.

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Tony’s fairly quiet for the rest of Jessica’s stay, listening mostly to the small-talk between her and Bruce before, finally, the Union County Child Services sedan pulls out of the driveway and disappears around the corner. When Bruce wanders back into the kitchen, he finds Tony perusing the thick packet of intake paperwork that Jessica’s left him to fill out.

“I’ve had less-invasive internal exams,” he complains as Bruce walks up, and Bruce snorts a mostly-silent laugh. He’s about to comment on how standard the whole thing is—employment history, criminal history, a list of the last ten years of addresses, a somewhat-inexplicable credit check—when Tony reaches over and pries his mostly-empty mug from his fingers. “Go check on the kid while I sign away my left arm,” he instructs.

He finishes off the last few sips of Bruce’s coffee and then wanders over to the junk drawer for a pen, but Bruce stays right where he is, watching. There’s a tightness in Tony’s shoulders and hands, a robotic seriousness that Bruce’s only ever seen right before important appeals—or right before important conversations. He remembers the stiffness in Tony’s knees when he’d climbed the steps up to the baptismal font at Steve and Bucky’s church on the day he became Dot’s godfather and the half-nervous way he’d paced-and-hovered while Bruce proof-read the letter he’d written on Clint’s behalf six weeks ago, but those moments are all few and far between. Few, far between, and nothing like right now.

He wonders whether the stiff seriousness is for Tony’s own self-preservation or something else entirely, and he’s not really reassured by the brush of Tony’s fingers against the back of his hand as he steps away, either. Even as he climbs the stairs up to the bedrooms, he listens for the sound of Tony moving through the kitchen and the run of the water as he washes out their mugs.
It’s quiet upstairs, a tomb more than series of rooms, and Bruce stands in the hallway just long enough to take the stillness in. The door to the guest room—Miles’s room, he catches himself thinking—is shut, no hint of movement or light within. Bruce raises his hand to knock, then thinks better and reaches for the doorknob. It’s unlocked and turns easily, and Bruce gently nudges inside.

The room’s dark, the lights all off and the drapes closed to block out most of the afternoon sun. In the remaining glow, it’s easy to make out Miles’s silhouette on the floor at the end of the bed. He’s tucked up into himself, his back against the mattress and his knees pulled almost to his chest; even as Bruce crosses the floor, he stares resolutely at the nearest wall. The debris of that morning is littered everywhere—forgotten pajamas, rejected outfits, a still-damp bath towel—and Bruce spends a few seconds remembering that Miles is, after all, only twelve years old.

He comes around to stand near the end of the bed. Miles hardly flinches when he pulls in a breath, just hugs his legs a little tighter.

“Hey,” Bruce says quietly.

“Hey,” Miles murmurs back.

“Jessica just left,” he offers, but the boy keeps staring straight ahead. He shoves his hands in his pockets and stares down at the top of Miles’s head. “She said you, uh, that things didn’t—”

The words jumble in the back of his throat, tentative and strange, and he swallows around them. There’s no use lying or digging out platitudes about fun, carefree visits, but Bruce isn’t sure whether he should mention the content of their talk with Jessica, either.

In the end, he settles on, “She said you were upset.”

For a few very long seconds, the room is bathed in absolute, stalwart silence. Then, slowly, Miles nods.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Can you?”

There’s something rough in the back of Miles’s voice, like the two tiny words caught, somehow, on his tongue. Bruce frowns and lowers himself gingerly onto the edge of the bed. He smoothes out the rumpled sheets, acutely aware of how focused the boy still is on the wall.

“Why wouldn’t I be able to?”

Finally, Miles lifts his head. It’s slow, timid motion, belonging more to the shy stranger who’d arrived in Bruce’s life two weeks ago than the boy who’d trusted him enough to cry in his office. He swallows audibly before he says, “Jessica told Uncle Aaron that he’s not supposed to talk about the case with me.”

“He shouldn’t, no,” Bruce admits, and Miles looks away again, hugging his legs a little tighter. Bruce reaches down and, carefully, touches the top of Miles’s head. He feels the boy flinch, a full-body jerk that nearly brings his back away from the mattress, but then he stills under the touch. “A lot of the case isn’t about you,” he explains softly. “It’s more between your uncle, Jessica, and Judge Rees. You shouldn’t have to worry about it.” He rolls his lips together, still searching futilely for the right words. He wonders whether they exist at all. “But that doesn’t stop us from talking about how you feel.”

Miles snorts what Bruce suspects is a laugh and tips his head down toward his knees. He picks at a seam of his jeans. “It’s stupid,” he finally says, shaking his head slightly.
“What is?”

“That everything’s screwed up like this.” He lifts his head, twisting around until only one shoulder’s against the mattress. He’s wide-eyed and frightened-looking, almost like a spooked animal in the forest, and Bruce’s fingers twitch with the want to gather him up and hold onto him. It’s a new urge, one he’s not certain how to combat, and he folds his hands together in his lap. “It’s like—I miss Uncle Aaron but I like being here, too. I hate not knowing what’s going to happen, I hate that he can’t just fix what he screwed up, I hate that I can’t just go back to my house, I—” Something chokes off the end of his sentence, and he casts his eyes down at the floor.

Bruce swallows around the tightness in the back of his own throat, but try as he might, he can’t force himself to look away from the boy in front of him. “And every time I think about it,” Miles murmurs, “I think how pissed my dad’d be.”

“At him?”

Miles shakes his head. “At me.” When he raises a hand, it’s to scrub at his half-hidden face, and Bruce can’t help the jolt in the pit of his stomach that worries that he’s wiping away tears. “I snuck around all the time to see him, and I lied about it. I told everybody Uncle Aaron was a good person, my dad too, and it’s like this is all a punishment for me—”

“Okay, no, see, I’m stopping that train right now.”

Bruce isn’t sure what comes first, the flare of the bulbs in the overhead fixture flickering on or the ruthless certainty of Tony’s voice, but they both fill the room with immediate, unstoppable light. Miles’s head jerks up, leaving Bruce to follow his gaze—not, of course, that there’s very far to look. Because by the time the light’s on, Tony’s already halfway across the room, and he certainly doesn’t hesitate to come right over and drop onto the bed next to Bruce. The mattress squeaks and moves, and he thinks he catches a half-second smile flashing its way across Miles’s face.

“Nothing—as in literally, not-a-single-thing nothing—you did or didn’t do or could’ve-would’ve-should’ve done created this mess,” Tony pushes, his fingers spreading as his hands flutter in front of him. “‘Cause what happened here’s that your uncle made a choice.”

Bruce watches as Miles’s tongue darts out to wet his lips. “Yeah, but—”

“No buts,” Tony cuts in. He shakes his head hard enough that Bruce can feel the bed shake with him. “He screwed up, made a bad choice, and now he’s gotta pay the piper. You just got caught up in the tailspin, or whatever.” He shifts until he can look across Bruce to meet Miles’s eyes. “Right now, all he’s being asked to do is make some better choices. And while he makes up his mind, you get to spend some quality time with us.”

Bruce can’t really contain the tiny smile that starts pushing at the corners of his mouth. “As quality as any time spent with Tony is,” he teases. He’s rewarded by Tony knocking their shoulders together hard enough that the bed squeaks again, which in turn causes a ridiculous Tony Stark eyebrow waggle. He rolls his eyes, but Tony’s fingers brush against the inside of his wrist; when Tony shifts again, it’s in part to throw a leg over Bruce’s lap.

Miles’s flash-blub grin lasts longer, this time, and warmth pools somewhere in Bruce’s chest. He wants to blame it entirely on one source—on Miles or on Tony, as though they’re each separate entities—but he knows it mostly comes from the two of them together.

From how he and Tony and Miles function together as a weird, mismatched unit.

When Miles’s smile fades again, he ducks his head. “What happens if he doesn’t do what he’s
supposed to?” he asks.

“If he knows what’s good for him,” Tony replies immediately, “he’ll do it.”

“And if for some reason he can’t,” Bruce adds, hardly a breath between Tony’s answer and his own, “then you’ll still have us.”

They’re simple words, out of context, reassurance for a terrified boy whose world recently crashed down around him, but when Bruce actually hears them, he’s suddenly struck dumb. The fingers that still dance around his pulse point, blunt and entirely too familiar, freeze as suddenly as Bruce’s own breath. He watches the half-moons of Tony’s nails and tries to remember how to work his lungs, but it’s nearly impossible.

Assuring Miles that they’ll still be there in some abstract future where Aaron Davis’s failed to comply with court orders is a promise too big for the suddenly too-small bedroom. It’s an answer filled with implication, with futures that Bruce can’t control, let alone promise, and it presupposes far too many things.

Like that Davis and Vanko won’t win on any of the arguments they’re throwing at the court.

And that Bruce’d be considered as any kind of permanent option for a boy he barely knows.

Or that, in however many weeks and months, he and Tony will still be—something.

When he finally recovers from the foreignness of his own voice and glances up, Miles is staring at him. Bruce can’t track the emotion that’s playing across the boy’s face; he thinks at first it might be terror, then thinks maybe it’s not fear but hope, and then wonders if it’s maybe caught between the two extremes.

Whatever it is, it slinks into his voice when he asks, “Really?”

Beside him, Tony snorts and rolls his eyes. “You really think we’d leave you high and dry?” he demands, and Bruce can’t quell the warmth follows on the tail of Miles’s bright, uninhibited smile. “Give us a little credit.”

“At least for now,” Bruce adds, and when Tony pinches him and calls him a traitor (this time), the only sound that fills the room is Miles’s laughter.

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They spend Saturday night not at Bruce’s but Tony’s, intake paperwork started and then abandoned on the desk in Tony’s office for an evening of Rock Band and bickering. Tony walks Miles through all the so-called classics, crooning ballads and jumping on the couch during hard rock, and Bruce laughs when Butterfingers nearly knocks him onto the floor. Once their fingers hurt from plastic guitars and their lungs ache from singing, they settle down in the living room to plunder Tony’s DVR.

“Wait, there’s more Walking Dead?” Miles demands. He’s tucked up in one of the oversized armchairs, Jarvis sprawled along the back cushion. When he shifts to sit on his knees, the cat complains with a long-suffering meow.
Tony shrugs. “I might’ve noticed that the third season started on AMC and might’ve recorded them for the next time you came over,” he comments lazily, and then tosses Miles the remote.

Miles’s grin might not rival Tony’s for pure wattage, Bruce knows, but somehow, it’s still just as warm. Bruce lets the figurative heat of that smile settle around him as he sits on the couch next to Tony—and then is promptly surrounded by actual heat when Tony slings an arm around his shoulders.

He lets himself be tugged into the familiar embrace, settling against Tony’s side like they’ve done this for years. He tries to focus on the episode recap, but instead he’s distracted by a thousand little things: the cadence of breath close to his ear, the idle twitch of fingers against his shoulder, the natural way his own hand settles on Tony’s leg. He’s tempted to close his eyes and just drink in this strange new version of their relationship, one where the jokes are the same but the touch is new.

Or not new at all, given the thousands of times Tony’s hugged him around the shoulders over the last five years. No, Bruce thinks as the other man’s face tips against his hair and settles there, nose and lips pressed against his scalp for longer than the usual half-second, the touch is just different.

Bruce thinks it’s maybe the kind of different he can get used to.

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Sunday morning, they meet Dot, Steve, and Bucky at Barnes & Noble and are dragged immediately into the hell of trying to prevent an excitable four-year-old from stealing off with her new best friend. Bruce laughs a few times at the picture the two of them make, the tiny blonde girl dragging Miles from aisle to aisle and instructing him to read paragraphs from various picture books. They stack blocks and assemble Lego houses at the various activity tables, flop on bean bag chairs when a woman in face paint announces that it’s story time, and Miles ends up having to carry Dot out of the kids’ section to convince her to leave the store. The mall itself is packed with clumps of weekend shoppers and bored teenagers, and Dot spends the entire walk from the bookstore to the food court clutching Miles’s hand in a death grip.

Miles never once loses track of her.

“I’m not allowed to hope his guardian’s a douchebag, am I?” Bucky asks quietly as they wait for Tony, Steve, and the kids to return with a lunch that Bruce hopes is not limited to soft pretzels and cinnamon buns.

“No,” Bruce replies, but he knows from the purse of Bucky’s lips how unconvincing he actually sounds.

After they eat, Dot drags Miles and their four chaperones to the mall’s indoor playground. The kids shed their shoes and bulky fall jackets before converging on the plastic equipment with the other children who’re spending their Sunday afternoons at play. Steve, Bucky, and Tony somehow wander into an argument about politics and fiscal policy, but Bruce keeps his attention on the playground, tracking the kids’ progress up the plastic steps into the “treehouse” and then down the whirligig slide, Dot leading Miles all the while.

If anyone notices when Miles pauses a few times to look back at Bruce, they certainly don’t say anything.
But then again, if anyone notices when Tony pauses in his argument to reach over and brush his fingers over Bruce’s hip, too measured and lingering to count as an accident—

Well.

They don’t say anything about that, either.

Except while Bruce is overseeing Miles’s math homework that evening, his BlackBerry chimes on the kitchen table with a one-word text from Bucky: *Finally*.

When he’s done shaking his head at it, he shows Tony, and Tony promptly snatches the phone away. They spend a few seconds scuffling over it, Tony’s forearm pressed against Bruce’s stomach as he hastily key-mashes his way through a retort. By the time he’s finished, Miles’s laughter is as bright as Tony’s mock-innocent grin, and Bruce scowls at them both before he takes his phone back.

The newly-sent reply in the conversation simply reads, *sometimes you’ve gotta stop postponing the inevitable*.

The heat that creeps up his neck in response is nothing, he finds, when compared to the barely-contained glow of Tony’s smile.

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**Chapter End Notes**

[Jennifer Walters (She-Hulk)](https://marvel.com/superheroes/she-hulk) is canonically Bruce's cousin and canonically a lawyer.
Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce is waiting for the other shoe to drop. His friends advise him to stop waiting, but here’s the problem: if he stops waiting, he starts falling—and he’s still afraid of the landing.

Chapter Notes

The appellee is the party who defends against an appeal.

With the usual help and usual thanks to my two favorite ladies, Jen and Sara.

“Wait,” Clint says, spreading his hands out in front of him and nearly knocking over his beer, “you and Tony are now a thing. An actual thing. The kind where, if I went over to your house, I’d find lube and condoms and whole nine yards.”

Next to him, Natasha rolls her eyes. “He’s a man,” she points out helpfully. “He probably already owned those things.”

“I’m also right here,” Bruce reminds them both, and helps himself to the second-last mozzarella stick.

The Wednesday night crowd at Clint’s truly awful dive bar is as toothless and bedraggled as ever, the strains of bad country music echoing thinly from the jukebox over to their booth. They’re settled into the back corner of the place for once, far from the thwack of billiard balls and din of gossiping waitresses, and Bruce can almost pretend they possess some small measure of privacy.

Well, at least until the flirty waiter who can’t stop staring down Natasha’s sweater loops back to offer them yet another unnecessary refill.

Honestly, he shouldn’t even be at the bar at all, let alone pulling the breading off a once-frozen string cheese or staring into the last half of his mediocre beer. He should be driving home, heater blasting and news radio meandering through the day’s headlines. He should be dumping his bag and coat in the foyer or brewing tea in the kitchen.

He should be settled onto the couch listening to Tony run through his outlines for oral arguments as a kind of strange, crooked foreplay, not—this.

“Yeah, you’re here all right,” Clint observes aloud. He gestures with one of the celery sticks left over from their basket of hot wings, then sucks the buffalo sauce off the end. The gesture’s almost
obscene, and Natasha graces them both with a well-timed gagging motion. “Here, at a bar, when you could be at home using your lube and condoms.”

“So could you,” Natasha challenges, leaning back in the booth.

“Oh, why do you think I was ten minutes late? Bumper-to-bumper Wednesday night traffic?”

She sighs. “Now I know why he keeps running you like a farm dog,” she retorts, and reaches for her beer.

“I—” Bruce starts carefully, but he’s silenced by the careful lift of one perfect auburn eyebrow. When he looks away from his colleagues, it’s to stare at the pile of breading on the plate in front of him, and the greasy clump of cheese he’s certainly not planning to eat. He rubs his fingertips off on a paper napkin, but he can still feel the oil staining his skin.

“Please tell me I didn’t lay down fifty bucks on a relationship you’re already throwing in the towel on,” Clint grouses. Bruce raises his head in time to watch the other man throw up his hands in exasperation. “What?” he demands, then grabs his beer bottle and points the neck across the table. “Because I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to be this kind of moody when you like the guy.”

“This from you,” Natasha intones.

“Therefore, natural conclusion: you don’t want to be Stark’s boyfriend after all.”

“No,” Bruce says, but he swears he hears the word before he feels it cross his lips, immediate and insistent in the relative silence of their booth. It slices into their conversation, cuts it deep and wide, and he realizes within seconds that both Clint and Natasha are staring at him like he’s a stranger. He runs his fingers through his hair, but he knows the only outcome is that he’s fluffed up the already-messy tangle of curls; when he drops his hands to his lap, he can’t help but toy with his watch band.

“It’s not what you think it is,” he tells them, the words quieter this time. But before Clint can say anything more than, “Then give us something to go on, here,” the nosy waiter’s back with their next round of drinks.

Bruce watches the waiter switch out their plates and glasses with a half-hearted kind of attention, but really, he can’t prevent his mind from wandering. It’s the same distraction that’s plagued him for the last few days, the same little corner he inevitably backs himself into.

Because the four days since Saturday have, without a doubt, been the four best days since Bruce’d picked up his phone and heard Jessica Jones’s voice on the other line. Because after Miles’s crisis of confidence and Bruce’s impossible promise that he and Tony’d be there for Miles regardless of the case’s outcome, life’s been—

Well, good.

Tony’d stayed over both Sunday and Monday night, filling the house with laughter and stupid mock-arguments that, occasionally, Bruce’d lost track of. On Monday, Tony’d surprised them with brand-new editions of Monopoly, Clue, and Life, and after dinner and dog time at his house, they’d returned to Bruce’s for a night of extremely competitive board-gaming. Tony’d first declared his official in-game husband to be Bruce because “the game said I had to get married, and I’m obviously not tumbling into some weird polygamist thing with you and somebody else”; by the end of the game, they’d become parents of twins named Aloysis and Zsa Zsa before Tony retired them to a life of extreme luxury.

“I think you cheated,” Miles’d said, scowling at his half-million dollars of fictional money.
“I think my years of wise investments and money management came in handy,” Tony’d retorted before stealing one of Miles’s fictional children right out of his fictional station wagon.

Tuesday, Tony’d only stayed long enough for dinner, citing “cranky dogs that miss their Daddy” and “a cat that peed in my closet.” Bruce’d laughed and rolled his eyes, but shooed the other man out the front door once Miles’d settled down with his homework. On the front stoop, Tony’d hooked his fingers in Bruce’s belt loops and backed him against the storm door to kiss him.

“For the record,” he’d murmured against Bruce’s mouth, breath as hot as it was damp and urgent, “I don’t wanna go home to the pets and the plants. ‘Cause now that I’m allowed to stay, I wanna keep doing this. Preferably for the longest of all long-terms.”

The next time they parted for breaths, greedy pants that sounded like gasps in the near-dark of the early evening, Bruce’d said, “Technically, you’re not allowed to stay until you turn in all your paperwork.”

Tony’d smiled against the corner of his mouth. “That’s according to the state,” he’d retorted, catching Bruce’s lower lip between his teeth. “I’m talking about according to you.”

“I asked you to stay a long time before we were doing this,” Bruce’d reminded him, his words mostly whispers lost in gentle, half-accidental lip-brushes.

“And now, our definitions line up,” Tony’d retorted him, and then’d spent the next two or three minutes making sure Bruce couldn’t reply.

Now, after a dinner of Chinese food with Miles and Tony and one of the more active class discussions of the semester (covering the penological implications of modeling juvenile detention centers after adult prisons), he’s staring at his fresh beer and trying to assemble his emotions into actual words. Trying and failing, that is.

Clint’s crunching down on a fresh set of celery sticks—no wings, this time, just celery and blue cheese dressing—when Natasha sets down her glass. For a moment, the only sound at their table is the tinny strains of “She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy.” Then, finally, she says, “Bruce.”

His name feels simultaneously like a chastisement and a balm. When he turns his glass in a slow circle, he leaves fingerprints in the frost. “Natasha?”

She tips her head a half-degree to one side, her eyes still flinty and cool. “What’s different?”

“What do you mean?”

“Between how things were a week ago, and how they are today. What’s changed?”

“Besides with the sex,” Clint notes, gesturing vaguely with his celery stick. He flicks dressing onto the tabletop and then wipes it away with his thumb. “Because, trust me, we don’t want details on how that’s changed.”

There’s immediately a loud thump under the table, and Clint nearly falls out of the booth as he jerks bodily away from Natasha. Bruce feels the smile lift the corners of his mouth and even snorts a laugh, but Natasha’s face remains completely blank. Every inch of her expression is a mask of seriousness, and Bruce wonders momentarily whether he’s seen her blink in the last few minutes.

“I’m with you both every day,” she says quietly, her thumb sweeping along the condensation on her
glass, “and other than that day in front of the microwave, I haven’t noticed much of a difference.”

Clint nearly chokes on a swig of his beer. “Wait, what happened in front of the microwave?”

Bruce sighs and shakes his head. He runs his fingernail along the edge of his glass. “I guess I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop,” he admits, then helps himself to a healthy swallow. When he sets it back down, they’re both still watching him. “Between Tony and Miles, I can’t stop thinking there’s a—catch.”

“Maybe the catch is that there’s not a catch,” Clint suggests with a shrug. He pops the last of his celery sticks in his mouth. “Maybe the secret to life with Tony’s just that it’s life with Tony. I mean, you guys were practically dating before you ever dated.”

“Because you’ve never mentioned that before,” Natasha mutters, picking up her glass.

“Things between you guys were already pretty good, right? Maybe the only direction for you to go is up.”

“When’d you become an unstoppable optimist, again?” Bruce questions. He suspects that Natasha’s hand is the only thing that keeps her from spitting beer across the table.

“Hands up if you had filthy pre-bar sex with your hot lawyer boyfriend before you came over here. What’s that? Nobody else?”

The sound of Natasha slapping his raised arm is loud enough that the nearest set of patrons turns around to glare at them. Clint hisses at her as he pulls it against his chest and rubs the quickly-reddening patch of skin. “And even if there is another shoe,” she adds after a few seconds of long-suffering eye-rolling, “should you really spend the rest of your life waiting for it to drop?”

“That’s the worst reassurance ever,” Clint snipes.

“At least I’m not comparing him to you and Phil again,” Natasha retorts, and she salutes him before taking another healthy drink of her beer.

Bruce stares at the rings of ruined table stain left by wet glasses rather than either of his friends. He traces one of them with his index finger, wondering idly whether someone else one sat in this booth and worried about whether a few days of happiness could really be sustained.

“I’m not foolish enough to try and extrapolate this to the rest of my life,” he says after a few seconds. “I just don’t want this to blow up in some uncontrolled way. For my sake, and for Miles’s.”

“Why the hell is that your default?” When he raises his head, Clint’s staring at him, his mouth half-open and a look of absolute confusion on his face. He sets down his beer bottle with a resounding thud. “I mean, maybe this is back to me being one to talk and everything—”

“Probably,” Natasha offers.

“—but what’s the point of doing any of this is you’re not gonna make the most of it?” he demands. “You’ve got the kid, you’ve got the guy, and it’s all going right. What’s the point of looking over your shoulder all the damn time? And what’re you gonna do when looking over your shoulder means you trip and land flat on your face?” He shakes his head and then shoves away from the table; an awkward scoot-and-slide motion later, he’s standing beside the booth with his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. “I need to piss,” he announces, and then walks away.

Bruce watches him retreat, his dark jacket disappearing into the shadows by the pool tables. When he
turns back to Natasha, she’s frowning at him. “That’s not all me, right?” he asks gently.

She shakes her head. “He and Phil are going to Clarion County for his expungement hearing on Friday,” she explains. She taps her fingernails against her glass, but her eyes are absolutely steady. “For what it’s worth,” she says after a few long seconds, “he’s not actually wrong.”

“I know,” Bruce admits, and lifts his beer.

When he arrives home a half-hour later, the house is in what’s quickly becoming its usual state of disarray, with Miles’s and Tony’s shoes strewn across the foyer and Miles’s half-packed school bag slumped against the closed closet door. He sets his own bag down next to it, hangs his jacket on the closet doorknob, and wanders through into the living room.

The coffee table’s a veritable mountain of legal pads, trial transcripts, and spiral-bound briefs-to-court, and Bruce can make out at least six different colors of post-it tabs peeking out between pages. Tony himself is perched on the very edge of the couch, a pencil pinned between his teeth and glasses nearly falling off his nose. He’s so focused on the top-most legal pad—top-most because it’s balanced atop several others and a leaning tower of trial transcripts—that Bruce almost wonders whether he’s heard him come in.

He’s just about to head into the kitchen for tea when Tony announces, “Ten seconds to figure out why this sounds stupid and then— A-ha! There we go!”

He drops the pencil into his hand and starts scribbling out something on the page, and Bruce can’t hold onto the little half-laugh that sneaks up his throat and escapes. By the time he’s crossed the threshold and actually walked into the living room proper, Tony’s abandoned everything on one of the empty couch cushion. He leans back slowly, molasses seeping into candy molds, and then drops his glasses on top of the pad.

“I was thinking about sending out a search party.”

“What, you didn’t believe I was having a beer with Clint and Natasha?”

“Oh, no, I believed it,” Tony assures him with a wide, loose gesture. It flutters, like the amusement playing across the corners of his lips and the lazy dance of mirth in his eyes. Something stirs in Bruce’s chest, warm and radiating outward. When he rounds the coffee table, Tony raises his chin until their eyes meet. “I just started to wonder whether I’d get you back before the matching manic-pedis started.”

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t have a salon on speed-dial like you do.”

“Anyway, good girl talk?” Tony presses, and Bruce watches the way his smile turns just a tiny bit wicked. It crinkles the lines around his eyes. Bruce’s next breath feels sharper than the two or three before. “You compare the relative prowess of your significant others between the sheets? Before you answer, keep in mind that I’ve been holding back, so if you’re thinking Coulson maybe’s starting to sound like a good alternative, think—”

Bruce isn’t sure what does it, exactly—whether it’s the teasing lilt to the already-addictive cadence of Tony’s voice, the crinkles around his eyes, the spark to his grin, or something else—but suddenly, he can’t really help himself. The couch dips under his weight before Tony finishes the comment about Coulson as an alternative, and the rest of the sentence is cut away by Bruce capturing his mouth. Tony’s next sound is throaty and half-hungry, and Bruce isn’t really surprised when fingers card through his hair and pull him closer.
Tony tastes like coffee and chocolate, bitter and sweet both at the same time. Bruce curls fingers in his shirt and drinks him in, suddenly unable to think about second shoes and unanticipated catches.

He can’t help but think that Clint and Natasha are both right, in their own way. Not in that the only direction they can climb is up—he’s not that naïve—but in that he can’t spend a lifetime waiting for the world to crumble down around him.

He’s spent long enough waiting for that.

When Tony pulls away, he’s red-lipped and panting, his hair standing at odd angles. His eyes are dark and wide, somehow innocent and smoldering at the same time, and Bruce refuses to look away. His voice is a half-rasp when he asks again, “Good girl talk?”

“Very,” Bruce replies, and reels him in for another kiss.

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They spend the rest of the week caught up in one another and then Miles, a series of overlapping circles that build almost into a three-part Venn diagram. They spend Thursday night walking the dogs and playing video games at Tony’s before all three of them trek back to Bruce’s to sleep; when Bruce leaves work Friday, Tony’s waiting for him at his car, the beloved Audi nowhere in sight.

Bruce raises an eyebrow. “Please tell me you didn’t hire a driver just to take your car home.”

“Who needs a driver when I have a Pepper?” Tony retorts, and Bruce shakes his head through his own half-swallowed laughter. He unlocks the doors, expecting that Tony’ll either round the car to the passenger’s side or simply commandeer the driver’s seat, but he stays still. It’s only when Bruce is within arm’s reach that he steps away from the side of the car. If he forgets to breathe in the second where Tony’s fingers tangle in his belt loops, well, that’s just coincidental.

The fact that his next breath is mostly a sigh into Tony’s mouth, however, is an entirely different matter.

“I think we’re supposed to be picking Miles up,” he points out, a murmur against Tony’s lips.

“In a minute,” Tony replies, and pulls him closer.

When Miles clammers into the car a half-hour later, red-cheeked from jogging across the school parking lot in the November cold, he greets them by asking, “Can I go to a movie with Ganke on Sunday?”

It’s a rush of breath, more a gasp than actual words, and is punctuated by the thump of the passenger door closing. Bruce twists around to glance at him and nearly knocks heads with Tony. The other man’s lips quirk into a tiny smirk, and Bruce resists the rising urge to roll his eyes. “A movie with Ganke?” he repeats.

“And hi, by the way,” Tony adds. The lines around his eyes bunch with the force of his smile. “Good to see you. Good day? Ours was pretty great. Did justice, saved children, that sort of thing.”

In the back seat, Miles sighs and rolls his eyes. When he leans back against the seat, it’s more a
slump than anything else, his jacket riding up as he crosses his arms over his chest. It’s petulant enough that Bruce wonders whether he learned it from Dot. “Are you really saying no?” he demands.

“I didn’t say no,” Tony returns. He glances at Bruce, eyebrows raised. “Did you say no?”

His wink is blink-and-you’ll-miss-it fast, a flutter of dark lashes more than anything else, and Bruce presses his mouth into a tight line to keep from smiling. “I don’t think so,” he admits, lifting his shoulders in a half-shrug. “I thought I was just asking for clarification.”

“And I,” Tony picks up, “thought I was just saying hi.Unless something was maybe lost in translation. You speak Hindi, right? ‘Cause maybe I was speaking Hindi, saying the wrong thing, and he—”

“Are you always this weird?” Miles demands, and Bruce watches the corners of his lips start to twitch. He clamps down on it when Bruce catches his eyes, but Bruce knows he’s teetering on the edge of an actual smile.

“You’ve met us, haven’t you?” Tony asks. He shifts further, the seatbelt straining as he twists and turns until he’s closer to sitting backwards than he is sitting forward. “I mean, we just ended week number three here. If you haven’t figured out the weird by now, we should probably just declare you a lost cause.”

“It’s not my weird,” Bruce clarifies with a shake of his head. “I’m the least weird one here.”

He turns around as he says it, stating the proposition as absolute gospel truth, but it’s entirely too late: Tony’s face crumbles into a mask of absolute betrayal, and Miles bursts out with a bark of laughter he can’t quite control. Bruce pulls the car out of the parking lot to the sound of the both of them, the dissonance of Tony declaring him a traitor while Miles laughs at the one-sided argument filling up the car.

When he glances in the rear-view mirror at one point, he catches not only the joy on Miles’s face, but the laughter in his own eyes. It mimics the warm, pleased feeling in his belly, and he can’t really complain about that.

They spend the ride back to Suffolk County discussing Miles’s plans for the weekend and hashing out a plan to balance Miles’s homework with the Sunday-afternoon movie—and to then schedule both those things alongside the Saturday morning visit with his uncle. The last event receives the least amount of attention, and after a throw-away comment about how the child services car smells like Lysol wipes, Miles falls absolutely silent.

At the first red light off the highway, Bruce glances over at Tony, who shrugs and ultimately breaks the silence by explaining the complicated office betting pool he and Bucky’ve started setting up. It involves the sex, birthdate, weight, length, and name of Thor and Jane’s unborn baby, the date of their still-unscheduled wedding, and the identities of the child’s godparents.

He’s halfway through his discussion of the sliding-scale payout—“The formula I’m setting up in Excel still isn’t right,” he explains, “but I’m getting there”—when Miles asks, “Can he come to our house, after?”

Even though the next traffic light is both a half-block away and still yellow, Bruce hits the brakes hard enough that the car jerks slightly. Beside him, Tony quirks an eyebrow and presses his lips together, and Bruce’s left no choice but to ease the car the rest of the way to the stop line. Once he
does, though, he glances over his shoulder at Miles.

“You mean Ganke?” he asks. His voice sounds a bit like it’s stuck in the back of his throat. “After the movie?”

“Yeah,” Miles replies, shrugging. “His mom lives in a tiny apartment. She’s cool and everything, but there’s not a lot of room there to hang out.” Bruce watches as he drops his hands into his lap and starts picking his zipper. The jacket’s new, one of the half-dozen or so attempts to fill in the gaps in Miles’s wardrobe. Back at the house, there’s a pile of new socks, underwear, and long-sleeved shirts waiting to be washed before wearing. “We don’t hang out as much anymore,” he says almost shyly, “and he wants to meet you guys.”

Bruce nearly flinches out of the driver’s seat when something soft and warm brushes against the inside of his wrist. Tony smiles softly as he glances over, a half-second purse of his lips that settles simultaneously in Bruce’s chest and stomach. He jerks his head vaguely in Miles’s direction, his index and middle fingers settling against Bruce’s pulse point. Bruce swallows before he nods.

Miles’s head rises quickly enough to cause whiplash when Bruce finally answers, “You can always have friends over.” The boy’s grin is so full of delight that Bruce isn’t even certain why he hesitated in the first place. “Just remember, there’s not much to do at the house.”

“We have games now,” Miles replies.

“Specifically, we have Clue. Which we can totally take the kids in.” Tony’s smile is nearly predatory, and his flash of white teeth is reminiscent of a shark’s. “I mean, I’ve seen all six episodes of *Sherlock*, I’m good to go.”

Bruce shakes his head, his lips pressed into a tight line to keep from chuckling aloud. “We’re not turning this into an all-out Clue battle.”

“Because you’re afraid you’ll lose?”

“Because I’m afraid you’ll do what you *always* do when you lose: turn into a five-year-old and—”

A horn blares suddenly, loud in the relative quiet of their barely-started mock-argument, and Bruce glances in the rear view mirror just in time to catch the woman in the sedan behind them flipping him off. He rolls his eyes before pulling away from the intersection, then tracks her progress as she speeds up to tail them, flicks on her blinker, and passes them in a fury of gunned engine and annoyed hand gestures.

“Like the rest of the world isn’t in a hurry,” he mutters. Next to him, Tony snorts in a way that is, without mistake, a laugh.

“What?” he demands.

“Nothing,” Tony defends, holding up his hands. “Just funny coming from the king of unjustified rage.”

“It’s never unjustified,” Bruce retorts.

“You made a social worker cry.”

“Once.”

“Uh, guys?” Miles’s voice is quiet from the back seat, but it’s light, too. Through the rearview mirror, Bruce can see that there’s a small smile playing around his mouth. It’s a cautious one, no carefree warmth about it, and he catches a half-second of Miles’s usual nervous weight-shift before
he’s forced to focus back on the road. “Ganke can come on Sunday, right?”

Tony holds up his hands in a clear act of surrender. “It’s Bruce’s house you wanna hang at, not mine. It’s up to Bruce.”

“And I say he can absolutely come,” Bruce replies. He steals one more glance in the rearview, just to catch the absolute grin that spreads across Miles’s face. “Clue battles and all.”

Even when he turns back to the road, he can’t ignore the warmth in Miles’s grin, or the way his barely-contained joy radiates easily outward.

But then, he can’t ignore the heat of Tony’s fingers where they settle against his wrist, either.

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“Okay, wow, so these are your foster dads?” Ganke Lee asks on Sunday afternoon.

“Only Bruce counts,” Miles corrects with an eye-roll. “Tony’s just his boyfriend.”

The early November chill’d transformed overnight into a proper mid-November cold, a frigid front with wind and threatened snow flurries that’d pinned the three of them at Tony’s for the night, unwilling to brave the cold even long enough to drive back to Bruce’s. Tony’d handled the “dirty work,” picking up a movie from Redbox and a change of clothes for Miles while Bruce’d dodged dogs and attempted to put together some semblance of a dinner in Tony’s oversized, under-stocked kitchen.

Miles, for the most part, stayed silent, tucking himself into the breakfast nook that overlooked the deck and taunting Jarvis with a torn up piece of paper napkin. He’d grinned for two hours straight after his visit with his uncle, recapping every shared conversation and card game while they’d played Mario Kart on Tony’s couch. But as time wore on, his mood’d started to dip, the storm clouds creeping slowly over his face. Tony’d dragged him outside to run the dogs around the yard, and Bruce’d watched from the kitchen as the boy’d stood on the deck and not really participated in the mad-cap chase around the pool.

He’d texted Jessica Jones while they were still outside, and she’d called him almost immediately. “It’s pretty common,” she’d explained over the sound of her toddler crowing in the background. Bruce’d sworn he could hear her shrug. “It’s that balancing act, you know? He’s buzzed about seeing his uncle, bummed about returning to the version of the world where the guy’s not in his life. He’ll learn to even out.”

Butterfingers’d run up to Miles then, carrying a rope toy and wagging his tail, and Miles’d at least wrestled the toy away to throw it for the dog. After usually-graceful beast dove off the end of the deck, nearly tripped over his own gangly legs, and ran away again, Bruce’d sighed. “He’s pretty out of sorts,” he’d informed Jessica quietly.

“He’ll be okay,” she’d assured him. “He has you.”

But after dinner and a truly mediocre movie about teenaged super-spies, Miles’d perked up enough to demand hot chocolate and what swiftly became the world’s longest game of Uno (thanks mostly to Tony’s “house rules”). By the time they’d climbed the stairs and shooed Miles into the guest room, he’d been laughing again.
“We have the movie tomorrow,” he’d reminded them from the doorway to the guest room. Jarvis was winding his body around the boy’s ankles, mewing pathetically for attention. Bruce’d nearly accused the cat of picking a new favorite but ended up momentarily distracted by Tony slipping his hand under the back of his t-shirt. He’d knocked his hip against Tony’s, but the other man’d just smiled serenely. “I told Ganke we’d meet him there and then drive him home.”

There’d been so much uncertainty creasing Miles’s face and so much unspoken anxiety caught in his darting eyes that Bruce couldn’t help reaching out to squeeze his arm. “We will,” he’d promised softly, and tried to ignore the way Miles swayed a few degrees into his touch.

“Cross our collective hearts,” Tony’d immediately jumped in. When Miles’s failed to smile, he’d reached over with his spare hand to draw the cross across Bruce’s chest, instead of his own. Bruce’d slapped him lightly, Miles’d chuckled and rolled his eyes, and the delicate balance was somehow restored.

At least until, an hour or so later, Bruce’d lifted his face away from Tony’s bare skin. In the almost perfect dark of the master bedroom, he’d hardly recognized the contours of the other man’s face. He’d waited until he felt the heat of those dark eyes studying him before he’d asked, “Do you worry about him?”

“Who wouldn’t worry?” And as rushed as the response was, as ruthlessly flippant, Bruce couldn’t ignore the way the half-whisper caught in the back of Tony’s throat, or the way his fingers traced idle patterns along Bruce’s back and side. “There’s no way I’m not gonna worry. I just mostly know that worrying’s never gonna solve anything.”

Bruce’d snorted quietly and shaken his head before he settled back against Tony’s shoulder, letting Tony drag him a few inches closer. Their legs had tangled under the bunched-up covers, then, Tony’s thigh nudging between Bruce’s own, and he’d spent a few seconds listening to the sound of their shared breathing. In the hallway, one of the dogs had sneezed and rolled over, his tags tinkling, but otherwise, the silence enveloped Bruce as much as Tony’s touch.

At least, until Bruce asked, “Then how do we solve things?”

“By being around for him,” Tony’d replied, and pressed his face into Bruce’s tussled hair. “‘Cause far as I’m concerned, that’s kinda what we do best.”

It appears that the “being around” he and Tony do so well consists of standing on the sidewalk outside the movie theater in the bitter cold, hands shoved in their coat pockets. Bruce’s thick knit scarf is inexplicably looped around Tony’s neck as they huddle together for the warmth they could easily find inside the theater—and as Miles’s best friend sizes them both up.

Ganke’s thick black parka causes him to look twice as stocky as when Bruce first saw him outside the middle school weeks ago, and the only thing controlling his thatch of dark, messy hair is the band from his ridiculous, fluffy earmuffs. When he huffs a breath, it morphs into a curl of steam in the bitter-cold air, but he’s too busy squinting and peering to really notice.

Finally, he glances at Miles for the first time since the boy’d climbed out of Bruce’s car. “One’s the crazy one and one’s the quiet one, right?”

Miles at least casts his eyes down at the sidewalk in embarrassment when Tony croaks, “Crazy?” His lips twitch in a tiny smile, though, and he and Ganke share a fleeting, private glance. Whatever inside joke Ganke’s just split wide open is momentarily left unsaid, however, thanks to Tony’s sputtering. “Because I know I’m not the quiet one, and that doesn’t leave me a whole lot of other options.”
Miles’s usual stores of preteen willpower are promptly depleted, and he flashes the whole group of them a dazzling, white-toothed grin. “Tony and then Bruce,” he answers Ganke. “In that order.”

Ganke grins too, bright enough and incorrigible enough that Bruce wonders whether he’ll regret allowing the two of them to chaperone themselves at the movie. But before he’s allowed enough time to breathe, Tony’s throwing out his hands, fingers spread and then immediately flapping as though he hopes to achieve lift-off.

“I’m the crazy one?” he demands, and Bruce can’t really help but shake his head. “Really? ‘Cause last I checked, I was the awesome one. Like, scientifically-proven-and-confirmed awesome. And therefore, not crazy.”

He punctuates his last sentence by reaching out to press his index finger to the tip of Miles’s nose, and Miles laughs as he ducks out of the way. The next time Tony swoops in, the boy grabs Ganke’s shoulders and uses him as a human shield, and the result is that both kids end up laughing as Miles dodges a second nose-poke.

The laugh that bubbles up out of Bruce’s belly betrays his mock-frustrated eye-roll; when he catches Tony by the arm and drags him back to his side, he knows he’s red-cheeked from both the cold and his laughter. A two-second glimpse of Tony’s face reveals he’s flushed from his own grin, too.

But then Tony dips his cold face and nose into Bruce’s neck, and Bruce pushes him away before he loses to a full-body shiver.

“You’re creating a self-fulfilling prophecy with the crazy,” he warns, and tries not to suck in too hard a breath when Tony presses his hot, wet mouth to the soft spot under his ear.

“And I meant it in a nice way,” Miles chimes in.

Tony is momentarily reminiscent of the Tony Stark who commands a courtroom, steel-eyed and absolutely blank. “I’m eating your goobers, now,” he declares.

“Goobers?” Bruce repeats, frowning. “Yeah. Movie theater candy. You don’t— God, did you grow up in Thor’s barn or something?”

Tony’s lawyer persona disappears, shoved away by another exaggerated hand gesture. Bruce is ready to protest that he’s never seen the point in buying candy at prices that practically require a second mortgage, but Tony simply loops an arm around his shoulders and drags him in close.

“They’re chocolate-covered peanuts,” he explains, “and they only ever taste good at the movies. Those, and Sno-Caps. It’s all— sugary ambrosia from the gods.”

While Ganke laughs, Miles frowns and narrows his eyes. “You’re not supposed to be the crazy one?” he asks, and Bruce can’t stop himself from grinning at the immediate betrayal that leaps onto Tony’s face. He sputters, flaps weakly, and jumps into his usual display of incoherent hurt even as his laugh lines are bunching.

All of that, though, is interrupted when Ganke blurts, “Dude, your foster dads are awesome!”

Tony stops then, half-frozen in his dramatic tracks, but Bruce hardly notices. In fact, it’s full seconds before he feels the heat and weight of Tony’s eyes studying his face, and another handful of beats before he bothers glancing over. There’s perfect, unrestrained surprise playing across Tony’s features, widening his eyes and parting his lips, but for one, Bruce can’t really fill in the silence.

After all, it’s the first time that, instead of placement or parent, someone’s referred to him as Miles’s
foster dad.

And the fact that it’s lumped in with Tony, that’s—

“Dad,” Miles is correcting in a tone that suggests he’s walked Ganke through the same conversation a dozen times before. When Bruce blinks away the cobwebs and focuses on the boys in front of him, he catches the tail end of a perfect twelve-year-old head-shake. “Bruce is my foster dad. Tony’s just his boyfriend, he’s not on the paperwork. Which I told you.”

“And like I told you,” Ganke retorts quickly, screwing up his face into a half-comical scowl, “that’s way too complicated to say every time you talk about them. As of right now, they’re your foster dads. The end.”

“But that’s wrong,” Miles returns.

“It’s pretty wrong that you won’t call the guy who’s been with his boyfriend for probably forever your foster dad, yeah,” Ganke agrees, but then he grabs Miles by the jacket and starts dragging him toward the front door to the movie theater. There’s a half-second of struggling, Miles digging in his heels and grumbling, and Bruce gives into the tiny smile that’s pressing at the corners of his mouth as he follows the boys into the building.

He, and then Tony, who catches him by one of his coat pockets and steps in close enough that their shoulders press together. He’s reminded momentarily of the thousand times in the past that he’d stood this close to Tony and worried strangers might mistake them for a couple.

Now, it’s no longer a mistake.

The thought twists in his stomach along with the term foster dad, mingling until he can’t really breathe around it.

It’s only after they’ve bought the tickets—an animated movie for the kids, and a random action film that Tony promises they’re “only seeing for messy make-out purposes” (drawing a groan from Miles) —that Ganke thinks to ask, “How long’ve they been together, anyway?”

He and Miles are only a handful of steps ahead, leading the charge toward the snack counter, but the question somehow carries back behind them, loud and clear. For a half-second, Bruce entirely forgets how to breathe.

The question’s simple, but the answer’s larger than life, an elephant milling through the crowd. Because either Miles fabricates an answer—a year, six months, some other arbitrary number that computes in his twelve-year-old brain—or he asks.

And Bruce isn’t entirely sure how to define what’s been building for months but’s only existed for the last—

“A year and a half.”

The boys and Bruce all stop at the bell-clear sound of Tony’s voice. He shrugs, almost unbearably casual about the whole thing, but Bruce catches the hint of tension in the way he holds his shoulders. His fingers curl a little tighter around Bruce’s coat pocket. “What?” he asks. “You asked how long we’ve been together. Answer’s a year and a half, give or take a couple days.”

“See?” Ganke’s glance at Miles teeters precariously on the edge of accusatory. “Pretty much together forever.”
“A year and a half isn’t forever,” Miles argues, but then Ganke grabs him by the arm and pulls him toward the snack counter.

The theater’s foyer is a cacophony of sound and activity, filled with children, parents, dating couples, and teens, but the whole of Bruce’s focus at that moment is on the man beside him. Tony’s fingers are still caught in his pocket, a familiar weight and warmth beside him, but he’s staring straight ahead. Watching the boys, Bruce thinks, but he wonders whether it’s out of honest vigilance or the need for distraction.

He suspects the latter.

He wets his lips, but when he opens them to speak, he finds himself staring at the patterned carpet instead of the side of Tony’s face. “A year and a half,” he says quietly, and it’s anything but a question.

Tony shrugs. “Sounded like as good an estimate as any, being as it’s when I decided we should probably try this all out.” Bruce’s head jerks up fast enough that he swears he can feel his teeth clatter together. Tony’s still staring out across the crowd of people, but there’s something soft about his features. Open, Bruce decides, and the openness stays when Tony finally meets his eyes. “I mean, like I said, it’s give or take a couple days.”

He feels almost like he’s choking when he attempts to pull in another breath. “I don’t know what—”

“Easter.” When Tony twists to look directly at him, he’s close enough that Bruce can study every inch of his face—every fine line, every individual eyelash, the full warmth of his gaze. “Egg hunt, giant ham, Dot’s first slumber party.”

Bruce’s lips part, trying to formulate words that slip away from his tongue rather than resting on it, but then Miles calls for them to come fund his ridiculous movie-treat shopping spree. The counter’s littered with boxes and bags of candy, two enormous tubs of popcorn, four sodas—“For you and Bruce, too,” Miles explains as he gestures to the giant paper cups—and a tray of industrial-waste grade nachos. Bruce cringes at the price tag, but Tony whips out a credit card and pays for all of it—before confiscating half the candy, one of the popcorn tubs, and his soda.

It’s only after they’ve left the boys at their theater and started down the hallway that the pieces finally tumble back into place and Bruce remembers Easter a year and a half ago.

Dot’s third Easter, to be precise, an event so momentous that Tony’d pulled out literally every stop for the almost-three-year-old. He’d created an Easter egg labyrinth in the backyard using refrigerator boxes and plywood, baked—with Bruce’s long-suffering help—a spiral-sliced ham, created three different flavors of sangria and a Bible trivia drinking game (no, really), and filled his house with all their friends. By the end of the evening, Bruce’d drunk too much to drive himself home and Dot’d fallen asleep on the guest room bed in her Easter dress, so Tony’d invited him, Steve, and Bucky to all spend the night.

Steve and Bucky, unsurprisingly, had crawled into bed with their tiny, sleepy daughter.

And Bruce, after a lot of cajoling and complaining, had shed his slacks and flopped onto the other side of Tony’s California king.

He hardly remembers it, now, the whole evening muddled by alcohol and time, but he can recall all the important details. Moving through Tony’s kitchen and helping him cook for the first time, chasing Dot through the Easter maze while the dogs barked at him from the outside, watching Tony’s laugh lines bunch when Bruce eviscerated everyone else at sacrilegious Bible trivia.
But more than any of that, he remembers how it felt to wake up in the middle of the night to find his back pressed against Tony’s chest and Tony snoring lightly against his ear.

He remembers thinking about how, after Easter, Tony’d touched him much more frequently, filling his life with fluttering fingers across his shoulders or over his hips. And he recalls wondering why, exactly, Tony’d started falling asleep on his shoulder at boring movies (and teleconferenced CLEs) so easily.

But more than that, he knows without a second thought that the first time he’d really started to want the thousand drive-by touches—

Well.

That also came after Easter a year and a half ago.

Ten minutes into the truly horrendous action flick Tony’s selected for them, Tony discovers that the arm rests in the top row fold up to create a miniature bench seat just for the two of them.

Thirty minutes into the movie, Bruce discovers that he has no idea what the plot is—and that he definitely doesn’t care.

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Jessica Drew arrives at Bruce’s house after dinner Tuesday night, armed with a cardboard beverage carrier from Starbucks and a messenger bag.

“I was in the neighborhood,” she says by way of a greeting. “I brought coffee.”

Bruce raises his eyebrows. “How much coffee have you had already?”

Her smile is slow and wicked, hot as a lingering sunburn but with a flash of white teeth. “Enough,” she replies, and steps inside.

The living room is teetering on the edge of being declared a federal disaster area, cluttered as it is with Bruce’s case files, Miles’s textbooks, and Tony’s leaning tower of transcripts and briefs. Upstairs, Bruce can hear the shower running and the off-key cadence of a classic rock song echoing through the stairwell. The pre-dinner, pre-homework dog run had kicked up mud and dead leaves left over from the dreary, rain-drenched morning, and once the dishes were drying in the drainer, Tony’d declared it “shower time” and charged up the stairs.

Bruce suspects that the running water has less to do with the lingering scent of mud on their skin and more to do with the self-proclaimed “appellee’s block” he’s spent the last day and a half fighting through.

Miles is sitting on the floor and glaring at his homework as Jessica sweeps into the room, discarding her bag on what used to be Bruce’s chair and then depositing herself on the couch. Bruce hovers in the doorway and watches the whole sequence of events play out like the stuttering frames of a flipbook: Miles glances up from his social studies worksheet, says “hi” with no vocal inflection, drops his eyes again, and then jerks in a whole-body double take. One knee leaps up to clatter against the underside of the table, and he yelps in pain.
“I brought you a hot chocolate,” Jessica says, and pulls one of the cups out of the drink carrier. “Extra chocolate flakes so you’re up all night.”

“Did I offend you in a past life?” Bruce wonders aloud from the doorway. Miles clutches his knee, his gaze darting between the two of them. He’s frowning, Bruce realizes, but in confusion more than spite.

“I was the stand-in guardian on the Gunderson appeal, remember? Before your life-partner man-friend took over arguing everything that filters into your office.” She shrugs as she lifts another drink from the carrier and raises it to her own lips. A greedy gulp later, she sighs. “Carol sends her congratulations, by the way. Wants to buy you two a fruit basket.”

Bruce shakes his head. “I sincerely doubt Carol Danvers wants to send anything edible to Tony.”

“You’d be surprised.” After another hungry gulp of coffee, Jessica thumps her paper cup down on the table and shifts her attention to Miles. “How’s it going, kid?”

And Miles, in a show of exactly how little restraint he (and the twelve-year-old population of the world) actually commands, blurs, “Why are you here?”

A half-second of silence sweeps over the house, uninterrupted by strange cars or tuneless whistling, before Jessica Drew laughs. She tosses her dark hair, her head thrown back in mirth, and Bruce allows his lips to curl into a tiny smile as he steps into the room. Jessica sometimes reminds him more of a cartoon character than a human—full of sound, fury, and mystery—but he knows from experience that she’s a talented lawyer and fierce guardian ad litem. He’s watched her argue cases both in front of a trial judge and on appeal, advocating for—or, depending on the situation, against—the termination of parental rights with a barely-contained fire. Bruce relies on the strength of his arguments and the law, everything constrained and neatly organized, but Jessica throws all her passion and power at the wall and hopes something sticks.

He admires that, in a way.

When he moves Jessica’s bag off the armchair, she hands him the third drink from the carrier. It’s a chai latte, spicy and sweet, made exactly to his specifications. He lets the scent of it carry him away before he explains, “Guardians ad litem need to check in with their clients to make sure all their needs are being met.”

“And to make sure they don’t have you locked in the basement, doing their laundry,” Jessica adds. She leans forward, arms resting on her thighs. In jeans, a t-shirt, and a windbreaker emblazoned with an English soccer team’s logo, she looks more like she’s headed to a sports game, not meeting with her twelve-year-old client. “State supreme court says once a month, but I try to catch kids around the three-week mark. Just in case.”

Miles frowns. “In case of what?” he asks, brow knotting together. Bruce resists the urge to sigh and sips his chai.

“Aliens? Weird science experiments gone horribly wrong?” Jessica shrugs. “Plus, I really was just down the road and figured ‘no time like the present.’”

“Also plus, she’s nosy.”

There’s amusement trailing on the ends of Tony’s words as he wanders into the living room, armed with a bag of potato chips and a fresh legal pad that Bruce knows for a fact is stolen from his office. His hair’s darker for the water still clinging to it, and the damp turns the dark gray, sleeveless tank
into a second skin. His sweatpants, the ones he’d brought over the week before and now lives in after work, cling to his hips and threaten to slide down; Bruce catches a half-glimpse of his hipbones and forgets momentarily how to swallow.

On the couch, Jessica’s grin borders on predatory. “Mister Stark,” she greets, tipping her head a few inches in a mockingly-respectful nod.

“Miss Drew,” Tony replies. He stalks around the coffee table like a lion on the African plains and settles into the far corner of the couch, leaving an entire cushion and a half between them. When he opens the potato chips, it’s with a snap of authority. “Broken any hearts lately?”

“Just a few hundred,” she responds with a wave of her hand. “Ruined any lives?”

Tony shrugs easily. “Only the usual,” he answers, and crunches down on a chip.

Bruce starts to roll his eyes at their usual posturing, a dance he’s seen at a hundred Urban Ascent board meetings and fundraisers, but he stops when he realizes that Miles is staring. His dark eyes track back and forth between the adults sharing the couch, watching every shift in posture and body language like the glue that binds the universe together might crumble if he blinks. His jaw tightens when Jessica passes Tony the final coffee, and only relaxes after Tony helps himself to a long sip.

Bruce knows that tension, he realizes after a few seconds, and his stomach swims from something other than the rich latte. He’s seen it on dozens of children in state care, the nervousness that comes with evaluating whether an adult’s on their side—or someone else’s.

Worse, he remembers how that tension feels, the way it wrapped fingers around his belly and refused to let go until someone cracked a smile.

Which is why, when he does roll his eyes, it’s with a purposeful half-grin and a shake of his head. “I will never understand your interpersonal relationships,” he says, glancing over at Tony. Tony’s eyes dance when he laughs and flops back into the corner of the couch. “Yeah, you will,” he retorts, and throws his feet up on the coffee table.

The tightness in Miles’s shoulders unspools as Jessica scowls at Tony’s bare and stretching toes, but Jessica barely seems to notice. She sets her cup down on the edge of the table and refocuses on Miles, her attention tracing his face. His lips are pursed and expression serious, but without the caution and uncertainty of when Jessica’d first swept into the room. Bruce tracks every micro-expression and blink along with Jessica, wondering whether he can see the same thing in the boy who’s lived with him for the last four weeks as she can.

Finally satisfied, she nods. “You look good,” she decides, reaching for her coffee again. “I’m starting to think maybe the whole ‘staying with Bruce and his smelly man-friend’ thing wasn’t a bad move.”

Tony scowls. “Hey, I just showered,” he defends.

Jessica promptly rolls her eyes, an overwrought expression with a lot of head-tossing, and Miles’s natural response is to laugh. It’s a warm, inviting sound, burbling up from his belly and filling the whole living room, and Bruce can’t resist his own smile. He glances at the lid of his chai, hoping to hide the way he knows his face blooms at the sound of Miles’s laughter, but he knows within seconds that he’s failed. Because when he glances up, the full heat of Tony’s attention is focused on him, and Tony’s smile is just as bright.

He picks at the edge of the lid with his fingernail and shakes his head.

He can’t quite put into words how it feels to sit in a living room with the man and the boy he
shouldn’t actually have, and he’s not sure now’s the time to start trying.

“It’s pretty great here,” Miles finally says, and Bruce forces his attention away from Tony to watch the boy shift to sitting cross-legged and then settle. He shrugs a little and grabs the hot chocolate off the table. “I mean, we do a lot together,” he explains after a few seconds of what Bruce can only assume is self-conscious silence. “We take the dogs out, or play games, and Bruce finally stopped making cauliflower.”

“It’s good for you,” Bruce reminds him, his own tiny smile hardly sufficient to convey the warmth bubbling around in his belly.

“It tastes like nothing,” Tony retorts, digging another chip out of the bag.

In the way that’s almost become routine, Miles rolls his eyes. “It’s good here,” he continues, shrugging slightly. “Better than I thought it’d be, that’s for sure.”

Jessica’s head bobs for a moment. Her fingernails, painted a blood-red color that Bruce ordinarily associates with Natasha, click against the coffee table. At first, he counts it as a distraction, but when one series of clicks becomes three and four, Bruce recognizes it as a stall. “On Thursday,” she says slowly, “I’m going into court about your case.”

Miles freezes, cup halfway to his lips, and stares at her. Bruce feels his own heart grind to a stuttering halt. It’s only Tony, bag crinkling in his lap, who manages to bleat out, “What?”

“It’s not a big thing,” Jessica explains, spreading her long fingers out in front of her. “Your uncle’s lawyer just asked the court to think about a couple things, and the judge’s asked me and Mister Murdock to come in for a discussion. Well, the legal equivalent of a discussion.” Miles’s posture loosens at the explanation and he finally sips his cocoa, but Bruce hears the frustration tightening Jessica’s tone. He should’ve expected the pile of motions to finally amount to a hearing, but it’s impossible to chase away the dread that’s winding its way through his veins. “We don’t need you there, but I wanted to make sure there’s nothing you wanted to tell Judge Rees.”

Tony mutters something under his breath, and Jessica sends him a dark look. He crunches extra loud on his next chip.

On the floor, Miles swallows audibly and stares at the paper Starbucks cup that’s clutched in his hand. Slump-shouldered as he is in his t-shirt and jeans, he looks smaller than when he’s charging after the dogs in the park, and more vulnerable than when he’s arguing his way through another unfair Monopoly transaction. Bruce thinks for a moment how hard it must be to be twelve years old, one foot in the teenage years while the other’s still only a kid, and how much more complicated it becomes when you’re in state-sanctioned limbo.

By twelve, Bruce’d at least known his place in the world. But then, he’d also never really gotten to be a kid, either.

“Uh,” Miles says softly, more a sigh than a word. When he glances up, he holds his entire body carefully, as though he’s balanced on the world’s most precarious tightrope. “Can you tell the judge that even though I love my uncle and want to live with him later, I think maybe I should stay here for a while longer?”

Bruce isn’t certain he can put a name to the feeling that unfurls in his chest. It’s like a thousand emotions bursting into one, a firework of sensation he can’t quite clamp down on that steals his breath away. All at once, he wants to drop onto the floor and wrap his arms around Miles, to run out of the room, to yell in the face of Aaron Davis, and to sit in a very quiet corner of his world and cry.
He wants to repair everything that’s broken in Miles’s life and, in the same breath, pride himself on how he’s started to stitch up the places that are threadbare and torn.

He wants to send Miles home strong and whole—and he wants *this*, this mess of a living room and cluttered disaster of a life, to be Miles’s home.

Across the coffee table, Jessica Drew smiles very gently. “I can do that,” she promises, and then leans out to offer Miles her little finger. “Pinky promise.”

Miles rolls his eyes, but not without a tiny smile dancing across his lips. “I’m kind of old for pinky promises,” he complains.

“Suck it up,” Jessica retorts, and Bruce chuckles when Miles finally reciprocates.

When he finally glances away, more to collect his wandering thoughts than anything else, he catches Tony watching him. His face is soft and open, lost in an expression Bruce barely recognizes.

But there’s something so overwhelmingly warm and sweet in his smile that Bruce can’t clamp down on the next wave of emotion that booms in his chest.

No, all he can do is smile back.

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That night, after Miles climbs into bed and all the lights in his room are switched off, Bruce hovers in the doorway and watches him shift around under the covers. Downstairs, Tony wanders through the rooms, locking the door and cleaning up their respective work messes, but for a few seconds, it’s just the two of them.

He’s just reaching to pull the door shut when Miles asks, “Bruce?” His voice is tremulous and distant, almost a whisper in the pitch-dark of his bedroom.

Bruce’s fingers close around air, rather than the doorknob. “Yeah?”

“It’s okay that I told Jessica I don’t think I should go home right away, right?”

On the second time, he brushes the knob with his fingertips and then closes his fist around it, his knuckles clenching until he can feel the tension radiating up his arm. Each breath feels like both a wheeze and a rush, sounds he can’t entirely control. He’s spent the last two hours, hours filled with work and casual, lingering touches from Tony, lost in his own thoughts, trying to reconcile the conversation with Jessica.

He’s the foster placement, tasked with helping the child reintegrate with his uncle.

But he’s the foster *dad*, and that’s—different.

“It’s always okay to stand up for what’s best for you,” he finally answers quietly. In the shadows, Miles rolls over in bed, and he forces a tiny smile. “And it’s okay to want what’s best for you, too.”

He thinks, in the darkness, that he can see the boy nod. “Okay,” he murmurs, and Bruce can’t shake how young and lost he sounds. “Goodnight.”
“Goodnight,” Bruce replies, and closes the door.

There’s no one in the hallway to ask why he stands there for a full five minutes after, his back pressed to the wall outside Miles’s bedroom and his eyes trained on the ceiling. There’s no one to witness when he closes his eyes against feelings he can’t control, or to hear how labored and shaky his breaths become. And when he finally trails downstairs, half-mechanical in every step, there’s no one to catch when he rubs his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

Tony’s in the kitchen when Bruce gets there, leaning over the island and squinting at a brief he wrote probably six or eight weeks earlier. He’s there to glance up at Bruce over the rims of his reading glasses, to frown at his expression when he wanders across the tile in his socked feet, and to roll his lips together when Bruce shakes his head.

He’s there with sides for Bruce to run his hands along, with hips for Bruce to spider his fingers over, and with a strong back that Bruce can press against. He’s there, smelling of Bruce’s shampoo and soap, when Bruce presses his nose and mouth against the back of his neck and closes his eyes.

Tony’s there in the kitchen, but he doesn’t ask. Instead, he twists around in Bruce’s grip and wraps arms around him without a single word.

And that, Bruce thinks, is why he loves him.
Families and Traditions

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, files are organized, motivations are discussed, developments are revealed, and traditions are maintained. Bruce and his friends give thanks for all they have—before Bruce is reminded of how much he could potentially lose.

Chapter Notes

For confidentiality reasons, it’s very common to use initials when discussing child welfare cases. In fact, most appeals of child welfare cases transform names into initials in order to protect the privacy of the children in question.

Also, as a small note, there are references to “pilgrims and Indians” in this chapter. It’s a preschool conceptualization of a holiday, what can I say?

I, personally, am thankful for my beta-readers, Jen and saranoh, who each in their own separate ways help turn these words from a jumble of letters on the page to a story worth telling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They spend the week after Jessica Drew’s visit in what’s swiftly becoming the usual way: sharing time between Tony’s house (complete with video games, dogs, and one inexplicable game of cold-weather bocce ball) and Bruce’s house (with its board games, stocked fridge, and careful homework monitoring). Tony prepares frantically to argue in front of the state supreme court the Monday after Thanksgiving, filling both his office and Bruce’s living room with bombastic practice arguments that make Johnnie Cochran appear subdued; Bruce treads water to keep ahead of all the hearings that are swiftly filling up his calendar. The two afternoons he works late with Jane, sifting through files for their end-of-the-year audit, Tony drives out to pick Miles up from school and brings him back to the office, and he works on homework in the conference room while Bruce seriously considers pulling his hair out.

At one point after he’s threatened to light his entire office on fire to end the madness, Miles offers, “Can I help?”

Jane brushes loose strands of hair out of her face. She’s kneeling on the threadbare carpeting, files stacked around her like the buttresses of an invisible fortress. Her shirt hugs the swell of her budding belly. “You can check off file numbers,” she suggests, and then tosses a glance in Bruce’s direction. “There’s no sensitive information on the master list, just initials and numbers.”
He nods and peers over the tops of his glasses at Miles. The boy hovers in the doorway, hands in his pockets and lips pursed together. “Tony started ranting about Terry, Ohio again,” Miles explains with a tiny shrug. “Pepper said I should find something else to do.”

“Terry, Ohio?” Jane echoes, frowning.

“Terry *versus* Ohio,” Bruce corrects with a shake of his head. “Fourth Amendment law involving—” When he realizes they’re both staring at him, twin puzzled expressions playing across their faces, he sighs. “Grab a highlighter,” he instructs Miles. “We’re on cases from 2010.”

Miles steps over one of the stacks to reach the pen cup on Bruce’s desk. It’s half-hidden by various piles of miscellaneous papers, and Bruce briefly wonders how many trees have died in the name of filling his expanding file folders. “You still have cases from two years ago?” the boy asks after he grabs an orange marker.

“We still have cases from *ten* years ago,” Jane replies with a little chuckle. She hands Miles the case master list and then shakes her head. “One came into custody when he was two and is now—seventeen? That’s close to fifteen years, I think.”

Miles frowns and, after a few seconds, drops his eyes to the list in his hands. He’s caught in suspended animation, somehow. Bruce swears he can see the thoughts swirling around his head, wisps of clouds attempting to form into a storm front.

Finally, he wets his lips. “Fifteen years and he never went home?” he asks quietly.

Bruce ducks his head, but not before he catches the avalanche of Jane’s smile tumbling off her lips. She frowns, her brow creasing, but he just shakes his head. For a moment, the office is silent, unburdened by the day’s usual white noise or the glare of the sun outside.

“No,” Bruce finally admits, “he didn’t go home.”

“But we’ve already done that one,” Jane adds gently.

Miles nods. “Okay,” he says, and drops onto the floor. He uncaps the highlighter, Jane hands him a legal pad to write on, and before Bruce can really track it, there’s a smile playing across his lips. “The next ones are all lumped together,” he reads from the list. “Numbers 10-015JW, 10-016JW, and 10-017JW, with the initials R.Q, L.Q., and B.Q.”

“Oh god, not *that* one,” Jane intones. She reaches for the file in question—easily the biggest in any of the stacks, heavy enough that she can hardly drag it across the carpet—and Bruce can’t help but smile when Miles laughs.

Hours later, after they’re finished sorting through the piles and are all wandering out into the evening dark, Tony included, Miles asks, “Do you know if it’s a girl or boy?”

It’s a non-sequitur Bruce only follows when he glances over at Jane. With her wool coat open against the breeze, her shirt is flattened against her chest and stomach, and there’s no missing her “baby bump.” Darcy’s established a unique tumblr account to track its growth, Bruce knows. She’d be disappointed to miss this rare glimpse at the early swell.

Jane pauses a moment on the stairs, as caught by the sudden question as Bruce himself was, but when Miles gestures vaguely at her middle, she smiles. “No,” she admits. “It’s too early yet, and Thor’s still trying to convince me that I don’t want to know.”

Beside Bruce, Tony looks up from his phone long enough to groan. “Here we go again,” he
grumbles.

Whether Jane laughs at his reaction or the way he catches Bruce’s arm when Bruce attempts to elbow him, he’s not entirely sure. Either way, she shakes her head as they start down the steps again, Tony’s arm linked around Bruce’s like it’s the world’s most casual way to walk. Bruce resists the urge to pull away at the public affection, and instead listens to Jane explain, “Frigga—that’s Thor’s mother—is sure it’s going to be a boy. She’s already digging out all of the old baby stuff at their house to hand over at Thanksgiving.”

Bruce is forced to steer Tony from walking into a lamp post, he’s so busy sorting through his remaining work e-mails. Fingers brush the inside of his wrist momentarily, either in distraction or a thank you. He ignores the curious twitch of Jane’s eyebrows. “Do you believe her?” he asks.

“No,” she replies. Her grin is easy and warm, lighting up her face. “If Frigga says boy, then it’s definitely a girl.” She shakes her head. “Between this and the wedding battle, though, I think I’m losing family favor to Loki’s girlfriend.”

That, of all things, brings Tony’s head snapping up. “Laufeyson has a girlfriend?” he demands. When he half-flings out his arm, he nearly throws his cell phone across the parking lot. “What is she, a snake? Tell me she’s a snake, the only kind of woman who’d date that asshole is a—”

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend,” Jane clarifies, holding up a quelling hand. “That’s kind of my point: I’m losing to what’s probably his hand.”

It takes a half-second for the joke to sink in to Tony’s work-muddled brain, but once it does, he bursts out laughing. It cuts through the dark, echoing off the steep face of the judicial complex and carrying through the parking lot. A few steps in front of them, Miles grins, his face as warm as Tony’s laughter.

“I take it you still haven’t set a wedding date,” Bruce offers once they start moving again. The parking lot’s mostly empty, save their cars, the official county vehicles that remain there overnight, and the white van owned by the evening cleaning company. The strange desolation reminds Bruce momentarily of all the zombie apocalypse shows they’ve watched in the last few weeks.

Jane, however, trends towards the same types of documentaries Bruce’d watched prior to becoming a foster parent, and smiles as she shakes her head. “Not yet, and it’s driving Frigga a little crazy,” she admits. “We’d prefer February or March, just something small before the baby comes. But you know how Odinsons can be.”

“Loud, demanding, and obnoxious?” Tony asks. He’s slipped his phone into his pocket, and his attention is, finally, fully on the conversation in front of him. But he’s also not untangled his arm from Bruce’s own. If anything, he pulls Bruce a little closer, their shoulders almost pressed together.

Bruce thinks momentarily that the affection, however ridiculous, is what makes Miles’s lips twitch up in a tiny smile.

Either way, Bruce sighs and shakes his head. “Tony,” he chides, “Thor’s not—”

“Oh, he’s two of the three,” Jane interrupts, holding up her small hands. “And if he makes one more sweeping declaration about our future without running it by me first, he qualifies for the third.”

Bruce knows that the grin he’s fighting against is probably impolite, but it certainly beats out Tony’s loud snicker in the tact department. He rolls his lips together until he can swallow around his own amusement. “Still annoyed by your proposal?” he asks.
Jane shrugs. “A little,” she admits with a tiny, coy smile, and Bruce can’t really help but laugh.

They all wander their separate ways after that, Jane climbing into her hatchback—“I told Thor that if he wants a minivan, he’s giving up the motorcycle,” she notes as she waves goodbye—and Bruce waving Miles over into the Prius. Tony promises to come by once he’s changed and let the dogs out—“And packed up some more back-up skivvies to live at your place,” he says, and Bruce bites down a smile as he rolls his eyes—and slowly untangles their arms.

Except, before he’s let go entirely, he catches Bruce’s wrist, reels him in, and kisses him softly. Carefully, Bruce thinks, with a tender laziness they’ve so far reserved for the ten minutes in the morning before Miles—an unnaturally early riser for a twelve-year-old—hears them moving around and demands they drag themselves out of the bedroom.

Bruce can’t shake how strange it is that he’s growing used to kissing Tony Stark.

“You can make out at home!” Miles interrupts in a shout, and his voice fills the parking lot like Tony’s laughter did however many minutes ago. The heat that rushes into Bruce’s face steals his breath almost as quickly as Tony’s kiss did, and he ducks his head as he steps away. Tony’s fingers linger where they landed on his hip, and he swears he can feel their heat even when they’re no longer touching.

“We’re gonna come up with privacy rules!” Tony retorts, as loud as Miles and just as shameless. The boy’s standing just in front of the open passenger side door, leaning on it and grinning like he’s just won the lottery. “Like, a mandate that five minutes in every sixty is ‘foster dads kiss and you find a hobby’ time.”

Miles rolls his eyes. “I bet you do a lot more than that when I’m not there,” he challenges.

“That’s why the five minutes only includes kissing,” Tony replies. “Cause for the other stuff, there’s a ten-part calculus formula that depends on things like which pants Bruce’s wearing—”

Bruce groans audibly, and not just because he already misses the heat of Tony pressed against him. “Tony.”

“—how many hours I was locked away in my office without human contact—”

“Tony.”

“—and whether we got our prerequisite five-in-sixty kissing time that day, ‘cause I can see—”

“Goodbye, Tony,” Bruce interrupts loudly enough that it actually carries, and he’s immediately rewarded by both the other man and Miles laughing at him. He rolls his eyes at the wink-and-nod routine Tony directs in Miles’s direction, shakes his head at the kiss blown to him across the parking lot, and finally—thankfully—climbs into his car.

He’s barely started the engine when Miles notes, “You’re still weird about PDA.”

“Because you keep encouraging him,” Bruce retorts, and the boy laughs again.

The car ride grows quiet after that, Miles staring out the window while Bruce attempts to maneuver through the heavy early-evening traffic. It’s close enough to Thanksgiving to clog the road with shoppers, and more than once they pass a grocery store with a filled-to-capacity parking lot. He considers commenting on the subject—or, more particularly, on the fact that their Thanksgiving will take place at Tony’s, filled with warmth, laughter, and questionably-prepared food—when Miles remarks, “My parents got married when I was three.”
It’s enough of a surprise that Bruce almost drives right past their next turn. He definitely forgets to signal. When he throws a glance in Miles’s direction, the boy’s still focused on the buildings they pass rather than on their conversation.

“They did?” he asks gently.

Miles nods. “My mom said my dad wasn’t ready to get married right when I was born,” he explains. There’s a quietness to his tone, a shyness that only really comes out when he talks about his family. Bruce’s heard it a few times now, trapped in their conversations about Aaron Davis and the parents Miles lost, but it’s infrequent.

Infrequent and, in a way, special. Because Bruce knows that Miles only really broaches this particular subject with him, and not with Tony.

“My dad kind of had to prove himself,” Miles continues, and Bruce forces himself to watch the road. “I guess he wasn’t always a good guy. But after he did what he needed to, they got married.”

“Do you remember it?” Bruce asks after a few seconds.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Miles shake his head. “My mom had pictures, but I was too young.” He shifts his weight around in his seat and turns to glance over at Bruce. “Is that why Jane isn’t married yet? Thor needs to prove himself?”

Despite himself, Bruce laughs. “No, nothing like that,” he replies. The car rolls to a stop at the next stop light, and he’s rewarded with a tiny smile from Miles. “Jane’s a little more non-traditional than Thor is, I think. She’d probably go her whole life without getting married and never complain. Thor, on the other hand, wants the whole white-picket-fence story.”

“But she’s going to marry him anyway?” Miles asks, leaning his head against the back of the seat.

“Relationships require compromise,” Bruce answers with a small shrug. He watches the cross-traffic zip by, lit only by street lights and the eerie green glow of the opposing traffic light. “Your dad changed his life because making your mother happy was more important than whatever he was doing at the time.” He steals one more glance at Miles, a smile pressing at the corners of his lips. “Jane wants a good life with Thor, and this is important to him. It’s what you do when you love someone.”

There’s a few seconds of silence, after that, Miles nodding in the near-dark of the car and then settling back in the passenger’s seat again. The light changes and they continue their slow march home, surrounded by strange cars and companionable silence.

Three intersections later, Miles breaks through the quiet. “Do you compromise with Tony a lot?”

The question is serious and earnest, one that Miles has clearly spent the last five minutes thinking about, but that doesn’t stop Bruce from laughing aloud. “You’ve known Tony for close to six weeks now,” he replies, shaking his head. “You tell me whether you think this relationship’d work without mountains of compromises.”

He decides seconds later that there’s no better sound than Miles’s laughter filling his car.

At least, until Tony joins them at home a half-hour later, and the laughter that fills his house belongs to all three of them together.
“And this one says—” Dot pauses, squinting at the index card clutched in her tiny fingers. “Daddy, what does this one say?”

“Phil,” Steve answers with the same sigh as he’s answered the last half-dozen reading questions.

“Phil!” Dot reports, and then climbs onto a chair to place it in the middle of a dinner plate.

Estimating conservatively, Bruce’s been to Tony Stark’s home at least a few hundred times in the last five years. He’s arrived in the wee hours of the morning to drive Tony to the airport, fallen asleep on the couch during a late-night movie marathon, spent a Saturday afternoon working at Tony’s dining room table, and stood on the back deck in the snow to ring in the new year. He’s house-sat alone, just him and the dogs, spent entire weeks eating dinners with Tony at the nook in the kitchen, and once attended an Urban Ascent charity event that happened right in Tony’s own living room. But even after cooking meals in Tony’s kitchen, showering in Tony’s bathroom, swimming in Tony’s pool, and (most recently) sleeping in Tony’s bed, he feels like evenings like this one are his favorites:

A holiday party filled with lights, sound, laughter, and their friends.

Almost everyone from the office is present for the third annual Stark-brand Thanksgiving dinner; Thor and Jane elected to travel to Wisconsin and spend time with the Odinsons and Darcy’s suffering through another Lewis family natural disaster—her words, not Bruce’s—but everyone else is clumped together in the living room, dining room, or kitchen, enjoying the evening. Dot, in a sweater dress with matching socks and a mess of hair that’s only just held back with barrettes, leads Miles on a circle around the dining table, explaining each of her homemade dinner place-markers before she assigns them to the appropriate place. They’re really just five-by-seven index cards covered in stickers, glitter, and drawings, but she forces Steve to read each of them before adding her color commentary.

And sometimes, the commentary is literally about color. “Natasha’s name is red because her hair is red,” she says, holding up the card so Miles can see.

“And covered in feather stickers,” Miles points out, grinning at her.

She narrows her eyes. “That’s because Natasha’s an Indian,” she retorts, and Steve sighs as he sips his beer.

In the living room, Phil, Clint, Natasha, and Pepper are all clumped together, caught up in a murmured conversation that’s only half-audible. More than once, Bruce suspects he catches one of the four of them glancing his way, but then they circle together more tightly and continue their chat.

“I have this distant dream that ends in my personal life not being the subject of gossip,” he remarks to Steve as he sets down the last of the glasses he’d carried into the dining room. They’re mismatched, different sizes and shapes, and Bruce can only imagine what Tony did to land himself with single or paired wine glasses instead of a full set.

Steve raises his eyebrows. “You don’t think you sacrificed that dream when you started ‘dating’ Tony?”

“Until recently, no,” Bruce admits with a rueful little smile. Steve shakes his head and laughs, his eyes cast momentarily at his beer bottle until Dot commands he read another card.
Bruce leaves the three of them at the dining room table to check on the potential disaster area in the kitchen, only pausing long enough to clap Miles on the shoulder and toss him a private smile. They’d spent a half-hour Tuesday night digging through the ever-expanding mess of clothes in Miles’s room in order to pick out something nice enough for dinner but still casual enough not to drive him crazy. The sweater’s a warm dark green with sleeves Miles won’t stop rolling up, and Bruce’d dragged him to a department store on Wednesday to find dress slacks to pair with it.

He knows, technically, he shouldn’t be loading Miles down with new purchases, books and clothes that he didn’t own before Bruce became his caregiver, but he can’t entirely help himself, either. He especially couldn’t after last Saturday’s visit, when Miles’d burst in through the front door, run upstairs to his bedroom, and refused to come out for an hour.

“I offered his uncle a Thanksgiving visit,” Jessica’d explained in the foyer, still bundled in her winter coat and ridiculous oversized scarf. She’d shrugged loosely, but her expression and overall manner was tight, wound up like a rubber band waiting to snap. “He said he had business to attend to and could only do it if it was an overnight.”

“You didn’t approve the overnight?” Bruce’d questioned gently. He’d felt more than heard Tony hovering just down the hallway, his attention half on the conversation and half on any potential disasters carrying on upstairs.

Jessica’d snorted. “He won’t even let us walk through the apartment, Bruce. There’s no way that kid’s spending ten minutes in his uncle’s control until we’ve got a safety plan a mile long.”

An hour after she left, Miles had finally trailed down from his bedroom, crossed into the living room, and switched on the television. He’d meandered through the Netflix and Hulu menus before finally switching the whole thing off.

“Can we go do something?” he’d asked, glancing over to where Bruce and Tony’d each been working on their respective laptops. Another sign of the new normal included the trailing cords all over his living room, and the half-permanent pile of legal pads Tony kept leaving on the end table.

“What?” Tony’d replied.

“Anything,” Miles’d said, and—after throwing on shoes and piling into the Prius, they’d spent three hours at the indoor golf complex, arguing their way through not one but two eighteen-hole mini-golf courses.

But when Bruce passes Rhodey, Peggy, and Maria in the living room, he catches more of Miles’s laughter than he does their argument, and finally allows himself a smile.

“All I’m saying is, you could sleep with her,” Tony’s telling Jasper as Bruce wanders into the kitchen. Tony’s wine glass is empty, and Bruce’s is now half empty and boasting a second set of lip prints. He rolls his eyes as he snatches it out of Tony’s reach and helps himself to a sip. “She might kill you, but it’d be worth it.”

“Totally worth it,” Bucky echoes. When Jasper and Tony both glance at him, he shrugs. “Married, not blind,” he reminds them as he returns to chopping onion for the salad.

“Are we talking about Maria?” Bruce asks.

“Who else?” Tony retorts. He’s wearing an apron he’d bought himself when he’d elected to have his ridiculous brick grill installed in the back yard, emblazoned with a picture of a grilling steak and the words on the eighth day, God commanded that man grill. He stops poking at the still-boiling
potatoes and points his fork at Jasper. “Grow a pair.”

“I have a fucking pair,” Jasper snaps. His entire body’s held taut under his button-down shirt and blazer. Come to think of it, he’s the only person in the entire house dressed as formally for their makeshift Thanksgiving as he usually is for work. “But you don’t just grab the person you’re interested in and mail her like a damn mountain lion.”

“Why not? Worked for me.” And before Bruce can even suggest to Tony that he stop, Tony grabs him by the hip and kisses him squarely on the mouth, his lips hot, wet, and entirely too familiar.

It’s only after he’s swanned out of the room and declared himself king of the meal that Bruce realizes Jasper and Bucky are both staring at him. “I’m not wearing the face mask this time,” Bucky points out, “so I shouldn’t be hallucinating.”

“What the actual shit?” Jasper adds.

“It’s nothing,” Bruce replies half-heartedly, staring down at the yellowish liquid in his glass and trying to ignore the tightness and nerves creeping up from his stomach. He helps himself to a sip of wine, but he knows from the heat of his cheeks that the other men are still both staring. He can hear Tony’s laughter in the living room and then Clint’s, but neither really helps him lift his head.

Also unhelpful is when Bucky’s knife clunks down on the counter and he accuses, “You’re actually sleeping together now, aren’t you?”

“Oh, come the fuck on,” Jasper responds. His voice is half-sputter, half-laugh, and when Bruce finally finds the strength to steal a look, he’s gesturing broadly with his glass of beer. He’d brought an assorted collection of brands Bruce himself’d never heard of and then refused to drink out of the bottles; this beer is a dark, almost muddy brown. “You’ve met Tony Stark, right? I mean, I’d find you attractive as hell if I was into that, Bruce, but Tony wants them all—” He waves a hand. “Steve-stacked.”

“Steve-stacked?” Bruce and Bucky repeat simultaneously. Bucky’s staring, and Bruce can’t decide whether his face is a mask of amusement or horror. “My husband is now a brand of hot?”

“A very particular kind, yeah,” Jasper clarifies with a shrug. “Huge muscles, tiny waist, ass that clearly won’t quit.”

Bucky choke on air.

“Did I guess wrong?”

“Jasper,” Bruce cuts in. Bucky’s clutching the counter, red faced from the effort either not to cry or laugh, and Bruce is seriously considering starting a small kitchen fire just to duck out of the conversation. He finishes his wine and then sets the empty glass on the counter, but Jasper’s attention never breaks. When he rolls his lips together, the other man calmly sips his beer; when he shifts his weight from one leg to the other, he still feels like a butterfly pinned to a display. “It’s not exactly something we planned, but—”

Before he can finish whatever explanation his brain’s still attempting to formulate, clumsy and imperfect as it may be, Dot bursts into the kitchen. She freezes for a half-second until she locates the still-sputtering Bucky, then runs up and grips him by the tails of his button-down. He smiles and tucks her loose hair behind her ear before he says, “Hey, squirt.”

“Daddy says I can sleep over if you say okay and Uncle Bruce says okay,” she blurts. Bucky frowns down at her, but she’s undeterred; she clings to his shirt and leans back a few inches until she’s
almost hanging from him. “What?”

“I’m just trying to keep up with whatever plan you and your dad came up with while I was suffering through Jasper’s crazy,” Bucky says.

Jasper snorts and rolls his eyes. “I totally fucking guessed right,” he mutters.

Dot, however, just scowls up at her father. She releases him, steps back, and plants her hands on her hips. Pure stubbornness radiates off her in waves. “I asked Miles if he wanted to have a sleepover,” she explains, punctuating each syllable as though she’s afraid Bucky’s IQ has dropped dramatically in the last thirty seconds. “Uncle Tony said I could sleepover here, with him and Miles and Uncle Bruce, but Daddy said only if you and Uncle Bruce say okay.”

Bucky’s head snaps over in Bruce’s direction, and Bruce instantly regrets not saving the last bit of his wine. He twists toward the stove to monitor the boiling potatoes; he knows they’re still too hard to remove from the heat, but he can’t bring himself to meet Bucky’s stare.

“Uncle Bruce is sleeping over with Uncle Tony?” he asks carefully.

Dot heaves the world’s most dramatic sigh. “Yes. And Uncle Tony says that they’ll sleep in his room and Miles in the first extra room and then I can sleep in the other one or with Miles if Miles says okay.” She pauses to draw in a long breath. “And he said you and daddy could go have grown-up time.”

Bucky’s eyes flutter shut for a half-second, and Bruce suspects that the long sigh is actually his will to fight leaving his body. “I’m not going to win this, am I?”

“Nope,” Jasper offers on Dot’s behalf.

Dot nods furiously in agreement, her hair bouncing. Hair, then entire body, because she hops up and down to punctuate the point. “Please?” she asks, all over-long vowels and grit baby teeth.

Bucky throws up his hands. “I hope Miles knows what he’s getting into with you as a roommate,” he finally informs his daughter, and Dot literally squeals her way through their hug before she rushes out of the room.

Her cheering echoes through into the kitchen, and Bruce forces a tiny smile before he reaches for the decanter of white wine that’s sitting on the island. It’s already half empty thanks to all the guests, but that hardly stops him from refilling his glass.

Or at least, attempting to refill it. Seconds before he closes his fingers around the neck of the glass bottle, Bucky slides it out of his reach.

The other man draws in close, crowding him, and Bruce somehow manages to roll his eyes. It feels forced and unnatural, though, because he knows what conversation’s coming next.

“You’re actually dating now,” Bucky accuses, and Bruce casts his eyes down at the marble countertop. The whole kitchen’s cluttered with the debris of Tony’s cooking—there’re spice shakers, crumpled plastic wrap, and various pieces of chopped vegetables littered everywhere—and Bruce starts fiddling with a container of seasoning salt. “Not fake dating,” Bucky presses, “not in-it-for-the-kid dating, not starting-to-give-in-thank-god dating, but actually dating.”

“Wait, they were fake dating?” Jasper questions.

Bruce shakes his head, but he’s somehow still fighting to assemble the explanation he knows the other man wants. He opens and then shuts the lid on the salt shaker, the plastic click interrupting but
not entirely breaking the silence around them.

“And it’s not just sex, either,” Bucky presses. Bruce feels the usual creep of heat inch up his neck and ducks his head even further. “I mean, Tony’s Tony and everything, but he wouldn’t kiss a fuck-buddy on the mouth like that.”

Beside them, Jasper snorts a laugh. “Come the fuck on,” he challenges, and Bruce glances over in time to catch him gesturing broadly with his beer. “Tony’s kissed me on the mouth. Twice.”

“That was mistletoe, that doesn’t count.” There’s an element of absolute certainty in Bucky’s voice, a kind of faith Bruce himself’s never really managed to master. When he finally raises his head and can meet Bucky’s steady, dark-eyed gaze, the other man points right at him. “You and Tony Stark are a bona fide couple.”

“‘Bone’ is right, at least,” Jasper weighs in, and Bruce shakes his head when Bucky grins.

He reaches for the decanter again, and this time, the other man lets him take it. The glass is cool to the touch, and for some reason, it’s comforting to feel the weight against his palm. His life in the last few weeks has felt surreal and impossible enough that the touch grounds him.

Well, touching something inanimate, at least.

He still feels like he’s falling, somehow, when the touch comes from Tony Stark.

“We’re—” He starts to say, but his tongue feels heavy behind his teeth. He finishes filling his glass and places the decanter back on the countertop before he looks back to Bucky and Jasper. “I wouldn’t call it dating, necessarily. It’s just—”

“It’s just that they’re definitely a lot more than just friends, these days.”

Natasha strides into the kitchen with all the confidence she usually reserves for the courtroom, her tall, heeled boots clicking on the tile. In black jeans and a clingy, silken top she occasionally wears to work, she looks almost like she’s stepped out of a music video. She sets her wine glass down on the counter.

“I’m surprised it’s taken you geniuses this long to figure it out.”

Jasper proudly flips her the bird while Bucky flattens a hand over his heart. “I’m offended,” he intones. “I’m the one who told you about the fake dating, and you didn’t return the favor.”

“I’m returning it now,” she replies. She refills her glass, then sets the bottle down and levels a serious look in Bucky’s direction. Her expression is devoid of all emotion, as flat and stoic as a cliff face, but Bruce knows that’s when she’s most dangerous.

Bucky raises his eyebrows, and Jasper sips his beer.

“Tony Stark and Bruce Banner,” Natasha says seriously, “are having sex on a regular basis.”

And Bruce is absolutely certain that the only reason he doesn’t turn bright, irreparable red is because of Jasper’s actual spit-take.

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They arrange themselves at the dinner table an hour later according to Dot’s exacting specifications,
listening carefully as she divides them into two groups: pilgrims and Indians. Steve tries futilely to correct her into the term “Native American,” but every time she scowls at him and pushes the appropriate person toward their supposed side of the table. Bruce ends up sandwiched between Tony and Clint, admiring his feather-and-leaf covered index card. Across from him, Miles sits beside Steve and tries not to look confused.

“Pepper and Uncle Tony can’t be on the same side because they fight too much,” Dot explains as she nudges Peggy into the last seat on the pilgrim side. Her blonde hair’s a wavy mess that hangs in her face, and she stubbornly pushes it out of the way as she surveys her work. “But Uncle Bruce had to be with Uncle Tony, and Phil had to be with Clint, and Jasper and Mister Rhodey had to be Indians because they’re brown.”

Maria coughs instead of laughing and reaches immediately for her wine. “Oh lord,” she mutters, and Peggy grins into her lap as she unfolds her napkin.

“Mister?” Rhodey asks Bucky. Bucky raises his hands in surrender before he helps Dot into her chair.

It’s only after she’s settled and Bucky’s fixed her barrettes that Miles frowns. “Wait. I’m brown, too.”

Beside him, Dot heaves a sigh. “You don’t count,” she declares, and moves her own place card to sit up next to her bright pink plastic cup.

The Thanksgiving dinner produced by Tony (with Bucky’s supervision, Bruce’s help, and Jasper’s color commentary) is a literal feast, and Bruce expects more than once that the table will collapse under its weight. There’s an enormous platter of turkey, more mashed potatoes than an army could eat, plus homemade stuffing, gravy, and green bean casserole. There’s a bowl of corn and a basket of rolls fresh from the oven, a massive salad and two plates of jellied cranberry sauce, plus baked sweet potatoes with some sort of brown sugar topping. It’s the sort of Thanksgiving Bruce pictured in the years after his mother died but before he moved in with his aunt, everything steaming and delicious.

Under the table, Tony bumps their knees together, and he honestly can’t contain his smile.

The platters and bowls rotate slowly from person to person, filling the room with appreciative murmurs and grumbles of hunger. More than once, Bruce glances up from adding a heaping spoonful of something to his plate and catches Miles staring. Not necessarily at the food as much as the experience, at the room full of chosen family and dear friends chatting and laughing together.

Something in Bruce’s belly twists when he remembers that the boy’s spent at least one holiday season without his parents. The feeling claws at his heart until he realizes he’s missed Clint’s request for the gravy because Tony’s passing it over him. “Sorry,” he says, but Clint just elbows him lightly.

“Holidays are weird,” he comments, and the sympathy in his voice is warmer than any Thanksgiving meal.

The mention of weirdness and holidays together turns into a conversation about ridiculous family traditions that leaves most of the table in stitches. Phil explains that his farmer-sister and her husband actually slaughter their own Thanksgiving turkey every year—“Their oldest helps,” he explains, and the only person who doesn’t look horrified is Miles—and Maria complains about her vegan sister-in-law and the horrors of tofurkey. Rhodey treats them all to an impression of his seriously Southern grandmother, after which Peggy recalls that her first proper American Thanksgiving involved a truly
awful college boyfriend—“He tried to propose to me six months after we broke up,” she adds, and Natasha nearly chokes on a mouthful. Once Natasha’s recovered, Sitwell admits that he misses his mother’s homemade day-after-Thanksgiving tamales.

“The only thing I really miss about Thanksgivings at home,” Pepper comments when all eyes finally fall to where she’s sitting between Maria and Peggy on the pilgrim side of the table, “is the tradition where you share the things you’re thankful for.”

Next to Bruce, Tony rolls his eyes. “Only you could have a secret store of extra-wholesome Midwesternness that nobody knows about,” he informs her with a twirl of his fork. “Next you’ll start knitting your own sweaters out of wool from sheep you sheared yourself.”

“I’ve sheared a sheep,” Pepper returns. “It’s not as fun as you’d think.”

Tony’s mouth drops open in surprise immediately, and Bruce laughs at his blank-faced expression. Tony attempts to retaliate by stepping on his foot under the table, but Bruce dodges, and whether it’s the warmth of the room or the couple glasses of wine swimming around in his belly, Bruce can’t help but grin. He’s so caught up in the juvenile game of almost-footsie Tony’s attempting to subject him to that he almost misses Miles’s voice cutting through the din:

“My mom used to make us do that, too.”

Bruce freezes immediately, allowing Tony open access to sink his elbow into the softest part of his side, but his breath’s already caught somewhere in the back of his throat. On Miles’s side of the table, Pepper abruptly stops cutting her turkey and Maria reaches swiftly for her drink, but their silence immediately radiates outward. Jasper stops in the middle of asking Rhodey for the butter, Natasha sets down her wine glass, and Phil frowns at his plate.

Steve looks about ready to clap Miles on the shoulder or drag him into a hug when Tony says, “Then let’s do it.” Every eye in the room swivels in his direction, but in a way it’s already too late: he spreads out his hands like he’s about to conduct an orchestra. “Tradition’s important, right? And we spend enough holidays together we might as well have a couple traditions to toss out there at our parties.”

At the end of the table, Jasper snorts. “You mean traditions besides molesting people under the mistletoe?”

Tony’s face lights up in a lazily incorrigible grin, and Bruce spends a moment fearing the mischief in his eyes. “As much as I know you liked it, Sits, that was one time,” he points out, leaning forward far enough to catch Jasper’s gaze. “And that was also before I had a hot boyfriend who caters to my every molestation need.”

“Tony,” Bruce groans. He narrowly beats away the urge to hide his face in his hands or climb under the table. As it happens, Maria and Peggy almost simultaneously choke on their drinks, and Rhodey drops his fork with a clatter.

“Just telling it like it is, big guy,” Tony returns, squeezing Bruce’s leg under the table. His palm is wide, warm, and only marginally reassuring. “Anyway, like I said: tradition. Might as well start a new one, might as well be tonight.”

“And we just blurt out something we’re grateful for?” Bucky asks.

On the other side of Dot, Miles nods slightly. The movement captures not only Bruce’s attention, but the attention of most the rest of the table, and the boy stares at his plate instead of the adults around
him. He fidgets slightly, then draws in a breath. “One at a time, in a circle,” he adds softly. “It doesn’t have to be a big thing, just something you’re glad to have.” He shrugs. “Sorry, this is probably stupid, we don’t—”

“I’m thankful for my family.”

For all her usual flights of ridiculousness and her stubborn streak, Dot’s comment is absolutely oozing with sweetness. Miles’s head jerks over at the little blonde girl next to him, and Bruce swears in that second that she is the literal center to Miles’s universe. “We talked about Thanksgiving at school, and I told everybody I was thankful for my family,” she continues as she pushes mashed potatoes around with her spoon. “And my foster fairy god brother.”

Next to her, Bucky lets out a tiny sound of defeat. “Still not how that works, Dot,” he informs her.

“But it is your turn,” Tony points out, and raises his glass.

They move slowly around the table as per Miles’s instructions, and Bruce is surprised in a way that each one of them pauses to think about an actual answer to what otherwise could be an exercise in artifice. Bucky’s thankful for the second-cousin who agreed to act as their surrogate and give them Dot, Tony’s grateful for his “first- and second-favorite guys,” and Bruce admits that he’s glad to live a life where he can help other people.

“Like Tony and his apparent needs,” Rhodey comments, and even though Bruce is flushing, he laughs.

Clint’s thankful for his job and his friends, Phil’s thankful that Clint’s suspension is over in eight business days—“Not that we’re counting,” he offers, to which Clint grins and waggles his eyebrows—and Natasha’s grateful for being an age where she can choose the people she spends her time with. Jasper rambles through something about “future possibilities” without swearing even once, Rhodey’s glad that Jasper only attempts sentimentality once a year, and once she’s through laughing at them both, Peggy shares how grateful she is to be able to Skype with her extended family back in London. Maria spends a long time sipping her wine before she admits she’s grateful for the future as well as the past, Pepper smiles placidly at Miles and says it’s nice to see other people miss old family traditions as much as she does, and Steve’s little speech sounds mostly like a prayer.

But then, finally, everyone’s waiting on Miles.

Miles, who wets his lips and swallows before he looks across the table at Bruce.

“I used to always say I was thankful for stupid stuff,” he admits, and Bruce feels the very corners of his lips press into a small smile. His stomach swims, a sudden knot of nerves, but Miles’s own mouth twitches into a smile. When he shifts to sit up a little straighter, Bruce pretends that the rush of emotion that sweeps over him isn’t a strange kind of parental pride. “But this year, I guess I’m just really happy that Bruce and Tony can be here for me while my uncle can’t.” He lifts his shoulders in a tiny shrug. “I kind of lucked out.”

“Yeah, you did,” Tony offers, and Miles’s grin steals Bruce’s breath away.

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Late that night, after they’ve confirmed that both Dot and Miles are asleep in the guest room, Dot
sprawled out across three-quarters of the queen bed while Miles scrunches into the last sliver, Bruce finds himself thankful for a thousand other things that he couldn’t name at dinner.

The heat of Tony’s lips against his mouth, his throat, and his shoulders, for example.

The keening words of praise and pleading that pour from Tony’s lips as Tony’s fingers curl against his chest and leave tiny red fingernail scratches, for another.

The roll of Tony’s hips, the feel of his bare skin under Bruce’s hands, the sounds of their breath and bodies in the near-dark of the master bedroom, the way his own lips gasp out Tony’s name as Tony turns more and fuck into a mantra.

Surrounded by Tony’s heat, Tony’s voice, and Tony’s touch, he can only vaguely remember the long look Steve leveled him in the kitchen after dinner, one full of earnest curiosity and just a touch too much practiced worry. “You could’ve said something,” he’d pointed out.

Bruce’d known instantly what Steve meant, mostly because the corner of his mouth was still warm from a hasty, pre-dessert kiss. He’d smiled softly and returned to stacking dishes in the sink. “If I said something, then everyone would’ve known,” he’d replied, staring at the silverware. “I don’t want to make things harder when we split up.”

“If you said something, then everyone would’ve known,” Steve had challenged immediately. When Bruce had lifted his head, he found himself at the full mercy of those blue eyes. Bruce’d understood, right then, why Bucky had always said he’d had no choice but to fall in love with Steve. “Who says you won’t stay together?”

And instead of answering, or explaining how much his heart caught at even the slight possibility of that happening, Bruce’d simply reached for another plate and shaken his head.

Even in Tony’s room, in Tony’s bed, he’s not entirely sure he can believe in a world where he’s lucky enough to drink in Tony’s moans and movement for the rest of his life.

He just knows that, however it ends, he’s grateful for these seconds, and the thousands that come after it.

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On Sunday night, Miles asks, “Why are you a foster dad, anyway?”

When Bruce looks up from the novel he’s cracked for the first time in more than three weeks—and thank goodness it’s a casual read and that he’s not floundering to remember the last couple chapters—he finds Miles lounging with his feet over the arm of the couch and his head resting on a balled-up throw blanket. Last Bruce’d checked, he’d been sitting up, his toes barely clinging onto the lip of the coffee table.

Being twelve sometimes seems miraculous.

“I thought the deal was that you’d work on your book report so I don’t have to harass you about it when Tony comes back from the capital,” Bruce reminds him.

Miles immediately screws his face into a frown. “The parents in this book are basically fostering a
“baby,” he argues, and flashes Bruce the cover of *The Giver*. It’s one of the half-dozen books they’d picked out at Barnes and Noble a few weeks earlier, and there’re already creases in the spine from the way he’s bent it back to read it. “Maybe that’s what I’m going to write my report on.”

“I don’t really think baby Gabe is the point of the story,” Bruce returns, but he knows there’s smile nudging at the corners of his mouth.

Miles rolls his eyes. “Don’t be lame,” he challenges, and Bruce knows he’s lost the battle when he laughs.

He watches the boy scramble to sit up properly, unable to really chase away his smile. It’s quiet in the house, thanks to Pepper’s insistence that she and Tony drive the five hours up to Grant County Sunday afternoon rather than in the earliest hours of Monday morning, and it feels almost lonely. Aside from the occasional buzz of a text message (from Tony), a surprise pizza delivery (from Tony), and a phone call (from Natasha, but Bruce’d answered assuming it’d be Tony), the evening’s been unusually peaceful.

But then, the last few days have been peaceful in their own way, too, as the dust of Bruce’s life finally settled into some semblance of order. His townhouse still shows perpetual signs of a preteen living there—he’d bickered with Miles about dirty socks in the bathroom just an hour ago—and he’s still receiving flabbergasted text messages as the “official news” about him and Tony spreads to the rest of the office (Darcy’d called Friday morning to scream incoherent excitement into his ear for ten minutes), but it all feels right. As right as waking up the morning after Thanksgiving with Tony’s face pressed against his shoulder, as right as walking the dogs and arguing about Disney movies with both him and Miles, as right as the quiet evening at home.

Miles abandons his book on the coffee table and shifts around to tuck his legs up on the couch. His visit with his uncle the day before had gone surprisingly well, and Bruce’d managed somehow to fight down his oddly conflicted feelings. After all, he’d reminded himself as he’d switched out loads of laundry in the basement a few hours after Miles’d returned home, Aaron Davis was the boy’s guardian. He had an absolute right to care for his nephew, and Bruce couldn’t really interfere with that. If the man actually made Miles happy for once, well, that was a good thing.

When he’d come back upstairs a few minutes later, though, Miles and Tony’d been researching poisonous animals for Miles’s science project, their heads tipped together as they peered at a Wikipedia article.

Miles belonged at home with his uncle, Bruce’d reminded himself.

He and Tony, they couldn’t really compete with that.

“Well?” Miles demands, and Bruce starts as he’s jerked full-body out of the memory. He closes his book and sets it on the end table, fully aware that Miles is tracking his every move.

Finally, he sits back in his chair and shrugs a little. “I’ve always wanted to help children,” he admits after a few seconds. “It’s why I went into juvenile law, why I decided I’d work a job like mine instead of, I don’t know, working for a firm or as in-house counsel to a big company.” He reaches up to remove his glasses, then fiddles with one of the arms. It’s loose from wear and tear, and he rolls it slightly between his fingers. “When I lived in Union County, I saw information about a licensing drive—to become a foster parent, I mean—and I figured I could help outside of work. And here I am.”

He spreads out his hands, an attempt at the kind of big *ta-da* that Tony’d accompany with snaps and wriggling fingers, and Miles chuckles a little. He leans his head against the couch cushion for a
moment, studying Bruce carefully. After a few seconds, he says, “Okay, but what’s the real reason?”

The question catches Bruce off guard. He frowns and sets his glasses atop the book. “That is the real reason.”

“My dad always said you can’t trust stories that sound too good to be true,” Miles replies. When he shakes his head, it presses his cheek further against the cushion. “Everyone’s selling something, so you have to take it with a grain of salt.” Bruce watches his toes curl against the couch. “I think your story kind of sounds too good to be true.”

Bruce opens his mouth momentarily, certain he’ll be able to formulate some kind of sense out of the surprised jumble in the back of his mind, but of course, nothing really comes of it. He rolls his lips together before he asks, “You think I have an ulterior motive?”

“No, but I think you have a different reason.”

There’s something quiet in the back of Miles’s tone, shy and half-tremulous in their mostly-empty house, and Bruce spends a few seconds unable to look away from him. Six weeks ago, he’d lived alone and danced around his impossible feelings toward Tony Stark; now, he’s the caretaker for a twelve-year-old and will sleep alone tonight for the first time in two weeks. He’s not naïve enough to think Miles is wholly responsible for this paradigm shift, but he can’t escape the thought that he’s helped.

The room’s still silent when Miles says, “You said you lived with your aunt because your parents died.”

Bruce hesitates momentarily, picking at a loose thread on arm of the chair. He wishes for a half-second that his phone would buzz with a text message, or that a neighbor’d come knock on the door. Neither thing happens.

“That’s accurate,” he answers.

“Did you—” Miles starts to ask, but then he hesitates. It’s only seven-thirty, still hours from either of them climbing the stairs to bed, but he’s already wearing his pajama pants. He runs his hand over a few wrinkles, studiously avoiding Bruce’s eyes, and Bruce watches him press his lips into a tight, half-worried line. When he swallows, it’s nearly audible. “Were you ever like me?”

Bruce knows what he means, but he inhales anyway. “Like you?” he repeats.

“A foster kid.”

And whether he wants it to or not, Bruce’s throat feels desert-parched when he replies, “Yes.”

He leans forward in the chair, running his palms along his thighs, but he knows it’s a stall rather than an attempt to beat the tension away. No, the tension lives in his chest, now, permanent and half-suffocating. He can breathe, sure, but it’s around a lump in his throat and into lungs that suddenly feel like they’re coated in papier-mâché.

He’s aware, of course, that Miles is watching him, dark eyes trained on his face. He decides that knowing this conversation might someday happen is nothing like actually having it.

He pulls in a breath. “My mother died when I was six,” he says again, toying with the rolled-up cuff of his shirt, “and my father— Even before she passed away, my father had a lot of, well, struggles, I guess you could say.” He shakes his head, watching at the corner of the coffee table rather than
Miles or the floor. “He was probably one of the smartest men alive, someone who could make Tony look like a blundering idiot—”

“Even when he’s not doing it on purpose?” Miles interrupts.

Despite himself, Bruce huffs a little laugh. “Don’t be fooled, Tony could join Mensa tomorrow if he’d just bother to fill out the paperwork.” Even without looking over, he can feel the force of Miles’s grin and the warmth it carries with it. But in a fight against incurable tension, warmth will literally always lose. He tangled his fingers together between his knees. “He was brilliant,” he continues, “but he had—problems. Some days, he was fine, and some days, he was paranoid, or moody, or—”

He swallows around the lump in the back of his throat.

“Or cruel,” he adds, and glances over at Miles.

Miles, for his part, hugs his legs closer to his chest. He’s tucked up small, but for the first time, it’s not because he’s shy or frightened. No, Bruce realizes, it’s because he’s listening, intent on the answer to his impossible question.

He watches the boy wet his lips. “Is that why your aunt and him didn’t get along?”

“What?”

“You said a while ago that your aunt didn’t want anything to do with him,” he explains with a tiny lift of his shoulders. “Was it because of all his weird moods and stuff?”

Bruce huffs a tiny breath and nods slightly. “In part,” he admits as he rubs his thumbs together. “He also drank, which just amplified everything that happened when his mood broke, and it—” He sighs quietly. “That’s no way to grow up.”

“Is that why you ended up in foster care?” Miles asks after a few seconds. “Because your mom died and your dad couldn’t take care of you?”

“Somewhat,” Bruce replies, shrugging slightly. “My mother died, and my father— By that time, he was broken beyond repair, I think. He ended up in an institution, and died there.”

The silence that sweeps in after that sentence is heavy, almost oppressive in its weight, and Bruce watches as Miles’s face shifts to process the new information in front of him. He wonders momentarily what Miles’s mental picture of Brian Banner is like, whether he imagines him as a wild-eyed cartoon villain or as an empty husk of a man. In Bruce’s memories, his father is always the same, a hulking inferno of anger and screaming rage, but then, the last time he’d seen his father was the night his mother died.

He wonders whether he would’ve looked smaller, more shattered, if Bruce’d visited him at the state hospital.

He tracks Miles’s face as the boy slowly uncoils, his legs dropping and then stretching along the couch. He snags the balled-up blanket he’d used as a pillow and drapes it over himself. Bruce suspects it’s all a stall, a way to break the stillness while he formulates his next question.

“How long’d you live with a foster family?” he finally asks, and Bruce can hear the caution in his tone.

It’s the caution, not the answer, that causes Bruce to smile slightly as he shakes his head. “I never
lived with a family,” he says, and Miles freezes for a half-second at the news. “Things were different when I was a kid. We had group homes—orphanages, I suppose you could say, even though some of us weren’t technically orphaned—where we all lived together.” He shrugs. “It was— Well, let’s just say I’m glad the system changed between then and now.”

He drops his eyes down to his still-clasped hands. After two weeks of fluttering touches from Tony, of tangled fingers and desperate clutching in bed, they feel almost cold and foreign. He picks momentarily at a hangnail, then tugs in another breath. “I visited my aunt about once a month,” he continues when Miles stays quiet, “but I didn’t move in with her until I was your age.”

The perfect beat of silence is broken by Miles’s tiny, rough breath. A gasp, Bruce thinks, but he dares not say the word—or look up.

“Six years?” he blurs, imperfect preteen tact and all.

Bruce nods. “Six years.”

“But why?”

Of all the unanswerable questions in the universe, this one is somehow the heaviest of all, and Bruce forces a slight, almost embarrassed smile. He recalls too clearly asking his aunt the same question, and how soft and sad her eyes turned when she shook her head in response. He’d learned that day that life’s million intricacies and complications sometimes leave all the lines blurred.

Or sometimes, he thinks, they eradicate the lines all together.

When he glances up, though, Miles is watching him, his face as open and curious as it is half-crumpled and sad. Sad or scared, Bruce mentally corrects, completely unready for whatever else their conversation holds.

“I think my aunt was scared,” he offers after a few more seconds, shaking his head slightly. “Not that I’d be too damaged by losing my mother, exactly, but because of everything that surrounded her death, and because of my father. My cousin isn’t much older than I am, either, and I think she just thought it’d be too much to handle both Jennifer and me.” He shrugs and, finally sits back in the chair a little. His back pops slightly as he settles. “So, I waited.”

On the couch, Miles frowns, his brow creasing and lips pursing together into a severe line. “You waited a stupid long time,” he decides.

Bruce snorts a tiny laugh. “What choice did I have?” he asks, opening his hands in a tiny, helpless gesture. “I can’t hold too much of it against her. And I—” He wets his lips and, for the first time in what feels like actual eons, smiles genuinely at the still-staring boy. “Not every life goes perfectly according to plan. Clint lived in an orphanage for a few years, Steve grew up with his grandmother after his mother died, and Bucky’s aunt raised him because of how much his parents moved around. I somehow found a place where my friends, the people who matter, understand what it’s like to have a family that doesn’t look like everybody else’s.”

Miles nods slightly before he shifts, pulling his legs back up. His toes peek out under the blanket, brown skin against the brown fabric of the couch. There’s something lost in his expression, at least for a few seconds.

“That doesn’t actually make it suck less,” he finally says.

“No,” Bruce agrees as Miles reaches for his book again, “it doesn’t.”
That night as they’re getting ready for bed, moving through the upstairs hallways in attempts to dump clothes into hampers (thank you, Miles) and brush teeth, Miles catches Bruce by the side of his shirt and, wordlessly, hugs him.

It’s fierce in its tightness, demanding in its warmth, and Bruce can’t help the way his shoulders soften and his belly twists as he wraps arms around Miles and hugs him back.

“Night,” Miles murmurs as he pulls away. He stares at the floor instead of Bruce, but Bruce can see the tiny smile nudging at the corners of his mouth.

“Night,” Bruce replies, and waits until Miles closes his bedroom door to walk away.

At ten-thirty Monday morning, Bruce’s office phone rings.

He’s sorting through reports for tomorrow’s stack of hearings, organizing and reorganizing recent documents atop all the usual desktop clutter. The year-end audit is now officially at its halfway mark, and all the dormant or otherwise unupdated files are stacked either against the wall or on the corners of Bruce’s desk. He feels like he’s building an impregnable fort out of the stupid things; more than once, he’s elbowed one onto the floor and sworn about it.

The morning’s otherwise ordinary, though, if a little lonelier for Tony’s absence. Miles’d leaned against the kitchen island and teased him that morning, asking “Do you miss the kissing or the coffee more?”, and Bruce’d laughed while he rolled his eyes.

He rolls his eyes as he reaches for the phone, too, since the newest e-mail popping up on his Outlook is from Clint and reads simply official countdown: 7 days.

“Suffolk County District Attorney’s Office, Doctor Banner speaking,” he greets, cradling the receiver against his shoulder.

He opens a reply e-mail to Clint and only narrowly avoids laughing at the three reply-alls that are flying up behind it.

He’s reading Darcy’s response—But I liked not having work!!! when the voice on the other end of the line says, “Bruce? This is Matt Murdock, from Union County.”

The grin immediately drops off Bruce’s face. It joins his heart in his belly, churning around in stomach acid and weak break room coffee. There’s an immediate lump in his throat, and when he swallows, he can feel it choking him. “Matt,” he replies, hardly recognizing his own voice. “What can I do for you?”

“I hate to be the one to do this,” Murdock responds, and Bruce can hear the caution inching into his tone. It’s a practiced evenness, lawyer-neutral in every conceivable way, and the blandness only increases the weight that’s sitting in the middle of Bruce’s chest. He’s vaguely aware that Murdock’s still talking, but his head’s swimming too violently to really focus on the words.
He reassembles himself just in time to hear, “So, I offered to call,” and realizes Murdock’s spent the last thirty seconds rambling about Jessica Jones.

“That’s fine,” Bruce says just to fill the pause with something. He swivels his chair toward the window. It’s an overcast late-November day, the sky populated entirely with heavy gray clouds, and he wonders for a moment whether it’ll rain.

Rain, he thinks, or pour.

“I know Miss Drew told you we’d had a hearing on all of Mister Vanko’s motions,” Murdock continues in his ear. “I figured the judge would rule before the holiday, but she just sent out her decision this morning. She outright rejected most of it—the demands for recusal, the reconsideration of the rehearing, all that.”

Bruce wets his lips. “But?”

“But.” Murdock exhales down the phone, a rush of breath that crackles in the receiver. “She’s agreed to expedite the process. She’s set an adjudicatory hearing for this Thursday afternoon, and she’s requested Miles be there in case we need his testimony.” There’s a half-beat of pause, and Bruce wonders whether the other man’s shaking his head. “I think it’s strategic on the judge’s part, really, letting him hang himself about not cooperating, but I need to make sure Miles will be there . . .”

He keeps talking, strings of sentences that Bruce hears more as feedback than actual words. Outside, the sky spits a handful of half-hearted raindrops, drizzle that spatters against the window. He tries not to compare the rain to the uncontrolled churning feeling in the depths of his stomach, but he knows there’s no way around it.

Miles, he reminds himself, isn’t his child.

But while Matt Murdock discusses the hearing that might return Miles to his uncle’s care, Bruce silently wishes that he was.

Chapter End Notes

Generally speaking, the second step of a child welfare case involves the court making official findings about whether that child needs to stay in state custody. This hearing, called an adjudicatory hearing in Bruce’s jurisdiction, requires more evidence than the first hearing. If there’s not enough evidence, the case can be dismissed and the child returned home.

I will also note that this chapter officially marks the place in the story where I am going to bend a few legal rules for the sake of moving the plot along. In order to bring all the moving parts together, I’ve had to tweak a bit of the “legal mumbo-jumbo.” I’m sure you all mind so, so much.

Also, Permanency will now be updated weekly through the end of the story. An updated schedule can be found here.
Either a Demon or a Ghost

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, emotions run high as Bruce realizes exactly how much Miles means not only to himself, but to Tony. But emotions run higher at the adjudicatory hearing, as Bruce discovers just how many things Tony’s left unsaid—and just how much that silence could cost.

Chapter Notes

There are a lot of random legal references in this chapter. I don’t think that knowing them is necessarily required, but I strive for clarity in all things:

- An interlocutory appeal is an appeal from a ruling other than a final judgment.
- *Troxel v. Granville* is a U.S. Supreme Court case that held, amongst other things, that fit parents have a Constitutional right to parent their children however they’d like.
- There are two types of guardianships: one involves being the guardian of a minor child (such as Miles), the other involves being the guardian of an elderly or otherwise dependent adult.
- A court may use existing files from one case to inform its decision in another. This process is called judicial notice.
- Respite care is when a foster parent essentially gets the night (or weekend) off from being a foster parent, and another placement briefly takes the child or children.

Have I mentioned lately that I have the best beta-readers in the world? Their names are Jen and saranoh, and they rock my world. Really. My whole world is rocked.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That motherfucking *assbucket,*” Tony declares Tuesday after Miles is in bed, and throws a fork into the sink.

Bruce casts his eyes at the kitchen island, but deep down, his stomach’s churning with the same anger that’s causing Tony to wear a trench into the tile floor. He’s spent the last day and a half thinking about the upcoming adjudicatory hearing, a hearing that could send Miles right back home into his uncle’s clutches.
He hates, in a way, that he thinks of Aaron Davis’s welcoming arms as clutches at all. Miles deserves his family. He just deserves a family that cares.

As it stands, Miles is still blissfully unaware of Thursday’s hearing, mostly because Bruce wanted to tell Tony first.

It’s a selfish choice, Bruce knows, and one that’s arguably not in Miles’s best interests, but he just couldn’t do it. He’d rehearsed his explanation in the car Monday afternoon, then again before dinner, but it hadn’t mattered; every time he started stringing sentences together into some semblance of order, Miles laughed and shattered his concentration. Or, if he didn’t laugh, he smiled, teased, winked, or just generally carried on, and Bruce—

Bruce couldn’t break him. Not without Tony there, not without his own reserve of emotional backup.

But Tony’d arrived at his house well past eleven Monday night, crashed against his back in the bed, and then left early to go look after his pets before a full day of work.

This is, literally, the first chance Bruce’s had to brief him on the subject.

And now, Tony’s threading fingers through his hair as he completes another agitated loop around the island.

“We can fight this, can’t we?” he demands, and Bruce rolls his lips together as he watches Tony throw out his arms in something like defeat. “I mean, child welfare procedure’s just civil procedure, right? We can ask Jess Drew or Murdock to make an interlocutory appeal on the judge’s ruling, throw in some stops, something to make sure he doesn’t go back to that entire bucket of douche, and then—”

“And then what?” Bruce asks quietly. Tony freezes mid-rant and drops his hands back to his sides, and Bruce suddenly finds that he can’t quite make eye contact. He stares at the countertop.

“Delaying the hearing doesn’t change the fact that Davis could win it. And it doesn’t make Miles any safer.”

“We have to do something.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure there’s anything we can do.”

“Okay, you know what? Here’s the problem.” Bruce glances up in time to catch Tony coming around the island. Before he can frown, let alone ask for details on the supposed problem, there are broad hands catching him by the arms. Tony traps him there, holds him still in the middle of the kitchen, and pins him down with a dark, wide-eyed gaze. “What I need from you, right now, is not rational, calm, human Bruce. Okay? I need you to put him away and bring out my big, mean, ragey, burn-it-to-the-fucking-ground Bruce. You think you can do that?”

Bruce sighs and tries to twist away, but Tony holds on tighter. “Tony—”

“I need the Bruce that makes social workers cry and pisses off attorneys ‘cause he’s so sneakily argumentative in his questioning. ‘Cause that Bruce is the one who’s gonna fix this.”

“There’s no fixing it, it’s not—”

“Nope, see, not talking to this Bruce.” Tony’s fingers spider, holding him tighter, and Bruce feels his own hands clench into fists at his side. “I need rage-against-the-machine Bruce, and I need him yesterday.”
“For what, Tony?” Bruce steps back hard, relying solely on momentum to jerk his shoulders away, and somehow, he breaks Tony’s grip. Tony throws up his hands in frustration, his eyes rolling back and a heaving sigh escaping between his full lips, but his exasperation isn’t quite enough. “This is how the system works. The kid comes into custody, and then, his parents get a chance to prove that they don’t actually need court intervention to—”

“We’re not talking about a parent here!” Tony interrupts. His hands fly through the air, propelling him first three steps toward Bruce and then twisting him in a circle that sends him pacing back through the kitchen. “This isn’t some—some Troxel situation where he’s been baby-snatched from his parents and now the court has to protect their constitutional rights.” He slaps his palms onto the island and then leans on them, slump-shouldered. Bruce remembers Atlas, the man who carried the weight of an entire world on his back, and suddenly can’t meet Tony’s eyes. “This is an asshole who left his twelve-year-old nephew alone and now gets to try and—What? Circumvent the system?” In his peripheral vision, Bruce watches Tony fling an arm out. “His guardianship should be dissolved,” he declares. “It should’ve been dissolved the second this kid came into custody, and you know it. And nothing, not one single thing, this asshole’s done since Jess Jones picked Miles up at school has proven me wrong about that!”

If the weight of the world’s pressing down on Tony’s shoulders, then there’s an entire moon in Bruce’s stomach, choking him and twisting around until he can hardly breathe. He stares at the countertop, then the floor, and tries to fight around the whisper in the back of his mind, the traitorous murmur that wants to admit that Tony’s right. He’s a child welfare attorney. He’s meant to protect children, to reunite families, to maintain the state’s interest in healthy homes.

But Miles, he’s—

Bruce shakes his head. “I’m not arguing that he’s being a model parent,” he says after a few seconds, “but he’s Miles’s legal guardian. There are procedures the court has to follow, conditions that have to be met before—”

“Unable or unwilling to serve,” Tony interrupts, and Bruce jerks his head up to look at him. The other man’s eyes are laser-precise, and Bruce imagines them boring straight through whatever sense of obligation he feels for the state and the law and deep down into the depths of his heart. As much as he wants to, he can’t look away. “Presently or permanently incapable of fulfilling the role of guardian due to mental or physical illness, by reason of intoxicating liquors and narcotic drugs, unable to provide a suitable environment for the ward.” He shrugs. “I miss any? ‘Cause I’ll go back through, count them on my fingers, whatever you—”

“You read his guardianship paperwork?” And even to his own ears, Bruce’s voice sounds foreign and strangled, half-choked in the back of his throat. In the last month and a half, it’s never occurred to him to even look up the Union County case number that granted Aaron Davis guardianship of his nephew, let alone—

“Why the hell not?” Tony demands. His hands both lift from the island this time, a frustrated, almost aggressive gesture, and Bruce realizes too late that he’s misinterpreted the question as something negative, as disapproval rather than surprise. “It’s a public record, just like anything else. Didn’t break a single damn rule doing it, which is more than I can say for the asshole who benefited from that document and the people who don’t see a problem with him sweeping in here and trying to take the kid back!”

Bruce’s mouth and throat both feel dry, as parched as a desert, but he can’t quite swallow, either. “That’s not what—”
“He fits, what, eighty-five percent of that description? Ninety? Maybe ninety-five, ‘cause I don’t think any guy who ditches a twelve-year-old for two days is a poster child for clean and sober living.” Tony levels a finger in Bruce’s direction, but it’s wavering, a vague and non-specific jab at the constant, invisible ghost of Aaron Davis. “And here’s the part that gets me: if Miles was some hundred-year-old lady or some other kind of dependent adult, the courts would be lighting the document on fire to get him away from this asshole. But he’s not, so of course we fall back on the Constitution and all this other bullshit, and what’s left for Miles, huh?”

He throws up his hands. Bruce drops his eyes to the floor.

“What’s left for him?”

Bruce wants to answer, wants to formulate his thoughts into at least enough order so that the question’s not hanging out there between them, an oppressive echo, but he can’t. Because under the words, the ranting strings of sentiment he’s used to from Tony, he can hear every detail he knows Tony means to stand on.

Every tremble.

Every catch.

Every sharp fall in his cadence, every syllable that sticks in the back of his throat, every almost-break.

He knows he shouldn’t hate Aaron Davis for what he’s done to Miles. He definitely shouldn’t also hate him for what, right now, he’s doing to Tony.

“Tony,” he says quietly, once he’s swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I—”

But whatever he’s planning saying, whatever response he’s about to cobble together, it dies on his lips.

Because, at the bottom of the stairs, Miles asks, “What’s going on?”

He’s dressed in baggy Batman pajama pants that’ve clearly seen better days and one of the too-big t-shirts from his first duffel bag. He looks tired, worn down from school and an afternoon spent with Tony. They’d run the dogs, they’d crowded together in Bruce’s kitchen to cook dinner, they’d all worked in the living room together, they’d—

Well.

They’d acted like a family.

The word rushes up into Bruce’s throat like bile.

He watches Miles rub the sleep out of his eyes. “Nothing,” he says in the most reassuring voice he can muster, but it’s coupled with Tony saying, “Some people get way too many fucking chances under the law, that’s what’s going on.” When Bruce jerks his head around to shoot Tony a dirty look, Tony throws up his hands and starts another agitated loop around the island.

“What’s actually going on?” Miles asks, and the trepidation in his voice makes Bruce’s heart ache.

Tony shakes his head and paces right into the living room, disappearing into the shadows of the single lamp that’s still burning. His footsteps echo, noisy slaps of his bare feet against the wood
floors, and for a moment, all Bruce can do is stare after him.

He hates the helpless feeling that claws at his belly, the one that threatens to pull the breath right from his body.

“I,” he starts, uncertainly, but Miles stares up at him. He drags fingers through his hair and then, in a mirror of Tony not thirty seconds earlier, shakes his head. “Matt Murdock called me yesterday,” he says.

Miles’s entire face crumples into a frown. “The blind guy from court?”

“Right. He, uh. Well, if you remember when Jessica first explained to you how this all works, there’s —”

“You have a hearing on Thursday.”

In the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, Tony crosses his arms over his chest. There’s something challenging about his posture, like he’s already planning to march into battle. Bruce knows he should correct it, somehow, should dissuade him from viewing the entire child welfare proceeding as some kind of exercise in us-versus-them, but it won’t do any good.

Worse, Bruce feels it too, the clenching feeling in the bottom of his stomach that makes him want to burst into Courtroom Four with his own guns blazing and arguments prepared.

Between them, Miles drops his face toward the floor. His shoulders tighten and draw together, and Bruce watches his hands curl into fists at his side. “Like the ones my lawyer had to go to?” he asks, but everything in his tone suggests he already knows the answer.

Bruce shakes his head anyway. “No,” he replies. His socked feet are quiet on the tile floor of the kitchen, and then on the wood that leads into the stairwell. He raises a hand, hesitates for a moment, and then places it on Miles’s shoulder. He feels the boy’s muscles unclench slowly, the gradual release of tension, but he doesn’t completely relax.

“This hearing is the next step in the whole process. It makes sure that, now that there’s no emergency, there really is enough reason to keep you from going home.” He pulls in a breath and tries to ignore how much it shakes. “They’ll ask about what happened when your uncle left you alone, what you and Jessica talked about when she came to your school, how things were at home before your uncle left—”

“Why do we have to go through all of it again?” Miles’s voice cracks, and Bruce feels something in his own chest break at the sound. When Miles’s head jerks up, his dark eyes are wet. Wet, Bruce thinks, and frightened.

“They already know he left me. They already know he’s not doing what he’s supposed to. What’s the difference?”

Bruce swallows around the tightness in his throat, fighting against the urge to reply not with the truth, but with I don’t know. “There’s a different standard of proof, different rules—”

“Because he’s your family.”

There’s something tight in the way Tony walks into the room, something half-mechanical and entirely un-Tony, but Bruce realizes after a few seconds that Miles won’t realize the difference. He watches the other man’s hand land on Miles’s empty shoulder and squeeze, broad and sure in a way Bruce’s own hands will never be. He considers stepping away, allowing them a moment, but then Tony’s other hand touches his wrist and stills him.

“Sometimes, families are shitty,” Tony says, almost uncharacteristically quiet. “Sometimes, the people who’re supposed to love you best, they don’t. They leave you high and dry, they screw you
over, they make you feel about a half-inch tall, whatever, but they’re still family.” His jaw works between sentences, and Bruce swears he can hear him swallow. “But the law says family comes first, that families need to stick together, and that means that families always get a second shot. Or a third. Or a—"

“They usually don’t get a third,” Bruce corrects, and the corners of Miles’s lips twitch upward, the barest ghost of a smile. “Or, if they do, it’s a long time afterward.”

He’s relieved in ways he can’t quite describe when Tony’s mouth softens, and when the lines around his dark eyes crinkle almost imperceptibly. “Always hook up with somebody smarter than you,” he says, and Bruce manages to snort what’s nearly a laugh while Tony touches the small of his back. “That way, when you start to misquote law to the kid who lives in your house—"

“This isn’t actually your house, you know.”

“—and eats your food, he can correct you.”

Miles’s lips twitch again, almost a full smile this time, and Bruce watches as some of the fear lifts from around his eyes. For a split-second, he’s tempted to draw the boy in and hug him properly, to try and combat some of the dread he knows his pooling in both their stomachs, but the second hardly lasts.

Not because he resists the temptation, but because he loses to it. When he tugs on Miles’s shoulder, the boy steps forward easily and wraps arms around him, and then, that’s how they stand:

Between the kitchen and the stairwell, Miles pressed against him with his face half-hidden in Bruce’s shirt, Bruce with his eyes closed, and Tony with his fingers spread along Bruce’s back.

The house feels somehow colder and darker than usual once they turn off all the lights and head back up the stairs. They walk Miles back to his room together, hovering in the dim light from the lamp on the bedside table as he crawls back into bed. Bruce forces a tiny smile as he wishes him goodnight and touches his shoulder before he turns out the light, but it’s hard not to feel suffocated by the darkness.

He’s argued hundreds of adjudicatory hearings in his career, advocating to keep children away from parents less dangerous and less irresponsible than Aaron Davis. This one, the one he’ll experience from the outside, it shouldn’t feel any different.

But none of the prior hearings ever ran the risk of leaving his second bedroom empty, or stealing shoes out of his foyer.

None of them ever filled Tony Stark’s voice with the catch and tremble he’d heard in the kitchen just a short while ago.

He’s not surprised when Tony trails him into the master bedroom, leaves his clothes on the floor, and crawls into bed behind him, or when there’s immediately hands reaching out for him in the darkness. They tangle together, Tony more an octopus than a man at Bruce’s back, with arms wrapped around his middle and legs hooked haphazardly together under the sheets. His goatee brushes against the back of Bruce’s neck, and more than once, he feels lips press against his hairline or wander to the back of his shoulder.

He’s not quite asleep but rather drifting when Tony murmurs, “Hey, Bruce?”

“Yeah?”
“Listen, I know you’re just gonna tell me off for saying it, and that’s okay.” His voice is hardly a whisper in the darkness of Bruce’s bedroom. “But, just so you know, I— As much as he’s Davis’s kid and whatever, I think he’s kinda our kid, too.”

For all the thousand things said in the kitchen that night and the thousand other, more desperate things Bruce’s thought in the last two days, it’s this, Tony’s honest murmur in the darkness, that climbs up his throat and nearly chokes him. He shifts and presses his cheek and nose into the pillow, tries to force breath into and out of his lungs, but he feels like he’s drowning.

When Tony murmurs his name again, it’s a puff of breath against the back of his neck, and all Bruce can really do is close his eyes.

“Kind of,” he somehow manages to admit, and he threads his fingers through Tony’s before they fall asleep.

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“We tried to make contact every day for the next week,” Jessica Jones explains from the witness stand, her hands folded atop a thick black binder filled with papers. “I personally called the numbers we had for the uncle—Mister Davis, sorry—three or four times a day. I drove past his apartment, I asked school personnel what they knew about him, I tried the aunt in Ohio again.” She shakes her head, then reaches to tuck hair behind her ear. It’s a nervous tic, Bruce knows, a bad habit that she can’t entirely break while she’s testifying. He’s noticed before, of course, but he’s never tracked it with the same acuity as this very minute.

“The guy was in the wind.”

“And just to be clear,” Matt Murdock says, his hands resting on either side of the podium, “you’re talking about Mister Davis.”

Jessica nods. “Right.”

Courtroom Four feels dim and oppressive, today, but then, most of the last forty-eight hours have felt the same. Bruce’d dragged himself out of bed and Tony’s death-grip at the sound of his alarm on Wednesday morning to find the sky clotted with heavy gray clouds. They’d spit rain and hopeful snow flurries all day, awful weather for both school and work, and Bruce’d felt the late November weather creep into his mood. He’d tried to focus on work, then on prepping for his Wednesday night class, but his eyes kept drifting toward the window and studying the sky.

The sky this morning still hung low and dark, and he’d shaken fat, sticky snowflakes from his hair as he’d walked into the Union County courthouse with Miles and Tony. He knows it’s still too warm for anything more than a dusting, but somehow, the promise of a true winter freeze creeps constantly into his bones.

He rubs his hands together in the gallery and pretends he’s not somehow cold from the outside-in.

“Let’s talk about the time between meeting with Miles at the school and Mister Davis’s return, now,” Matt Murdock says in the well of the courtroom, a fluid half-shrug of his shoulders accompanying the question. His manner is relaxed and easy, a far cry from the barely-contained ferocity he usually brings to the courtroom. But then, Bruce thinks, usually the parents in these actions aren’t facing pending criminal charges for the possession of stolen merchandise—a case file that the judge’s already judicially noticed—and unlikely to testify. And usually, the situation isn’t as cut-and-dried as
leaving a twelve-year-old home alone for two days.

He rolls his lips together and watches Murdock lift his hands from the podium. “Did you have any contact with Mister Davis prior to his arrest?”

Jessica shakes her head. “No.”

“To your knowledge, did he attempt to contact Miles’s school?”

“Not to my knowledge, no.”

“Did he attempt to contact Miles himself?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Miss Jones,” Murdock says, leaning forward on the podium, “you already testified—and the court’s already taken notice of this—that Mister Davis was arrested October 26, nearly a week after you met Miles at Castle Rock Middle School.”

Jessica nods. “That’s correct,” she answers, a studious seriousness settling in her voice.

Murdock mirrors her nod, but it’s tighter, completely devoid of Jessica’s loose ease. “And for those six days between your meeting with Miles and Mister Davis’s arrest, what contact did Mister Davis have with his nephew?”

Her jaw tightens. “None that I’m aware of,” Jessica summarizes.

Murdock moves on, then, headlining the next segment of questioning with the comment, “I’d like to talk about what’s transpired since Mister Davis’s arrest,” but Bruce finds his mind wandering away from the testimony and over to the guardian ad litem’s table. Jessica Drew’s head is tipped toward her legal pad, her hand jerking as she scribbles some sort of note to herself. Beside her, Miles’s chair swings idly from left to right, tiny micro-movements courtesy of the toe of his tennis shoe. The legal pad in front of him sits blank and ignored, along with a pen and a packet of sticky notes. Bruce’d watched Jessica explain the proceeding and encourage Miles to take his own notes as well as pass her post-its filled with questions, but so far, Miles’s only movement has been limited to the slow rock back and forth.

All day, Bruce’d struggled to encourage Miles to function without dragging his feet. He’d spent twenty minutes cajoling him out of bed only to watch him glare at his cereal without the usual morning chatter. Tony, who’d spent the night—half because Bruce’d abandoned all attempts to argue with him about it, half because Bruce’d thought they needed the moral support—tried to joke and jab his way through breakfast, only to be rewarded with moody pre-teen eye-rolls. Miles’d showered, brushed his teeth, and dressed in a sweater and his Thanksgiving slacks without complaining, but it’d been absolutely joyless.

Like the conversation late Tuesday night had clung to Miles, weighing down his shoulders and pulling any sort of happiness right out of him.

Miles swings the vinyl chair another time, harder than in the last half-hour, and in a split-second, Jessica Drew reaches out, grips the back of it, and stops him from any more fidgeting. He jumps a little, snapping to sit up straight, and Bruce only recognizes that he’s slid forward in his own seat when he does it. The knee-jerk reaction startles him momentarily, and suddenly he can’t quite breathe around the protective, half-desperate feeling in the pit of his stomach.

But then, something brushes against the inside of his wrist. When he glances toward the seat beside
him, Tony’s watching him, his eyebrows raised and face almost indescribably soft. Reassuring, Bruce terms it as his heart rate starts to recover, even though Bruce knows Tony’s just as worried.

Tony, who’d wandered around all morning almost as aimlessly as Miles had.

Tony, who’d brought his iPad into Bruce’s office and worked from there almost all morning, tucked away from whatever demons waited for him in his own office.

Tony, whose fingers slide into Bruce’s palm and tug his hand until he settles back and relaxes, and who then doesn’t let go.

“What can you tell me about how Miles is doing now?” Murdock asks. His voice is almost soothing, a regular cadence that almost lulls Bruce’s nerves, and he forces himself to roll the tension from his shoulders and relax.

“Oh, he’s doing great,” Jessica Jones replies, and for the first time, there’s enthusiasm in her tone. A small smile plays across her lips as she unfolds her hands. “We’ve got some services in place, he visits with his uncle every Saturday, and aside from that school hiccup—”

“Hiccup?” Murdock interrupts.

She shrugs. “He and a friend got in a fight, and he got sent home for the day. I talked to the principal after, and she said that if it hadn’t been for their zero-tolerance policy, she would’ve let them head back to class.” Bruce appreciates that her smile never slips. “Doctor Banner dealt with it, and Miles promised me it won’t happen again.”

Miles’s head dips in what Bruce suspects is embarrassment as Murdock nods. There’s something warmer in his face too, now, something lifting the seriousness of the last several minutes. “And how is Miles’s placement with Doctor Banner going? That was an issue last time we were here.”

“It was,” Jessica admits with a little shake of her head, “but everything’s going well. Doctor Banner’s been with our agency for a long time—almost nine years—and he knows what he’s doing.” Next to him, Tony nudges his elbow into Bruce’s arm, and Bruce rolls his eyes as he returns the favor. “Like I put in the report, it’s been good for Miles to go from a home with pretty much no support other than the parent to one with a more extended support system.”

Bruce can’t quite name the feeling that settles into his chest, hearing that, but he can’t really ignore it, either. Especially since the fingers tangled with his squeeze his hand—and especially since, when he glances over at Tony, there’s something incredibly, almost unfamiliarly warm about his smile.

“What kind of support?” Murdock asks.

“Bruce—Doctor Banner—has a really strong circle of friends,” Jessica explains. “They spent Thanksgiving together, they hang out on weekends, and I think that’s been good for Miles. Plus,” she adds after a second’s pause, “Tony’s been pretty good for Miles, too.”

“Tony?”

“Tony Stark. Bruce’s boyfriend.” Bruce tries to ignore the heat that climbs out from under his collar and threatens to overtake his entire face. “He’s more or less a de facto second parent at this point.” Jessica shrugs. “Having him around’s helped, I think.”

Matt Murdock nods. “Thank you, Miss Jones,” he says. His face tips in the direction of the judge. “No further questions, your honor.”
Judge Rees’s lips twitch into some semblance of a smile. “Thank you. Miss Drew?”

“Right,” Jessica Drew says, and pushes up out of her chair.

As the guardian ad litem, Jessica focuses her questions on Miles—Miles’s condition when Jessica Jones arrived at the middle school, Miles’s needs, Miles’s therapy and his life with both Aaron Davis and, now, with Bruce—and Bruce finds himself allowing his mind to wander. It drifts almost to the pace of Tony’s perpetually-wandering fingers, and every time he focuses, the focus is directed at the wrong thing. At one point, he watches Miles pick at a hangnail and thinks about how small and scared he looks without meaning to; at another, he catches himself staring at Aaron Davis’s too-placid, unaffected face.

Davis wears a button-down shirt and a pair of jeans and sits perfectly still at counsel table, never once scribbling down a note or turning to murmur something to Vanko. He and his attorney’d arrived in the courtroom last, trailing in after everyone else. They’d started with a verbal motion to exclude any mention of Davis’s pending criminal charges—something the judge’d immediately denied—and now, they’re each statues in their stillness. Occasionally, Vanko leans back enough to make his chair bob, but otherwise, he’s as still as his client.

Bruce’d overheard Jessica Drew and Matt Murdock in the hallway before the hearing grumbling about Davis hiring Vanko to represent him for his criminal trial. Bruce wonders now how frequently the two men meet—and how much time they spend together on strategy.

Tony’s thumb brushes against Bruce’s own, and he drops his eyes away from the well of the courtroom for a few seconds to study the other man’s hand. He finds it comforting, somehow, the familiar shape of those fingers and their blunt roughness against his skin. He feels unprofessional, being distracted by the tiny half-touches and perpetually drifting fingers, but at the same time, it’s soothing.

It grounds him, he thinks. It pulls him out of the forest of worry that he keeps running into, that sunless place his mind keeps dragging him through.

When he glances up, he smiles slightly at Tony and is rewarded with a half-second mirror of his own expression.

At least, until the judge says, “Any questions for the witness, Mister Vanko?”

“Yes, judge,” Vanko says, rising slowly to his feet. There’s an uneasy grace to the way he moves, an almost artificial smoothness that Bruce hates from the moment he recognizes it. He gathers up his legal pad and walks over to the podium with a lazy ease. He settles his notes first, then his hands, and for a few seconds just stands in front of Jessica Jones, watching her.

On the witness stand, Jessica shifts.

“Miss Jones,” Vanko greets, nodding. “You are doing well today, yes?”

Jessica shrugs. “Sure.”

“And just making clear, you made promise to tell truth and the whole truth, yes?”

“Yeah, I think that’s what being under oath means,” she responds tightly.

“Good, good.” Vanko glances down at his pad for a moment. Bruce watches every second, every microscopic nod of his head and purse of his lips, and he can’t stop his stomach from churning. Lawyers—at least, most the lawyers he knows—ask about the truth when they’re expecting the
witness to lie. Or at least, when they’re thinking the witness will consider lying.

Jessica isn’t a liar, Bruce knows.

But that doesn’t make it any easier to accept the way the corner of Vanko’s mouth twitches, or how easily his big hands settle on the sides of the podium.

“Let us then please talk about Mister Stark,” he says. “We can do that, yes? Mister Tony Stark, you mentioned him, so we can talk about him?”

“We can talk about him,” Jessica confirms, and for the first time since he first reached over to touch Bruce’s hand, Tony’s fingers stop moving.

“Good, good,” Vanko says again, but Bruce ignores his quiet murmurs of approval to glance at the man beside him. Tony’s already-serious expression settles into something grave and dark, something Bruce can’t actually name, and he spends a half-second tracking the tension that climbs into Tony’s shoulders and jaw. When he swallows, it’s a hard gulp that Bruce imagines he can hear; when he slips his hand away from Bruce’s, it’s to tangle his own fingers and knot his hands together in his lap. He starts to lean forward, thinks better of it, and sits up straight.

He absolutely does not blink.

And he absolutely does not glance away from Anton Vanko.

Jessica’s answering a question that Bruce missed, but she’s shaking her head emphatically Bruce glances back to the witness stand. “He absolutely does not,” she says sternly. “He might spend the night over there once in a while, but he has his own place.”

“But Mister Stark has contact with child?” Vanko presses.

“Like I said before, yes, he—”

“Okay, you know what? I’m going to object here.” Bruce can’t hide the relief that floods his chest when Jessica Drew pops out of her chair, her hands flattened to counsel table. Her jaw tightens as she glances between Vanko and the judge. “This isn’t relevant. We’re talking about whether that man—” Bruce nearly smiles when she points an accusatory finger across the courtroom at Aaron Davis. “—can safely care for Miles, not whether Bruce and Tony deserve to win ‘favorite couple’ at the People’s Choice Awards.”

Bruce thinks for a moment that the corner of Judge Rees’s mouth twists. “Mister Vanko?”

“Judge, this is case about the child being safe.” When Vanko raises his broad hands, it’s very nearly in a shrug. “State and Miss Drew say that child is not safe with his uncle, that being with Doctor Banner and Mister Stark is better than being with his uncle. If my client is unsafe, then question is: what is safe? What does safe look like? Who makes child safe?” He settles his hands on the podium again. “I am asking about safety of child with Doctor Banner.”

For a few seconds, Judge Rees stares out into the courtroom, dark eyes trained entirely on Vanko. When she finally nods, Bruce feels the cold fingers of nervousness grip his stomach. “You have very narrow leeway on this, Mister Vanko,” she warns, “but I’ll allow it.”

“Thank you, judge.” Vanko nods exactly once before turning back to Jessica Jones. “Mister Stark has contact with child, you said?”

Jessica rolls her lips together before answering, “Yes.”
“And what, exactly, do you know—you, or agency, or people working with Mister Davis and with child—know about this man who has contact with child?”

“And Tony Stark?” Jessica asks, raising her eyebrows. “What do we know about Tony?”

“Yes.”

“I— I don’t even know how to start answering that question.” Jessica spreads out her hands. “It’s Tony Stark. I don’t know if you know this, but his dad founded Stark Industries. He spent a long time in the public eye, and kind of still is.”

At the podium, Vanko shrugs, his broad shoulders lifting his suit coat. “Humor the court, please.”

“Your honor,” Jessica Drew starts to object, but Judge Rees raises a hand. When the guardian ad litem drops back into her chair, it squeaks in protest.

For a few seconds, though, the courtroom falls silent save for Jessica’s breaths rushing against the microphone and the slow tick of the clock on the wall. Bruce feels his heart racing, his pulse thronming not only in his chest but in his temples. Beside him, Tony’s absolutely still, his eyes trained forward and hardly blinking.

Bruce knows, of course, that Tony was once a twenty-something wunderkind engineer who occasionally careened off the rails and ended up in the tabloids. He knows that, somewhere, there’s a support group filled with the spurned women Tony Stark once toyed with and discarded. He knows the ancient history of the man beside him, the man who once drifted from party to bikini model without a care in the world.

Fifteen years ago, and not in any way that’s relevant to whether Miles is presently safe.

Finally, though, Jessica exhales. “He’s Tony Stark,” she says, shrugging her shoulders. “He’s an assistant district attorney for Suffolk County. He runs his mother’s charitable foundation, most of which goes into the Urban Ascent programs and all its feeders. He’s on the board of directors for Stark Industries. I mean, what else do you want? The names of his dogs?”

“And his job?” Vanko asks.

“Uh, assistant district attorney for—”

“No, not this job. Other job.” Vanko’s tone is tight, almost demanding, and Bruce swears that his breaths are drowning him. Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Tony squaring his shoulders and sitting up to full height. “Job before Suffolk County.”

Jessica shakes her head. “I first met him after he met Bruce,” she replies, “and since they met at work—”

“And health?” Vanko interrupts.

“He seems perfectly healthy to me—”

“And past problems? Drug or crime or—”

“Okay, again, no.” This time, when Jessica Drew rises, she sends her chair sliding back until it impacts the bar between the well of the courtroom and the gallery. She throws out her hands, her bright fingernails turning to red blurs as she gestures. “Your honor, I’m sorry, but whatever fishing
expedition we’re being dragged along on right now has nothing to do with Miles’s safety. Miss Jones testified to what she knows about Mister Stark. That’s it.” She opens her palms and shrugs. “I think the narrow leeway’s been pretty exhausted here.”

Judge Rees presses her lips together and then, slowly, nods. “I’m inclined to agree with you,” she says. She leans forward and folds her hands on the bench. “Move along, Mister Vanko.”

Vanko shakes his head. “No more questions, judge.”

“Very well. Mister Murdock, redirect?”

Bruce wants to watch Vanko meander back to his seat and listen to the murmurs exchanged between himself and his client, but instead, he ends up watching Tony. The tension in his shoulders loosens but fails to completely unwind, his posture slouching only a few inches and his hand slowly uncurling from their death grip. He reaches up and drags his fingers through his hair, then leans forward and rests his elbows on his thighs, but Bruce knows something’s wrong.

He’s seen a thousand of Tony Stark’s expressions; triumph, anger, frustration, excitement, sadness, playfulness, optimism, and disappointment only begin the list. But today, for the first time, he suspects he’s seen what Tony Stark looks like when he’s scared.

No, not scared. Scared is too mild a word.

When he’s terrified and staring down either a demon or a ghost.

He considers reaching out to touch Tony, to comfort him in some small way, but he’s not entirely sure whether touch will actually help. Worse, he’s not entirely sure touch will chase away the uneasy feeling pooling in his own stomach, the one that wonders what exactly Tony is afraid of.

Tony’s never hidden his wild-child past. He’s never shied away from publicity and swarms of journalists.

Whatever this is, it’s bigger than that.

“Judge, this is pretty simple,” Jessica Drew’s saying when Bruce drags his eyes back to the well of the courtroom, and Bruce realizes after a half-second that he’s missed Matt Murdock’s final argument. “The law says that you adjudicate a child when he fits into one of the child welfare categories. Miles fits into two or three. His uncle disappeared—lack of adequate supervision, lack of adequate care and control—and hoped he’d fend for himself, which really, is a form of neglect. And he’s still not doing anything to change that.” She lifts her hands from the podium. “It’s great that Mister Vanko’s so concerned about Miles’s well-being with Doctor Banner, but at least Doctor Banner doesn’t leave him alone for two days at a time.”

At counsel table, Vanko sighs. “Judge.”

“Yeah, okay, argumentative,” Jessica admits, holding up her hands. “Withdrawn. But I’m just saying: he’s a child who needs court intervention to ensure his welfare. The rest of this is window dressing.”

Bruce tracks her progress back to counsel table and back into her seat, but no amount of counting her high-heeled footfalls tramples down on the anxious feeling that’s bubbling up in his stomach. Vanko leans over and murmurs something to Davis, waits for a response, and then rises slowly. Every gesture and step feels somehow predatory, the languid stalking of a lion across the Serengeti.

At the podium, the attorney pauses to button his suit jacket. He’s without his legal pad, this time, and
he folds his hands in the place his papers would normally rest. In the front row of the gallery, Jessica Jones tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

Beside Bruce, Tony pulls in a breath. Bruce is half-certain he holds it, too.

“Judge, I know, and Mister Davis knows, that he is not a perfect man,” Vanko begins. His voice dims to a quiet rumble, something almost regretful in the grave-silent room. “He has troubles. He makes mistakes. But these troubles are not too big for him to be parent to the nephew he loves very much. These troubles, they are things that happened, and we all have things that happen, sometimes.”

Bruce can’t see the man’s entire face, but he can see and hear enough to know that Vanko’s smiling. Something in his stomach, something instinctual and lizard-brained, immediately chills, and goose flesh clumps up his arms.

“But what is worse than Mister Davis’s troubles—worse than any of the troubles in the world, any things that happen—is that this boy, boy who state says is not safe with uncle who loves him very much, is living with someone who will not keep him safe. Because however bad Mister Davis’s troubles were, they are not worse than Mister Stark’s, and Mister Stark stays with Mister Banner.”

Something clatters as one of the other attorneys rise, and Bruce blinks as he watches Matt Murdock’s assistant reach out to keep his chair from rolling away. “Your honor,” Murdock interrupts, “this is not—”

“Judge, I have witnesses,” Vanko continues, voice broadening until it fills the entire room, “they will testify, Mister Stark is not a safe influence on Miles, is not good ‘de facto second parent.’” His fingers hook in vicious, claw-like air quotes, and then curl his hands into fists before they land again on the podium. “They will testify, Mister Stark has drug problem, that he went to rehabilitation facility—”

“Your honor,” Murdock stresses, louder than the first time. “This isn’t relevant. This isn’t even an issue, we can’t—”

“—that he left against advice, that he lost job, that—”

“Okay, seriously, judge,” Jessica drew cuts in, her chair slamming against the bar a second time. “This needs to stop right now, before—”

“Enough, all of you!”

Judge Rees’s voice rises up like the crack of a gun across the cacophony of voices, and the entire courtroom stills to stare up at her. She’s standing behind the bench, her hands flattened against the surface and her dark eyes trained down on the three attorneys like heat-seeking lasers. Bruce follows her gaze from Murdock, to Jessica, and then at last to Vanko, and he forces himself not to spend any time dwelling on Miles.

Miles, who’s slouched into his chair and staring at his hands.

Miles, who looks small and still surrounded by looming, arguing adults.

Vanko opens his mouth to say something, and the judge’s eyes narrow. “Especially you, Mister Vanko,” she snaps, and Bruce watches him press his lips into a thin line. He thinks maybe the attorney’s silence will allow his stomach to settle, but in way, the quiet only agitates him further. He focuses on Judge Rees as she drops back into her seat.
He wonders whether he should look over at Tony, to see more of the man beside him than the shape of his body and his uncharacteristic stillness.

But Tony isn’t the only one scared, right now.

“Now,” the judge says, settling into her chair, “can someone please tell me what’s going on here?”

“You mean besides the fact Mister Vanko’s trying to testify right now?” Jessica Drew asks, opening her hands.

“Do you have a half hour for the list?” Judge Rees narrows her eyes. “Miss Drew.”

Across the courtroom, Jessica drops her eyes to counsel table and, for possibly the first time in recorded history, looks slightly guilty. “Sorry, your honor.”

The judge waits until the guardian ad litem’s quiet and her hands are back against her side before she glances over at Matt Murdock. Even then, she pauses to massage a temple before speaking. “Mister Murdock,” she says slowly, “is there any weight to Mister Vanko’s allegations?”

“I don’t think so, your honor,” Murdock admits, shaking his head. “And given that Mister Stark has completed an intake with Union County Child Services, I would assume—”

“Actually, your honor, that’s incorrect.”

And if the pit of Bruce’s stomach is frozen, frigid with dread, fear, and a thousand other emotions, then his mouth is part of that tundra. Because his lips and tongue dry up as he watches Jessica Jones rise from her seat.

She holds her shoulders taut as she shakes her head. “Mister Stark hasn’t completed his intake,” she explains carefully, every word annunciated almost to the point of echoing through the courtroom. “I have no idea whether any of this is true or not.”

Bruce knows, at least intellectually, that the hearing continues on from that point. He thinks, in some weird, disconnected way, that he hears Judge Rees thanking Jessica, and that she then instructs all the attorneys to sit down. Out of the corner of his eye, he suspects he catches Aaron Davis and Vanko each smiling. Miles scoots his chair over to ask Jessica Drew a question, and Jessica shakes her head; at his table, Murdock leans over and murmurs something to his assistant.

But all these things are distractions, white noise from the actual center of Bruce’s attention, the post keeping his mind from wandering away:

Tony.

Because Tony’s not watching the well of the courtroom or listening to the judge, either. No, Tony’s face is lowered to stare at where he’s folded his hands together between his knees. His eyes are half-closed, long lashes helping to hide an expression Bruce absolutely doesn’t recognize, and his full lips are pursed into a tight line. For a few seconds, Bruce wonders if he’s even breathing.

And then, he lifts his chin.

He lifts his chin, tilts his head in Bruce’s direction, and meets his eyes.

In that second, despite all the nights spent clinging to one another, sharing whispers and touches in the dark, Bruce isn’t sure he recognizes the man sitting beside him.
What he is sure of is that Vanko’s told the truth.

==

“As you fucking kidding me?” Jessica Jones shouts, and physically throws her bag onto the conference room floor.

The dying bamboo plant’s leaves jump as she slams the door behind her, closing herself, Bruce, and Tony into the tiny room with its mismatched furniture. The already-claustrophobic space feels stuffy and airless, and Bruce catches himself wandering into the furthest corner. He can’t sit down, can’t focus all his swimming thoughts into coherent words, can’t even breathe properly—

And that’s all without Jessica yelling.

Yelling first, and then stalking across the room to Tony and smacking him hard in the upper arm. Once, then again, and Bruce watches as he flinches without stepping away. Jessica’d barely contained her rage after court adjourned, gritting her teeth together and ordering them into the conference room, and Tony actually hisses in pain when she hits him a third time.

A tiny voice in the back of Bruce’s head mumbles that Tony deserves it.

Bruce drops his eyes to the floor, shoves his hands into his pockets, and says absolutely nothing.

In the end, Judge Rees had agreed with Matt Murdock and Jessica Drew, adjudicating Miles under the child welfare code and leaving him in state custody. Even though the hearing’d only ended five or ten minutes earlier, to Bruce it feels like hours; his stomach’d swum upon hearing her words, unsettled and churning through all the official court findings. He hadn’t been able to breathe, sitting there next to the still-silent and motionless Tony, and he’d felt Vanko’s words like flies buzzing around in his head.

And then, Judge Rees had folded her hands atop the bench.

“I am extremely bothered by today’s allegations,” she’d said carefully, every word punctuated with surgical precision. “It’s bad enough that a man who is acting as this child’s second foster parent hasn’t been vetted by any agency, and worse still that there are so many unknowns. It raises serious questions as to the suitability of this foster home.”

She’d pressed her lips together, and Bruce’d sworn for a few seconds he could feel his chest caving in on itself.

“I am setting a hearing a week from Monday to specifically consider the suitability of this placement. Mister Vanko can produce his witnesses, if there are any, and Miss Jones can explain why we’re still waiting on an intake for someone who is clearly an enormous part of this young man’s life.” She’d shaken her head. “In the meantime, the other orders of the court remain. We’re adjourned.”

Bruce thinks he can still hear the judge’s voice rattling around in his head, but when Jessica shoves a chair against the table, it’s replaced entirely by the present conversation.

“And your text messages,” she accuses Tony, jabbing a finger into the air between them. Tony’s rubbing his upper arm over his pale gray suit jacket, a frown creasing the fine lines of his face. “All that bullshit about how you needed until after the holiday, how you needed until after oral argument
“Wait,” Bruce interrupts, holding out his hands. He feels a little like he’s coming up for air after being tossed in the ocean, cold water muddying his thoughts but slowly clearing. “You texted Jessica about not completing your intake?”

“In my defense,” Tony retorts, his hand pausing on his arm, “we kinda did have, you know, Thanksgiving, which I hosted, and then oral argument, which I—”

“Do you think that fucking matters?” Jessica cuts in. She stalks two steps toward Tony, then three steps back, a lioness shoved in far too small a cage. When she twists around to point the accusatory finger in Tony’s direction a second time, her hair flies around her. “You realize I can’t fix this, right? If what Vanko just said is true, I have no history of good deeds and shiny-happy credit checks to rehabilitate this with. Nothing!”

“Then I guess it’s pretty good that it’s not true,” Tony says matter-of-factly. Too matter-of-factly, Bruce thinks, too casual and easy to unclench the bolus of fear that’s clumped in his stomach.

Fear, and something else, something Bruce can’t name. It threatens to climb up his throat and choke him, but he forces himself to keep swallowing around it.

Across the room, Jessica stills. “It’s not?”

“No,” Tony replies—then pauses. “Well, mostly no. Sort of.”

The room falls silent, then, save for the sound of Tony scratching the back of his neck while he stares at the floor. Bruce wets his lips, but when he opens his mouth, the only sound he releases is a sigh. It drags, lingering, until he swallows around the tightness in the back of his throat.

“Tony,” he says, and his voice sounds strangled.

And then, his chest feels strangled because Tony lifts his head and meets his eyes with the same frightened expression as in the courtroom not a half-hour before. “It’s not entirely true,” he says, and for one of the few times in their history together, Bruce can’t read his tone for honesty. “It’s all—twisted-up and overstated, it’s one of those estimates where the answer’s in the ballpark but way, way on the far end of the ballpark, it has only the most minimal basis in reality, so small that—”

“It has basis in reality?” Bruce interrupts. He hardly recognizes his own words, every one of them stumbling and plummeting off his tongue.

At almost the same instant, Jessica throws up her hands. “You were a drug addict?” she demands, and the accusatory index finger is back, jabbing in Tony’s direction. “In rehab?”

“And you lost your job?” Bruce tags on, his brain and his mouth not connecting properly because for every hundred thousand thoughts, he can hardly assemble one half-sentence into being.

“And you didn’t think you should’ve mentioned this to someone instead of—”

“Okay, wait, stop!” Tony shouts. “This is spiraling way out of control and talented as I am, I cannot answer you both at once!”

He spreads out his arms like he’s refereeing a hockey game and attempting to stop a brawl on the ice, and despite the hundreds of nameless emotions rushing around in his brain, Bruce presses his lips together. He feels like he’s swimming in some kind of surreal alternate version of the universe. Either that, or he’s about to discover all three of them are on Punk’d or Candid Camera.
None of it, none of Vanko’s ridiculous claims and innuendos, can possibly be true. The whole ordeal—drugs, jobs, rehab, things right out of a soap opera or Harlequin romance novel—is a fabrication, a lie created to try and force the judge to release Miles from state custody.

Lies created by a man who clearly dislikes Tony, who’d informed him that their history wasn’t “water under the bridge.”

Right?

Tony casts his eyes toward the floor again and shoves his hands into the pockets of his slacks. Bruce feels his stomach petrify, a hard stone that sinks further the longer he looks across the conference room at the other man.

He and Tony, they’re— Well, they’re something, now.

Everything else has to be lies.

Jessica drops her hands to her hips and raises her eyebrows. Bruce rolls his lips together and balls his hands into fists when they threaten to shake.

And Tony—

“No, I—” Tony starts to say, but then he sighs. It’s a rush of breath, a long, drawn-out sound that Bruce feels as much as he hears. “Six, six and a half years ago, I had heart surgery,” he says, and he taps his chest roughly where the long, thick scar on his chest starts. “There were complications, problems afterward, it all kind of got— Sticky.” He shrugs and opens his hands. “I wasn’t exactly a model human being and it all kinda got away from me, but I got better. Okay?” Bruce glances away just as the usual sweeping, flutter-fingered gestures start. “I got my head on straight, I fixed the problem, and yeah, I left my old job, but it wasn’t like I was out selling Percocet on the street or something, it wasn’t that bad.”

Bruce barely recognizes his own voice when he says, “But there were drugs.”

“There were painkillers because I’d just had my chest torn apart, I don’t see how you can—” When raises his chin, it’s in time to watch Tony shake his head. He makes no eye contact, not with Bruce or with Jessica, and Bruce can’t help but suspect a little of that avoidance is tied up with shame. Shame, or something like it, something thicker and just as unwelcome. “Look,” he says finally, “I’ll finish the intake tonight. Alright? Sign it, seal it, deliver it, present it to the judge with all the bells and whistles, and then everybody can see that what Vanko said in there’s just all conflated horseshit, and—”

“You think that’s how this works?” Jessica interrupts. There’s something almost half-amused in her tone and the snort that follows the question, but Bruce knows without a second thought that it’s bitter. Bitter, he thinks, and angry, because there’s fire in her sharp eyes when she shakes her head. “It takes at least three weeks to process a clean intake, Tony. If any of this non-specific ‘stickiness’ requires extra interviews—”

She shakes her head again, her mouth almost tipped into a rueful smile. “You want to know the thing that pisses me off most?” she asks after a half-second, all her attention focused on Tony. “If you’d just told me this was a thing, if you’d warned me, I would’ve fought tooth and nail to clear you. I’ve argued for situations a lot worse than this one.” She tosses up her hands. “But now that you’ve proven what a stupid bastard you are and I have to present this in front of the court? Miles could be disrupted.” One angry hand gestures toward the door. “That kid, who needs you two idiots, he could be disrupted and thrown out into the middle of nowhere instead of being with guys who actually love
him, and all because you can’t be bothered to fill out some fucking paperwork!”

Jessica’s voice shakes and cracks on the last shout, and Bruce suddenly can’t look at her. He can’t look at her, or at Tony, or even at the still-closed conference room door. Outside in the hallway, he knows, Miles waits for both of them, tucked up with his guardian ad litem while he tries to understand the chaos that’s just rained down in his life, and Bruce—

Just picturing Miles’s confused expression—or his hurt, or his fear—is enough to make Bruce want to stay inside the conference room for another year.

He wonders whether he’s alone in that, too, because the sound is Tony asking, “Then what the hell happens next?”

Jessica starts replying, starts stringing together a non-answer involving the intake paperwork and Judge Rees, but the words never quite reach Bruce’s consciousness. They float around him, wisps that don’t quite congregate into clouds, and for the first time in what feels like decades, he feels—helpless.

He feels like the world’s shaking around him, like it’s shuddering before it shatters, and it’s only after he hears Jessica say, “And you better not even take an afternoon nap on the couch over there, or I swear to Christ I will kill you,” that his own voice breaks into the conversation.

“I need respite tonight.”

The words trip off his tongue, unfamiliar and clumsy. When he looks up, Jessica and Tony both are staring at him.

“What?” Jessica asks.

“Respite,” he repeats, more certain this time. “Foster parents get respite when they ask for it, right? I need respite, tonight, right now. I need—”

He shakes his head, not sure how else to put it, how to explain that he needs a night to try and harness his life back into his control. Jessica stares at him, blank-faced in her surprise, and he tightens his fists at his side.

He needs this to be a nightmare, a bad dream he can wake up from. He needs—

“Where am I going to get respite at four p.m. on a Thursday?” she asks, and he lifts his head enough to meet her eyes. Her shoulders lift helplessly. “We barely have enough homes for the kids who need actual placement, let alone coming up with a random overnight on a Thursday when—”

“Call Steve and Bucky.” From Tony’s lips, it’s nearly a murmur. When Bruce spares him a sideways glance, the other man’s holding out his cell phone. “Upstanding citizens, four-year-old daughter, our best friends.”

“Your best friends,” Bruce corrects. He’s surprised at the sharpness in his own tone.

Tony pauses for a second, then wets his lips. “My best friends, then,” he replies, glancing over at Jessica. “But they’ll do it.”

Jessica looks between the two of them for a half-second, her mouth creased into a severe frown, but then she steps forward and snatches the phone from between Tony’s fingers. “I’ll call my boss for approval, then your friends,” she decides, waving the phone in Tony’s direction, “and I’ll try to leave out the part where you’re an insufferable jackass. But one of you needs explain respite to Miles,
because with all the shit I’m about to take, I’m not also going to be the one who made the twelve-year-old cry.”

The word *cry* knots in Bruce’s stomach, but he nods. “I’ll tell him,” he offers.

“We’ll tell him,” Tony echoes. Bruce glances at the door rather than look at him.

“I don’t care who, just do it,” Jessica informs them, but then she steps out of the room.

The door closes behind her, a heavy thud in the doorjamb, and Bruce stares at it for a few seconds while silence overtakes the conference room. It’s a brief reprieve from the last few minutes of insanity, a breath of quiet Bruce attempts to drink in—but then, Tony breaks it.

“So,” he says, and as practiced as his casualness is, Bruce can hear the caution looming in the back of his tone, “you wanna take good cop and I take bad cop? I mean, not that we really need cops for this one, given that it’s more us just explaining reality instead of—”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Bruce repeats. He thinks he can feel his thoughts tangling together when he shakes his head, but he can hear the certainty in his own voice. “I’ll tell Miles about respite. You can wait here until we’ve talked, and then I’ll drive you back to the judicial complex.”

There’s a beat of absolute silence before Tony actually snorts a laugh. “You’re kinda not the only person he’s gonna miss tonight, big guy,” he retorts, “and kinda not the only person who’s gonna miss *him*. It’s maybe not fair to—”

“Fair?” Bruce demands. Every word feels like an electric spark as he turns on Tony, the syllables spitting from his lips into the space between them. Tony steps back, and Bruce realizes only belatedly that it’s because he’s shoved his hand out and pointed two fingers directly in Tony’s direction. “Do you actually want to talk about what’s *fair* right now, Tony? Because it’s not a conversation you’ll actually *like*.”

He thinks he hears Tony’s voice behind him, or maybe Tony’s footsteps, but he doesn’t look back. Doesn’t, or maybe can’t, because he’s not certain what happens next or whether he trusts himself enough to find out.

And because, right now, somewhere deep inside his chest, he feels like he’s being slowly torn in two.

He knows he can’t actually run away from that feeling, but he also knows there’s no harm in trying.

Chapter End Notes

Generally speaking, issues of where and with whom a child is placed are separate from issues of whether that child needs to be in state custody. I imagine most judges would outright reject the argument of “the kid should go home because the foster home is also not great.” However, in order to make all the working pieces of this fic come together, I’ve sort of stacked the two concepts. Creative license! But that said, most courts would not call a whole hearing to consider the safety or problems of the placement, and instead
just require the agency to take care of the problems.
Irretrievable Things

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce reacquaints himself with a certain kind of solitude. But while his home and Miles are both eerily silent, his mind won’t stay quiet, and he’s left to wonder whether whose interests he’s protecting: Miles’s, his own, or no one’s.

Chapter Notes

A subpoena is an order to appear at a court proceeding and testify.

Once again, Jen and saranoh come through with an award-winning beta job. As though anyone is surprised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They drive back to the judicial complex in absolute silence.

Bruce stares out at the highway for every one of the twenty-six miles between the Union County courthouse and the Suffolk County judicial complex, refusing to even spare the slightest of glances toward the passenger seat. It’s juvenile, he knows, a vindictive cold-shoulder better suited for a teenager than a man pushing forty, but he can’t help himself. His mind’s a mass of thoughts he can’t control, and all he’s able to do is wade through the rubble.

When he’d dropped onto the bench outside Courtroom Four next to Miles and explained that he’d spend the night with Steve, Bucky, and Dot, Miles’d only asked one question: “Why?”

Bruce’d considered a hundred reassuring lies, promises about how he and Tony planned to sit down and talk about what’d happened in court, but the words all stuck in the back of his throat. In the end, he’d threaded his hands together in his lap and stared at the speckled floor tiles. “Remember that first visit with your uncle,” he’d finally said quietly, “when you went up to the bedroom for a while because you weren’t really ready to talk to anybody?”

In his peripheral vision, he’d caught Miles nodding.

“Sometimes, adults need some time like that, too.”

They’d sat there quietly for a few long seconds before Miles’d murmured, “My uncle’s lawyer was lying about Tony, right?”

Bruce’d shaken his head. “I don’t know.”
Miles’d nodded slightly, and Bruce’d watched as poked at the floor with the toe of his sneaker. He’d waited another few seconds before asking, “You didn’t know he was going to do this, did you?”

Against his better judgment, Bruce had released a bitter huff of breath. It brought Miles’s chin up, and layered guilt on the other three hundred emotions churning in the bottom of his belly. “No,” he’d admitted, glancing over at the boy next to him, “I didn’t.”

“And it’s pretty crazy bad?”

His one futile attempt at a smile’d died as soon as it started, and Bruce’d ended up reaching over to put a hand on Miles’s shoulder. “It’s not good,” he’d confirmed, “but I’m going to try to fix it.”

Miles’d frowned at him, his dark eyes open, but also cautious. “Just you?”

“Just me,” he’d replied, and hugged the boy tightly until Jessica’d announced it was time to go.

He’d watched Miles disappear down the stairs, and then spent a few minutes staring down into the empty hallway before stepping into the conference room and collecting Tony. The other man’d followed him out to the car and climbed in silently, no attempts to fill the space between them with noise or with touch. Bruce’d almost wanted him to reach out, wanted some excuse to lose his temper, but Tony stayed at arm’s length.

He’s still at arm’s length when they pull into an empty parking spot at the judicial complex. The lot’s half-empty, thanks to the late hour, and three or four stalls down, Tony’s Audi waits. Bruce puts the car in park, kills the engine, and then sits with his hands on the steering wheel.

He assumes Tony’ll just climb out and leave him to the silence and his own rushing thoughts. When he hears the click of the seatbelt, he feels his shoulders relax in his certainty. At least until Tony says, “Are you going to yell at me or anything, or are we just going straight from everything being awesome to never talking again? You know, just so I can write the right thing in my scrapbook.”

Bruce isn’t sure why it’s the errant, throw-away comment—one the same as all of Tony’s errant, throw-away comments—that ignites his already-thin strands of self-control, but it does. The flames jump and lick at each fraying thread until they all snap, one after another, and nothing’s left.

Well, nothing except the sensation his entire body jerking against his seatbelt so he can twist over to stare at Tony. Tony wears a mask of casualness and disinterest that Bruce knows hides whatever is brewing under the surface, but somehow, it only pisses him off more. Because the mask is a lie, a distraction from what’s real, and—

And immediately, Bruce thinks of other lies, of other half-truths and stories left purposely untold only to be thrown out in open court and to Miles’s detriment.

“Awesome?” he asks, and the anger seeping into his voice makes Tony’s long eyelashes blink. “You think everything was awesome?”

“Uh, until today, yeah,” Tony replies immediately, spreading out his hands. Bruce thinks for a moment he hears a note of surprise in his tone—or if not surprise, at least uncertainty—and somehow, his fingers tighten as he grips the steering wheel. “Till today, everything considered, I think we were doing pretty damn well for ourselves, and now suddenly it’s—”

“Now suddenly?” Bruce demands, a louder, more frustrated echo of Tony’s forcible calm. He hates Tony for it, hates the constant hum of nonchalant bullshit that radiates around him, but he knows in
that half-second that Tony can’t help it. Tony can’t help burying whatever he actually feels until the world’s forgotten about it, and—

And suddenly, he’s incredibly, insensibly angry about a trait he once actually admired.

He smacks the steering wheel, and when Tony murmurs, “Big guy?”, he smacks it a second time, harder than the first.

“Five and a half years, Tony,” he says, his own voice bitter and acidic to his own ears. It’s a voice he doesn’t recognize, a stranger’s voice, and he curls his fingers back around the wheel. “Five and a half years knowing you, of—laying myself bare and telling you everything I’ve been through, every screwed-up part of my life from my mother’s death until the day we met, and I find out in open court that you— You—”

When he shakes his head, everything he wants to say tumbles together into a storm cloud of anger he can’t separate into its parts. Because it’s not the accusations, exactly—not the lies or half-lies Vanko announced in front of strangers, their colleagues, and Miles—but it’s definitely the secrets.

It’s—

“Bruce,” Tony says, almost a murmur in a car that suddenly feels too small for both of them. “Bruce, listen, you’ve gotta—”

“Me listen?” he asks, throwing up his hands. “Me listen? No, Tony, you need to listen.” He grips the steering wheel again, harder this time, and feels the tremble run up and down his arms. He shakes it once, but nothing actually moves. “This is—I knew this is how it would be, I always knew,” he hears himself saying, swift and angry as a tidal wave. His eyes prickle, and he wonders for only a split-second whether they’re wet. “You do this. You—lull people into this sense of security, you let them feel like they matter and that everything they’ve thought they could never have are actually things they deserve. You let them wait and want and then, do you know what happens, Tony? Do you?”

When he spares himself a breath to turn and actually look at Tony, he catches the other man staring at him, stock-still and open-lipped. Surprise, Bruce remembers, is not one of Tony’s more common expressions, not unless it ends in delight. Now, there’s no delight, no chance for a brilliant Tony Stark smile, and Bruce almost feels guilty for that.

Guilty because— Why, exactly? Because he’s hurt?

Because he’s angry, because he feels betrayed, because Tony’s managed to prove him right?

He refuses to feel guilty about that.

“You wait,” Bruce presses, his voice thin and shaking as he strings the words together, “until someone is stupidly, irretrievably in love with you, wait until they’re thinking that you could make— That you could be something more than the sum of your parts, and you pull the rug out from under them. Because you, Tony, are too selfish to bother with being honest!”

The last word rings out between them, too loud for the car, and Bruce wrenches his face away from Tony. He wrenches his attention away, forces himself to stare out at the parking lot instead of at the man beside him. His stomach churns, his chest seizes, and he thinks for the first time in actual, measurable years that he might lose a battle with the burning feeling in his eyes.

He closes them, forces himself to breathe evenly and study the backs of his eyelids, when he hears Tony swallow.
“You’re in love with me?” he asks, and Bruce stops breathing all together.

For a few seconds, he forgets every last word he’s said, every angry burst of vitriol still ringing in his ears, except for one phrase: stupidly, irretrievably in love with you. His stomach twists, and he feels his hands shake when he grips the steering wheel with white-knuckled fingers. When he opens his eyes, all he can see are the backs of his hands and the beige vinyl.

“Go, Tony,” he whispers.

“Yeah, no, that’s not gonna happen.” Tony’s voice is almost unrecognizable, low and gentle as it is, and out of the corner of his eye, Bruce can watch him shift his weight around in the passenger’s seat. “I can’t just leave that as-is, not after—”

“Do you think it actually matters?” Bruce returns. He doesn’t mean to whisper, necessarily, but somehow, for the first time in the last handful of minutes, his voice refuses to rise. He stares at the dashboard, at the browning grass outside, at the shadows of the parking lot lights on the sidewalk. “Do you think how I feel changes what happens? That it changes that we could— That Miles could end up back with his uncle, or living in the middle of nowhere?”

He thinks for a half-second that Tony’s lips move, starting to form words that can’t possibly close the chasm that’s opened up between them, and he turns away. He stares out into the parking lot, his teeth grinding together, because he’s afraid of what comes next.

Not just from Tony, but from his own mouth.

When the silence breaks, entire minutes later, it’s with the tell-tale click of the door latch. He tilts his head just far enough to watch Tony shove the door open and slowly slip out onto the pavement. Every movement jerks, uneven and tight instead of his usual grace, and Bruce feels his gut clench until he can’t breathe.

Some part of him, some stupid, lost, foolish corner of his mind, wants to reach out and beg Tony to stay.

The rest of him feels like a hole’s opened up in his chest, and he’s not sure how to fill it.

“I’ll call you,” Tony says quietly, three words almost lost in the late-November wind.

“Sure,” Bruce says limply, and turns away before Tony closes the door.

He sits in his dark, empty car for a long time after that, watching first as the Audi disappears out of the lot and then as other, less-familiar cars drive away, too. He watches until some of them blur—shapeless blotches of color in the near-dark—and then, he tips his forehead against the steering wheel and stares at absolutely nothing.

When, at home, he pulls his silenced cell phone out of his work bag, there’s a long list of text messages waiting for him. A few are from Jane, work updates he missed while in Union County; two more are from Jessica, a rambling and poorly-punctuated guide to how to ask for respite next time he needs it. The most recent message is from Pepper, and reads simply, Tony just hung up on me when I asked about the hearing. You okay?

He closes it and opens up the second-most-recent, instead.

**Steve Rogers:** Miles is pretty upset. He said you and Tony are fighting, that Tony’s on drugs? What’s going on?
Bruce leans against the kitchen island and stares at the message for an unnecessarily long time. He swears for a moment he can even hear Steve’s voice in his head.

When he opens the reply, he realizes his hand is trembling. I’m fine, he writes back. Tell Miles I’ll see him tomorrow. I’m going to turn off my phone and go to bed.

He sends the text, exits out of the messages menu, and starts to briefly check his e-mail, but a reply pops up before his phone’s even recognized his wireless internet.

It’s not even six. Is Tony with you? What’s actually going on?

The breath Bruce pulls in shakes, and he spends a second just trying to remember what full, unhindered breaths feel like.

Tony’s at home, he replies, and I’m going to bed.

And, after he turns off his BlackBerry and abandons it on the kitchen island, that’s exactly what he does.

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It’s just after ten a.m. on Saturday morning when Clint rocks up onto the balls of his feet, grins, and asks, “You gonna let me in or what?”

A bitterly cold December wind rushes in around him, cutting through Bruce’s bathrobe and pajama pants and leaving him feeling utterly, unbearably cold. Before the doorbell rang, he’d been bunched up under his sheets and comforter, his entire body covered save for his head and a random classical station playing on his clock radio. He’d planned on staying that way, warm if prostrate, until Jessica brought Miles back from his visit.

Now, he’s staring at Clint Barton, dressed in jeans and a worn peacoat, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. And the longer he looks, the more Clint bounces.

“I thought you and Phil ran on Saturday mornings,” he says over the noise of wind whistling through the trees.

“Been there, done that, even squeezed in my after-workout workout, if you know what I mean.” He grins when Bruce rolls his eyes. “Figured you might want a coffee buddy or something.”

“I have Miles,” Bruce points out.

“Not right now, you don’t.” Bruce raises his eyebrows in surprise, but Clint simply shrugs. “Nat got Pepper to pump Tony about when the kid’s outta the house,” he explains easily, a grin still playing around the corners of his mouth. “She would’ve come too, but they’re off on some kinda girl-on-girl wine tasting tour or something.”

He rocks back on his heels, teetering for a moment on the cement stoop, and Bruce leans his weight against the doorjamb. Secretly, he’d looked forward to the few hours home alone—no Miles, no concerned text messages from Steve or any of his other coworkers, no interruptions—and the opportunity to actually sleep.
He feels like he’s not slept in a week. It’s really only been two nights.

“I think I remember you being annoyed when Tony and I showed up on your doorstep with doughnuts,” he reminds Clint. He’s not surprised at how little humor there is in his tone.

“Yeah, and I think I remember that part of that was ‘cause your boyfriend false-advertised his way into the situation.” Bruce drops his eyes to the ground and says nothing. “C’mon, you gonna let me in or what?”

After the next gusting whistle of wind, Bruce nods and steps slowly out of the way.

The house stands quiet and empty, its usual disarray no longer as appealing as when it’s filled with life and sound. Miles’s backpack is slumped in the corner of the foyer, and Miles’s slippers—one of the dozens of gifts from Tony over the last few weeks—are abandoned in the hallway. Bruce leads Clint through the mess and into the kitchen, where the remnants of their hasty doughnut breakfast are still spread all over the island.

All things considered, Bruce suspects he’s been at least an adequate parent in the last twenty-four hours. He’d picked Miles up from Steve and Bucky’s and driven him to school, explaining along the way that he and Tony’d decided it was best that he stay away until all the dust settled. At every stoplight and yield sign, though, he’d caught Miles regarding him skeptically, his mouth pursed into a serious, humorless line.

In the school parking lot, Miles’d unbuckled his seatbelt and, much like Tony’d done the afternoon before, twisted around to stare Bruce down. He’d waited until Bruce forced a smile and wished him a good day at school to ask, “Did you and Tony break up? Is that why you sent me to Dot’s house?”

Bruce’d felt his smile slip into something softer. When he shifted his weight in the driver’s seat, he’d felt a little like Miles, fidgeting before the hardest part of the conversation. He’d shaken his head. “Would you believe me if I said I’m not sure?”

“No,” Miles’d answered immediately, but then Bruce’d met his eyes. He’d watched the boy’s expression change, the serious stubbornness slipping. Finally, he’d wet his lips and amended, “Maybe.”

Bruce had tracked him all the way across the parking lot, up the wide concrete stairs, and into the red brick building. And then, just for a few minutes, he’d sat in the car and tried to find an answer to Miles’s question.

None came.

At work, he’d drifted from task to task in a half-distracted stupor, avoiding concerned looks not only from Steve and Bucky, but also from Natasha, Pepper, and Jane. Eventually, when their purse-lipped frowns built to be too much, he’d packed up a stack of files and retreated to the relative quiet of the law library on the fourth floor. The law librarian, a retired clerk of the court with thinning hair and a wild beard, switched between poorly-buffered internet radio stations the entire time, and Bruce’d found himself paying more attention to the broken strains of music than the stack of social work reports.

He’d picked Miles up from his after-school program a full hour early, treated him to dinner out and a truly ridiculous action-adventure movie, and tried to chase away the emptiness gnawing in his belly.

Except after Miles’d climbed into bed and Bruce’d closed his bedroom door to the silence of a lonely Friday evening, he’d affirmatively discovered that none of the distractions worked.
He balls up some of the wax paper from the pre-visit doughnuts and drops them into the garbage can, acutely aware that Clint’s surveying the entire scene. He gestures toward the half-finished pot on the coffee maker’s burner and the House Stark mug he’d removed thoughtlessly from the cabinet that morning, and he definitely doesn’t miss Clint’s frown. There’s disapproval creasing his face as he moves across the room.

As he fills the mug, he notes, “This is just sad.”

Bruce snorts. “Darcy squatted outside your apartment for ten hours, afraid that you were about to move to Timbuktu.”

“Hey, in my defense, I thought I’d ruined my life and lost my guy.”

“Then in my defense, I think I’ve lost the guy and maybe Miles,” Bruce retorts, and that’s when Clint spills the coffee.

The dark liquid pours all over the counter and then immediately rolls onto the floor, Clint swearing all the while. He grabs the roll of paper towel, holder and all, and drops to his knees, and Bruce rolls his eyes as he reaches for the stack of grease-stained doughnut napkins. They crouch together on the floor, sopping up hot coffee and hissing in pain as it drips on their hands; once the tile’s dry, Clint starts to work on the counter.

He’s still wiping up the mess when he says, “What the hell happened?”

Bruce sighs and throws the handful of sodden napkins into the trash. “Never mind, it’s not—”

“No, not ‘never mind,’” Clint returns. He drops his soaked paper towels into the sink and immediately twists to stare Bruce down. Bruce shakes his head and reaches for the cup of coffee he’d left on the island. It’s cool to the touch, but at least he can grip the mug. “Last I checked, everybody was nervy about the big hearing but otherwise okay.” When Bruce narrows his eyes at him, Clint shrugs. “Nat and I talk.”

“Clearly.”

“Now, you’re hiding out in your PJs at ten in the morning and telling me that Tony and Miles are both on their way out.” He pauses, mug halfway to his lips. “You didn’t lose the hearing, right?”

“It wasn’t my hearing to lose,” Bruce points out, but he hears the hesitation in his own voice. Clint quirks an eyebrow, and he shakes his head. “Miles’ll stay in state custody,” he explains after a few seconds, “but the judge might disrupt his placement.”

He knows from how hard Clint swallows that the other man understands the seriousness of that sentence. He places the mug on the counter and wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. “Even though he’s good here?” he asks.

Bruce nods.

“Why?”

“Because I misplaced my trust in someone I—” Bruce pauses long enough to shake his head. The words stick in the back of his throat, as bitter as cold, over-brewed coffee. He stares into his half-empty mug and abandons it to walk into the living room. He’s not sure why he decides on the change, especially since he can hear the tell-tale clomp of Clint’s boots following behind him.

Miles’s copy of The Giver sits on the coffee table, along with one of Tony’s legal pads. Tony’s
laptop charger snakes across the floor, too, forgotten halfway under the couch and table. He surveys
the scene, then lets out a too-long sigh. “Tony’s history is—questionable,” he says finally, “and he
never finished his intake with social services.”

Clint’s quiet for a few seconds before he asks, “What kind of questionable? On a scale of, I don’t
know, Phil’s only-once-in-his-whole-life speeding ticket to my juvenile crime spree.”

Bruce tries to snort a laugh, but it sounds cold even to his own ears. He shakes his head. “I don’t
know.”

“’Cause he bullshitted his way through it?”

“Because he never told me.”

When Bruce turns around, Clint’s standing in the doorway, his shoulder against the wall and his eyes
fixed entirely on Bruce. For a moment, he’s reminded of Tony and his alpha-male habit of filling
doorways with his presence. But even that two-second reminder feels like a sharp knife to the bottom
of his ribs. He pulls in a breath. “He knows everything,” he tells Clint, the words falling like lead
weights into the otherwise silent room. “All the things I— I’ve told him more than I’ve ever told
another human being. About my mother and father, about the way I grew up, he knows all of it.”

Clint nods slightly, a barely-there lift of his chin. “And you thought he should turn around and let it
all out, too?”

“I think—” he starts, but the sentence stutters and falters. He wets his lips, but his mouth still feels
dry. “I think a little reciprocity would’ve been nice.”

“Reciprocity,” Clint repeats.

“Yes.”

“From Tony Stark. You’ve met Stark, right?” When Bruce frowns, Clint spreads out his hands,
coffee mug and all. “The guy can talk for an hour and say nothing. Great trait for an appellate
attorney, sure, but probably pretty shitty when you’re his guy.”

The earnestness in Clint’s voice, warm and full, almost coaxes Bruce into a smile, but what comes
out instead is a tiny snort of a laugh. He shakes his head. “I wasn’t his ‘guy’ when I told him about
my parents,” he points out.

“You trusted him, though, right? He was pretty much your best friend?”

He shrugs. “Sure.”

“Then you were already on your way to being his guy.”

Bruce shakes his head again before dragging his fingers through his hair, but the frustrating problem
with Clint Barton is the fact that he’s so often right. Bruce’d noticed it within weeks of him starting
at the district attorney’s office—his talent not only for reading people, but reading them with a
preternatural correctness—and tracked it ever since. It amazes him, sometimes, that a man so terrified
of his own flaws can also quickly categorize everyone else’s, but he figures that’s just another one of
Clint’s thousand talents.

He lowers his hands and then moves to the couch, dropping onto the edge of it. He settles his elbows
on his legs while Clint trails after him. The other man settles heavily onto the cushions and even
kicks his feet up on the coffee table, but Bruce just stares at Miles’s creased book and Tony’s dog-
“I never expected it to go anywhere,” Bruce admits, remembering too clearly the moment almost a month earlier when he’d said almost the exact same thing to Natasha. “I thought enough nights of sushi and bad movies, we might fumble into something—”

“Don’t want to think of Stark fumbling,” Clint cuts in, and Bruce rolls his eyes.

“—but that it’d never turn into something bigger.” His hands rotate in a tiny circle that reminds him too much of Tony’s usual gestures, and he threads his fingers together. “But then he encouraged me to become Miles’s full-time placement, started spending all this time over here, and it grew.”

The last word feels heavier than all the ones before it. When he glances over, Clint’s sipping his coffee, his attention perfectly focused on Bruce. Bruce sighs and shakes his head. “I can’t remember the last time I was in a relationship,” he admits.

Clint promptly snorts. Bruce assumes it’s purposeful until he covers his mouth, coughs, and swallows what he suspects was an almost-inhaled mouthful of coffee. “Tell me about it. Before Phil, it was dates. Occasionally. Maybe.”

For the first time in what feels like an interminably long time, Bruce feels the ghost of a smile pressing at the corners of his lips. “I think it was even less for me,” he replies. He dips his head to stare at his hands. “I— My track record isn’t good. I’ve lost almost everyone I ever loved. My mother, other people I invested my energy in, they’re all gone.” He rubs the side of his thumb over a hangnail. “I’m not sure it’s worth it, really.”

“Hey, man, I was right there with you,” Clint says. “Then, I met Phil.”

His face is as open and honest as his tone, and suddenly, Bruce can’t remember the last time he’s heard Clint say something with as much conviction as he’s packed into those four words. Even at his disciplinary hearing, there’d been a tentativeness skirting around the edges of his words. He’d been nervous for his future, that day. Now, Bruce wonders whether he’s found his future in Phil Coulson.

They sit in silence for a few long minutes, Clint sipping his coffee and then wandering into the kitchen for a refill while Bruce stares at his hands. He remembers the thousand places his hands’ve been in the last two months: on Miles’s shoulders, wrapped around Miles’s back, touching his short-sheared hair or his forehead—or splayed against Tony’s skin, tangled in Tony’s fingers, tracing the shape of his muscles and his scar in the dark. Bruce knows that scar, the source of all his troubles, like he knows his own body. Give him a piece of paper and a pencil, he could probably draw the shape of it without looking.

He’d first seen it on a swelteringly-hot summer day years earlier. Tony’d peeled off his shirt and then flopped face-first into his pool, and it’d only been after he rolled over onto his back and spat water at Bruce that Bruce’d noticed the scar.

Bruce, for his part, had been sitting on the edge of the pool with his legs dangling, reading one of the potential textbooks he’d been vetting for his first-ever law school class. He’d wiped water from his glasses before asking, “What’s the scar from?”

Tony’d shrugged, as nonchalant as ever. “Nasty congenital heart thing amped up to eleven due to my once-amazing party lifestyle,” he’d answered casually. Bruce still remembers watching the way Tony’d run his fingers down the length of it. “Long surgery, longer recovery, better now.”

“Just like that?” Bruce’d asked.
“Just like that,” Tony’d retorted, and then grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him into the pool—glasses, textbook, and all.

A few months later, over dinner, Bruce’d stumbled his way through the complicated story of his father, his mother, and his six years in an orphanage.

And a few months after that, he’d and Dot’d “slept over” on Easter.

He’s still reminiscing, his mind wandering idly from one disconnected thought to another, when Clint comments, “So, what’re you gonna do?”

Bruce raises his head to find Clint back in the corner of the couch, still watching him as he cups his broad palms around the coffee mug. “Do?” he repeats.

Clint swings his legs down off the table and sets the mug down with a resounding thump. “You said Tony’s history could make the judge yank the kid, right?” he asks, and Bruce nods. “I think that kinda leaves you with three options. Number one, you dump your guy so you can keep your kid, like in that fucked-up King Solomon story where he cut the baby in half to make everybody happy.”

There’s a beat of silence before Bruce realizes he’s frowning. “King Solomon never cut the baby in half.”

Clint shrugs. “He did over at the Church of Barney’s Bedtime Stories,” he replies. “Number two, you dump your guy ‘cause you’re pissed that he didn’t tell you about all his broken parts, and you still get to keep your kid. Just, you know, without the guy who helped turn him into your kid.”

Bruce feels his fingers pull tighter against one another. He dips his head, staring at his still-folded hands. He considers a thousand denials—that Miles isn’t his child, that Tony is certainly not his “guy,” that Tony has nothing to do with his and Miles’s relationship—but he knows every one of those words is a lie.

“Or number three,” Clint says, his voice a little softer this time. “You and Tony fix it, and then both of you fight like hell to keep your kid. ‘Cause if nothing else, I’m pretty sure Dot’s already written a book called *Miles Has Two Daddies*.”

The last of his words trail off slowly, ebbing away into imperfect silence, but Bruce finds it nearly impossible to look up from his hands. He’s not prepared, really, for the honesty he knows he’ll find written all over Clint’s face. Everything about Clint—words, expression, manner—morphs when he’s serious, and for some reason, that seriousness is suddenly terrifying.

He wets his lips, then swallows around the lump in his throat. He’s still staring at his fingers when he murmurs, “I’m not sure if the way I feel can be fixed.”

A tiny noise of assent rumbles up from Clint’s throat, and when Bruce finally glances over, the other man’s mirroring his posture. Not on purpose, Bruce thinks, but because Clint’s learned more self-preservation in thirty-five years than most people learn in twice that and mimicking body language is just one of those skills. He dangles the coffee mug between his fingers, takes a sip, and then lets it settle between his legs again.

“I get it,” he says after a few seconds. “You expected one thing outta him and got another, fucking it all up. People do that. But here’s the part other people maybe won’t tell you, ‘cause it’s Stark we’re talking about.” He meets Bruce’s eyes, his expression entirely devoid of its usual easy humor. “The guy deserves a second chance.”

Bruce snorts and looks away again. “Why?”
“Because he loves you. I mean, if that doesn’t earn him a reprieve, what does?”

All of Bruce’s fraying self-restraint working together can’t contain the second bitter noise that bubbles from the back of his throat. He shakes his head. “I’m not entirely sure Tony’s capable of that sort of love, Clint.”

“Bruce.”

When he lifts his head, Clint’s attention is trained on him, sharp and focused. Phil’s jokingly called him an owl, before—wide-eyed, observant, sometimes eerily quiet—but right now, he reminds Bruce more of a hawk. Bruce rolls his lips together, but for whatever reason, he doesn’t drop his face away again.

“You don’t know this,” Clint says, certainty creeping into his voice, “but I’ve spent the last six months telling Tony that he’s gotta get his shit together and do something about you. And every time, he told me the same thing: that it was slow going, but he was working on it.”

Bruce can’t name the feeling that closes its fingers around his stomach, or the one that settles onto his chest and threatens to crush the breath out of him. He wants, momentarily, to duck his head again, to hide from the piercing focus of Clint’s gaze, but he knows it won’t do any good. Instead, he finds himself fighting off all the emotions he’s spent the last thirty-six hours avoiding: guilt, hurt, loneliness, shame, and—

Well, it’s past the point where he can deny it to anyone, including himself.

Love’s one of those emotions, too.

“I’ve never seen.” Clint continues, his fingers curling more tightly around the coffee mug in his hand, “somebody wait so long or work so hard toward getting what they want. And that’s counting me and Phil.” He shrugs. “If that’s not love, then I don’t know what is.”

Bruce spends a few seconds just looking at the man next to him, eyes tracing the lines on his face and the tight set of his jaw, before he shakes his head. The smile that pushes at the corners of his mouth isn’t genuine, necessarily, but it’s not entirely forced, either. It pools in his belly along with all the other feelings he can and can’t name.

“If Natasha were here,” he says finally, “she’d say all that’s funny, coming from you.”

Clint snorts. “Good thing she’s not here, then,” he retorts, and finishes his coffee in one hungry swig.

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“What’s going on?”

Pepper’s question is accompanied by the smack of her hand against Bruce’s desk, and Bruce nearly leaps straight out of his chair. Judge Smithe had cancelled all his afternoon hearings to deal with a juvenile bench trial that Thor’d thought would end in a plea deal—“The boy is as stubborn as he is criminal,” Thor’d complained over lunch—and Bruce had looked forward to a day of catch-up.

He glances away from his computer monitor, and Pepper glares. When he removes his glasses, her expression intensifies. “Going on?” he echoes.
“With you, Tony, and Miles, yes.”

Bruce immediately drops his eyes to his keyboard, rolling his lips together into what he hopes is at least a frown. Pepper rarely wastes time or words—she’s ruthlessly, almost mechanically efficient, which is part of why she and Tony work so well together—and he somehow feels like an ant beneath her magnifying glass. He considers lying, but he knows she’ll see right through it; he considers the truth, but the words feel as though they’re glued to the back of his tongue.

Truth is not something he’s particularly good at, right now.

“Tony’s not telling me anything,” Pepper presses, her hands falling to her hips. “He’s barely even coming out of his office. Meanwhile, I need at least one of you to—”

“It’s nothing,” Bruce assures her. He lifts his head and attempts a warm smile, but she immediately narrows her eyes.

“Don’t you dare lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” he promises, even though that itself is a second lie. “Nothing’s—”

“Bruce, I’ve been subpoenaed.” Her words ring through the room, whip-snap sharp, and Bruce’s half-formed reassurance dies on his lips. Her grip on her hips tightens, creasing the fabric of her blouse and skirt. Her eyes are instantly deadly. “So I’ll ask you again: what is going on?”

For a moment, Bruce honestly cannot form words. When they finally come together, they begin with, “Close the door.”

“I’m not—”

“Pepper.” He hears the crack in his own voice and watches as her face slowly softens. Her pink-lipped frown is almost devastating in its worry. Bruce thinks he’d feel touched if his heart wasn’t still aching. “Please.”

She does.

The last three days, Bruce thinks as he watches her clear off a chair and settle into it, have felt like the loneliest, emptiest, bleakest days of his life. He may clearly remember the years in the orphanage or his first twenty-four hours of confusion in Calcutta, but somehow, that doesn’t compare to the days without Tony. He’d spent Saturday and Sunday keeping Miles as busy as possible—they’d worked together on his science project and book report, wandered around the science center with Ganke, bought a couple cheap games for Bruce’s computer—but not even the activities chased away Tony’s ghost. A few times, he’d caught the boy staring at the pictures over the couch or the yellowing, scribbled notes (mostly Scrabble scores and half-lewd post-its) on Bruce’s fridge, and Bruce’d known he was wondering about Tony.

Sunday night, after the usual tooth-brushing and half-hearted tidying up, Miles’d flopped out on his bed. “Are we really just not gonna talk about it?” he’d asked.

Bruce’d paused, his hand halfway to the light switch. “Talk about what?”

“Tony.” Even after almost ten years of working with children, Bruce hadn’t been able to read Miles’s expression. He’d recognized a few of the emotions playing across his face—disappointment, fear, worry—but some went completely unnamed. “You said you didn’t break up, but you haven’t even texted him in two days.”
“You don’t know I haven’t texted him,” Bruce’d pointed out.

Miles’d scowled at him across the room. “You haven’t texted anyone.” Bruce’d snorted something dangerously close to a laugh, but in the end, he’d also dropped his eyes to the floor. “If all he did was drugs, that’s not that big a deal,” Miles’d added after a few seconds of heavy silence. When Bruce’d raised his eyes, the boy was staring up at the ceiling. “I’m pretty sure my dad and Uncle Aaron did drugs. Or maybe they were in a gang. I don’t know, I just know they did something bad back before I was born.”

Briefly, Bruce’d wondered whether Davis had ever abandoned that life. Instead, he’d shaken his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. “It’s complicated,” he’d finally said. “Tony’s past means you could be moved away, maybe really far away, and jeopardizing that—”

“What’s the point of me still being here if you’re sad all the time?” Miles’d interrupted. He’d sat up abruptly, kicking off the covers as he went. For the first time, Bruce’d realized that his pajama shirt was actually one of the Angry Birds t-shirts from Tony. He’d tried to force the pang of guilt from settling in his chest. “I get that you’re the foster dad, not Tony,” Miles’d pressed, his voice urgent and angry, “but since what happened at court, you’re weird and sad. I don’t care if you want to break up and still be awesome, but it’s pretty stupid if you’re doing it for me and then acting like everything in the world sucks.”

He’d flopped back onto the bed, then turned to face away from the doorway. “Miles,” Bruce’d said, but the boy’d just shaken his head.

“I like both of you, you know?” he’d asked, and pulled the covers up to his chin. Bruce’d hovered in the doorway for a long time before, finally, turning out the light.

He remembers Miles’s angry glare burning the same way Pepper’s attentive stare burns, steady as a laser light. He plays with the arm of his glasses for a moment before sighing. “Judge Rees might move Miles.”

“What?” Pepper demands, real dismay slipping into her usually-controlled tone. She raises a hand like she wants to cover her mouth. “Why? He does great with you. He’s practically your family at this point, I don’t—”

“His uncle’s attorney knew information about Tony’s past,” Bruce interrupts. Pepper’s honest worry coils in his belly like a boa constrictor. “He said Tony’d lost his job—I assume at Cramer and March—because of drug abuse, and since Tony’d never filled out his intake, no one could confirm or deny his secret addict past.”

The last three words pop out from between Bruce’s lips like gunshots, bitter cracks that Bruce knows immediately he can’t actually retract, but none of that compares to the seriousness in Pepper’s tone when she says, “He wasn’t an addict.”

The next seconds play out like a moment in one of the cartoons Miles keeps queuing up on Netflix: Bruce’s head jerks up to stare at Pepper, Pepper’s face flushes red as she actually covers her mouth, and they blink at one another in silence. Bruce is almost certain he’s never seen the unflappable Pepper Potts embarrassed before, and he once witnessed Thor outing her and Natasha at a cocktail party.

( Natasha’d spent the rest of the night grumbling about murdering people with her left shoe.)

“I’m sorry,” Pepper says, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t’ve said that. I’m actually under a non-disclosure agreement that Obadiah Stane and Tony made me sign years ago, I—”
She trails off, then, leaving Bruce to gape blankly at her. The color retreats from her cheeks and she folds her hands in her lap, but he detects a lingering worry playing across her expression. Especially when she shifts and says, “You should ask Tony about it.”

Bruce snorts. “Because that’s gone so well for me up to this point.”

“Expecting him to tell you outright isn’t the same as asking, Bruce. I think sometimes what happened is the lowest he’s ever been, and to—”

“I asked about his scar, Pepper,” he cuts in, his voice sharper than he necessarily means it to be, and he watches as her lips snap shut. “We’ve spent entire nights sitting up, wandering through the worst parts of our lives. At least, I thought we did.” He shakes his head and swivels to stare at his screensaver. The bouncing bubbles do nothing to improve his mood. “He said he’d do the intake. He said he’d protect Miles so he didn’t end up somewhere else. And now, after all that, I find out that he held back the one thing that everyone needed to know.”

He’s tracking the progress of a blue bubble across the screen when Pepper replies, “Tony’s fear of showing weakness doesn’t take away from what you two have.”

“You sure about that?”

He suspects Pepper’ll leave after the silence in the room becomes too much, after the pressure’s risen to bursting. His screen flickers into power save mode, and in his pale-faced reflection, he can clearly see the hurt that’s playing across his features. Hurt, he thinks, and exhaustion, the combination of the fight with Tony and the frustration Miles’s spent two days wearing like a badge of honor.

Finally, Pepper sighs.

“I don’t know exactly what was wrong with his heart,” she says quietly, and Bruce twists to look at her. She’s staring at her hands, shaking her head until a tendril of red-blonde hair slips out of the twist and falls alongside her face. “I know it was congenital, I know he should’ve taken care of it when he was in college, but I also know how well he took care of himself in college. And graduate school. And, actually, law school after that.” She snorts an almost inaudible laugh. “When he finally needed surgery, it took a lot out of him. I’d just started at Cramer and March, I don’t know all the gory details, but I know it was— Well, it was bad.” Bruce watches her rub her thumbs together softly. “He was in a lot of pain. Physical pain, mostly, but some emotional pain too. He needed painkillers to manage it.”

When she glances up, her entire face is soft. Contemplative, almost, but Bruce thinks he recognizes fear there, too. Tony Stark, he knows, is a man with a thousand fair-weather friends, but Bruce can count on one hand the people who’ve remained loyal to him over the years.

Rhodey, for one, a friend of Tony’s from a hundred years before either of them worked in the judicial complex. Obadiah Stane, the CEO of Stark Industries and Tony’s second father. Pepper, the loyal paralegal who followed him from Cramer and March.

And him, he catches himself thinking. At least, it used to be.

“After about six months, when it became clear that it was more than just complications from the surgery, someone reported it to the managing partners at the firm,” she continues, shaking her head again. “They sat him down and issued an ultimatum: either he left voluntarily to get his act together, or they’d fire him and report him to the bar disciplinary committee. So Tony emptied out his desk, packed his bags, and spent a few months putting his life back together at Four Oaks.”
“The rehab facility for the rich-and-famous?” Bruce asks, blinking. Pepper nods. “I know Tony has the money, but I thought you had to be a rock star or an actor to get a room there.”

“Obie—Obadiah—pulled some strings,” Pepper replies, shrugging slightly. “Not without a catch, of course, because Obadiah’s nothing if he’s not a businessman. The quid pro quo was that Tony took a less active role in Stark Industries. He became a figurehead, a shareholder on the board and the head of the charities, and pretty much turned the company over to Obie.” She purses her lips for a long, tense moment. “When he felt like his head was on straight,” she continues, “Tony checked himself out of Four Oaks, verified with the partners that he really was better, and started looking for a new job. I’d barely started perusing the ‘wanted’ ads when he called and asked me to be his trial assistant.”

Bruce nearly smiles, a little jolt of warmth he doesn’t quite expect climbing into his chest. “Because you’re the world’s most capable paralegal,” he surmises with a shake of his head.

“Because he knew I was the person who turned him in to the partners,” Pepper returns. Bruce spends a second trying to process that information, but she barely pauses for breath. “He said he needed someone to be his conscience while he tried to reboot everything he’d worked for.”

Despite everything else rushing through his head, all tangled, disorganized, and refusing to compute correctly, Bruce snorts a tiny laugh. “That doesn’t sound like Tony.”

“Are you sure?” she retorts, raising her eyebrows. “Because he convinced you to move from never getting invested in a child to loving one as your own.”

“I don’t—”

“No, you do. And more than that, Tony does, too.” She raises a hand and tucks her loose strand of hair behind her ear. Bruce’s always thought of her as placid, a calm sea breeze when compared to Tony’s wild fire; right now, she’s somehow proving him right. She purses her lips, breathes in, and then raises her chin until she meets his eyes. “Bruce, he almost lost everything he worked for, but he pulled himself back from it.”

It’s full seconds before Bruce drops his eyes away. When he shakes his head, it’s with a huff of breath that sounds suspiciously like a sigh. “Because of you, maybe.”

“Me? Oh, no, not me.” For a moment, he thinks he can hear one of her tiniest, coyest smiles. “No, my big mouth might’ve started him down the straight and narrow, but you know who I think really saved him?”

When Bruce picks his head up, she catches and holds his eyes.

“You.”

She says it with absolute certainty, like a universal axiom that’s never been disproved, and Bruce glances away again. He stares out the window at the thin streaks of December sun forcing their way through the thick cloud cover, but the quiet of a winter afternoon can’t clear his thoughts. He tries futilely to imagine the Tony Stark of Pepper’s memory—scarred and in pain, relying first on painkillers and then strangers just to drag himself through a day—but he keeps returning instead to the Tony he knows.

Laughing, energetic, perpetually-kind Tony, the Tony who’s goaded him into a thousand things he’s never once regretted.

He listens to Pepper rise from the chair and the dull sound of her heels against the carpeting. She’s
almost silent as she moves across the office and opens the door. Bruce glances over his shoulder at her and studies the lean line of her back before he asks, “What about Vanko?”

She looks over at him and shakes her head. “I can’t tell you the whole story,” she replies. “Some things need to be left for Tony.”

Bruce nods and watches her step out of the office and disappear down the hallway. All the usual noise is there, the constant hum of activity that perpetually fills the district attorney’s office, but he hardly hears it.

He’s too busy thinking about the Tony who existed at Cramer and March, and the Tony who exists here, at the D.A.’s office.

He can’t really believe they’re one in the same.

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Wednesday morning, the first e-mail to rush into Bruce’s Outlook inbox comes complete with the subject line *don’t delete this just because you hate me right now*

Just a glance at the name attached to the message—as though Bruce needs to glance at the name at all—weighs down Bruce’s shoulders with a tension and uncertainty that’s plagued him for the last twenty-four hours. He’d successfully forced himself through the rest of his work day after Pepper walked out of his office, but parenting’d proven an entire different matter. Miles’d skulked into the car, deposited himself in the passenger seat, and crossed his arms over his chest, as morose as Bruce’d ever seen him. Questions about school were fielded with one- and two-word answers, and Bruce’d finally abandoned all hope and allowed the boy to rest his forehead against the car window.

Three blocks from the house, Miles’d broken his silence to ask, “Can I go to Tony’s while you’re at class tomorrow night?”

Bruce’d jerked his head in Miles’s direction with enough force that the car swerved with him. He’d counted himself lucky that they’d already made it into his neighborhood. “What?”

“If he can’t come over, can I go over there?” Miles’d twisted around in the seat to peer at him. Something in his expression was, for the first time, distinctly unfriendly. “I haven’t seen him since Thursday, and you can’t leave me home alone.”

Rolling his lips together, Bruce’d tried to ignore the heat of Miles’s continued half-glare. He’d turned two corners before he’d finally answered, “No.”

“But—”

“I know Jessica Drew explained some of this to you,” Bruce’d interrupted without ever glancing away from the road. His hands’d felt too-tight around the steering wheel. “Until everything with Tony’s sorted out, you shouldn’t be alone with him. That’s why you’re going to Steve and Bucky’s.”

“So I need a babysitter to hang out with my own foster dad?”

Even now, Bruce isn’t sure what surprised him most about the question: the anger that fueled every
word, or the use of the term “foster dad” in relation to Tony. When he glanced over at Miles at the next stop sign, he discovered that the boy’d shrunk down into the recesses of the seat, arms crossed over his chest. “Never mind,” he’d muttered bitterly.

He’d closed himself in his room to do his homework, that night, and only wandered down for dinner and to snag his book of the coffee table.

It was the loneliest Bruce’d felt in a very long time.

He stares at the e-mail for a long time, the letters blurring slightly in his vision, before he pushes out of his seat. He walks to the break room, pours himself a cup of coffee and helps himself to a slice of coffee cake from the enormous “Welcome back, Clint!” spread, and then, wanders the halls. He spends a few minutes listening to Phil and Darcy (of all duos) enthusiastically discuss the latest The Walking Dead trade paperback, then walks past a conversation between Peggy, Jane, and Maria that ends in Maria declaring she’ll absolutely never have children. Eventually, he ends up eating his coffee cake in Clint’s office while Clint and Natasha bicker about the weather.

“It’s not going to snow,” Natasha says, irritably flipping a page in her case file.

“But I like snow,” Clint argues. He’s lounging on the nest of pillows that once was merely a window ledge, his cheek nearly pressed against the windowpane. “It’s not really December until there’s snow.”

“With global warming, there might never be snow again,” Natasha retorts, and Bruce nearly chokes on his coffee cake.

When he returns to his office, though, the e-mail is still there, staring up at him amongst all the correspondence from social workers and random forwarded messages from the clerk.

He hesitates, then double-clicks it open.

i’m not asking for a truce because i know i won’t get one. but if it’s okay with you, i wanna stop by steve and buck’s tonight and hang with the kid.

The breath rushes from Bruce’s lungs like someone’s punched him in the stomach, and inhaling is suddenly painful. He forces down a mouthful of coffee, but his chest seizes all over again when he re-reads the e-mail.

Opening up a reply window feels like the hardest thing he’s ever done.

You need to stay at the apartment, he types back. He can feel the tremor in his wrists and hands, an unsteady shake that he can’t entirely control. His fingertips feel cold, but curling them into his palms does nothing to warm them. I don’t want it to get back to the judge that you and he were alone together.

Tony’s response zips through before Bruce’s even attempted to quell the churning of his stomach. i promise i won’t even let them out of the room for a ten minute quickie.

The laugh that escapes Bruce’s mouth is entirely unexpected, but he can’t help it. For a split second, he wants to abandon all the hurt and anger of the last six days and sob.

He misses Tony’s warmth and laughter like a limb, like he’s lost part of his body. Part of his heart, he catches himself thinking, and he swears his whole body aches from the thought alone.

Thinking of Miles does nothing to ease that particular ache.
But then he thinks about life without Miles, and all the fresher, sharper hurt rushes back in.

*Make sure they know that,* he writes back, and he’s not entirely surprised when Tony’s only other retort is a winking smiley face.

After that, surviving his Wednesday morning is deceptively easy. He attends a handful of hearings, catches up on incident reports involving children not yet in state custody, and sorts out plans for a quickly-approaching parental rights termination trial. By lunch, he’s spoken on the phone to a half-dozen different people, cleared off a corner of his desk, and transformed himself into something almost human.

Except when he walks into Steve’s office to ask whether anyone has lunch plans, Bruce finds him and Bucky bent over Subway sandwiches and arguing about alternative charges.

“Sorry,” Bruce says, moving to step out of the doorway, but Steve shakes his head and waves him back in. He wipes his mouth discretely while Bucky chomps down on a potato chip.

He’s not even halfway done chewing before he asks, “This mean you’re talking again?”

Steve rolls his eyes. “I thought we were going with subtlety,” he complains.

His husband shrugs. “You were chewing.”

“And I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bruce informs both of them, turning up his hands. Bucky snorts a half-laugh and reaches for another chip while Steve stares him down. “What?”

“Tony forwarded us the e-mails about visiting Miles tonight,” Steve says after a few more seconds, and Bruce can’t contain the full-body sigh that escapes his pursed lips. He pinches the bridge of his nose, acutely aware that both Steve and Bucky are watching his every move. “It’s good,” Steve presses, sounding more like a relationship counselor than an attorney. “Pepper told me—”

“After he bribed her with god-knows-what,” Bucky notes.

“—that things haven’t been great between you two lately, but if this is the way to start making amends—”

“I’m not ‘making amends,’ Steve,” Bruce interrupts before the entire interaction swerves violently into the realm of Doctor Phil. “He misses Miles, and Miles misses him. It’s not in his best interest to cut off contact completely, even if the court’d probably disagree with me.”

“In Tony’s best interest, or in Miles’s?” He narrows his eyes at Bucky, who shrugs. “Look, I don’t know what exactly he did to piss you off, and I’m not going to pump our coworkers to find out—”

“All I did was ask a question,” Steve points out.

“—but I’ve got to wonder who this is all for: the kid, Tony, or your probably-guilty conscience.”

Something like amusement lifts the end of Bucky’s commentary, and Bruce shakes his head as he steps away from the doorway. “I’ll see you when I bring Miles over,” he says.

And he’s surprised how easy it is to breathe around the stone in his stomach after he hears Bucky call after him, “You know it’s gonna be hell explaining your break-up to our kid, right?”

He finishes work around the usual time, and if he clicks the “send/receive” button on Outlook a few more times than he should, well, no one is any the wiser. He’s not entirely sure what he expects—
another message about spending the afternoon with Miles? An apology? An offer to talk?—but either way, he’s rewarded with silence. Silence plagues him in the car, too, where Miles sits with his arms crossed and once again avoids meaningful conversation except to tell Bruce what he wants from the drive-through. They eat in the living room at the house while something mindless streams on the television.

Bruce considers breaking the silence several times and telling Miles that Tony’ll be at Steve and Bucky’s, but he’s not sure he should ruin the surprise.

He’s already almost late when they pull into the parking lot at Steve and Bucky’s apartment complex, maneuvering through the early-winter dark that’s hardly broken by the yellow-white light from the street lamps. Miles slouches in his seat, clearly annoyed at the entire arrangement, and with every passing second, Bruce’s heart sinks further into his stomach.

At least, until Miles spots the silver Audi parked alongside Steve’s ridiculous, five-star-safety-rating sedan.

In the dark, Bruce can’t see enough of Miles’s face to fully gauge his reaction, but his actions scream a thousand times louder than any lip-twitch or raised eyebrow. He’s unhooked his seatbelt before Bruce is fully in the empty parking spot and out the passenger-side door before the car’s even in park. He charges up the stairs to Steve and Bucky’s apartment at full-throttle, abandoning his backpack and half-finished soda.

Bruce kills the engine just in time to hear the shout of excitement echo through the early evening air. For a moment, he sits silently in the car, unable to describe even to himself the feeling that’s slowly stealing his breath away.

When he finally makes it to the front door, Miles’s backpack dangling limply from one hand, Steve’s already waiting for him in the entryway. Behind him, Dot’s squealing in excitement while literally bouncing, Bucky’s shouting at her to come get in her bath, and Miles—Miles is gripped firmly in Tony’s arms, Tony’s fingers digging into his winter coat while Miles buries his face in Tony’s chest. Whatever they’re saying’s too quiet for Bruce to hear, but the visual alone is enough.

“I’ll be back around nine-thirty,” he hears himself tell Steve as he passes the backpack over. It’s an abrupt, half-urgent movement, and Steve nearly drops it.

“You could come in and say—”

“Nine-thirty,” Bruce repeats, and immediately walks away.

He finds no joy in the game of finals review Jeopardy he plays with his class, in discussing common errors in their papers, or in answering any last burning questions they might have. He can’t find the energy to smile at any of them, even as Sam shakes his hand to thank him for a great semester and Kitty brags about submitting her paper to an essay contest. Everything, every thought and breath, circles back to Miles, Tony, and the strange phantom-limb sensation that keeps strangling the breath out of his chest.

Six weeks ago, he thought his life was complete. He thought his work, his class, and his friends were absolutely enough.

Now, he’s not so sure.

He sits in the parking lot outside Steve and Bucky’s apartment until almost ten p.m., watching the
light burn in the window that overlooks the lot and wishing in an impossible, almost juvenile way that he could turn back the clock a few weeks. He wants the past version of himself to press Tony about the intake, to harass him until all the paperwork’s filled in, and then to lie in bed and reopen the wounds they’ve each only really revealed to the other. He wants to claw his way through the story of Brian Banner’s illness and insanity, to tear the door to honesty wide open, and ensure that Miles will stay safe.

That their life, together, will stay safe.

The apartment’s quiet when, at a quarter after ten, Steve opens the door to Bruce’s knocking. “Sorry,” Bruce apologizes, shoving his hands in his pockets. Miles toes on his shoes, his eyes cast on the floor, and hovering next to him—

Bruce can’t remember a time Tony Stark—vibrant, impossible, unstoppable Tony Stark—has looked so tired. Dark circles bruise his eyes, his hair’s a mess, and he wears ratty jeans with a truly horrendous green sweater. Bruce actually suspects it’s the sweater from their Christmas “ugly sweater” party two years ago, one Tony kept expressly because it was “warm, comfy, and only three bucks at Goodwill.”

Tony shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Bruce wets his lips, but can’t form words.

Finally, Tony lifts his shoulders. “Hey,” he says softly.

Bruce swallows. “Hey.”

“Thanks. For, you know, tonight.” Tony’s next shrug is almost mechanical, a robotic lift-and-fall of his normally-loose shoulders. He slides his hands into his back pockets, hesitates in that position, and then drops them to his side. “We did some pre-algebra, read up on semi-colon usage, filled out a mind map. Cool stuff like that.”

His voice is absolutely joyless.

And just when Bruce thought he couldn’t ache any worse.

“That sounds good,” he says dumbly after another few, long seconds. He watches Miles gather up his backpack and sling it over his shoulder, but the boy pauses halfway to the doorway. He glances in Bruce’s direction, purses his lips, and then steps back into the apartment. Tony grips him just as hard the first time, and Bruce—

Bruce stares at the floor instead of watching.

It’s a full minute later before Miles walks willingly out of the apartment, provided “willingly” includes dragging his feet and staring at the ground. Bruce thanks Steve and wishes him a good night, but for some reason, he can’t glance back at Tony.

He wants to trust himself to make the right decision, to protect Miles and the hurt that still twists in his chest, but he wants to press himself into Tony’s arms, too. He wants to fix all the broken things, to figure out exactly how many bridges they’ve accidentally burned, and repair the ones he can.

He wants—

“How big guy?”

The nickname’s tremulous, more a whisper than anything else, and Bruce stops in the doorway as though he’s been dropped in ice. Dozens of people say his given name in an average week, but only
one person in the world’s ever called him “big guy.”

He swallows and, slowly, glances over his shoulder. Tony meets his eyes, and a sliver of pink tongue snakes out to wet his lips.

“Just FYI, and all that,” he says carefully, and Bruce suspects that every syllable is a struggle in self-control, “I finished up the intake first thing Monday. Faxed it over and everything. Jess says she’s working on it.”

Bruce is surprised how genuinely pleased his voice sounds—and how easily the corners of his lips lift—when he replies, “I’m glad.”

Halfway through the drive home, as they pass ambitious homes already displaying Christmas lights in the quiet winter dark, Miles presses his face against his arm and says, “This must be what it feels like when your parents get divorced.”

“Maybe,” Bruce murmurs, and wonders whether missing someone in a divorce hurts anywhere near as much as missing Tony.

Chapter End Notes

I know next to nothing about medicine. I therefore decided the best choice was to be purposely vague, not name Tony’s specific heart condition, and leave it at that. Forgive my intentional vagueness.
Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce’s friends intervene, helping to remind him that the life he has is worth fighting for. Whether the court will agree, however, is a different matter—especially as Vanko wants nothing more than to tear Bruce’s life apart.

Chapter Notes

My poor betas. Both this and the next chapter are over forty pages long, therefore doubling the number of errors they were forced to suffer through. How do they ever survive my brands of torture? Jen and saranoh are just the best.

“Bruce Banner, this is your intervention,” Bucky says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“No, it’s not,” Bruce retorts, but when he turns around to leave the restaurant, Clint is bodily blocking the door.

It’s Friday afternoon at one p.m., a late time for a lunch, and the burgers-and-wings joint three blocks from the judicial center is completely empty except for their party of six and an old man watching golf on one of the big-screen TVs. The whole place smells like grilling meat and hot sauce, neither of which count as Bruce’s absolute favorite things, but he’d been grateful for the chance to escape the office, stretch his legs, and spend time with Natasha and Clint.

Natasha’s standing just to Clint’s left, her hands settled on her hips and her shoulders squared. At her shoulder hovers Pepper, winter coat abandoned somewhere but a thick scarf still around her throat. When Bruce turns away from them, it’s to glance over his shoulder at Bucky and Steve.

Bucky and Steve, who’d disappeared at noon for a “private couple’s lunch” (Clint’s words).

Bucky and Steve, who look ready to pounce should Bruce decide to find the restaurant’s back door.

A waitress in a sports jersey that boasts the name of the restaurant pops out of the dining area and flashes them all winning smiles. “Miss Potts, your table’s ready.”

Pepper smiles indulgently. “Thank you, Amber,” she says. When she steps away from the door, Natasha follows on her heels, but Clint remains. The longer Bruce watches him, the tighter he holds his shoulders; he eventually looks more like a statue of the idealized man—barrel-chested, broad-
shouldered, and stern—than an actual human being.

“Bruce,” Steve murmurs behind him, voice low and exceptionally gentle. Even without looking, Bruce can picture his soft frown and the worry etching its way across his face.

Bruce sighs. “I’m hungry,” he informs them all, and heads obediently into the dining area.

Pepper sends him one of her most sympathetic glances as he sinks into one of the hard wooden chairs and picks up his menu, but he refuses to meet her eyes. Since Wednesday, his life’s once again felt like a rollercoaster ride he’s not been able to control, coursing up and down while he’s clutched on for dear life. He’d tossed and turned all night after seeing Tony at Steve and Bucky’s, but then awoke to a much happier, much more compassionate Miles. Over breakfast, he’d retold stories of the night before—some involving Tony, some involving Dot, some involving Bucky’s utter inability to successfully bathe his daughter—and actually dazzled Bruce with a few of his usual warm smiles.

A few blocks from school, he’d glanced away from the window to comment, “Being mad all the time must suck, you know?”

Bruce’d almost assumed it to be an accusation, another razor-sharp question about the last week of Miles’s life, but a cursory glance revealed that the boy’s eyes were soft and considering. Bruce’d forced a smile before he’d shaken his head. “It’s never all the time.”

“I think my dad was mad pretty much all the time,” Miles’d replied. Out of the corner of his eye, Bruce’d caught him shrugging. “At least at my uncle.”

“Anger doesn’t live in isolation,” Bruce’d said quietly, pulling into the middle school’s parking lot. He’d killed the engine and then glanced over to where Miles was still watching him, face open and actively curious. Young, Bruce’d thought for the first time in several weeks. The face of a kid instead of the wise-beyond-his-years almost-teen Bruce usually dealt with. “It’s wrapped up in a lot of other emotions, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like disappointment, sadness, grief, hurt—”

“Those are still all pretty bad emotions,” Miles’d interrupted. His face’d crumpled into a slow frown.

Bruce’d felt the corners of his lips twitch up into a smile. “I never claimed they weren’t,” he’d retorted, and reached over to squeeze Miles around the shoulders before he climbed out of the car.

Amber-the-waitress, with her entirely too-tight black pants and fake sports jersey, appears suddenly at Bruce’s elbow, and he jerks out of his thoughts to order an iced tea. She chirps her way through everyone else’s drinks, promises Bucky that his appetizer sampler is well on its way, and disappears again.

Bruce picks up his menu, fully aware that every eye at the table is narrowed in on him. He studies the list of potential hot wing sauces and refuses to lift his head.

Finally, someone across from him heaves a long-suffering sigh. “How much longer does this have to go on?” Natasha demands, her tone hard-edged and flinty. “Because I’m not sure we can take another week of this.”

“And this is about you,” Bruce returns, still not looking up.

“It’s about all of us,” Steve offers. In his peripheral vision, Bruce watches his hands open in what he
assumes is some sort of surrender. “I know it’s easy to be hurt—”

“He’s kind of the king of butthurt,” Bucky interjects.

“—when someone you love lets you down.” Bruce suspects the tightness in Steve’s tone has more to do with Bucky than his motivational speech. “But you’re both practically ghosts at this point, and that can’t possibly be healthy for either of you.”

“Or,” Clint puts in, leaning back in his chair, “for your kid.”

Bruce flips a page in his menu, his fingers curling against the lamination. Beside him, Clint’s chair creaks as he balances it on two legs and crosses his arms over his chest. It’s a challenging posture, and Bruce feels the heat of those watchful eyes on the side of his face.

He’s really only used to Tony watching him that closely.

And he’s still not used to even the barest, most fleeting thought of Tony causing his breath to catch in the back of his throat.

He sighs as he sets down his menu. “I know you all think there’s something to talk about,” he finally says, his thumbnail picking at the edge of the table, “but there’s not. The court’ll decide on Monday whether Miles can stay, and—”

“And what?” Bucky demands, throwing up his hands. “There’s no and in this unless it’s and then I’ll make up with Tony so he finally looks like a human again.”

Before Bruce can open his mouth, Pepper nods in agreement. “Or one that ends in you promising to leave your office.”

“And stop hiding out in the law library downstairs,” Clint adds, his chair rocking slightly.

“Hiding out or running away,” Bucky notes.

“Or dodging entire conversations,” Natasha tags on as she folds her hands atop her closed menu.

At the end of the table, Steve opens his palms again. For a moment, Bruce thinks he’ll stop the conversation in its swiftly-derailing tracks, but then he rolls his lips together. “And the conversations go beyond us, too,” he stresses, and Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose in an attempt to overcome his rising headache. “Because you’re not required to talk to your friends, but you can’t forget that there’s a child here, and he—”

“Does nobody care about how I feel?”

The strength and anger that erupts in Bruce’s near-shout surprises him, and his voice echoes across the mostly-empty restaurant. Their waitress, laden down with a tray of drinks, freezes in the middle of her bounding approach, the old man eating alone stops chewing, and Clint drops his chair back to all four legs. His friends attempt to hide their reactions—Pepper recovers quite nicely from her flinch, Steve unwinds his fingers from their death-grip on his menu, Natasha quells the up-tick of one perfect eyebrow—but he knows the damage’s done.

When he exhales, it’s to stare at the nicked wooden tabletop and slow his heart rate. He listens to the plastic clunk of six glasses settling on the table, but says absolutely nothing.

Bucky thanks the waitress, and then the room’s silent again save for the polite clapping of spectators on the golf show.
“Bruce,” Natasha says. Her voice is quiet, but not without the note of warning.

He shakes his head. “I know you all mean well,” he replies. For all the spitfire anger of the last ten seconds, the words now stick in the back of his throat. He swallows around them. “I know you’re trying to—help and that you think this is what’s best for me, but it’s not.”

“So if this isn’t what’s best for you, what is?” Clint asks, spreading out his hands. Bruce glances in his direction, and he feels the frown tightening his brow. “Cutting Tony out like a tumor? Never speaking to him again?”

Bruce resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Not everything is black and white,” he defends. His fingers toy idly with the packet of rolled-up silverware in front of him. “Our relationship is complicated, and I think my life—”

“You mean the life that’s already Tony’s?” Natasha interrupts. When Bruce looks across the table, her expression is hard and cold. Like a stone bust, he thinks, chiseled out of marble and incapable of empathy. She hardly blinks. “He’s been part of you for as long as I’ve known you. Nobody at this table but you thinks what happened in court changed that.”

Bruce opens his mouth to build some sort of response, a defense against the accusation that his life is not is own, when Amber reappears with an enormous appetizer platter and her order pad at the ready. The other dig into the fried vegetables, mozzarella sticks, jalapeño poppers, and cheese dip, but Bruce just keeps rolling his silverware packet between his hands.

He tries to convince himself that his life and Tony’s are separate entities, divided cleanly down the middle with the sort of bright line he just informed Clint doesn’t exist, but he knows that’s a lie. He’d known it the night before, when Miles—flopped out on the couch and idly paging through one of the astronomy textbooks from upstairs—had asked, “Can I call Tony?”

For once, Bruce’d finished his work early and was actually reading for leisure. He’d glanced over only to discover that Miles was stalwartly refusing to raise his eyes from the book. He’d almost smiled, but then the bundle of tightly-wound nerves in his belly had exerted their control. “About?” he’d asked.

He’d tried to keep his tone warm, but he’d watched as Miles stopped swinging his legs, and as his grip tightened on the book. “I just thought it’d be pretty cool to talk to him.”

“Oh.” When Bruce’d glanced away momentarily, his eyes’d landed on one of the many pictures hanging on the wall above the couch. Steve’d snapped it at the previous year’s New Year’s Eve party, a ridiculous monument to Thor’s nearly-poisonous vodka punch and Maria’s heavily-spiked eggnog. Tony’s sprawled across him in the picture, his impeccable suit rumpled and the fedora he’d attempted to pass off as an “Al Capone” hat pulled down over one eye. They’re laughing, though, red-faced and lost in some joke Bruce no longer remembers.

He learned later that Steve’d attempted to replace it twice, but to no avail. “It’s one of my favorites,” Tony’d defended, crossing his arms over his chest.

Bruce’d smiled while he’d admitted, “I like it, too.”

He’d stared at the picture for a long time in the silence of the living room, interrupted only by Miles’s breathing. “I’ll set you up with Skype,” he’d said finally.

Miles’d nearly fallen off the couch in his urgent scramble to sit up. Bruce’d bitten back a laugh, then lost the battle against it when the astronomy book went tumbling under the coffee table. “I’ll grab
“your laptop,” Miles’d said, and disappeared upstairs.

Bruce’d listened to them talk for an hour and a half about absolutely nothing, meandering through conversations about school, Ganke’s latest disaster in science lab, and exactly how many times a cute girl who Bruce didn’t even know about had winked at Miles.

Halfway through the conversation, when Bruce’d passed between Miles to go turn on another lamp, Tony’d stopped in the middle of a sentence. Bruce’d dropped his eyes to the monitor in time to catch Tony waving.

He’d waved back.

“Your order?” Amber the waitress asks, and Bruce nearly overbalances his chair as he jerks back to reality. He realizes belatedly that someone’s loaded up a plate with a mozzarella stick, two jalapeño poppers, and a handful of tortilla chips and left it in front of him. He forces a smile, orders a chicken sandwich, and sends Amber on her way.

He’s still staring at the food in front of him when Pepper notes, “Bruce, you and Tony have been joined at the hip since he started working at the district attorney’s office.” She stirs her soda with her straw, foam rising to the top, and then takes a sip. “I don’t think you can argue that your life and his are all that separate.”

“Hell, I thought you guys were dating the first time I met you,” Bucky offers. He shrugs as he tears into a cheese stick. “First Christmas party I ever went to, back when Steve was an intern with dreams of sleeping his way to the top, and the only thing I came away with was that the quiet guy and Steve’s loud-mouthed ex-boss were doing it.”

Steve rolls his eyes and steals a spear of fried zucchini off his husband’s plate. “You’re charming.”

“I’m honest.”

“Much as I hate to admit it, Tasha’s right,” Clint says with a little shake of his head. Across the table, Natasha flicks her balled-up straw wrapper at him. “You keep talking about your life like it’s got these two parts: the Tony part, and the not-Tony part.” He pauses to suck a stray glob of cheese dip off the side of his thumb. “I think they’re more like the same thing.”

Despite the plate of steaming food in front of him, the glass of untouched iced tea beside it, and the faces of five of his friends all pinning him to the spot, the only thing Bruce can really look at is Clint. Clint raises his eyebrows, then meets Bruce’s gaze, and for a minute, they stare at each other.

Bruce thinks he knows the answer when he asks, “Meaning?”

What he doesn’t expect is that it’s Natasha who replies, “Meaning Tony Stark is your life.”

She leans forward and lifts her glass of water as soon as she says it, but her eyes never leave Bruce’s face. He wonders for a moment what she’s able to detect in his expression, what emotions his eyes and mouth betray even when he’s silent. He rolls his lips together, then wets them, but his chest feels too tight to inhale; when the tension finally loosens enough that he can breathe, he knows everyone’s waiting for him to say something.

For a moment, he’s aware of every sound around him: Clint crunches down on a chip, the ice in Steve’s glass tinkles together, Bucky shifts to reach for more dip, Pepper stirs her soda again. The spectators on the golf show clap, and Amber the waitress chirps at the old man in the booth. Only Natasha is silent.
Silent, Bruce thinks, and focused in a way that reminds him of a predator stalking prey.

He finally exhales.

“Tony, he’s— Tony Stark isn’t a life, not for me or anyone else.” He fans out his fingers on the tabletop, staring at them rather than the eyes tracking his every move. “He’s a force of nature or an act of God, a hurricane who sweeps in and has the potential to destroy everything he touches.” He shakes his head. “I can’t survive that.”

He’s hardly drawn in his next breath when Steve asks, “Can you imagine life without him?”

The force in his voice is enough to bring Bruce’s head up, and he abandons his study of his own fingernails to meet the intensity of Steve’s stare. Steve’s jaw tightens, his Adam’s apple bobs, and Bruce wonders for a second whether he’s ever seen Steve angry before.

Then he realizes that Steve isn’t angry as much as he is worried, and that his concern outweighs every other emotion he might be battling.

“I—”

“It’s a yes or no question,” Natasha cuts in, and Bruce raises a hand to rub his forehead.

“Look,” Steve presses, his hands curled around his glass. “You and Tony’ve been running circles around one another as long as I’ve worked at this office. As much as you might want to be, you’re not two separate people anymore. You’re a team.” Bruce drops his gaze to study the way Steve’s fingers flex and tighten. He feels like those fingers are clenching around his lungs, too. “You’re Uncle Tony and Uncle Bruce. You’re attorneys-for-the-appellee Banner and Stark. You might be great apart, but you’re better together.”

“And,” Bucky adds quietly, “you balance him out.”

“Like nobody else in the world does,” Pepper agrees. Bruce catches her nodding out of the corner of his eye.

“You’ve survived the hurricane for years,” Steve continues. There’s none of Pepper’s quiet consideration or Bucky’s caution in his tone. Every word is full-voiced and presented without hesitation. Bruce suddenly knows why Phil and Maria both rely so heavily on Steve as a second chair on important trials. “I think the real question is whether you can survive without it.”

“And more than that,” Bucky picks up, “whether your kid can survive without it.”

The group falls silent then, leaving Bruce to swallow around the rising lump in the back of his throat. He wants to protest, throwing out all the usual arguments—that Tony’s betrayed his trust, that Miles isn’t his son—but the words all jumble together before they reach his tongue.

Because he’d watched Miles and Tony wish one another goodnight over Skype, and he’d felt like part of his heart was missing.

Because he’d woken up at two a.m. and couldn’t stop himself from peeking in on Miles.

Because Tony isn’t the only person he’s accidentally fallen in love with over the last six weeks. It’s just a very different type of love.

He’s still struggling with his response when Clint leans forward and plants his elbows on the table. “When it comes to the kid, you’re still missing one big piece of the puzzle,” he says, and Bruce shifts
just enough to meet his ever-watchful eyes. “Even if Miles goes home to Uncle Shitty tomorrow, or if the judge on Monday sends him somewhere else, he’s always gonna be at least a little bit your kid.” Bruce tries to glance away again, but for some reason, Clint’s gaze pins him to that very spot, freezing him almost like stone. “And he’s always gonna remember you and Tony, the rest of his life, so when he invites you to his college graduation a decade from now, you won’t be there as some guy who knew him once.”

Bruce knows the next handful of words before Clint even says them, but it’s no easier to hear.

“You’ll be there as his dad.”

He finally looks away then, dipping his face and whole head toward where his hands are clenched into fists on his lap. He tries to breathe evenly and to fight the rising, rolling tide of emotion that threatens to drown him, but he can’t.

Amber brings their orders to the table, but Bruce doesn’t eat.

And that night, when his bedroom’s dark and cold and he’s laid in bed for several sleepless hours, Bruce picks up his cell phone and scrolls down to the most familiar name in the directory. 

Tomorrow, we need to talk.

==

“We’re assholes,” Tony greets Saturday morning.

The thick gray cloud cover spits optimistic snow flurries that melt as soon as they land on the concrete, the grass, or Tony’s hair. Specifically on Tony’s rumpled, wind-swept hair, just like they melt on Tony’s wind-swept scarf and not-quite-buttoned winter coat. He’s wearing jeans and tennis shoes, normal Tony fare, and he seems almost normal.

Except a five-second study of his face reveals the dark circles under his eyes and the three-day growth of stubble that’s not part of his goatee. And a five-second survey of his body language displays fingers that are tapping against his legs, feet that can’t stand still, and the most defeated, slumped shoulders in the world.

Bruce’s fingers flex around the doorknob. “I’m not sure the best way to start this conversation is to call me an asshole,” he points out. His voice sounds sticky, like there are barbs that catch each word in the back of his throat.

“Not you, we. Collective. Both of us.” Tony raises a hand and sweeps it into the space between them, an all-encompassing gesture. Bruce notices immediately how far Tony keeps his hand from Bruce’s chest, and how cautious he is to avoid body-to-body contact. The stone in his belly rolls over. “I did a lot of thinking when, you know, everything went shitty and radio silent, and I realized that we suck at important things, and sucking at important things makes us assholes.”

A gust of bitter December wind punctuates the breath of pause between them. Bruce loosens his grip on the door, but he can’t quite release the tension in his jaw.

Tony wets his lips. “Can I come in? Please? Because I’d like to come in so we can have that talk and maybe not be assholes anymore.”
There’s less manic banging around than usual when Bruce finally steps out of the way, less of the usual life that Tony brings to the house. With Miles already on the way to his visit with Davis, the silence is almost eerie and unwelcome. Bruce closes and locks the door but then leaves Tony alone in the foyer, wandering back through to the kitchen. He’d still been in the process of cleaning up the debris from another Saturday morning doughnut breakfast when the doorbell’d rung, and he stares at the mess still displayed on the kitchen table. He’d browsed the news on his laptop while Miles chattered and downed his milk like a man dying from thirst in the desert might drink water; there’s still a half-filled Boston cream (“I told you that you wouldn’t like it,” Bruce’d reminded Miles after he’d shoved it away) and a glass sitting on the table.

He’s learned to accept the mess as part of life with a twelve-year-old but right now, suddenly, self-consciousness spikes in his belly. He grabs the glass and walks it to the sink, then runs water to rinse it out. A brief glance reminds him that there’s no coffee in the pot, but there’s still hot water in the kettle.

“He offers, but when he looks over his shoulder, he stills.

Tony stands stock still on the far side of the island, surveying the kitchen like it’s his own private no-man’s-land. His dark eyes study not Bruce or the kettle but the thousand other, tiny things that’ve come to make this place not a house but a home. His fingers reach for and then idly roll one of Miles’s pencils—for some reason, the only pencils he’ll accept for school or home are the classic, yellow-painted ones—and Bruce follows the other man’s gaze as they track across the scene. There’s a doughnut bag on the counter closest to the fridge, Miles’s marked-up A-minus-quality book report he’d planned to take his uncle but forgot in the rush to leave the house, a pamphlet advertising all the field trips Miles’s after school program will take over break (and the prices for each).

After long enough, Bruce stops trying to imagine what Tony sees and instead follows the line of his body. His shoulders are soft, nearly slumped, and his full lips pursed. His hands are shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans, and he looks almost defeated. For the first time in the last nine days, Bruce wonders how Tony’s spent all his empty time.

He’s still studying Tony’s face when Tony glances up. “What?” he asks.

Bruce blinks. Momentarily, he can’t remember what he’s asked, or even how to formulate words. After he swallows, his voice returns. It sounds half-strangled to his own ears. “Tea?”

Tony cocks his head almost imperceptibly. “Spicy Indian magic tea?”

The tiny smile that ghosts across Bruce’s mouth feels almost like relief. “Yeah.”

“Then sure, absolutely.”

He turns away from Tony to prepare a second mug—he’s honestly not sure where he’s left his own, whether it’s still on the table or whether he set it down elsewhere after the doorbell rang—but focusing on the task is nearly impossible. He’s acutely, almost obsessively aware of Tony’s proximity, of the six or seven feet that separate them and the steady sound of his breathing in the mostly-silent kitchen. He fumbles a mug down out of the cabinet and opens the drawer for the empty teabags, but through every motion, he feels like his hands aren’t his own.

Because every twitch of his fingers and flex of his wrist, every meaningless motion, fills his mind not with thoughts of tea and hot water, but with thoughts of Tony.
The dried tea leaves are rough against his fingertips as he packs them into the empty teabag, but all he’s focused instead on the thought of how Tony’s hair is always almost unbearably soft when his fingers thread through it, or when he relies on a handful to guide Tony’s mouth across his skin.

The steam that curls from the mug is hot, certainly, but nothing compares to the burning heat of Tony’s stubble against his throat, or the hot press of Tony’s lips against his mouth, his pulse point, or the back of his shoulder.

The smell of spices rising on the steam isn’t the smell of Tony’s sweat and aftershave, and the hard ceramic of the mug is a poor substitute for the hard muscles of Tony’s arms, thighs, back, and chest.

Their fingers brush when he passes the cup over, and Bruce nearly drops it. If they linger at the corner of the island, their fingers hardly touching while their bodies ache for more of the same, neither of them admit it.

He watches Tony stare down at the darkening liquid in the mug.

“For the record, since that’s pretty much as good a place as any to start,” Tony says, words hardly louder than a whisper, “I was gonna tell you.”

In any other situation, Bruce knows, he’d snort a laugh and step away. He’d rely on petulant, childish, combative anger to fuel him through the conversation.

But there’s so much sadness and guilt etched on Tony’s face, and Bruce is so tired of being angry.

“When?” he asks finally.

Tony, then, is the one who snorts. The tiny, derisive sound fills the room. “You know, Pep asked me the same question when she dragged me out to that disgusting wings place for lunch yesterday and I still don’t actually have an answer.”

His eyes are wide and dark when he looks up at Bruce, simultaneously soft and—lost, Bruce thinks. They’re stranger’s eyes, eyes that belong not to Tony Stark but to the broken man who’d come before, who’d hidden away his pain first in a reckless life and then in illness.

Bruce swallows.

“’Cause, I mean, here’s the thing,” Tony continues, shaking his head slightly. “If we count when I first wanted to tell you? God, I wanted to tell you when you noticed the scar, maybe even before then, when I realized that you were like Pep, somebody I could trust, but then—”

He trails off, his head shaking harder this time. Bruce watches his shoulders lift in fall in a tiny shrug.

“But you didn’t,” Bruce finishes quietly.

“And I kinda screwed the pooch on that one, yeah,” Tony admits, nodding.

He glances down at the mug again, then removes the teabag and squeezes it. Bruce watches the individual drops fall, rippling on the surface of the tea, and then, he watches Tony.

He watches every step between their spot beside the island and the garbage can, studies the tilt of Tony’s hips as he moves and the line of his back when he bends to open the cabinet under the sink. He memorizes the sliver of pale skin between the waistband of Tony’s jeans and his t-shirt, the shape of his body when he stands again, and the bend of his elbows when he picks his mug back up off the counter.
Bruce remembers when, years ago, he used to imagine that Tony slept in suits, forever pressed and tailored within an inch of his life.

Now, the Tony in his mind is this Tony, a man who lives in jeans and t-shirts, a man who’s constantly barefoot and imperfect.

He hardly recognizes his own voice when he asks, “If it wasn’t for Miles, would you have told me?”

Tony turns so abruptly and so violently that a tidal wave of tea washes over the edge of his mug and splatters all over the floor. Bruce thinks he catches a flash of pain on the other man’s face, but then it’s replaced with the kind of stony determination Tony usually reserves for court—and frustrated phone calls with other members of the Stark Industries board of directors.

“I was always going to tell you.”

For a second, Bruce forgets how to breathe. “Tony—”

“Always, Bruce. Not a doubt in my mind, I was always gonna tell you.” Within seconds, he abandons the mug on the countertop and stalks forward, closing the distance between them with steps that remind Bruce more of a stalking mountain lion than a man. When they’re all of a foot apart, he raises his hands almost as though he plans on reaching out, but then hesitates. One palm drops back against the side of his leg while the other finds the countertop.

“I wasn’t— It just got—” he starts, stumbling. His fingers curl against the Formica. “You told me these things, these secrets of yours that you’d never told anybody, and I couldn’t compare with that. You know? The things you survived, they were bigger than anything I could’ve even made up in my head, and I had, what? Daddy issues?” He raises his free hand in a wide shrug. “Trouble finding myself? A lot of stupid teenage angst that I didn’t sort out ‘till I was in my thirties?” He shakes his head. “I couldn’t live up to what you went through with my petty bullshit.”

“Who said you had to compare?” Bruce retorts, a spike of annoyance rising in his belly. He considers throwing up his hands, but Tony’s close enough that he’s not sure he could avoid brushing fingers against his shirt. His shirt or his skin, textures his fingers have forgotten but his brain can’t release. No, he’s left shaking his head instead, his jaw tightening as he resists the urge to step away—or worse, to leave the room entirely. “You don’t need a trump card to override my screwed up life, Tony. Your past, my past, it’s not a contest you need to win.”

Tony rolls his eyes, a gesture that leaves Bruce gritting his teeth. “Kinda is when you’re trying to prove you’re good enough for the company you keep.”

“Good enough?” Bruce repeats. He’s not sure what’s louder: the words themselves or the involuntary huff of laughter after. “When was it ever a matter of—”

“When wasn’t it?” Tony demands. He twists away from Bruce, but three steps toward the sink later, he’s stalking back. “I walked into that office with all my fucked-up bits, all my baggage that I couldn’t really tell anybody about—thanks to the bar association and the assholes at Cramer and March that had my back ‘till I broke, and, oh yeah, thanks to Obie, too—and who’d I meet? Who?” He tosses up his hands. “Saint Coulson, for one, then Maria Hill, Destroyer of Worlds, and you, and Hank Pym, overall asshole but pretty decent attorney, and that’s not counting Fury and his ever-watchful eye. I met Thor, and then Steve—who is, by the way, pretty much the poster child for the American dream—started working there too, and— It took Red and Barton showing up for me to not feel like shit every time I walked in the door, and FYI, Barton’s only been there for eight months now.”
His shoulders soften, almost like a balloon deflating, and Bruce watches as he drags his fingers through his hair. His eyes drift to the floor, then back up until they meet Bruce’s, and the rock in Bruce’s belly churns until he feels like he can’t breathe. “From the time I started,” he says quietly, “nine-tenths of that office deserved what they had. And me? I was the one percent.”

The room falls silent then, save the noise of the furnace clicking on in the basement and their whispers of breath, and Bruce feels the last tendrils of anger and frustration slowly start to uncoil from around his heart. The man before him isn’t his Tony but a pale, drawn, exhausted facsimile created by stupid fights, a juvenile inability to communicate, and fear. Bruce’s fear, certainly, but also Tony’s own, a fear that’s spent years growing and multiplying.

In that moment, Bruce is absolutely certain that Pepper was right, and that Tony’s last months at Cramer and March were the most miserable of his life.

Bruce doesn’t want these last nine days of radio silence and quiet, stewing anger to come anywhere close to that. And he wants the Tony before him to be his Tony, laughing and ridiculous instead of silent and defeated.

He rolls his lips together, drawing in a long, slow breath. His lungs burn, he thinks, but then he wonders if maybe it’s his heart, instead. “You’re mixing your measurements,” he notes softly. Tony quirks an eyebrow. “You went from a fraction to a percent.”

“Well, I did quit the whole ‘engineering for the future’ thing for a reason,” Tony huffs, but the tension finally unspools from his shoulders. When the corners of his eyes crinkle in something that’s nearly a laugh, Bruce feels the stone in his stomach disintegrate. He dips his head, shaking it slightly, but he can’t escape his own, tiny smile. He suspects Tony catches the curl of his mouth or the warmth in his own eyes, too, because the other man reaches over and lightly nudges Bruce’s hip with the backs of two fingers. It’s a gentle touch, playful and stupid; when Bruce sways with it, those same two fingers snake forward and catch the belt loop of the pants he’s wearing. They tangle there but don’t reel him in, and that’s how they stand for a few seconds: a foot apart, hardly touching, Bruce staring at the floor even as the heat of Tony’s gaze plays across his face.

“We good?” Tony asks.

Bruce wets his lips, swallowing around the last remnants of the lump that’s lived the last week in his throat. “I still have questions,” he admits, raising his head. “I still don’t know all the details, or who Vanko is, you were still dishonest, I—”

“Hey.” The single syllable is accompanied by a light tug to Bruce’s waistband, and he can’t help but take a hesitant step forward. Tony spends a quiet half-second searching his face. “I didn’t ask if you forgave and forgot everything, or even if you were willing to,” he presses, and Bruce feels his thumb wander over the fabric of his sweater. “’Cause, I mean, you weren’t exactly Prince Charming about this whole thing either, and god knows I’m gonna hold onto at least a third of that for some nasty future fight.” Bruce rolls his eyes. “I’m just asking whether we’re, you know, okay enough to keep going.”

“Keep going?”

“Yeah.” He watches as Tony parts his lips, hesitates, purses them together, and then opens them again. “I mean, no offense to the single life, but this whole week-long pseudo-break-up kinda sucked, and I’m pretty sick of things sucking.” Tony pauses and tilts his head toward the ceiling. He looks almost pensive—at least until his thumb sneaks under the hem of Bruce’s sweater and Bruce
sucks in a breath at the sudden skin-on-skin contact. “Actually, I’m only sick of certain things sucking.”

Bruce wants to shake his head or step away, engage in some overt sign at just how absolutely pathetic that joke was, but then Tony’s fingers are releasing his belt loop and sliding under his shirt. Two fingers, then four, then his rough palm, hot and familiar against Bruce’s skin. His stomach jumps and he shivers, a full-body reaction he can’t hide.

Tony smiles but doesn’t move, almost as though he’s rooted to that particular spot on the tile, and Bruce swears that the longer the other man watches him, the more his skin itches for more contact. His fingers curl into fists at his sides, but then they’re moving without his permission, curling into Tony’s t-shirt instead.

He should be angry, some hateful corner of his conscience urges him. He should demand more conversation, more time to answer the questions still jumbling in the back of his mind. He should be worried about Miles, about Monday, about what happens the next time they teeter on the edge of a secret.

But Miles’s future, he realizes, doesn’t exist in a bubble. It exists in not just Miles himself or Bruce, but in the three of them.

They’re close enough to share breath when Bruce remembers the question, the words that’d tripped between Tony’s lips and landed between them. When he glances up, Tony’s dark eyes are tracking his mouth, distracted and needy enough that Bruce almost forgets to formulate an answer.

“I’m not sure I know how to stop moving forward, not when I—”

The sudden, loud hard crash of something hitting the storm door cuts off whatever clumsy, terrifying words Bruce nearly tripped into, and he and Tony jerk apart from one another almost as though they’ve each been scalded. There’s a second crash, then a third, and Tony’s fumbling for his cell phone while Bruce is tracking across the kitchen and into the hallway. Metal springs squeal and the glass shakes in the frame before the crashing is replaced with loud, urgent thuds.

Bruce is barely in the foyer before he hears Jessica Jones’s voice shout, “Miles, stop!” loud enough to echo.

He unlocks the door and wrenches it open in absolute record time.

Miles freezes as soon as the door’s open, his fists raised and ready to continue pounding, and for a split second, he and Bruce stare at one another. His face is tear-streaked and he’s still crying, his eyelashes clumped with wet and his entire face stained red. A dozen emotions track across his face—terror, grief, shock, anger—before he physically shoves Bruce’s arm out of the way and bolts into the house.

The sound of a sob, or something like it, echoes in the stairwell. Somewhere between the kitchen and the foyer, Bruce can hear Tony saying, “Actually, no, sorry about that, my kid was just doing something stupid, we’ll have a good long chat about scaring people into calling 9-1-1.”

“Jesus Christ, he is faster than he looks,” Jessica declares, and Bruce twists back around to see her standing on the stoop, hands on her knees. The Union County Child Services sedan is parked at an awkward angle across the street, and the passenger’s door hangs open. Jessica’s hair is windswept and messy, and when Bruce starts to speak, she holds up a hand. “Still have baby weight,” she informs him roughly, shaking her head. “Gotta give me a second or I might keel over.”
“What the hell just happened?” Tony demands, coming to stand at Bruce’s shoulder. He’s still clutching his cell phone; Jessica raises her hand again to quiet him, but he points it at her, as accusatory as if it were his finger. “‘Cause I just got off the phone with a pissed off 9-1-1 operator who wanted to know why I’d call in ‘crazy person trying to break down the door’ when it was really ‘social worker can’t manage a twelve-year-old who’s sobbing.’” He pauses. “And why’s the twelve-year-old sobbing, anyway?”

Jessica straightens to her full height and brushes her long hair out of her face. “Davis no-showed,” she says, spreading out her hands.

Bruce’s chest seizes, all his breath rushing out of him in a slow, heavy sigh. Beside him, Tony demands, “What do you mean, he no-showed?”

“I mean that we sat in a visit room for twenty-five minutes and he never showed up,” Jessica replies. She drops her hands to her side, her shoulders lifting in the rough approximation of a shrug. “We’re supposed to cancel if they’re fifteen minutes late, but I figured with the drive and everything . . .” She shakes her head. “I called his phone, but he didn’t answer. The office has calls in to the officer who’s supervising him on the criminal case and his attorney, but right now, I don’t know where he is.”

“And Miles?” Bruce asks quietly.

“I kind of think you can see how well he’s taken it.” She sighs. “He’s never missed before. Hell, he’s never even been late.”

Bruce nods vaguely and glances over his shoulder. Tony stands behind him, his face serious and his lips pursed into a tight frown. He wishes, not for the first time, that he knew how to read the other man’s mind.

There are so many pieces of this puzzle that’s slowly become their life still rattling around, disjointed and disconnected, but he knows Tony well enough to read the concern there.

The genuine, overwhelming concern for the boy he’d told the 9-1-1 operator was his kid.

“What happens next?” Bruce finally hears himself asking. It’s a question he’s formulated as a prosecuting attorney, but never as a foster parent.

Jessica drags fingers through her hair. “I go piss my husband off by spending Dani’s Santa-visit texting with my office,” she replies. When Bruce frowns, she waves off his concern. “All in a day’s work. As for you two . . .” Her face softens. “Keep him here. Calm him down, talk him through it. Just—he’s his parents, okay?”

Bruce isn’t surprised when his own lips form the word, “Definitely.”

And honestly, he’s not surprised when he hears Tony say, “We will,” either.

Jessica nods. “Good.” Bruce isn’t necessarily sure it’s a blessing as much as the last part of her order, but before he can ask, she turns on her heel and starts stalking back toward the ill-parked white sedan. She’s all of a quarter of the way down the front walk, though, when she swings back around and levels a finger in Tony’s direction. “His intake was pristine, by the way. Wish he would’ve done it on time.”

At his shoulder, Tony shrugs. “Fashionably late as always,” he replies.

Bruce feels his eyes narrow involuntarily. “That’s not something to make a joke about yet, Tony.”
For a split second, Tony looks like he just might be fully chastened, but then he blinks. The tiny grin that nudges the corners of his mouth is warm and almost endearing. Well, maybe not almost. “Yet?” he asks.

Bruce sighs. “Yet,” he replies, and Jessica laughs as she heads back down the walk.

The house is quiet once the door is closed and locked, and Bruce can’t help but lean against it once he hears Jessica’s car sputter away. Tony’s still lingering all of a half-breath away, his expression soft and still tinged with worry. Bruce watches a sliver of pink tongue sweep across his lips and an unsubtle shift of weight from one foot to the other.

“What?” Tony asks finally.

“Always the kid,” Bruce replies, and drags himself away from the door.

He picks up Miles’s coat from the kitchen floor as they track their way back through the house, and Tony kicks the boy’s shoes into the living room just so they aren’t lying at the bottom of the stairs. Their plodding footsteps sound too loud echoing up the steps, but then, anything would likely sound too-loud in the deafening silence upstairs.

Miles’s bedroom door stands open this time, though, and the light’s on when Bruce reaches the doorway. Miles himself is balled up on the bed, halfway under the thick winter comforter Bruce’d dragged down from the attic a couple weeks earlier. He lays on the furthest side of the bed, closer to the far wall than the door, and Bruce can tell within seconds that he’s hiding his face in his pillow.

He hesitates there for a moment, studying the tremble of Miles’s shoulders and feeling his mouth slowly dry out. In forty-eight hours, he thinks, this boy—this shaking, hiding, hurt boy—could be sent to live with strangers. He could be torn away from people who care enough to stand in his doorway and search for the right words to mend the hurt if not the situation.

For what feels like the first time, he hates everything about the system he’s devoted almost ten years of his life to.

And then fingers press to the small of his back, and Tony nudges him forward.

The floorboards creak as soon as Bruce crosses the threshold, though, and somehow, that makes Miles freeze like a deer in headlights. Bruce swallows around the lump in the back of his throat, but when he parts his lips, it’s not his own voice he hears.

Instead, it’s Tony’s.

“Jessica kinda mentioned what happened, if you’re afraid we’re about to drag it out with you kicking and screaming,” he says. The casualness, Bruce knows, is manufactured, and his voice is gentle. “We can skip right to the part where he decided to be a—”

“Why?” Miles demands, his voice cracking on the single syllable. He keeps his face hidden from view, his body curling tighter as he clutches the bed covers. “Why is he such an asshole? Why can he just fix this?”

Even after the last week’s whirlwind of emotion—eight full days of anger, hurt, betrayal, loneliness, and the thousand others that’d followed on their heels—it’s those shaking, helpless words that somehow break Bruce’s heart. He steps away from Tony and over the usual debris of twelve-year-old life to cross to the bed. “Miles—”

“No!” Miles snaps. He sits up abruptly, turning on Bruce, and Bruce catches another glance of his
red, tear-stained, lost face. “He won’t do anything he’s supposed to. He just pisses Jessica off all the time and now he won’t even come see me?” He drags a hand over his face, but his tears don’t actually stop. He’s as helpless to control them as Bruce is to control his feet, which close the rest of the distance and leave him standing helplessly at the side of Miles’s bed. “Why can’t he just show up and be there? Why can’t he do what he’s supposed to like a normal person?”

“But the other part of it’s that he’s looking the gift horse that is his awesome nephew right in the mouth. Because big shoes or not, hard or not, Miles’s got one thing right: the guy should be there. He should man up.” He pauses at Bruce’s shoulder. “Even if him not being around means that we luck out, ’cause we get extra time with a great kid we’re lucky to have.”

Bruce feels a familiar tug of uncertainty in his gut, one that wants to correct all of Tony’s assumptions—not just the ones involving Davis’s intent, but also the ones where Miles is theirs—but he realizes after a second of breathlessness that he can’t. He can’t correct them when they’re things he thinks almost every day, things he wants badly enough that he can’t formulate the words for them.

But then, he looks over at Miles.

He looks over, Miles’s face crumples again, folding in on itself until he’s choking on a fresh wave of tears, and immediately, all of Bruce’s uncertainty crumbles away. He lands on the bed before he can even conjure a second thought and Miles is immediately in his grip, hiding his face in Bruce’s shirt instead of in a pillow or blanket. Bruce wraps arms around him, pulling him close, and he can’t help but spend a few seconds with his cheek against Miles’s head. For a moment, he forgets that Miles is almost a teenager, or that Miles is someone else’s child; right then, Miles is his boy, he’s in pain, and the only thing Bruce can think to do is cure it.

The bed dips when Tony settles on Miles’s other side, and he spreads his hand against Miles’s back. When Bruce lifts his head, it’s to study the softness of Tony’s face, the lost little contours of his expression he hides from everyone else. A thousand people know bombastic, overwrought, dramatic Tony Stark.

No one besides Bruce knows the man who looks like he could cry from seeing Miles this upset.

And that, Bruce realizes, is why he’s absolutely incapable of giving up on Tony: because no one else could ever love Miles as much as he does.

They sit like that for a long time, Miles crying against Bruce’s shirt while Tony strokes his back, until they’re rocking idly to a non-existent beat. Eventually, Miles sniffs and raises his head enough to wipe his nose on the back of his sleeve. He glances over at Tony, then back at Bruce, and all without untangling himself from the men who still haven’t quite let him go.
“I thought you guys broke up,” he murmurs finally, and Bruce feels his heart drop into his stomach. He’s hardly started searching for the explanation when Tony says, “Fought.” When he looks over at Tony, the other man’s dark eyes are searching his face. He presses his lips together, then purses them into a tentative smile. “We came, we saw, we yelled at each other in Bruce’s car and in the kitchen, and then we fixed it.” His hand strokes along Miles’s back. “No break up. Not even close.”

Bruce wonders, just for a second, whether Tony’s always put that much faith in the two of them together—and why it’s taken him years to even inch in that direction. Instead, though, he forces a little smile and nods along with the explanation. “We’re working on it.”

“That’s mostly what family does,” Tony chimes in. He spreads out his hands and, slowly, Miles uncurls from his place against Bruce’s chest to sit up properly. “They get into situations that suck—fights with hot boyfriends, messed up life choices, not-really-secret secrets that asshole lawyers parade around the courtroom to try to take away the awesome kid who lives with your hot boyfriend—”

Miles’s lips nudge into a grin, and Bruce, predictably, rolls his eyes. “—and then, they fight like hell to put it all back together.” He leans over enough to nudge Miles, who in turn ends up nudging Bruce. “Just like we’re gonna do on Monday.”

The budding smile teetering around the corners of Miles’s mouth falls away. “We’re not really a family,” he points out, and Bruce wonders how his life changed so much that those five words empty out his lungs and heart. At least, he wonders it until Tony, grinning brilliantly, shakes his head. “See, and that’s where you’re wrong,” he declares. His voice is, once again, absolutely brimming with the kind of conviction Bruce can rarely summon up. “We’re actually the best kind of family, ’cause we’re a family that picked each other.”

Miles’s grin reappears, and this time, it spreads to his still red-rimmed eyes. “I think Jessica just told you to take me,” he points out. Despite himself, Bruce can’t hide his own little grin. Or the laugh that comes immediately after, when Tony’s face is plastered with a wounded expression and he presses a hand to his chest. “I remember a day not too long ago when you used to blindly worship everything I said. I don’t think I like this new system.”

“Yeah, you do,” Bruce returns, and he swears he falls in love with Tony all over again when Tony smiles.

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They end up spending most of the morning and afternoon at Tony’s, first running the dogs at the park and then filling the seemingly-endless hours with video games, snacks, and the ridiculous cat-dancer toy Tony’d bought for Jarvis on a whim. Bruce tries to unwind the tension from the morning and enjoy the usual sights and sounds of a Saturday afternoon with two children—because, after all, Tony is a twelve-year-old trapped in a forty-year-old’s body—but he finds himself continually tracking Miles’s mood. The boy acts almost entirely normal, laughing at jokes and watching the cat trip himself in an effort to catch the feathery toy, but Bruce knows the difference.
He can see it in the way Miles’s smiles dim too quickly, and the quiet moments where he stares too long at the floor while waiting for the next group of online MarioKart contestants to all commit to the race.

Jessica texts three times across the course of the afternoon, but every message reads the same: *no update, keep you posted*.

Bruce isn’t sure whether he finds that reassuring or ominous.

They order a pizza for dinner and swing by a Redbox for a movie on the way back to Bruce’s house, but Bruce can tell within the first ten minutes of dinner that Miles is flagging. By the time the rich, genius vigilante returns to Gotham from Bhutan, the boy’s asleep on his half of the couch, mouth hanging open and tiny snores escaping without his knowledge.

Bruce considers just leaving him there, tucked up in a blanket and oblivious to the world. It’s Tony, sitting in the other corner of the couch and polishing off one last piece of pizza, who thinks otherwise. Bruce watches from the armchair as Tony tosses his crust onto his plate and hoists himself up onto his feet, and then again as he gives Miles’s leg a tug. “C’mon, scoot,” he urges, and Miles grumbles as he’s dragged down the couch only half-voluntarily. He uncurls slowly, stretching to his full height, and even lets Tony snap the blanket out and drape it all the way over him.

“See?” Tony demands, and reaches to tuck the blanket in around Miles’s shoulders. “No scoliosis or arthritis or whatever you get from sleeping in pretzel form.”

Miles grumbles and presses his face into the throw pillow. “You an’ Bruce’re bossy,” he complains, his voice thick and cloudy from sleep.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony retorts. He reaches down and strokes a hand over Miles’s head, and Bruce can’t swallow around the curl of regret in his belly. He sits forward and starts reaching for the abandoned plates, an attempt to chase away the guilt he feels for robbing Miles of Tony—and Tony of Miles—for an entire week.

But then Miles groans, “Bossiest parents ever,” before rolling over to face the back of the couch, and Bruce forgets he was reaching for the plates at all.

He stares at his own hands for a moment, empty and half-outstretched to reach across the table; when he looks up, he catches Tony watching Miles as he settles back into sleep. He hovers there for a moment, a shadow over the sleeping boy, and then reaches down to touch his head again. It’s gentler, this time, almost a caress against his hair and temple, and Bruce hears Miles sigh.

“Yeah, we are,” Tony breathes, and this time, the tight feeling in Bruce’s stomach is an entirely new one.

He pulls himself out of the moment and finally grabs the plates, stacking them in a haphazard pile and then moving into the kitchen. He’s vaguely aware of the sound of Tony moving behind him, his heavy, barefooted steps slapping against the floor, but he ends up just staring down into the sink. He curls his fingers around the lip of the countertop, suddenly overwhelmed with emotions he’s not technically allowed to have.

He waits until he senses Tony’s nearness, until he imagines he can feel Tony breathing next to him, before he murmurs, “We’re not actually his parents.”

“Bruce—”

“Parents don’t need to answer to hateful lawyers and petty clients,” he presses, and gooseflesh rises
along his arms when Tony’s hand flattens against his back. He digs his fingernails into the underside of the counter. “Parents don’t lose their children because of unfinished paperwork and strangers leveling accusations. They don’t—”

He snorts away whatever words threaten to bubble up and choke him next. When he glances over his shoulder, it’s at Tony: Tony’s too-big, too-careful eyes, Tony’s pursed lips, Tony’s quiet concern he shows almost no one. Bruce feels his shoulders slump, and when he swallows, it’s around the mass in the back of his throat. “I’m sorry,” he says dumbly, and reaches to turn on the sink and start rinsing the plates. “I just—”

“Parents don’t usually end up in the same courtroom with attorneys who hate their guts,” Tony replies. Bruce looks back at him long enough to watch him shrug. There’s uncertainty in his expression and trapped in his tone, but somehow, the hand on Bruce’s back never falters. “Or at least, if they do, it’s with a really excellent conflict-of-interest argument based on personal bias and being an entire universe of jackass.”

Bruce rolls his lips together. He thinks for a moment he feels a smile tug at the corners of his mouth, but it certainly doesn’t last. “Vanko?” he asks quietly.

Tony nods silently. Bruce watches him for a moment, the dip and flutter of his eyelashes when his gaze drifts to the floor, the purse of his lips when the quiet rises to surround them both. His fingers stretch and spread against Bruce’s shirt, then lift and disappear, and Bruce feels colder for it.

“Last part of the puzzle, right?” Tony asks. There’s an unfamiliar anxiety written across his features, soft and fear-tinged, and Bruce wonders how much of their day together’s been spent under the looming storm cloud of Anton Vanko. Bruce’d worried so much about Miles, he’d never stopped to consider the stitches still required to close up the gaping wound open between them.

But all he can think to say, in that moment, is, “Right.”

“Then let’s talk about it. Him, technically, but at this point, he’s really more an ‘it’ to me.”

Bruce attempts a smile, a press of his lips to break the heavy tension between them, but he knows it doesn’t meet his eyes. No, its only utility is forcing a tiny, half-lost smile out of Tony before Tony’s fingers curl around his wrist. His wrist first, then his hand, and they end up with linked fingers as they wander out of the kitchen and upstairs, sparing only a second’s glance to confirm that Miles sleeps on.

Bruce expects Tony will drag him into the bedroom, divest him of clothes before whatever scars are all opened back up, but he veers left at the top of the stairs and tugs Bruce into his home office. It’s a room Bruce’s hardly seen in the last few weeks, and it feels dark and musty until he switches on the overhead light. In the bright white glare, all the room’s flaws are immediately apparent—the skewed rug, the undusted shelves, the perpetually-crooked blinds and the mismatched wall art from Bruce’s various overseas adventures.

But then, all the other details are illuminated, too.

Because Bruce’s office is a sort of secret mausoleum, a tomb to honor the lives he led before he arrived back from India and started law school at twenty-seven. His middle school and high school academic awards are shoved on shelves with ancient books from undergrad and his doctorate program, his physics degrees hang undusted on the walls, and, here and there, there’s a photo on display. They’re not from the usual array of pictures—there’s no incorrigible grins from Tony or cute blonde girl mugging for the camera—but from the version of his life that, now, is mostly past.
Pictures of him and Jennifer from their childhood, for instance. His high school and college graduation photos with his aunt, uncle, and cousin, the four of them looking almost like a traditional family. A handful of snapshots from college, including a few with his last serious girlfriend.

And, on a high shelf with the handful of books that’d survived moving to the group home and then again to his aunt’s out in California, a photo of his mother.

Tony immediately heads for the threadbare armchair in the corner, a beaten-up Goodwill purchase that’d become Bruce’s first piece of furniture when he landed in the states after his time in Calcutta, and he drags it until it’s nearly in front of Bruce’s desk. The springs creak when he throws his body into it, and Bruce shakes his head as he slides the desk chair over. The desk itself is covered in books and papers, mostly half-started personal research projects and notes to himself, and he studies the disorganization as he sinks down into his seat.

Tony remains uncharacteristically quiet until they’re both settled.

“If I start this story at the beginning,” he says finally, playing idly with the small, decorative globe that sits on the corner of Bruce’s desk, “I’m starting way back when my dad was an asshole to some guy and started a legacy of ‘let’s hate the Starks for being rich and smart and awesome.’”

Bruce presses his lips together. When Tony spins the globe for the third time, Bruce leans forward enough to stop it with two fingers. They’re all of eight inches apart, their knees almost tangled in their respective chairs, and Bruce simultaneously wants to push all the way to the other end of the room and to kiss Tony until they’re both breathless.

Instead, he says, “Start with you.”

Tony raises his eyes and nods. “Okay then,” he says, but then he wets his lips and falls silent again. He drops his hands to his lap, worrying them together. Bruce thinks he’ll still on his own, settle from whatever wire he’s balanced on. Instead, he lets out a huff of breath.

“I was a hotshot fucking asshole when I started at Cramer and March. You know that, right? I was fresh out of law school, had my other degrees under my belt, you name it. To this day, I’m pretty sure they hired me ‘cause Stark Industries used them to clean up their messes, not because they thought I was any good as a lawyer.” He shakes his head, and Bruce watches as he tips his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Vanko, he was there too, fresh and new as I was. The guy talks like he’s fresh off the boat from the old country, but he’s smart. I mean Laufeyson-smart, the kind of smart that kinda rattles you when you realize it’s a thing that exists.”

“I think most people feel the same way about you,” Bruce says quietly.

Tony snorts. “No, see, there’s the difference,” he retorts. He spreads his hands, and they dance slowly around one another for a moment before stilling in his lap again. “Me, I play a good game. Especially back then, I was all bullshit and bluster and pretty much zero percent competence. I knew how to look good, not be good. At least, not mostly.” He leans his elbows on his legs, sliding forward to look at the floor instead. “It was like a perfect fucking confluence of events, too, because I was there pretty much on name alone and then there was Vanko. Who, if I didn’t endear him to me with the parties, the booze, the models, the models’ twin sisters—”

“I’m not sure I want to think too long and hard about parts of that,” Bruce interrupts. Tony’s eyes jerk up from the floor, and despite himself, Bruce smiles slightly. Tony smiles too, but briefly, a flicker of light before he looks away again.

“A couple years in,” he continues after a few seconds, his fingers tap-dancing against each other
between his knees, “we were up for the same spot on a big trial team. The kind of stuff that starts you inching into the big leagues, the chance to head up dispositions and cover discovery and all the things that matter when you’re handling big corporate suits.” He wets his lips. “I never screwed him over. I mean, that’s the way he took it, and I bet dollars to doughnuts that’s still the way he takes it now, but all I did was go to the firm events and wine and dine the partners just like everybody expected.”

Tony lifts his eyes but not his head, and Bruce is caught for a moment by the picture he makes, his dark eyes peering through long lashes and his full lips pursed into a frown. But more than that, Bruce’s struck by the honesty playing across every inch of his body, from the steadiness of his gaze to the soft line of his shoulders.

He hardly recognizes that his fingers have fanned out to touch Tony somehow—to press against his knee and coax a tiny, half-hidden smile from the other man—until he feels his skin against the denim.

“You got the spot on the team,” he surmises.

Tony nods. “Yeah.”

“And?”

“And eight months later, my messed-up ticker landed me in the hospital, somebody with more letters after their name than me sliced me open, and I spent a year in the kinda haze you learn about in after-school specials.” He shrugs lightly, and Bruce isn’t really surprised when, in the shrug’s aftermath, Tony’s fingers brush against his own. They’re rough even now, the old calluses from his years of working with his hands long-gone but the feathery white scars still there, and Bruce almost smiles at the familiarity.

“I’m pretty sure he tried to turn me in to the partners a hundred times before Pep did,” Tony continues, shaking his head. “I just don’t think anybody thought it was anything more than a jealous grudge.”

“And he holds it against you enough to want to throw a twelve-year-old boy under the bus?” Bruce asks. He hears the bitterness in his voice, sharp and acidic, and he thinks the snorted sound that escapes between Tony’s pursed lips just might be half a laugh.

“Why not?” Tony replies. He sits up and spreads out his hands, another shrug moving his shoulders under his t-shirt. “God, Bruce, you know what would’ve happened if somebody’d actually believed the guy?” he demands. “By the time Pepper got the guts to march up to management, I needed the intervention, don’t get me wrong, but Vanko? No, I would’ve fought it to the death, and I’d probably be disbarred right now. And he knows it.” He throws one hand out to the side, gesturing at a ghost only he can see—Vanko, maybe, or maybe the broken man that this Tony Stark could have become. “He knows, and he’s pissed, and the thing that gets me the most is that if this were the me five years ago, the guy who worked at that vampire of a law firm? I’d still want to see the other guy’s blood in the water, too.”

He slouches back in the armchair then, springs creaking again, and Bruce spends a moment trying to find the right words to break the sudden silence. He thinks for a moment about the person he might’ve become without his aunt’s intervention and about what broken version of himself might exist in an alternate universe. But he chased away that alternate Bruce as a teenager, not as a grown man scrabbling for redemption.

“You’re not that person now,” he says quietly, and feels Tony’s eyes study his face as he looks at the floor. “I’m not sure you ever were.”

“You don’t know that,” Tony challenges, scoffing.
“I know your heart.” It feels cheesy, momentarily, but when Bruce glances up, there’s sweet, honest surprise caught in Tony’s eyes. He smiles softly, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. “If the roles were reversed, I can’t imagine you cutting him down in open court, or trying to take something—well, something he loves away from him.”

The word love feels leaden on his tongue, but it somehow curls Tony’s mouth into a gentle, almost wistful smile. He slides one foot forward and knocks it against Bruce’s ankle, and Bruce shakes his head as he smiles back.

“I thought for about eight days there that he succeeded,” Tony says after a few seconds. The entirety of his attention is focused on studying Bruce’s face, and Bruce feels the tips of his ears warming the longer they stare at one another. “It took ‘til this morning to know that, no, I still got to keep what matters.”

“We’ll know Monday,” Bruce says quietly.

“What about the Miles part of it, sure,” Tony replies, unblinking, “but I kind of like thinking that one of those things I love’ll stick around regardless.”

Bruce will never know, at least not entirely, what causes him to lean forward and capture Tony’s mouth seconds later, whether it’s the blinding brilliance of his smile or the heat of Bruce’s own cheeks flushing red, but he’s not sure either of those things matter. Because Tony catches him before his desk chair crashes too hard into the other man’s knees and lets him say the thousand things he’s spent the last day and weeks thinking through breathless kisses and tiny sounds in the back of his throat.

His mind swims and his belly churns. He feels like he’s teetering on the brink of disaster, and he knows that Monday could gather up everything he has right now—Tony in his grip, Miles sleeping on his couch, the sense of rightness that renders him breathless every time he look at either of them—and lock it away.

But that’s thirty-six hours away.

It’s not right now.

They kiss like teenagers for what feels like hours, roaming hands and hungry gasps to close the chasm of the last week. When Tony draws him up out of the chair and tugs him into the hallway, he never once complains, even as he stumbles against the wall and allows Tony the opportunity to pin him there and kiss him again, harder than before. His mouth feels bruised, his skin too hot under his clothes, and it’s a concerted effort to remember to close the bedroom door.

Tony’s never more perfect, Bruce thinks, than with his face hidden in the pillow while Bruce bends to leave trails of kisses and teases of teeth on the back of his shoulder.

And his name never sounds better than when Tony’s gasping it, a curse and a prayer both at the same time.

After their hearts slow to normal and their breathing calms, Tony rolls reluctantly off the bed and starts trudging toward his discarded clothes. Bruce rolls onto his side and watches him, memorizing every step across the bare floor like he’s forgotten what Tony looks like in his bedroom. Then again, given the last week, maybe he has.

“You know this is a Monday thing, right?” Tony asks once he’s located his boxers. He gestures with them, a flapping black flag in the mostly-dark bedroom, and Bruce rolls his eyes. “This isn’t a ‘fuck
and run’ thing, this is a ‘not giving anybody any fuel for the fire’ thing.’”

“I know,” Bruce answers. Tony’s scar looks like a shadow in the dim light from the lamp.

“Because the last thing I want to do right now is leave you, here, looking like that, with the sex hair and the swollen mouth and all that skin—”

“I know,” Bruce cuts in, but he feels more like a teenager after prom night than an adult when he blushes.

“—but I wanna make sure we give this whole thing the very best shot.” He pauses to tug on his underwear and then reaches for his jeans. “But I’ll be back in the morning. With eggs or something, ’cause the kid can’t live on doughnuts alone.”

Bruce snorts and rolls to look at the ceiling. He tries for a moment not to think about how his bed feels suddenly empty again, or that he knows the sheets’ll be cool by the time he’s able to fall asleep. “I can’t keep you away from Miles,” he observes.

“Wrong.” The bed dips suddenly, and when Bruce looks over, Tony’s kneeling beside him. He looms there for a moment, still shirtless, before tipping forward. He catches himself on a hand and stares Bruce down, their faces inches apart. “You can’t keep me away from either of you.”

“Either of us?” Bruce echoes.

“My first and second favorite boys.”

Tony kisses him again then, slow and sweet in the rising chill of the bedroom, and Bruce wonders what other words are hidden in that kiss. He holds onto Tony tighter than he should, imagining promises and apologies, pasts and futures, and the thousand other things signified by fingers tangled in hair and greedy breaths. When they break apart, Tony watches him for a second longer than usual, his expression almost undefinable. Then, he kisses Bruce on the nose, hops off the bed, and goes about putting his shirt on.

After Tony leaves, the house falls quiet and empty. Bruce wraps himself up in his robe and tracks downstairs in the quiet and the dark. On the couch, Miles sleeps on, oblivious to the rest of the world.

This, Bruce thinks as he watches Miles sleep, is the one thing Tony’s never lied about, the one thing he’s never overstated or misrepresented. He’d steered Bruce into this life even when it’d terrified him, knowing the whole time it was the right choice.

It’s only Bruce who’s just discovered he was headed true north the whole time.

Monday, Bruce remembers, is thirty-six hours away.

And everything in front of him is worth fighting for.

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“Please state your name for the record,” Matt Murdock instructs the first witness at Monday’s hearing, and Bruce watches as the person on the stand pulls in a breath and squares his shoulders.
And then, he answers, “Anthony Edward Stark.”

Bruce’d stood with Tony in the doorway to Courtroom Four twenty minutes earlier as Tony’d begged, pleaded, and cajoled Matt Murdock into calling him as a witness. Nearby, Miles’d chatted about school with the reluctantly-subpoenaed Pepper, and both of them worked valiantly not to cast their eyes back over at the three attorneys near the door. Bruce’d caught Pepper worrying her lower lip between her teeth, though, and Miles’s nervous shift from foot-to-foot, and he’d known how much their efforts were failing.

“It’s not a good idea,” Murdock’d repeated for the fifth or sixth time in as many minutes. His assistant had hugged her stack of files tighter to her chest. “Vanko already wants to crucify you. You don’t need to poke the beehive with a stick.”

Tony, for all the restraint he’d shown in sleeping at home both Saturday and Sunday nights, had both thrown up his hands and rolled his eyes. “This isn’t a stick,” he’d argued, his voice carrying across the well of the courtroom. “This is basic trial advocacy, state’s attorney 101!” He’d glanced briefly over at Bruce and then narrowed all his attention in on Matt. “What was the first thing you learned about bringing out crappy facts, huh?”

Murdock’d sighed. “Mister Stark—”

“I’ve gone to two-thirds of your CLEs and helped you with an appeal, don’t ‘Mister Stark’ me.”

“Fine, then, Tony—”

“And the answer, by the way,” Tony’d continued, leaving Bruce with the distinct impression that Murdock was rolling his eyes behind his sunglasses, “is that you draw the sting. You throw the guy on the stand and you let the court know that, yeah, there’s some shit there, but the shit doesn’t detract from all the rainbows and kittens.” Tony’d settled his hands on the hips. “Draw the sting, Murdock.”

“This isn’t the same as putting on a cop who did eighty-seven things right and one thing wrong,” Murdock’d returned with a shake of his head. “Your facts are all negative facts.”

“My facts,” Tony’d retorted, “is that I care about a kid and the kid’s foster dad, and that, in all my caring, I didn’t advertise a screwed-up piece of my past. A piece of my past,” he added, holding up a finger, “that nine-tenths of biological parents would never tell their kids about with total impunity.”

“This isn’t the same thing.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t still draw the sting.”

Murdock had lifted a quelling hand, then, holding it between himself and Tony until Tony fell silent. Bruce’d watched as he nudged up the glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, and then as he rubbed his hand against the back of his neck. “Bruce?” he’d asked after a few seconds.

Bruce, for his part, had blinked. “Yeah?”

“What would you do? If this was your case in Suffolk County, all the same facts. Foster dad’s partner hides from the intake, court’s evaluating placement.” Bruce’d felt for a moment like Murdock was staring both at and through him, even though he knew that wasn’t strictly possible.

He’d rolled his lips together.

“I’d put him on the stand,” he’d admitted quietly. “Even if nine-tenths of the facts were bad ones, I’d want the court to hear why.” He’d swallowed around the growing lump in his throat. “I’d want him
to be able to explain how much he cared.”

Murdock’d nodded, then, and the conversation’d ended. At least, until Tony’d looped an arm around Bruce’s shoulders for a half-hug, kissed him somewhere near his temple, and twirled off to go talk to Miles and Pepper.

Now, Tony’s a different person on the stand, as polished and put-together as the one-time president of Stark Industries. Bruce reminds himself that all the versions of Tony—the businessman, the figurehead, the lawyer, the pseudo-father—are actually the same man, but it’s hard to believe right now. Especially as Murdock finishes with the standard questions about education and occupation and moves onto ask, “What is your relationship to this case?”

Tony leans forward a few inches, closer to the microphone. “I’m Bruce’s— Doctor Banner, the foster dad. I’m his partner.”

Bruce thinks he catches Tony’s gaze flickering in his direction, and he feels his chest tighten for a second longer than strictly necessary. In front of him, Jessica Jones twists around long enough to send him a glance; beside him, Pepper reaches over and pats his leg.

“And where do you reside?” Murdock asks.

“72 Carriage Hill Road.”

“Is that Doctor Banner’s address as well?”

“No.”

Murdock nods and rests his hands on either side of the podium. “So you don’t live with Doctor Banner?”

“No,” Tony replies with a shake of his head. “I spend the night there occasionally. A couple times a week on a good week, less if we’re busy. Like you’d probably expect from most couples, really.”

The words tumble out effortlessly, conversational and easy. Bruce almost envies the way things like “partner” and “couples” roll off his tongue like he’s said them a thousand times before. He wonders if he’ll ever feel that comfortable saying the same.

“And were any of these times spending the night subsequent to Miles living with Doctor Banner?” Murdock continued.

Tony nodded. “Several, sure.”

“And you’re familiar with the child?”

“He lives full-time with the guy I’m dating. We’re pretty close, the kid and I.”

And no one in the world, not even the blind Matt Murdock, could miss the blinding sweetness of Miles’s immediate smile.

Murdock walks Tony through a series of questions about his relationship with Miles, after that, and Bruce feels his attention wane in small, almost untraceable ways. He watches Judge Rees scratch occasional notes on a legal pad before studying Tony on the witness stand; he tracks the way Tony shifts to fold his hands on the desktop in front of him, and then on the way he settles back into the chair; he follows a flash of neon green as Miles slides Jessica Drew a sticky note.
But most often, he catches himself watching Vanko as he leans far back in the vinyl chair at counsel table, his lips pursed and his eyes never lifting from Tony.

The chair behind him, the one reserved for his client, is empty. He’d informed Judge Rees that he’d been in brief contact with Davis on Thursday, but Matt Murdock reported that he’d no-showed to a criminal hearing on Tuesday and was now under a bench warrant. Either way, there’s no extra set of peering eyes beside the attorney and no frantic whispers about Miles’s well-being.

Bruce wonders whether this hearing was ever about Miles at all.

“Now, Mister Stark,” Murdock says after a pause in the testimony, and Bruce glances back to the podium in time to watch the attorney rest his hands lightly on his stack of Braille-printed notes. Murdock’s tone is tight and serious, and suddenly, Bruce’s stomach turns to stone. “You were in the courtroom for the adjudicatory hearing a little over a week ago, correct?”

On the stand, Tony straightens until he’s sitting up to his full height. “Yes.”

“And you heard certain allegations made by Mister Vanko?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Were those accusations true?”

Tony pauses a single beat before he very subtly lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “Kind of,” he says carefully.

Murdock purses his lips into the world’s briefest frown. “Can you explain what you mean by that?”

“I mean that parts of what Mister Vanko said were absolutely true, but the rest was— Well, I’ll go with ‘exaggerated.’” Bruce watches as, very slowly, Tony lifts his hands from his lap; they spin into an emphatic gesture he can’t really stop. “What actually happened was in there somewhere, but it turned into an overstatement wrapped up in a lie and tied together with an ‘I don’t really know where he got that idea’ bow.”

At the defense’s counsel table, Vanko sighs. When he says, “Judge,” it’s nearly a grumble, a thunderclap caught in his broad chest even as he leans further back in his seat.

Judge Rees nods. “Mister Stark, let’s try not to exaggerate ourselves while on the stand.”

Bruce catches Pepper gritting her teeth while Tony himself raises his hands. “I’m sorry, your honor,” he replies, and it sounds absolutely genuine. “I just mean to say that some things actually happened, but others didn’t.”

Murdock nods momentarily, his hands settling back on either side of the podium. Bruce thinks he notices the attorney’s shoulders relaxing under his suit jacket. “I’d like to walk through the accusations and separate the truth from the fiction, if you don’t mind.”

There’s something both soft and brilliant about Tony’s smile. “Not at all.”

Bruce listens to every nuance of the story of Tony Stark’s physically-broken heart like he’s never heard it before, because in a way, he hasn’t. The facts don’t differ from Pepper’s version, of course—if anything, Pepper’s quiet calm about the whole situation makes her telling feel like the more reliable one—but there’s something about hearing the rise and fall of Tony’s voice that transforms it into something new. It’s no longer about a stranger with a heart condition and a struggle to care for himself afterwards, but about the man he knows and cares about clawing his way from the brink of
his own destruction.

Tony uses that term exactly once—“It was Four Oaks or self-destruction,” he explains, shrugging lightly—but Bruce swears he can hear it in every hesitation between clauses or pause for breath. And he can read the damage, the fear that Tony must’ve felt five years ago, in every aborted half-gesture and tiny purse of his lips.

He just hopes Judge Rees notices the same.

When Murdock’s finished walking him through the whole timeline, from his heart surgery to the complications after, from the ultimatum issued by the partners at Cramer and March to starting his career over at the district attorney’s office, he asks Tony if there’s anything else he wants to say.

Bruce watches him wet his lips and then swallow.

“I’m sorry,” Tony says, and for the thousand times he’s rolled his eyes through a faked non-apology, the two words are absolutely genuine. “I should’ve filled out the paperwork and told Jess—Miss Jones—about it, I just—” He snorts quietly and shakes his head. “I didn’t want to let anybody down. Which is pretty dumb, given that I did that times about a million by landing us all here today.”

Murdock smiles slightly. “No further questions, your honor,” he says, and steps away from the podium.

Jessica Drew leans over and murmurs something to Miles, and she waits for the boy to nod before she finally stands. Her heels click percussively on the tile as she steps up to the podium empty-handed, no sign of her legal pad or even an errant post-it note from the boy. “Mister Stark, do you care about Miles?”

Tony hardly pauses for breath before he answers, “Absolutely, yes.”

“Would you ever put him in a dangerous situation?”

“Oh purpose? Not unless you count rollercoasters or snowboarding dangerous, no.” Bruce bites down on the edges of his smile, but he can’t help studying the way Tony glances over at Miles. Something in his expression softens and turns almost sweet before he adds, “And I know there are no guarantees in life and everything, but I’d try not to do it accidentally, either.”

“And how exactly does Doctor Banner feel about the whole arrangement between you two and Miles?”

“Bruce knows how I feel about Miles,” Tony answers, and Bruce feels his breath catch in his throat as Tony glances in his direction. “He knows I’d never do anything to hurt him. Either of them, actually. I mean, in a lot of ways, they’re kind of all the family I’ve got.”

Even though he can only see about a third of Jessica’s face, Bruce swears the guardian ad litem smiles. “Nothing further.”

“Thank you,” Judge Rees says with a nod. She sets down her pen and glances down at the final counsel table. “Mister Vanko?”

Vanko rises slowly, more a mountain than a man, and lopes toward the podium as though time itself waits only for him. There’s something feral about every step, though, something aggressive and nearly predatory, and Bruce sits forward as he watches the attorney settle behind the podium. Beside him, Pepper straightens her spine and purses her lips, as rigid as though she’s carved from stone.
“Mister Stark,” Vanko greets after a full minute of silence, his lips curling into an entirely unpleasant smile.

On the witness stand, Tony squares his shoulders. “Mister Vanko.”

“I want to talk about things. Things you said now, things that are maybe not true. Yes?”

“You ask, I’ll answer,” Tony replies. Acidity dances along the edge of his tone, and Bruce catches the judge raising one slender eyebrow. He’s not certain whether Tony notices or not, but he does purse his lips together once he hears himself.

“Good.” Vanko glances down at his legal pad, and Bruce recognizes instantly that he’s dragging out every moment for all it’s worth. “You said you were not addict, correct?”

“Yes.”

“That you needed painkillers to help with pain. From heart. Correct?”

Tony nods. “Yes, that’s what I said.”

“So when you were at rehab, Four Oaks, you met with therapist? With people to help you with problems that were not painkiller problems, but other problems?”

There’s a moment of hesitation before Tony finally nods. “Yes,” he acknowledges, shrugging slightly. “I saw a counselor. Yinsen, he’s a great guy. We met three times a week at the start, then weaning off before my discharge. We still text occasionally.”

Vanko nods. “And he is drug counselor?”

“No, he’s an individual therapist.” Tony leans forward, his hands folded on the desktop in front of him. Bruce watches his knuckles flex and wonders how hard he’s working not to untangle his fingers and start talking with his hands. “Like I said in my testimony, I’m not an addict.”

“But you were at rehab,” Vanko replies easily. In any other setting, someone might mistake it for a casual conversation. He leans an elbow on the podium. “Rehab is for addict.”

“True rehab, sure,” Tony answers with a tiny bob of his head, “but Four Oaks isn’t just a rehab facility. They work in a lot of different fields.”

“What is your field?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said lots of fields.” Vanko raises a hand and waves it idly. “But you are not addict. So what are you?”

There’s a long beat of silence while Tony worries his lips together. Bruce watches his tangled fingers tighten together, and he suspects the whisper of noise he hears is the other man drawing in a deep breath.

But finally, Tony answers, “I had a mental health diagnosis.”

“What one?”

The flicker of irritation that flashes across Tony’s face causes Bruce’s stomach to twist into a knot. He slides further forward on the uncomfortable gallery chair, his own fingers curling against his legs.
Pepper sends him a sideways glance, but he shakes her concern away; his only worry is Tony, and whether the other man can successfully sit on his anger.

But finally, Tony exhales. “I had what the experts call a major depressive episode,” he answers. His voice holds steady and clear, the frustration only evident in the tightness of his jaw. “And, by the way, the drugs were only a symptom of that, not the cause. Because if the drugs cause the episode, it’s not actually an episode.” He pauses long enough to shrug. “At least, that’s how I understood it.”

Vanko nods, a tight dip of his head that looks more mechanical than human. He drums his large fingers against the surface of the podium for a moment, but his eyes never leave Tony. There’s something uncomfortable in the silence, almost sinister, and Bruce can’t help but frown. Finally, Vanko asks, “So drugs were not problem.” He stops short, his brow tightening. “Your brain, though, it was problem?”

Tony shrugs. “I guess you can say that, sure.”

“And now?”

“How what?”

“Now your brain is not problem?” Vanko spreads his arms out like a circus ringleader, and in the gallery, Pepper snorts like she’s just suffered through one of Tony’s worst jokes. “You are cured?”

“Cured? No.” Tony’s head shake is immediate and sharp, a contrast to the seconds of hesitation just minutes ago. He sits forward, but as Bruce watches, all the tension unspools and leaves him the Tony that Bruce knows: comfortable, open, and only mildly combative. When he shrugs, it’s an easy lift of his shoulders, and there is something almost warm in his slow-burn smile. “My brain’s always going to be a problem, Mister Vanko. It’s always going to fly at a hundred miles an hour, it’s always going to throw me off a little. That’s what it does.” His dark eyes narrow, focusing entirely on the attorney in front of him. “But if what you’re really asking is whether I think I’m going to suffer the kind of depression that hit me five years ago, then the answer’s no.”

Every muscle in Vanko’s back draws tight, and even tilted away from gallery as he is, Bruce can catch his jaw clenching. “Why?”

“Because unlike five years ago, I’m surrounded by people who care about me,” Tony answers, propelled by his usual easy confidence. “And I know that even if I let my brain start to screw me over, they won’t.”

For seconds that feel like hours, long taffy-pull stretches of time spiral outward, Anton Vanko stares at Tony, and Tony stares right back.

Finally, the attorney picks up his legal pad and steps away from the podium. “No more questions,” he says, and on the stand, Tony smiles.

Tony’s allowed to step down after Murdock and Jessica each decline a second chance at questioning, and both Bruce and Miles track Tony’s progress back to the gallery. Tony winks at Miles as he passes counsel table, a private moment that causes Miles’s face to light up in a grin; when he swivels his chair long enough to grace Bruce with the same delight, Jessica Drew rolls her eyes and forcibly turns him back around. Murdock calls Jessica Jones to stand once Tony’s settled, but Bruce barely hears the other man’s voice.

No, instead he’s focused on the way Tony drops into the chair beside him, the way Tony’s entire
body slumps in some strange combination of relief and worry, and how Tony’s hand immediately, unerringly, finds his own.

Their fingers tangle, as tight and as sure as Tony’d folded his own hands together on the stand, and Bruce forces a tiny smile. “You drew the sting,” he murmurs while Murdock walks Jessica through the usual foundation questions—her name, her occupation, her familiarity with Miles’s case.

Tony presses his lips together for a split-second before whispering, “Scale of ten, how scared are you right now?”

They watch each other in the almost-quiet of the courtroom, the silence between Murdock’s questions and Jessica’s testimony broken only by their breathing and the slow creak of Miles swiveling back and forth on his chair.

“It’s always going to be ten,” he finally says, the words hardly audible even to his own ears.

The smile that touches the corners of Tony’s mouth never reaches his eyes. “Me too,” he admits, and squeezes Bruce’s hand as they settle in to watch the proceedings.

Jessica’s testimony is practiced and concise, the well-oiled machine of a seasoned social worker familiar with the questions before her. She praises Tony’s late-but-accurate intake and recounts bits and pieces of her conversations with Four Oaks personnel before Vanko growls out a hearsay objection that the judge immediately sustains. The conversation swiftly transitions from Tony’s past to Tony’s present and Jessica’s concerns about Miles’s living in a home where Tony sometimes spends the night.

“I have absolutely no concerns at this time;” Jessica assures the court, and Murdock thanks her before he sits down.

Jessica Drew returns to the podium empty-handed, her fingers spreading against the surface of the wood. “You’ve observed Tony—Mister Stark—and Miles together, right?”

The social worker nods. “I have.”

“Any concerns whether Miles is safe in his care?”

“I have never been concerned about Miles’s safety with Tony;” Jessica Jones immediately answers. Her nervous tic of tucking her hair behind her ear is conspicuously absent as she lifts her eyes from the podium to look up at Judge Rees. “At this point, I’d be more worried about disrupting Miles from a family setting where he’s loved than what harm Tony could do based on something that happened five years ago.”

The tightness in Bruce’s chest starts to recede when Jessica Drew smiles. “No other questions, your honor.”

When the judge looks to Vanko, he shakes his head. “No questions,” he says nonchalantly, and Jessica Jones is allowed to step down. She thanks the judge and crosses the well of the courtroom quickly, pausing to flick only one nasty glance in Vanko’s direction. When she steps back behind the bar and into the gallery, she pauses before sitting down.

“You’re lucky he loves you,” she informs Tony. It’s quiet, but not enough to keep a slow-burn smile of Jessica Drew’s face as she stands to tell the judge she’s not presenting any evidence of her own.

“Which one?” Tony asks, and Bruce forces himself to roll his eyes. Jessica mirrors him and shakes her head before sitting down, but Bruce catches the smile playing around the corners of her mouth.
The smile hardly lasts, though, because it’s then that Vanko stands. He buttons his expensive suit jacket and clears his throat. At Bruce’s elbow, Pepper stills, and Bruce thinks he hears her swallow.

“Miss Potts,” Vanko says, and moves toward the podium as Pepper rises.

She’s dressed in a black suit and killer heels, the picture of a consummate professional, but Bruce knows her well enough to detect the flutter of nervousness as she crosses the well of the courtroom and moves to stand beside the witness box. Her voice is bell-clear and even when she swears to tell the truth, but she worries her lips before she sits down, and shifts to get comfortable. Vanko watches the whole time, an expression not unlike a smirk playing across his face.

Bruce feels his stomach pull tight and twist.

When he glances over his shoulder at Tony, he’s just as stock-still and silent, his mouth pressed into a permanent-looking frown. The fingers of his free hand dance against his knee, tap-tapping a rhythm Bruce can’t quite follow. He imagines that he feels Tony’s nerves radiating between the two of them, their tangled hands creating a conduit of uncertainty.

Vanko leans his elbow on the podium. “Give your name to court,” he instructs.

Pepper’s tight smile never touches her eyes. “Virginia Potts.”

“You have job, yes?”

“I do, yes,” she answers. Her eyes flick in Bruce and Tony’s direction for a moment, but they don’t settle there. “I work at the Suffolk County District Attorney’s Office.”

Vanko nods slightly, still almost-smirking. “What is description of job?”

“Oh, uh, I wear a few different hats,” Pepper replies, shrugging lightly. “I’m primarily the appellate trial assistant, but I help manage the other three trial assistants, too.”

“With Mister Stark?” Vanko prompts.

“Excuse me?”

“You work with Mister Stark?”

Pepper worries her lips again before the humorless smile reappears on her face. Her tone is clipped, toeing along the very edge of snide, when she answers, “As he’s the appellate attorney, yes, I do.”

“And you have job before this, yes?” Vanko presses, gesturing vaguely between them. “This is not first job?”

“No, this isn’t my first job.”

“Where was last job?”

Despite already knowing the answer, Bruce feels a lead weight settle on his chest. He pulls in a breath and exhales while Pepper sits forward a few inches. “I worked as a paralegal in the corporate litigation division at Cramer and March,” she answers, folding her hands in her lap. Vanko raises an eyebrow, the sinister smirk broadening slightly, and watches as Pepper rubs her thumbs together. “I worked with five associates, including Tony Stark.”

Judge Rees’s pen stops moving across her legal pad for a moment, and Bruce is certain that he hears Jessica Drew grumble something under her breath. Vanko, however, leaves the words hanging there
between them, heavy in the quiet of the room. Bruce is reminded momentarily of Loki Laufeyson’s showmanship, the easy way the defense attorney transforms a room into a circus ring. Vanko’s an understated version, drawing out the quiet so that every breath and fidget is amplified to ten times their normal volume.

Pepper crosses her legs on the stand. Tony exhales slowly, like a man who’s bracing for impact. Bruce swallows around the lump in his throat.

“We talk now about Mister Stark,” Vanko informs the courtroom, and then, the real questioning begins.

He walks through what feels like every detail of Pepper and Tony’s working relationship, examining each moment from the time when Pepper started at the firm—“About six or seven months before Tony’s surgery,” she explains—to the time when she resigned—“About six months after Tony left,” she recalls with a brief shrug. Vanko fires off a thousand questions about Tony’s behavior, Tony’s habits, Tony’s demeanor, Tony’s health in general, things that hardly seem relevant but survive all of Jessica Drew’s objections. The attorney asks about specific projects and dinners, events Pepper admits to hardly remembering but that Vanko’s clearly never forgotten, and Bruce feels his patience fraying as the questions slowly become more and more demanding.

Beside him, Tony is statue-still, chiseled from marble or crafted from steel as he watches Pepper reply to every one of Vanko’s demands. His thumb occasionally brushes Bruce’s, a reminder that he’s present and breathing, but nothing drags his eyes away from the woman on the stand. Bruce wonders what thoughts are rushing through his head and what emotions besides fear are slowly suffocating him.

Then, Pepper responds to a question about Tony’s well-being after his surgery by saying, “He was my boss and my friend. I never stopped worrying about him,” and Tony’s eyes close for a half-second too long.

Bruce might not be able to name the specific emotions, but he can certainly guess at them, after that.

“So, Miss Potts,” Vanko finally says after another of his too-long pauses. His hands settle on either side of the podium, loose and comfortable, and he lifts his shoulders in a casual shrug. Pepper’s posture on the witness stand remains tight and serious, and her hands stay folded in her lap. “You hear Mister Stark talk today, yes?”

“I did, yes,” Pepper answers evenly.

“You know he was turned into partners at old job for drugs and problems, yes?”

“I’m aware.”

“And he had choice: leave on his own and get help, or be fired and reported to bar?”

Pepper nods. “As I understood it, yes, those were the options presented to him by the partners.”

Vanko mirrors her nod, an easy bob of his head. The smile that creases his mouth is tiny but predatory, the smile of a big jungle cat prowling through the brush. He watches her for a moment, and Bruce almost mistakes it for fondness.

Except when Vanko glances over his shoulder in Tony’s direction, his eyes darken, and Bruce knows that the fondness—along with everything else—is part of Vanko’s puppet show.

“You know all this about Mister Stark,” Vanko presses, “all these things, bad things, things that are
not good qualities for man or for lawyer, and you follow him around like puppy from job to other job?”

“No,” Pepper replies immediately, and for the first time in the long line of questioning, Bruce watches as her carefully-perfected control splinters and snaps. She opens her hands and places them on the desktop, then leans forward, every motion the very picture of barely-contained anger. Her jaw sets in a tight line, and when her eyes narrow, Vanko’s smile suddenly drops away. “With all due respect, Mister Vanko, that’s absolutely not the truth. Did I leave Cramer and March? Yes, I did. I left because it was a toxic work environment that I did not enjoy, and no amount of zeros in my salary could change the fact that I hated every day I worked there. I was already job-hunting when Tony contacted me and asked that I come to the district attorney’s office. The two things just happened to coincide.”

Her fingers curl slightly, pressing into the desktop.

“But I want to make absolutely clear to you that if I didn’t believe in Tony Stark as a person and didn’t genuinely think that the months at Four Oaks changed his life, I would’ve waited for a different position.” Anger flashes through her eyes, and Bruce watches as her lips curl into a sneer that can only barely be mistaken as a smile. “I worried about him, but I wasn’t a blind devotee.”

Bruce feels himself smile, a tiny grin that he tries to hide by dipping his head. Tony squeezes his hand, and when he glances over, he catches Tony watching him, one corner of his mouth tilting up. Warmth pools in Bruce’s stomach then, the first little bolt of something other than worry.

But the warmth rushes away when Vanko breaks the silence by asking, “And you did not follow Mister Stark because you sleep with Mister Stark?”

The courtroom bursts into motion as soon as the question’s out of his mouth. Both Jessica Drew and Murdock rocket to their feet, spouting objections that echo through the room. Miles twists around in his chair to stare at Tony, and Tony, to his credit, immediately shakes his head. Anger flickers across his face as Pepper rears back away from the microphone and demands, “What?”

But none of these things distract Vanko, who never stops speaking. “You sleep with Mister Stark,” he accuses, his voice rising over the din. He levels a finger in Pepper’s direction, and Bruce watches as Pepper gapes at him. “You start relationship, like other paralegals start relationship with Mister Stark, and now you lie to court to—”

“Mister Vanko,” Judge Rees announces, her voice nearly a shout in order to be heard, “that’s enough!”

Vanko immediately snaps his mouth shut, but his jaw is tight and his fingers are gripping the podium harder than Bruce’s ever seen. Beside him, Tony untangles their fingers to grip the arm of the uncomfortable gallery chairs, his shoulders square and his face a mask of contained rage. Bruce is certain in that moment that, if given the opportunity, Tony would punch Vanko square in the face.

“You are not invited to badger your own witness,” the judge continues sharply. “Move on.”

“Judge—”

“Move on, Mister Vanko,” she repeats, and her tone leaves absolutely no room for argument.

Vanko stands behind the podium for a moment longer, his attention completely focused on Pepper. Pepper stares back at him, her face cold and hard. Twice, her jaw works as though she’s about to say something, but each time she thinks better of it.
Finally, Vanko shrugs. “No more questions,” he decides, and walks back to counsel table.

Murdock and Jessica both decline to question Pepper. When she steps off the witness stand, she spends too long glaring at Vanko before she walks into the gallery and then, right out of the courtroom.

The doors swing shut behind her.

The courtroom falls absolutely silent after that, a hush that sweeps across the room and threatens to suffocate each of them. Or maybe it’s not the silence but the fear that’s suffocating them, stealing away the air until Bruce feels his heart start to race. Judge Rees flips back in her legal pad for a moment, her face half-hidden from the seven people watching her, and Bruce’s stomach twists itself into knots.

He spent the first three days with Miles swearing he’d send the boy away after the weekend. He spent the first three weeks with Miles drowning in his feelings not only for the boy, but for Tony, the de facto second parent and the partner Bruce’d never expected to find.

And now, in the minutes of silence, the only thing he wants is both of them, together, as his accidentally-found family. He wants more days like yesterday, running the dogs at the park and arguing over whether the snow flurries will actually stick. He wants to make hot chocolate while Tony slides behind him to grab soup bowls, hands brushing his hips, and stolen chocolate-tinged kisses that cause Miles to roll his eyes. He wants to bicker about when to start homework, consider winter break field trips to museums and aquariums, to physically steer Miles toward the door when it’s time to go home because no, he can’t play a tenth round of Punch-Out on the Wii, he needs to shower before bed.

He wants to watch Miles hug Tony goodnight a thousand more times, and witness the soft surprise of Tony’s smile when it happens.

He wants the best friend who’s somehow become the center of his universe, and the accidental foster child who’s somehow become his son.

When Judge Rees’s head finally lifts, Bruce leans forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands nearly covering his mouth.

Tony straightens beside him and draws in a breath that’s sharper than Bruce thinks either of them imagined. At counsel table, Miles sits up too, wriggling in his chair until he’s perfectly straight-backed and watching the judge.

For a moment, no one breathes.

“It seems to me that there are two possible versions of Mister Stark’s past,” she says finally, leaning back in her chair. Her eyes survey the courtroom, and Bruce feels his heart rise into his throat when her eyes come to rest on Tony. “One version paints him as an unredeemable addict, and the other involves a surgery gone wrong and a mental health diagnosis. Apparently, I’m supposed to choose between them, and use that choice to determine whether Miles be moved from a home where he’s thriving.”

She pauses, her lips pressed into a small frown.

“Am I unbothered by Mister Stark’s past? No. Any judge would be concerned.” She shakes her head. “But balanced against that worry is Mister Stark’s forthrightness today, and the clear dedication that he and Doctor Banner have shown Miles since he came into state custody. And both those things exist regardless of which story you choose to believe.”
When Bruce breathes, he swears the air scalds his lungs. Next to him, Tony balls his hands together, white-knuckled fists held in his lap while his toe taps uncontrollably.

He only freezes when Judge Rees’s attention snaps directly to him.

“Mister Stark,” she says, her voice stern and authoritative, “you are hereby ordered to ensure that whatever steps of your intake remain are completed within the next thirty days. Let me make myself very clear on this: if Union County Child Services asks you to jump, you jump. No pausing to ask how high, no beating around the bush. If they ask you for something, you will do it. Failure to comply will result in Miles being removed from Doctor Banner’s home, end of story.”

Tony’s nod is so tiny, Bruce almost misses it. The cold fingers of fear grip his stomach tighter, cutting off his ability to breathe. He watches Tony’s knuckles pale as he holds his whole body that one last degree tighter.

And then, Judge Rees smiles.

“But all that said, I see no reason at this time to disrupt Miles’s placement with Doctor Banner.”

Bruce knows, intellectually, that Judge Rees continues speaking after that one sentence, rattling off court orders for both the parties and Union County Child Services to follow, but Bruce hardly hears them. No, all he hears is the rush of relief that floods his ears, the force of his own held breath rushing from his lungs and the pound of his pulse in his ears. Tony grabs his arm hard enough to bruise, fingers curling into his skin, and when Bruce glances over, he’s floored by the brightness of his smile. He’s not sure whether the rush of unrestrained joy he feels in his heart originates in Tony’s grin or his own, but for the first time, Bruce makes no attempt to shove it down or hide.

He smiles back, wide and hopeful, and lets all the heat rush into his face.

In the well of the courtroom, a chair squeaks loudly enough to interrupt the judge’s rulings, and both Bruce and Tony glance over in time to see Jessica Drew roll her eyes before spinning Miles’s chair back around to face the bench. Miles’s grin is like a match in the darkness, chasing away the shadows they’ve spent a week and a half fighting, and Bruce nearly laughs when he catches the guardian ad litem smiling, too.

Judge Rees waits until Miles is facing forward again to level her attention in his direction. Her face is soft but serious. “Miles,” she says, and the boy sits up a few inches taller, “you are a very lucky young man to have two people who love you this much willing to fight this hard for you. I hope you understand that.”

There’s no word but “pride” for the rush of emotion Bruce feels when Miles nods and replies, “I do.”

The judge smiles at him. “Good,” she decides, her hands gathering up the file in front of her. “In that case, we’re adjourned.”

Everyone rises with her as she steps down from the bench, and Bruce swears he feels the barely-contained thrum of excitement in the courtroom vibrating around him until the secured door out of the courtroom finally closes. He hardly has time to let out another breath of relief and gratitude, though, before there are hands catching him by the waist, and he knows before it happens that there’s no force in the universe strong enough to dissuade Tony from kissing him. He crushes their mouths together, and Bruce realizes as his arms rise and his fingers curl in Tony’s shirt that he doesn’t want to stop him.

Not right now, and maybe never again.
“What’d we say about the five minutes an hour rule?” Tony demands, and Bruce shakes his head as they finally untangle from one another. Miles leans against the bar separating the well of the courtroom from the gallery, his face absolutely overtaken by his grin. Bruce wants to bottle the warmth and joy that radiates off him, to keep it on a shelf as another memento of his strange, wonderful life.

Instead, he says, “Come over here,” and is barely in the aisle between the rows of too-narrow gallery seats before Miles is gripping him in a too-tight hug. He squeezes him back, aware the whole time that Tony’s watching them from an arm’s length away.

“Told you we’d fight,” he says quietly, and Miles lifts his face away from Bruce’s shirt to look over at him. With hands in his pockets and the line of his shoulders finally softened, he looks again like their Tony, the one who forces twelve-year-olds on “taste adventures” and yells obscenities at MarioKart.

Miles’s grin melts into something small and sweet, an unexpected expression from a boy who’s spent the last few days locked in a perpetual state of quiet worry. “Family you kind of chose, right?” he replies.

“Right,” Tony retorts, and Bruce isn’t at all surprised when Miles turns the half-second arm-nudge into a hug of Tony’s own.

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They skip the last hour of work and Miles’s last hour of school and head over to Tony’s, where Tony immediately starts inviting over all of their coworkers for a celebratory dinner and, when that’s finished, calls a local restaurant to order a terrifyingly large spread of Chinese food. Pepper arrives while Tony’s arguing about the price of egg rolls, toeing off her heels and dropping her blazer over the back of a chair. She walks into the kitchen, ignores Tony’s frantic wave, and helps herself to a bottle of wine off the rack on the countertop.

“Miles is outside?” she asks, and Bruce nods vaguely in the direction of the back yard. He can just barely hear the dogs barking at one another and the sound of Miles’s laughter cascading over it.

“Good. In that case, I fucking hate Anton Vanko, and I hope he burns in hell.”

The placid calm in her voice is so overwhelming that Bruce nearly chokes on his laughter. Tony pauses in the middle of a sentence and grins before launching back into whatever bickering will earn him the most crab rangoon. “He was horrible,” Bruce admits.

Pepper rolls her eyes. “The price of gas is horrible. Vanko is—” She bites her tongue and stretches up for a wine glass. After she brings it down, she twists to look at Bruce. “I’m glad the judge saw through his bullshit,” she says, smiling. “I started to worry she might not halfway through my angry-walk, and—”

“The sexiest of all her emotional walks,” Tony announces. He tosses his cell phone onto the counter before wandering over to sling an arm around Pepper’s waist. Pepper elbows him lightly in the side,
but he just tugs her closer. “Pepper Potts, have I mentioned lately that you are legitimately and completely amazing?”

Pepper allows one flicker of a smile to cross her lips before she stands on it and levels Tony a serious looks. “Not lately enough for my taste, no.”

“Huh. I’ll have to work on that, then.” Tony allows her to duck out of his grip but then leans in just enough to plant a kiss on her cheek. She blinks, surprised, and nearly misses her blind grab for the corkscrew. By time she twists to look at him, though, Tony’s already gone, brushing a kiss across Bruce’s mouth before he heads out the backdoor in his bare feet.

“You’re never going to stop being surprised by him, you know,” she remarks when he’s gone, and Bruce glances back at her in time to watch her pull the cork out of the bottle. She tosses him a glance over her shoulder. “Every time you think life just might settle, he’ll find a new way to prove you wrong.”

And Bruce, despite everything that’s happened in the last few weeks and everything that could still happen, can’t contain his smile. For a few seconds, all he knows is what’s around him: the familiarity of Tony’s kitchen and Tony’s house, the sound of the dogs clattering across the deck outside, the cadence of Tony and Miles’s laughter as it echoes in out of the cold.

“I’m not sure if I know how to live any other way,” he admits, shrugging.

Across from him, Pepper leans against the counter, her glass settled comfortably in her hands. “You shouldn’t want to,” she decides, and when she smiles, Bruce smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

“Drawing the sting” is a technique used by trial attorneys in which an attorney voluntarily brings out negative or damning information himself, rather than letting the other side bring it out. That way, the court (or jury) hears it straight from the horse’s mouth—so to speak.

I also posted "A Long Time Coming" today, which is the MPU origin story of Steve and Bucky’s relationship from when they met until the present. Just in case you wanted something a bit lighter to go with your weekly dose of Permanency.

Next week, I will also be hosting Motion Practice Friday on my tumblr and answer any questions about Permanency and my other stories. I’ll include a link to my tumblr upon the posting of next week’s chapter, but I thought I’d put everyone on the lookout for it.
What We Can Be

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, there is fear but also hope, uncertainty but also determination, frustration but also joy. And, above all else, there is permanency.

Chapter Notes

I could not have gotten here without Jen and saranoh. Really.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And then,” Clint declares, raising his half-finished beer high above his head and drawing attention from at least three other tables, “they lived happily ever after.”

The December chill has successfully chased away the majority of the regular patrons at Clint’s favorite dive bar, and Bruce leans his elbows on the slightly-sticky table of their booth as he rolls his eyes. A mediocre country ballad croons through the tinny jukebox speakers, and a few tables over, a group of barely-legal university students pass around an enormous plate of nachos. The place is dead enough that the bartender is watching professional basketball between pouring drinks, and for the first time, Bruce almost thinks it’s nice.

Of course, he’s also just watched his students groan and mutter their way through what he feels is a pretty objectively easy final, so maybe it’s his overall mood talking.

Across the table, Natasha rolls her eyes and pulls the dish of spinach dip over so she can spoon some onto her plate. “You could have celebrated this momentous occasion with us Monday night,” she points out, and Clint pulls a face as he helps himself to a thirsty sip of beer. “Where the food and booze was free and not likely voted ‘most likely to kill you from indigestion.’”

“Yeah, yeah,” Clint grumbles. He reaches for his basket of cheese sticks and, as though proving a point, tears off a chunk of one and pops it in his mouth. “But I had plans Monday night. Sexy plans.”

He waggles his eyebrows and flashes Natasha his toothiest grin, and Natasha sighs before she shakes her head. “Everyone knows that Monday is muy thai night,” she informs him, and his grin immediately drops away. “And, last I heard, Wilson was still kicking your ass.”

There’s a long, heavy pause before Clint complains, “I swear to god I pulled muscles I didn’t even know existed, it was so bad.”
And, despite himself, Bruce laughs.

He knows intellectually that only two full days have passed since Monday’s hearing, a mere forty-eight hours of reacclimating himself to a life in which losing Miles is no longer a constant fear. They’d spent the whole of Monday evening at Tony’s, stuffing themselves with Chinese food and laughing with their friends, and the only moment more exhilarating than when Judge Rees refused to disrupt Miles’s placement was when Dot burst in through the front door, spotted Miles, and literally tackled him in a hug. He’d lost his balance and crashed to the floor, a pile of limbs and then of dog as soon as Dummy spotted them, and Dot’d shrilled about missing him at the top of her lungs.

Bucky’d sighed as he plucked her up off the ground and helped her straighten her dress. “You know, you saw him on Wednesday,” he’d pointed out.

Dot’s withering look could’ve stopped a lava flow at a hundred paces. “That was a long time ago,” she’d informed her father, and then attached herself to Miles’s side for the remainder of the night.

Once everyone’d cleared out and multiple containers of leftovers were stacked in the trunk of Bruce’s car, Tony’d grabbed both him and Miles and hugged them goodnight together. “Be good,” he’d instructed, and Miles’d rolled his eyes as he wriggled away. “I meant Bruce, not you,” Tony’d assured him, and Bruce’d laughed as the boy’d grabbed his backpack and darted out to the car.

But Bruce’d stood under the ridiculous porch light on Tony’s equally-ridiculous front stoop and watched the light cast shadows across Tony’s face. They’d lingered together, Tony’s hand still planted on his side and their combined breaths curling into steam, and Bruce’d struggled to find the words for everything he’d felt.

Finally, he’d just said, “Thank you.”

“Pretty sure I’m supposed to be thanking you, right about now,” Tony’d retorted, his voice soft and warm against the frigid December evening.

“Why’s that?”

“Because even when I really didn’t deserve it, you lemme have my second chance.”

He’d kissed Bruce then, sweet and gentle in the darkness, and Bruce’d found himself pressing bodily to Tony just to leech his heat. His heat and the thousand things he’d missed about the other man, his scent and proximity, the familiar cadence of his breath and the slow burn of his facial hair. Even when they’d pulled apart, they’d leaned against one another and shared a handful of hungry breaths.

Then, Miles’d laid on the horn, and they’d both given into laughter.

“Further proof we’ve stumbled on an awesome kid,” Tony’d murmured, and Bruce’d ignored the flush of heat in his cheeks to press his lips against the corner of Tony’s mouth and, then, to let him go.

Tuesday night, Tony’d arrived on Bruce’s doorstep at eight-thirty with a duffel bag and a smile.

“I’ve decided I get a drawer,” he’d said.

Bruce’d rolled his eyes. “You’ve had a drawer since you started leaving socks here four years ago,” he’d pointed out.

“Well, then I’ve decided I get to fill the drawer,” he’d retorted, and he’d high-fived Miles upon entering the foyer.
Bruce thinks forty-eight hours shouldn’t feel like forty-eight days, weeks, or months, but in a way, that’s how life with Tony feels now. Because even if reality would argue otherwise, he feels as though the fraction of his life spent with Tony now outnumbers the time spent without.

He’s about to explain that very thing when his phone chimes in his pocket. Across the table, Clint rolls his eyes, mutters something under his breath that sounds distinctly like “loverboy,” and is rewarded by Natasha stomping on his toes under the table.

Bruce is still snorting a laugh as he pulls out his phone. The lock screen promises that the new text message is from Tony—absolutely no surprise there—but he can’t help but break out in a grin when he actually unlocks the phone.

The picture Tony’s sent him is of a shopping cart that is nearly overflowing with pink. There’s at least two Barbie dolls, an oversized stuffed unicorn with a hot-pink mane, three different Disney Princess puzzles, and a stack of picture and coloring books that threatens to fall out of the child seat.

The caption reads this is why you shouldve come goddaughter x-mas shopping with us.

Bruce shakes his head at the photo and opens a new message. It’s not my money, he reminds Tony for the tenth time. No, he’s already spent his allotted Dot funds on a box-set collection of Doctor Seuss books and the new Cranium game meant for children.

(He’d gone a little over budget, but not like Tony.)

He’s about to lock the screen when his phone chimes again. just for that i’m not showing you what we’re getting YOU for x-mas, Tony retorts, and Bruce rolls his eyes before he puts his phone back in his pocket.

“You look happy,” Natasha observes, and he blinks as he reaches for his beer. She’s studying him from across the table, her lips pursed into a tiny, almost enigmatic smile. Bruce feels his face flush and attempts to hide it by drinking, but he knows it’s absolutely futile.

Clint snorts and steals a pita chip off Natasha’s plate. “Of course he looks happy,” he informs her, crunching down loudly. “He made up with Tony and he gets to keep his kid. That’s pretty much riding off into the sunset, around here.”

Natasha shakes her head. “Because that’s how it works in reality.”

“Were you this mean to me when I started working in our office? Because I don’t think you used to be this mean.”

Bruce chuckles as Natasha pushes her plate out of his reach using only her middle finger, and watches as the two of them struggle against each other like snotty, accidental siblings. Clint huffs out a breath when he gets an elbow to the ribs, Natasha nearly stabs him with her fork when he threatens to grope her, and the whole show only ends when the waitress arrives with a fresh round of drinks.

“Everyone okay here?” she asks, but her eyes linger a little too long on Bruce. He sputters for a second, manages to thank her awkwardly, and stares at his beer as she and her swaying hips wander away.

Clint, ever the charmer, burst out laughing.

“Things aren’t perfect,” Bruce explains once the other man’s recovered by wiping his eyes and swallowing several greedy mouthfuls of beer. “I think we’re still navigating everything that’s happened in the last couple weeks. But we’re getting there.”
“Bruce, this is Stark we’re talking about, here,” Clint points out, tipping his glass in Bruce’s direction. “It’ll never be perfect. I’m pretty sure the guy doesn’t even know the meaning of the word.” He leans back and stretches one arm along the top of the booth. Beside him, Natasha shakes her head, but she doesn’t actually slap his arm away. Progress, Bruce thinks with a tiny smile. “What’s important is that you’re not worried about dropping shoes or secret pasts anymore. And you’re not, right?”

Bruce looks down at his rings of moisture his full glass’s left on the table. “I’m not,” he admits, and he feels the warmth of his own smile.

When he looks up again, both Clint and Natasha are smiling back at him, and for the first time, he realizes just how genuinely happy his friends are to have witnessed his slow trudge from where he started eight weeks ago to where he is today.

“Good,” Natasha says, and they leave the conversation at that.

When Bruce arrives back at home just after ten, over-full thanks to the second order of mozzarella sticks Clint’d cajoled him into splitting, the house is dark and quiet. He finds one of three Toys ‘R’ Us bags in the foyer—the other two are piled together on the armchair in the living room—and the remnants of Starbucks hot cocoa cups sitting on the kitchen island. A single light shines upstairs, so he locks the door, checks the thermostat, and climbs the steps into the light.

Miles’s bedroom door is already closed but unlatched, a sign he’s either asleep or about to be, which leaves the master bedroom as the only clear source of the last burning lamp. Tony’s propped up against the head of the bed, a pencil between his teeth and a spiral-bound legal brief clutched in his fingers, and even though there’s no way he’s missed Bruce’s shadow darkening the doorway, he doesn’t glance up. For a moment, then, Bruce ends up standing at the threshold to his own bedroom, staring at the man in his bed.

He tries to think of him as “just Tony”—just Tony in a plain gray t-shirt, just Tony in his glasses with one leg sticking out from under the covers, just Tony with his wallet and phone tossed haphazardly on the dresser—when, in fact, it’s not “just” anything.

It’s simultaneously everything he missed in the eight horrible days they hadn’t spoken, and everything he’s always wanted but never hoped for.

“You’re not invisible, you know,” Tony comments around the pencil as he flicks to the next page. When he looks up over the rims of his glasses, Bruce is struck with the sudden urge to climb onto the bed, throw the brief across the room, and render Tony speechless. Instead, all he does is stand there and smile softly. “I mean, unless I’ve fallen asleep and woken up in a dream where you greet me by standing creepily in the doorway and not by jumping me like we haven’t seen each other in six months.”

Bruce snorts a tiny laugh and shakes his head. “And here, I was just thinking that I missed you,” he comments as he steps into the room.

“Of course you missed me,” Tony returns, turning back to the brief. “I mean, I am me.”

As it turns out, Tony complains very briefly when Bruce tugs the brief out of his grip and drops it unceremoniously onto the floor.

It just also turns out that Bruce is quite adept at stopping Tony’s complaints.
“We have a problem,” Jessica Jones says Saturday morning.

Snow flutters down in fat clumps of flakes, heavy and wet enough to finally stick to every surface in sight. They coat the deck behind Tony’s house in a slushy grey-white film that melts just quickly enough to not count as actual accumulation. Jessica’s hair is a collection of damp flyaways that curl around the side of her face and stick to her cheeks, and all the cloudy-breathed huffing in the world can’t chase them away. Her dark brown coat looks almost speckled thanks to the still-melting flakes. Beside her, Tony’s scarf catches on the little gusts of winter wind, whipping over his shoulder or into his face. The flakes caught in his hair melt slowly, giving him an odd, uneven salt-and-pepper appearance that remind Bruce a little of the silver he sometimes finds in Tony’s temples.

Bruce shoves his own hands in his coat pockets, for all the good it does against the cold and the snow.

In the yard, Dot attempts to pack the sorry slush into a snowball using her nearly neon-pink mittens, but it all turns to mush the second her hands clasp around it. Miles laughs when she tries to throw what’s left of it in his direction. The end result, though, is that she takes off after him across the wet, slippery grass, shouting that she’ll just put her mitten in his face. The dogs try to follow, Miles loses his footing in the wet and muck, and the end result is a twelve-year-old being tackled by his cousin.

By Dot, Bruce reminds himself. Miles isn’t anyone’s cousin.

But when he gets back up, he runs extra-slowly, a sure sign that he wants the girl to catch him.

Bruce hadn’t been especially surprised when, Friday afternoon, his phone buzzed with a text from Jessica Jones. Her usual non-English read simply no visit w davis but i need a mtg, and he’d stared at the words for longer than strictly necessary. When he’d asked why, Jessica’d taken over an hour to send back a five-word response:

nobody knows where he is

He’d replayed the message on his drive to pick up Miles from school, wording and rewording his explanation for why there’d be no Saturday morning visit with Aaron Davis. By the time he’d pulled into the parking lot, all his words lived in one great jumble. He’d ended up killing the engine and watching Miles and his friends talk at the bottom of the steps into the school. All three of the boys were bundled up in coats, hats, and—in Ganke’s case—ridiculous fluffy earmuffs, their laughter dissolving into clouds of breath like halos around them.

When Miles’d spotted Bruce’s car, though, he’d waved off his friends and jogged a beeline across the parking lot. “Ganke’s mom says it might snow,” he’d announced as he’d dropped into the passenger’s seat.

Bruce’d forced a smile. “Maybe,” he’d replied, and he’d known immediately how unconvincing he’d sounded when Miles’s grin fell right off his face. He’d rolled his lips together and watched the boy stare at him, silent in bare-faced worry, and the words’d come together easily, after that.

Miles’d sat in absolute, stalwart quiet, his eyes dropping to the floor mats. When Bruce’d finished explaining, he’d barely lifted his shoulders. “Okay,” he’d said.

“Okay?” Bruce’d repeated.
“Yeah. Okay.” Miles’d shrugged again before he slouched all the way back in the seat. He’d tipped the back of his head against the upholstery and stared at the ceiling. “I mean, I already kind of figured it might happen, so whatever.”

“Miles—”

“Let’s just go home,” the boy’d interrupted. He’d reached for his seatbelt then, but his eyes’d never moved back in Bruce’s direction.

And Bruce’d fought against the lump in the back of his throat for a few heavy seconds before he’d replied, “Okay.”

He’d tried to come up with a way to fill the silence that followed them back to the house, full of crushed expectations and Miles’s quiet sulking, but in the end, the solution laid in Tony. Because Tony’d declared it “mansion night” and forced Miles upstairs to pack a duffel bag, Tony’d piled them into Bruce’s car and snatched the keys right out of Bruce’s hand to drive them across town, and Tony’d stopped off at the grocery store to load them down with dinner supplies. It’d been Tony who’d turned on the satellite radio on his stereo system, Tony who’d bossed them around the kitchen while they prepared homemade pizza using Pillsbury dough and pre-shredded cheese, and Tony who’d called Steve and Bucky to demand a Saturday-morning play date with Dot. Miles’s head’d still dipped in disappointment a few times, his eyes wandering outside or to the floor, but every time Tony’d found another video, card, or board game to play.

Miles’d laughed so hard during Blind Man’s Poker that he’d actually cried, and for the first time all night, Bruce’d felt relief sweep over him.

The relief stayed even through the next morning, too, when Tony’d arrived with a still-sleepy Dot and an enormous canvas bag filled with supplies for French toast. Bruce, still in his pajamas and not yet halfway through his first cup of coffee, had rolled his eyes before helping Dot onto a stepstool so she could stir the batter. Miles’d hovered and then helped dip the bread, and Tony—

Well, the most Tony’d contributed were syrup-flavored kisses, but Bruce hadn’t minded that, either.

Jessica’d arrived after breakfast ended—and then, it’d started snowing.

Dot shrieks as Miles picks her up and spins her around in the snow, her legs dangling and her face pressing into Miles’s damp shoulder, but it’s Tony that breaks the silence on the deck. “What level of problem are we talking about?” he asks, glancing over at Jessica. “The fact the kid’s uncle is the biggest douchebag to ever bag his douche, or the fact that he’s clearly run off to— I don’t know, is Douche Island a real place?”

Bruce sighs. “Tony—”

“Douchetopia? Doucheveria has a nice ring to it, sort of Eastern European, like it belongs in the Balkans or something—”

“That’s not the problem,” Jessica interrupts with a tiny shake of her head. She never once cracks even the barest hint of a smile, though, a seriousness that curls fingers around Bruce’s heart. Butterfingers rushes up onto the deck, slips a little in his excitement to see the people he’d left all of five minutes ago, and crashes into Tony’s legs. But Tony, like Bruce, never lifts his eyes away from Jessica. “I’ve spent this whole week falling over myself to find this guy, but we’ve got nothing,” she says after a few seconds. “He skipped out on a criminal hearing, and the judge issued a warrant to pick him up. The officer who’s supervising him while he’s on release thinks he might’ve split, I guess someone’s suggested he might be down in Mexico—”
“Mexico?” Bruce blurts. Beside him, Tony huffs half a laugh and rolls his eyes.

“—but either way, he’s missing in action.” Jessica shrugs her shoulders. “I’m meeting with Matt and one of the child services lawyers on Wednesday. We’re going to review all the guardianship paperwork and if they think it’s enough, Matt’ll file a motion to dissolve it.”

“And then what?” Tony asks. He spreads out his hands, flashes of almost-white in the overcast grey of the snowy morning. “Another six months of limbo for the kid who’s already been screwed over seven ways from Sunday?”

“I don’t have all the details,” Jessica admits, tucking a strand of damp hair behind her ear, “but after he’s served—however they accomplish that when nobody knows where he is—”

“Publication,” Bruce and Tony both answer, and Bruce can’t help a tiny smile when Tony knocks their shoulders together.

Jessica rolls her eyes. “I don’t always need to learn the law,” she informs them. She rubs her cold-red nose for a half second. “Either way, there’ll be a hearing. Matt said they treat it a little like a trial to terminate parental rights. Judge Rees’ll have to see whether there’s enough to terminate the guardianship.”

“There’s enough,” Bruce says quietly. Tony and Jessica immediately both twist to look at him, but he’s too busy staring out into the yard, watching as Dot and Miles each flop onto their backs to create slushy snow angels. He realizes after a few seconds that Miles is actually demonstrating the technique for Dot, instructing her on how to not kick up as much of the almost-snow as she’s spreading to make her angel. She laughs, her bright pink snow pants rustling the whole time, but Bruce can’t look away from the brilliant warmth of Miles’s grin. “The bar’s not very high,” he continues, not really thinking about the words as they fall from his lips, “and if Davis’s left him again, I can’t see the court waiting around for him to come back.” When he glances over, Tony’s watching him carefully, lips pursed into something that’s nearly a frown. “He deserves a more permanent situation. I don’t think Judge Rees can see it any other way.”

“I don’t either,” Jessica admits, shrugging. “And that brings us to the actual problem.”

Tony opens his mouth then, a demanding question clearly at the ready, but the sudden clatter of Dummy rushing up the steps onto the deck cuts him off. Because behind Dummy are booted footfalls, heavy clomps on the wood, and Tony’s almost bowled over by the force of Dot hugging his legs. “I’m cold,” she complains, and buries her face in his coat.

Tony scowls. “Cold and wet,” he complains, trying to playfully push her away, but Dot just grins and presses closer. “God, do I have to do like I do with the dogs and put you in the garage until you dry off? Is that a thing in our future? Because I think you kinda smell like wet dog right now, and I don’t—”

“No,” Dot complains, drawing out the syllable, and both Bruce and Miles laugh when she tilts her head up and plants her chin on Tony’s hip. Her face is wind-chapped and red, and there’s messy, damp hair cascading down out of her hat. “We want hot cocoa.”

“We?” Tony asks, blinking. “You’re staging a coup now? Two against one, is that it?”

“Two against two,” Bruce points out with a little grin. He can tell with a single glance that Miles is seconds away from giving into his laughter. “Unless I’ve stopped counting.”

“You never count.”
“I think Bruce kind of counts double,” Miles offers, and Tony narrows his eyes in what can only be a challenge. “I mean, he’s sort of the responsible dad, and—”

“Betrayed!” Tony announces, clutching his gloved hands to his chest, and Miles finally loses himself to laughter. Dot joins in immediately, not because she understands the conversation but because Tony accompanies the declaration with a number of over-dramatic steps backward. Beside them, Jessica grins and shakes her head. “Are you witnessing this, Jess? This is practically a Shakespearean tragedy. *Et tu, Miles?*

Miles rolls his eyes. “I’m making us hot chocolate,” he decides, and Bruce ducks his head to hide his own grin from Tony. “Because you’re dead and everything.”

“And he steps over my quickly-cooling corpse to do it!” Tony complains, but he catches Miles long enough to half-hug him before the boy corrals Dot and the dogs in through the back door.

Jessica sighs. “Bruce has the patience of a saint for tolerating you,” she decides.

Tony grins and throws an arm around Bruce’s shoulders. “Bruce loves it,” he insists, and even though he shivers, Bruce doesn’t complain when Tony shoves his freezing nose against his neck and leaves it there for a few seconds.

They wander together into the house, Jessica following on their collective heels. Bruce pauses occasionally to pick up the discarded hats, gloves, and pieces of Dot’s snowsuit that are strewn on a rough path through the living room from the back door. Dot hovers at the bottom of the stairwell, stripped down to her leggings and sweater, and Bruce watches her vibrate expectantly until Miles races down to join her. He’s back in his Batman pajama pants, along with a Castle Rock Middle School sweatshirt that’d materialized out of his backpack one day after school.

He skids to a stop at the bottom of the steps. “You guys want any?”

Tony’s slow-burn grin is as incorrigible as it is wicked. “Oh, *I always* want,” he starts, but then Jessica shoots him a murderous glance. He snaps his lips shut and tries desperately to summon a serious expression. Unsurprisingly, it fails. “Just nuke me some leftover coffee,” he amends, and Jessica tries not to roll her eyes.

Bruce sighs as he starts unbuttoning his coat. “Give us five minutes,” he says, “and I’ll come in and —”

“I’ve made mac-and-cheese, like, a hundred times,” Miles interjects. With his hands on his hips, he’s suddenly both twelve and seventeen. Bruce isn’t sure he looks forward to Miles’s teenage years. Well, provided he’s allowed to see them. “I can pour some coffee and heat up milk.”

As though on cue, Dot loops her arms around one of Miles’s and then leans bodily against him. “He’s a big kid,” she notes, peering up in Bruce’s direction. “Big kids can use the stove.”

“Well, approval from the four-year-old definitely makes it totally okay,” Tony declares, throwing up his hands.

Dot scowls at him. “I’m four-and-a-half.”

“Sorry, princess, but sig-figs aren’t going to save—”

“It’s fine,” Jessica interrupts, tossing up her hands. Her coat swings as she shakes her head, and she barely pauses as she shrugs it from her shoulders. “He’s in state custody, I’m an agent of the state, he can make the damn cocoa.” She throws her coat over her arm and then glances at Bruce. “Seriously,
“‘Survive’ is probably the best word for it, yes,” Bruce replies, and Jessica laughs at Tony’s newest betrayed face.

They send the kids into the kitchen with the instructions to be careful and to bring all three adults cups of coffee—“One at a time,” Bruce stresses, and Miles rolls his eyes. Tony grabs their coats with only minimal amounts of manhandling, leaving Bruce and Jessica alone in the living room. Jessica picks one of the oversized chairs and struggles to sit up straight on the edge; Bruce feels like he’s sinking when he drops onto the couch, but not just because of the amount of padding.

He watches Jessica rub her hands together for a moment before she says, “You’re not listed as a permanency option.”

The words drop into the relative quiet of the room like individual bomb blasts. Bruce casts his eyes across the open floor plan to where he can nearly see Miles and Dot moving around the kitchen. He tries to swallow, but his throat feels suddenly tight.

“Until a couple of months ago, you weren’t even a long-term placement,” Jessica continues, and Bruce forces his attention back in her direction. “This is uncharted territory for you. For me, too, since usually the case is a year old before we have to this conversation.”

Bruce wets his lips. “Which conversation?” he asks. His voice sounds strangled.

Strangled and forced, because Jessica quirks a single eyebrow and sends him what he suspects is the kind of disapproving look she saves for her toddler. “The one where I need to know if you’re an adoptive placement,” she informs him, every syllable making it crystal clear that she’s only humoring him. “If you’re not, I need to start planning for what happens after the guardianship goes away. But if you are—”

“He is.”

Tony’s voice rings through the room like a bell, as strong and as confident as when he’s in the courtroom, and Bruce glances up in time to track his slow progress from the front foyer into the living room. He walks like a lazy jungle cat, all hips and disinterested attention, and Bruce suddenly feels the full weight of that focus.

Still in her too-stuffed chair, Jessica asks, “Wait, what?”

Bruce tries again to swallow, but he thinks his heart’s caught in the back of his throat. “Tony—”

“He’s the adoptive placement.” He drapes himself across the arm of the couch, one arm stretching along the back. His posture’s almost aggressively lazy. “I mean, of course he’s the adoptive placement. Why wouldn’t he be the adoptive placement?”

Even staring at the coffee table, Bruce swears he feels the heat of Tony’s eyes on the back of his neck. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“There’s no thinking about it,” Tony retorts. He shifts enough that the cushion behind Bruce moves, but Bruce doesn’t dare look up. Looking up means surrendering himself to the full force of Tony’s attention, to losing himself in whatever expectant expression is waiting for him, and right now—

Right now, Bruce can’t do that.

His silent must stretch a beat too long, though, because Tony presses, “You love that kid, the kid
loves you, and he’s great with us.” Bruce hears his heartbeat rush into his temples. “Where’s the thinking in that?”

“It’s not that easy,” Bruce says, but the words come out as a murmur more than anything else.

He suspects Tony’ll continue, try to cajole him into making some kind of impossible declaration right then and there, but it’s Jessica who speaks next. “He’s right,” she says gently, and Bruce glances over in time to see her shrug. “It’s not like buying a car. You don’t just get to drive him off the lot. There’s a home study process, plus additional background checks, fingerprinting, approval from the state agency—and that’s before you’re even selected.” She shakes her head. “You commit to a lot just by being the adoptive placement.”

Bruce nods slowly, his lips pressing into a thin line. “And you can still get turned down,” he points out, even though he somehow knows in his heart—or maybe his gut—how unlikely that is.

“And there’s that,” Jessica echoes, and Bruce glances away before he has to watch her smile disappear.

The next half-hour is spent meandering through the details of the adoption process, steps that Bruce knows with as much certainty as he knows the sound of his own voice. Tony listens raptly—or at least, as raptly as Tony ever listens to anything—as he perches on the arm of the couch, but Bruce can feel his ever-attentive eyes drifting in his direction, burning a hole under his collar. He tries to ignore it, staring first at his hands and then, once Miles delivers their steaming-hot cups, at his coffee, but he can’t ignore the itch of that gaze.

He can’t ignore the knot in his stomach, either.

Jessica drags herself out of the overstuffed chair after she finishes her coffee and heads towards the front foyer. “Think about it,” she tells Bruce, and Bruce forces a little smile as he nods. He watches the floor as Tony collects her coat and leads her toward the door, and he’s not surprised when her shout of, “Later, Miles!” is met with an equally-loud shout of, “Bye, Jess!”

“He should call you Miss Jones,” Bruce notes as Jessica winds her scarf around her throat.

She flashes him a grin. “I’ve been called worse,” she promises, but her expression sobers. Her gaze moves from Bruce to Tony and back again, and Bruce shoves his hands in his pockets under the seriousness that’s caught on her face. “We’ll tell him about Davis when we’re sure what’s happening,” she says, her hands dropping to her sides. “In the meantime, look out for him.”

“Look out for him how?” Tony asks, and Bruce glances his direction when he hears the worry that catches in the back of his throat. “This isn’t one of those Lifetime original movie situations where the crazy uncle’s gonna show up and throw him in the back of his white van, is it?”

Bruce resists the urge to pinch away the tension in the bridge of his nose. “No one should allow you more than a hundred cable channels,” he comments, and Tony purposely bumps their arms together.

Standing just inside the doorway, Jessica snorts a laugh and shakes her head. “No abductions, no,” she says, holding up her hands. “But he’s twelve, and this could be a pretty rough one-eighty.” She spends a beat too long focused entirely on Bruce, and Bruce finds it impossible to look away. “He needs you.”

“For a lot more than just the missing uncle Olympics,” Tony tacks on, and Bruce dips his head to avoid meeting either of their eyes.

Jessica leaves after that, disappearing in her own car for the first time in the last six or seven weeks,
and Bruce leaves Tony to lock the door behind her. He wanders into the living room, collecting their empty mugs, and then retreats into the kitchen. Milky film covers the pot on the stove, more mugs are abandoned in the built-in breakfast nook, and empty hot cocoa packets litter the counter. Upstairs, he can hear Dot laughing about something and the heavy thuds of the dogs running around.

He leaves them to play and starts cleaning up the debris.

Starts being the operative word, because he’s hardly managed to move the mugs into the sink before Tony asks, “Are we not even going to talk about what I think?”

Bruce flicks on the faucet and watches the steam rise from the hot water, but he purposely remains silent.

“Because I get that you’re scared or whatever. I mean, hell, you’d be somebody’s dad. That’s pretty much the scariest thing I can imagine, more or less.” Bruce dumps out the cocoa residue and starts rinsing out the mugs, but he’s acutely aware of every footfall and rustle of clothes as Tony moves through the kitchen. He braces himself for hands fluttering along his sides or settling on his back, but they never come. Instead, when he tosses a glance over his shoulder, he discovers that Tony’s hoisted himself onto the enormous island, his legs swinging idly. “But the kid’s lost his parents, now he’s lost his uncle, and the last thing he needs is to lose the guys who care about him as much as his parents and uncle do.”

Bruce snorts a tiny laugh and shakes his head. “I’m not sure Aaron Davis set a very high bar for loving Miles,” he says quietly. Every word feels like a eulogy, and he’s not entirely sure why.

“Well, we’ll call Davis the bare minimum, then. Like, he’s the absolute lowest bar anybody’s gotta jump over ever, we’ll say that.” Bruce rolls his eyes and turns back to the sink. Behind him, he swears he can hear Tony sigh. “He needs a home.”

“He’s a smart, funny, thoughtful twelve-year-old,” he replies. He reaches for the milk pan, intending to just drag it over into the sink, but he ends up staring at it. He imagines Miles at his last home, making macaroni and cheese out of a box and waiting for his uncle, and he suddenly can’t focus on the dishes anymore. He shoves everything around until the pan’ll fit and then shuts off the water. “I’m thirty-nine years old,” he says once the kitchen’s plunged into silence, his hands braced against the countertop. “I’ve never—I didn’t even mean to become a long-term foster placement, let alone an adoptive one.”

“And look how that turned out.” When he keeps staring into the sink, something soft presses against his hip. He looks down in time to see Tony’s toes curl against the fabric of his jeans. He closes his eyes to keep from laughing aloud at the ridiculousness of it all. “Look at what you’ve done for Miles. And when you’re done with that, look at what he’s done for us.”

Tony punctuates it with little bounces of his foot against Bruce’s hip, and Bruce lets out a slow breath.

“C’mon, big guy. I don’t see how you can look at that kid, look at what he has with us, and still—”

“That’s the problem.”

The words escape as whispers, tiny and caught in the back of his throat, and Bruce presses his lips together as soon as he hears them. He tightens his grip on the counter, but it’s already too late; Tony’s foot drops away from his side, and then he hears the other man land on the floor just inches behind him.
“What?” he asks, and Bruce is almost strangled by the way Tony’s voice catches. “What problem? Where’s the problem in me seeing the kid, and the two of us and wanting—”

“There’s no ‘us’ in this, Tony,” Bruce retorts. He releases the countertop and turns around, unprepared for how close Tony’s standing, or how soft and open his expression is. Tony’s rarely bare around other people, always relying on one of his thousand masks to hide his true feelings, but Bruce can suddenly read all the different emotions caught in his serious face and his dark eyes. He scrubs a hand through his hair and tries to remember what it is to breathe, but everything feels suddenly too close, too cut off. “I’m the foster placement,” he continues, aware that every word feels sticky on the back of his tongue. “I’m the one who’ll be forced to fill out the paperwork, to complete the home study, to promise that Miles’ll be my child until one of us dies, and then to follow up on what happens after that.” When he drops his hand, Tony’s still staring at him. “All those things, they’ll be on me.”

He watches for a second as Tony’s jaw works. He thinks it’s a swallow, or maybe a strangled breath, but either way, Tony just keeps watching him, pinning him there with a gaze.

“How do I promise him anything else?” he presses when Tony’s still silent, his voice cracking in the back of his throat. “We call it permanency because it’s meant to be permanent. It’s meant to be where that child will stay forever, something he can count on. And I can’t be the only thing he has.”

Tony tosses his head and throws up his hands, the world’s most unnecessarily dramatic eye-roll. “And what about me, huh?” he demands, and Bruce can’t help but catch the hint of hurt that lingers in the back of his tone. “It’s you and the kid ‘till the end of time and I’m, what, the guy who brings pizza every once in a while but doesn’t actually get a say in all this?” Bruce finds it suddenly impossible to meet his eyes, so he stares at the floor. “I’m just the other guy, nothing that matters but somebody who—”

“How do I promise him anything else?” Bruce interrupts. He opens his hands in front of him, some sort of palms-up call for peace, but all it accomplishes is summoning a shocked expression and plastering it on Tony’s face. He steps back against the island and Bruce slides away, adds distance between them because he can’t find the right words, and then twists back around when he realizes that he won’t actually be able to walk through the wall and escape from the room. “We’ve been dating for, what, a month?” he asks, and he’s not sure why the sadness in Tony’s eyes empties out his stomach and lungs until he feels hollow. “What happens if we break up again? What happens if some other roadblock or issue comes up that we can’t hurdle, what do we put Miles through if—”

“What if I get hit by a bus tomorrow?” Tony demands. He throws out his arms, his sweater riding up and his whole body on display, less a circus ringleader and more a giant target. Bruce imagines him on display or thrown into traffic, and he drops his eyes to the floor. “What if my heart blows up on me again?” Bruce hears him huff a breath. “You know, you talk about the two of us like the only options out there is that we either date forever—though I think dating’s a pretty small word for what the two of us have—or we split up. Do you have absolutely no faith whatsoever that maybe there’s a third option there, one of those less-travelled roads Frost talked about?”

When Bruce looks up, it’s to watch Tony drop his arms to his sides. His shoulders slump, but his face is serious and steady. Solid, he thinks, the kind of foundation Bruce sometimes thinks he’s spent his entire life seeking out.

He rolls his lips together. “I—”

“You know the one I’m talking about,” Tony says, and his voice is quieter now, almost a whisper. “It’s the one where there’s jewelry and both of us promise we’re not going anywhere until somebody
Bruce opens his mouth, a reply forming on the very tip of his tongue—until Tony’s words sink in and every barb drops away. He stands there for a moment, open-mouthed and half-gaping, watching as Tony stares him down. He never glances away, and hardly blinks, and Bruce feels like a lead weight’s been settled in the middle of his chest.

He’s thought of a thousand possible endings to his relationship with Tony, some before he and Tony even shared their first kiss, and none of them compares to that one. He’s not sure he’s ever really considered it a possibility.

Except on some of the loneliest nights after the adjudicatory hearing and Tony’s lies of omission, he’d sometimes wondered whether he’d sacrificed his last real chance to live—

What, he wonders. To live happily ever after?

He lets his gaze wander away from Tony’s ever-staring eyes, lets them travel to the countertop and then, finally, the floor. His own socks are gray, Tony’s feet are bare, and Bruce can’t remember the last time he’d been comfortable enough in a relationship to wander around in stocking feet and jeans with frayed cuffs.

He wets his lips.

“I never ruled it out,” he says quietly.

“What?”

“The third option. I—” When he exhales, his voice shakes. “I never ruled it out.”

There’s a pause where he can hear Tony swallow. “But?” he asks, nearly whispering.

Bruce snorts softly and shakes his head. “But that’s not where we’re at right now, is it? Not after everything that’s happened, after—”

There’s a thousand more things to say, words he could spend the whole afternoon tripping over, around, and through, but footsteps on the stairs cut him off. He twists around as Miles bursts into the room, Dot hot on his heels and sliding on the kitchen tile, and they crash together as they skitter to a stop. Dot’s face is pink, Miles is breathless, but they’re grinning like cats who caught and shared the one canary.

At least until Miles glances between the two adults in the room. “What’s wrong?” he asks, the grin dropping off his face in an instant.

Bruce tries to force a smile, but somehow, it’s Tony who manages the honest grin-and-wink routine. He throws an arm around Miles’s shoulders and drags him close, leaving the boy to wriggle in an attempted escape.

“The big guy and I were just arguing about the relative merits of Stieg Larsson’s The Girl With the Whatever-Whatever trilogy.”

Bruce will forever be grateful that Tony allows him a decent reason to roll his eyes. “Millennium series,” he corrects.

“That’s the name?” Tony retorts, scowling. “It’s a book about a crazy girl covered in tattoos and piercings and it’s called the Millennium series?”

“It’s named after the magazine Blomkvist works for, not—” Bruce realizes belatedly that Miles and
Dot are staring at him too, so he sighs and shakes his head. “Never mind.”

“Whatever,” Miles says, and Tony forces him to endure ten seconds of the world’s lightest noogie before he’s finally allowed to slip away. “Dot wants to play with the Kinect, and I don’t remember how to turn it on.”

Tony narrows his eyes. “You’re twelve. Aren’t you supposed to be a technological savant?”

“This from you,” Bruce intones, and when Tony pulls a face, Miles laughs. It’s the first bolt of warmth to enter the room since Jessica’d left. He tries to bask in it, to soak up the boy’s grinning joy, but he’s too acutely aware of Tony’s eyes still watching him to really enjoy it. “Come on, I know how to turn it on,” he says, and reaches to steer Miles out of the room.

Miles ducks out of the way, though, which leaves Bruce’s arm dangling on air for a split-second too long. He tries to lower it, but Tony catches him instead. He loops their arms together, declaring, “Bruce using technology right is something I’ve gotta see!” before he leans in just far enough to press his nose to Bruce’s jaw. Bruce thinks momentarily it’s a show, a sign for Miles that all is as it should be.

But even after the kids are turned away, he holds on.

And even after the kids are turned away, Bruce lets him.

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That night, after Dot’s returned to Steve and Bucky exhausted and properly covered in snow from building an afternoon snowman in the three inches of accumulation, Tony presses his nose to the back of Bruce’s neck and murmurs, “You said you never ruled it out.”

It’s quiet and dark in Tony’s bedroom, the drapes all closed and the whole house asleep, and Bruce stares out into the black-on-black of midnight shadows. The wall clock ticks idly and the winter wind rattles the windowpanes, but otherwise the house feels like a coffin, devoid of life and light. When he shifts, Tony loosens his grip; when he rolls onto his back to stare at the ceiling, he swears he can feel Tony’s eyes on him in the dark.

He imagines he can trace patterns and shapes in the paint he can’t actually see, constellations that only exist in his own mind.

“I’m not sure I ever ruled it all the way in, either,” he admits in a whisper, his voice hardly audible over the whistle of the wind just outside. He closes his eyes and imagines the words caught in the gusts, twisting in eddies and then disappearing into the night. “I can count my relationships on one hand, my serious relationships on one finger, and I just don’t know if—”

“So let me prove to you that you can rule it in.”

Tony props himself up on an elbow as he says it, a looming shadow in the darkness, and Bruce tries not to distract himself with the outline of Tony’s body as the sheets cling to him. He’s memorized so much of Tony’s skin, traced the contours of bone and muscle with his palms and fingertips, but he sometimes feels that it’ll never be enough. Because even after a day of chasing around two kids, even after the meeting with Jessica and the edge to the conversation in the kitchen, Bruce wants to spend a lifetime learning Tony’s body.
No, he corrects. He wants to spend a lifetime learning *Tony*.

It’s a powerful, sobering, suffocating thought.

“Let me prove I won’t screw it up again,” Tony presses, and Bruce rolls his head back against the pillow and refocuses on the ceiling. “Lemme show you that I mean it, that I’m not actually going anywhere, that I’m here for you *and* for your kid—”

“He’s not my kid,” Bruce says for the thousandth time.

“Well, once he is your kid,” Tony retorts, and Bruce sighs as he closes his eyes. “What do you need from me, huh? An affidavit? A permitting process? A solemn vow under penalty of perjury that there’s never gonna be any more roadblocks, any more crazy shit, any more—”

“Secrets?”

Bruce only realizes he’s finished the sentence when Tony falls absolutely silent beside him. He reaches up and rubs his face with the heel of his hand. He wants to crawl under the covers and fall asleep, he thinks. He wants to rewind to the part of the day before Jessica arrived, before his slowly-settling life’d been rattled like a cup of dice.

When he drops his hand back onto the covers, he’s aware of how closely Tony’s watching him. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs, and tips his head in the direction of the other man. “That was mean, I—”

He shakes his head slightly and watches as Tony—or rather, as the shadow in the bed beside him, the outline of the man who’s slowly become the center of his gravitational pull—settles down to lie beside him. A hand reaches out and fingers slowly slide up the middle of Bruce’s chest. He shivers, his body involuntarily tipping into the touch.

Tony accepts the silent invitation and reaches for him, tossing a leg over one of Bruce’s and sliding their bodies together. He’s almost too-hot under the covers, but it’s comfortingly familiar, and Bruce twists until he can hide his face in Tony’s skin.

“I don’t know the answer,” he finally admits. Surrounded by Tony’s heat and scent, he feels suddenly groggy, ready to drop asleep and forget the day. “I wish I did, but I don’t.”

He feels Tony nod, and for a moment, he thinks the conversation’s finally ended. They shift around after long enough, Bruce rolling onto his side and Tony molding to his back. Fingers drift over Bruce’s side and hip, idle strokes that raise gooseflesh and make Bruce half-ache for something more.

His eyes are closed when Tony says, “Well, for the record, I’ll do it.”

Bruce lifts his head just far enough to catch the ghostly motion of Tony’s fingers on his hip. “Do what?”

“Whatever it takes to prove myself to you. To get it all ruled in.” Tony presses his mouth to the back of Bruce’s neck. “When you figure it out, I’ll do it, no questions asked. Alright?”

“Alright,” Bruce echoes in a voice he hardly recognizes as his own. When he closes his eyes again, he tries to focus on the cadence of his breath and the sound of the wind outside, calming white noises that’ll lull him to sleep. Instead, he ends up studying the shape of Tony’s lips against the back of his shoulder, the tickle of Tony’s sigh against his skin, the spread of Tony’s hand over his hip before he settles.
Tony’s the white noise that pulls him slowly into sleep, he thinks as he starts to drift, surrounded by skin and warmth. Tony’s what comforts him enough that he can relax.

It’s only seconds before he falls asleep that he realizes that it’s not the warmth that drags him down, but the absolute belief that Tony will, without a doubt, keep his promise to prove himself.

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“There aren’t going to be any stars with this cloud cover,” Bruce says gently.

They’re standing in the yard he shares with the residents of seven other townhomes, an empty patch of snow that’s turned icy and ugly thanks to kids and dogs. There’s a lopsided snowman leaning against a green transformer box and a few demented in a drift where the ground is lower; under a pine tree, someone’s attempted to build either a tiny sledding hill or a pretty pathetic snow fort.

Miles, however, ignores all these things to tip his head up toward the dark winter night sky. He’s spent the last few days uncharacteristically quiet, holed up in his own thoughts and his last batch of homework before winter break. Bruce suspects the willingness to do homework is really a willingness to dive into distraction, because every time he finishes an assignment, he’s ready with a dozen other possible activities: Skyping with Ganke, playing a board game, watching television, diving into the comics Phil’s finally lent him. But Bruce’d picked him up from his Tuesday afternoon therapy session only to find him especially quiet, and he hadn’t been surprised to find Miles looming in the doorway to Bruce’s office when he’d finished his homework.

“Can we go check out the stars?” he’d asked, and Bruce’d pulled off his glasses to study the boy. He’d already tugged on his coat and boots, the very picture of a winter explorer. Bruce’d smiled and agreed—and then, they’d stepped outside.

Miles frowns at the clouds, his hands shoved into his pockets. “It’s not going to be better at the park, is it?” he asks quietly.

“Probably not,” Bruce replies.

He knows they should probably go inside and find a new distraction, but Miles never buds from his spot in the snow. Bruce queues up a thousand possible options—hot cocoa and the Christmas cookies Jane’d sent home with him yesterday, a new show on Netflix, a Skype session with Tony while he prepares for the CLE he’s speaking at tomorrow, a long game of gin rummy—but none seem exactly right. He’s still figuring out how best to break the silence and steer them inside when Miles says, “My therapist keeps asking about what happens next.”

The feeling in Bruce’s stomach reminds him of one of those free-fall rides in an amusement park. He swallows around the thick feeling in the back of his throat. “How so?”

“She wants to know what I think things’ll look like if he doesn’t show back up.” Miles shrugs slightly, his eyes drifting only momentarily toward Bruce before focusing on the sky again. “Where I’ll live, who I’ll live with, all of that.” He snorts a little, his breath curling on air. “Like it matters.”

“Of course it matters,” Bruce says immediately. Miles’s face is half in shadow, but he can see the emotions slowly cycling across it, the fear that mingles with hurt and helplessness. He can’t help but wonder when in the last seven weeks he’d learned to read the boy so easily, learned to decipher his moods as easily as he deciphers Tony’s.
Thinking of Tony pulls the breath from his lungs. He looks out across the yards, at the marred snow and the yellow-white glow from back porch lights. “We don’t know what’s going to happen with your uncle,” he offers after a few more seconds, shrugging slightly. “He might call Jessica tomorrow, he might not. But even if he doesn’t—”

“I hope he doesn’t.”

The almost-formed words escape like air from Bruce’s lips. “Miles,” he says gently, and reaches for the boy’s shoulder.

“Don’t,” Miles retorts, and pulls away. He staggers a little, overbalanced by the force of his momentum, and crunches into the icy three-day old snow. When he twists to peer up at Bruce, he moves right into the glow of the porch light, displaying all the anger and hurt he’s hidden away since Saturday. Bruce pulls in a sharp breath, but he swears the air freezes in his lungs.

“Miles—”

“You can’t make this suck less!” Miles announces, throwing out his hands while his breath clouds in the cold. “You can’t fix the fact that he wants nothing to do with me, that he sucks, that—”

“Miles,” Bruce says again, raising his voice only enough to be heard over the boy’s tirade. He steps forward, reaching out, but Miles darts back again.

“Everybody acts like he’s just going to come back from wherever and do everything he’s supposed and suddenly be this perfect person, but that doesn’t even make sense! He’s a crappy person, he’s a crappy parent, and he’s never gonna be something different!” His hands drop to his sides, and Bruce watches for a split second as his shoulders tremble. “I keep trying to figure it out,” he says, suddenly quiet and choked enough that Bruce almost misses the words. “I keep sitting there and trying to figure out why.”

Bruce rolls his lips together. “People don’t always live up to your expectations,” he murmurs. He stares at his still half-outstretched hand, the one he’d pressed to Miles’s shoulder, and he shoves it into his pocket. Suddenly, the December night feels a thousand degrees colder. “They sometimes need things you’re not aware of, but it feels like betrayal, and—”

“He doesn’t need anything,” Miles retorts. He shakes his head, his eyes dropping to the snow at his feet. For a long few seconds, he’s absolutely silent, still staring at the ground. “I keep thinking it’s like you said about your aunt,” he says after long enough, every word punctuated by a little cloud of breath. “Like he’s punishing me because he was pissed at my dad this whole time.”

Apart from Miles’s fading voice, the night is absolutely silent—no gusts of wind, no nearby cars, no dogs barking three lots away—and leaves Bruce with the uncanny feeling that he can hear his own heart thrumming in his chest. Thrumming, then breaking, because with slumped shoulders and a face hidden from the light, Miles just looks—

Sad isn’t a strong enough word.

Small, perhaps. Small, lost, helpless, drowning. Those words, they all work.

Bruce swallows around the hollow feeling in his chest. “It’s not about your dad,” he replies, and desperately hopes that it’s the truth.

“Then what?”

“I can’t answer that. It’s complicated, it—”
Miles lets out a bitter sound like a laugh, raising his head only long enough to roll his eyes. “That’s your answer to everything,” he retorts, throwing Bruce a frustrated glance. “How’s it complicated? He left.”

“I know,” Bruce responds, “but—”

“He left,” Miles presses, and shakes his head, “and now my therapist is asking me all these stupid questions that don’t have answers.” He looks back at the ground, his hands burying further in his pockets, and Bruce’s chest tightens until he wonders if he can breathe at all. “But no one answers my questions. I’m supposed to know how my life’s going to look but no one cares what I want to know. No one bothers to tell me why.” Miles huffs a breath, and Bruce swallows around the thickness in the back of his throat. “Why did he go? Why doesn’t he come back? Why am I stuck like this when he could’ve taken me, why—”

“Because sometimes even the people you love let you down, Miles!”

Bruce’s voice echoes in the dark, reverberating off the other houses that back up to the empty lot, and he can’t help himself when he throws up his hands. He’s suddenly, simultaneously two versions of himself, the rational adult who’s survived almost forty years of an impossible, frustrating, enlightening life, and the twelve-year-old waiting to see if his aunt would actually keep him. The twelve-year-old version of himself, the broken, scared kid terrified of his future, claws at his chest and ribcage. He wants to escape, to scream and cry, and to fall apart.

The adult, on the other hand, just wants to gather Miles into his arms and promise ridiculous things.

They both leave wet heat stinging his eyes.

“People lie, sometimes,” he says, his voice miraculously steady. “They lie, they cheat, they hurt you or someone else you love, and sometimes—” He shakes his head. He feels like he can’t quite breathe around the feeling in his chest and throat, like words are altogether futile. Except when he thinks about abandoning words altogether, he realizes Miles is staring at him. His face looks younger in the dim light from the back porch, soft and innocent in a way Bruce isn’t entirely used to.

Miles, he remembers, is twelve, too.

Miles is twelve, and an orphan, and on his third family in the last year.

Bruce wets his lips.

“There isn’t a test for being a parent,” he says quietly, his shoulders lifting in a helpless shrug. “No one checks to make sure you’ll be selfless, or safe, or that you’ll love the child you’re lucky enough to get the way that you should. Sometimes, people luck out and end up with wonderful parents. And sometimes, they—don’t.”

Miles ducks his head away, tries to hide his eyes, but Bruce reaches out and nudges his chin up. The boy’s face is wet with fresh tears, and Bruce smiles softly. His thumb brushes one away, and even though Miles wriggles, he doesn’t try to dart out of Bruce’s grasp again. “But if you luck out,” he continues, voice hardly a murmur, “you can sometimes find people who love you anyway. No matter what kind of parents you have.”

They stare at each other for a few long moments until, finally, Miles drags one arm of his coat across his face. It only manages to smear the tear trails, and Bruce can’t help his little half-chuckle at the preteen posturing. They’re the only two people in sight, but Miles still snifflies valiantly, almost challengingly, before he shoves his hands back in his coat pockets.
Bruce watches him toe a clump of snow.

“I’ll stop feeling like I’ll never go home again, right?” he asks after another handful of seconds. There’s unflinching, unreserved hope flashing across his expression, and Bruce tries to hold onto his smile. “That feeling goes away?”

“No,” Bruce admits quietly. Miles exhales roughly, something between a laugh and a sigh, and he scowls up in Bruce’s direction. Bruce shrugs slightly and shakes his head. “But you will wake up one morning and realize you’re already home with your family, and you won’t want to be anywhere else.”

He watches as a tiny smile pushes at the corners of Miles’s mouth. “You think that’ll happen with us?”

And despite everything he’d said to Tony and Jessica, despite all the trepidation and uncertainty that still resides deep in his belly and his heart, Bruce manages one tiny, soft smile. “I hope so.”

Late that night, once they’ve made hot chocolate and watched two different astronomy documentaries thanks to the marvels of the internet (the second-best option to watching the stars in person, Bruce thinks), Bruce lays in bed and stares at the ceiling. The lamp on the bedside table is still on, displaying the usual debris surrounding it: the alarm clock, his cell phone, the photo of him and Tony at Dot’s birthday, the book he’s picked up three times in the last hour and cannot bring himself to read. He stares at the clock’s obscene hour of the night, but his eyes keep drifting back to the photo, or to his phone.

Tony’s CLE is three counties away, Bruce knows, requiring a crack-of-dawn drive. There’s absolutely no way he’d still be awake.

He picks up his phone anyway.

*I need to know there’s nothing else*, he texts after several half-started attempts, typing and retyping the words until he’s certain they’re right. Except as soon as he presses the send button, he’s not entirely sure anything’s right, and he regrets the message immediately.

He’s actually halfway through an apology when a reply buzzes through. *nothing else what?*

Bruce snorts and shakes his head. *Shouldn’t you be asleep?*

*busy missing you before bed and that means exactly what you think it means ;-)* Bruce is about ninety-five percent sure the winking emoticon is actually a graphic on Tony’s iPhone, some ridiculous devil-face that Tony’ll later mock him for not fully appreciating. He’s about to comment on that very thing, though, when Tony adds, *nothing else what?*

Bruce stares at the message for longer that he usually needs to before he opens the reply screen. *Standing between us*, he answers, but somehow, those three words aren’t enough. *That’s what I need you to prove. I just don’t know how.*

At first, there’s no response, the screen dimming and then locking when no reply comes through, and Bruce exhales as he reaches to deposit his phone back on the bedside table. He thinks maybe he really did interrupt Tony’s nighttime “routine”—and dwelling on the thought makes it even harder to think about sleeping—or that Tony’s dropped off to sleep.

Or that he’s asked something impossible, something for which Tony has no snappy retort.

He’s stretching to turn off the light when his phone chimes again. When he unlocks the screen,
Tony’s reply simply reads, *don’t worry*

Bruce wets his lips before he opens a reply. *Why’s that?*

*because you might not know how,* Tony retorts seconds later, *but i do.*

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“Ten dollars says they come back engaged, thanks to Phil’s parents,” Natasha comments, and pops a fallen pickle into her mouth.

The sky outside is mostly gray and overcast, promising more snow to end the week before Christmas, but inside Steve’s office, it’s toasty-warm. Bruce knows it’s because there’s a space heater hidden under his desk—he can hear the idle hissing even over the sound of four people chewing—but it’s easier to pretend the room’s just naturally that inviting. After all, Steve’s the one whose office walls are covered in Dot’s art and the one who keeps family photos on his desk at all times. Really, it reminds Bruce more of a home office than a space reserved for an assistant district attorney.

The newest piece of gallery-quality artwork that hangs from the file cabinet features not only two yellow-haired blobs next to a brown-haired one, but also a black-haired blob with more black on his “face”, a second brown-haired blob, and a completely brown blob with a thin line of black on top. Bruce knows without thinking too hard what Dot’s drawn, and try as he might, his eyes keep drifting in that direction.

Bucky kicks him lightly and raises his eyebrows, and Bruce at least manages to roll his eyes before focusing back on his sandwich.

“I met Phil’s parents when they visited a few years ago,” Steve notes as Bruce refocuses on the conversation. He’s pushing chips around on the paper from his sandwich, but he’s also frowning. “They can’t be *that* bad.”

“ Took Phil a week to work up to asking him to go,” Bucky points out.

“Because it’s Christmas,” Steve argues. Bucky spends a split-second mimicking Steve’s earnest expression before a chip’s flicked at his face. He cackles as he bends to pick it up off the floor. “Christmas’s a pretty big holiday.”

Natasha shakes her head. “For normal people,” she puts in. She leans back in her chair and recrosses her legs. “Clint’s not like you two or Thor,” she reminds them, and Bruce glances down at what’s left of his lunch. He knows the part of the conversation that’s about to follow, and he can’t help the uncertainty that coils around his lungs and cuts off his breath. “There’s no great extended family out there, waiting for him to show up and sing ‘Auld Lang Syne.’ A family Christmas’s probably new.”

Bucky stops chewing to glance over at her. “You do know that we’ve got all of ten family members between the two of us, right?”

“You also have a daughter,” she retorts, picking up her sandwich. It’s halfway to her lips before she pauses. “And a Stark,” she adds, and smiles as Bucky and Steve both snort identical laughs.
The office is quiet for a Wednesday, a fact that simultaneously fills Bruce with gratitude and puts him on edge. Tony’s away at the CLE, Clint and Phil are out for a long “couple’s lunch” that reduced Maria and Darcy to over-dramatic mock-gagging in the hallway, and Thor and Jane are picking up Thor’s parents from the airport for the start of a ten-day-long Odinson family Christmas. Court dockets are light in honor of the season, and most would-be criminals are hiding from the weather. Bruce knows with certainty that it won’t last—the first three or four weeks after Christmas are always some of his busiest as the glow of the holiday wears off—but for right now, he’s grateful that he has time to breathe.

He’s less grateful, however, that he’s left with so much time to think.

“What about you two?” Bucky asks suddenly, and Bruce blinks as he realizes he’s missed part of the conversation. All three of his friends are watching him expectantly; the longer he sits silently, the further Natasha’s eyebrows rise. “Any big holiday plans besides Tony running up his pay-per-view bill?”

Behind his desk, Steve rolls his eyes. “I don’t think he actually watches porn and eats steak on Christmas,” he informs Bucky. Bucky snorts a laugh and rolls his eyes. “I don’t,” Steve repeats.

“It’s Tony,” Bucky stresses. “He probably does.”

“Almost certainty,” Natasha echoes.

“I’ve never seen it,” Bruce admits, holding up his hands as some sort of peace-keeping tool, “but I believe it.” Bucky grins in victory, an expression Bruce tries to echo, but in the end the most he can manage is a half-hearted twitch that hardly touches his lips. He picks at the toasted edge of his sandwich. “Miles’s uncle hasn’t been in contact with anyone from child services,” he says after a few seconds, and he’s not entirely surprised when Steve sets down his coffee cup with a heavy thud. He shakes his head and drops his eyes down to his lunch. “They’re meeting today to figure out whether they can move to dissolve the guardianship based on what he’s done so far.”

“You mean what he hasn’t done,” Bucky comments.

Bruce nods slowly. “That, yes.”

“And then what?” Natasha asks. There’s something careful in her voice, like every word and syllable’s been chosen with surgical precision. Bruce rolls his lips together but doesn’t look up. “His parents are already gone, and it doesn’t sound like he has any other family. He’d be available for adoption, then?”

Steve’s chair creaks, and when Bruce glances up, it’s to watch the other man shift all the way forward until his elbows are resting on his desk. “You’d adopt him?” he asks. His wide-eyed curiosity instantly reminds Bruce of Dot, and he’s forced to swallow around a laugh. “If you could adopt him, it’d be great,” Steve presses, too earnest for words. Bruce manages a tiny smile and looks back down at his lap. “You’re great with him.”

“Would you even be an option?” Bucky tacks on.

Bruce nods slowly, a careful bob of his head. “I could be an option.”

“And so you’re doing it?” Natasha asks.

“I don’t know.”

There’s a beat of pause, but only one, before Steve echoes, “You don’t know?” As much as Bruce
likes Steve, the honest confusion in his voice is suddenly grating. He drags a hand over his face, too aware that the other man is watching him carefully from behind his desk. “You’ve already done so much for him.”

“Or Miles has done a lot for Bruce,” Natasha comments. When Bruce glances back up, he’s faced with the full force of her stare. “It goes both ways,” she notes, and he snorts a tiny laugh. “Miles’s changed a lot about your life over the last two months. And he brought you and Tony together.”

Bruce tries to force a little smile, but he knows it hardly reaches the corners of his mouth. “It’s Tony I’m worried about,” he says after a few seconds.

Steve frowns. “Tony?”

“I— After everything that happened with the hearing and with Vanko, I’m not sure it’s a good idea,” he admits, shaking his head. He rubs the side of his neck, then drops his hands into his lap. “We’re just now starting to recover, and as much as Tony’s sure it’s a good idea, I don’t think—”

“Wait, okay, hold on,” Bucky interrupts. He spreads out his hands in front of him like he’s attempting to stop traffic or command a battalion. “Forget about Tony for a second. Tony’s not even important to this.”

Across his desk, Steve sighs. “Tony’s his partner,” he reminds his husband, who promptly treats them all to a long-suffering eye-roll. “He can’t forget about whether he’d be a suitable parent to Miles.”

“Yeah, but he can’t have a kid based on what Tony wants, either. It’s his choice.” Bucky sits forward in his chair, elbows on his thighs. Bruce feels like a bug under a microscope, or an ant under a curious child’s magnifying glass. He adjusts his watch and avoids Bucky’s eyes. “If this was just you—no Tony, no relationship hiccup, no intervention—”

“You watch too much How I Met Your Mother,” Natasha decides.

“—what would you pick?” When Bruce glances up, Bucky’s attention is wholly focused on him. His eyes are as intent as Tony’s but not as clear, not as perfectly-honed and unerring. For a split second, he misses Tony’s presence, his demanding nearness that always fills the office with an extra spark of life. But Tony’s away for the day, and he’s left instead with the quirk of Bucky’s eyebrow and not-quite-Rogers-level curiosity. “Would you even hesitate on the adoption thing?”

Bruce shakes his head. “It’s not that easy.”

“No, it isn’t.” Natasha’s voice is soft, closer to a murmur than anything else, and when Bruce glances over, it’s to watch her tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. There’s no sign of the fierce attorney in her face or her manner, and for once, she’s simply Natasha Romanoff: private, maybe, but loyal and an unflinchingly good friend. She tangles her fingers together. “Tony’s the reason he decided to keep Miles for longer than the weekend,” she recalls. “Tony’s the reason he decided to keep Miles for longer than the weekend,” she recalls. “He’s been there for Miles since day one. Asking Bruce to make this decision without counting Tony as part of the equation is like asking you two to decide whether you would’ve had Dot without one another.”

Steve and Bucky both fall silent when Natasha glances over at them. Bucky drops his eyes to his lap, half-guilty, and Steve casts his eyes in the direction of one of Dot’s thousand drawings.

“He’ll never be my kid,” Bruce says after a few seconds, once Natasha’s words have faded and the only sound that’s left in the room is the hissing of Steve’s space heater. “Even if I adopt him, even if
I’m the only name on all the paperwork, he’ll be ours. And I—” The words catch in the back of his throat, and he shakes his head. “I’m not sure that he—that either of us, I mean, not just Tony—is ready to make that kind of promise.”

He catches a momentary glance between Steve and Natasha, silent and fleeting. Steve dips his head, Natasha purses her lips, and for a beat too long, no one actually moves.

But in the end, it’s Bucky who snorts a tiny laugh and shakes his head. “Nobody’s ever ready to make the parent promises,” he says, shrugging. “Hell, most days, I still don’t think I’m ready, and Dot’ll be five in May.”

“He’s not lying,” Steve agrees, and smiles when Bucky rolls his eyes.

“I’m just saying,” Bucky presses, leaning his elbows on his legs again, “that you can never be all the way ready.”

“And not being ready,” Natasha adds quietly, “shouldn’t keep you from trying.”

He hears Bucky and Natasha’s voices in his head a hundred times throughout the rest of the day, ever-repeating murmurs that pop up in the back of his mind when he least expects it. He wonders as he picks Miles up from school whether he’d ever even considered becoming a parent were it not for Tony. He wants to think yes, but as he watches Miles switch over to the classic rock station and start singing along, he’s not entirely sure.

He’s not sure he’ll ever be ready for a full-time life with Miles or any other child, for the noise, the chaos, and the shoes abandoned in the middle of the hallway. He’s not sure he’s prepared for the years of teenage laundry, of arguing over broccoli as a side dish, or of threatening to unplug the computer because Skyping with Ganke needs to wait until after homework’s finished.

But then Tony walks into the house a half-hour later, still dressed in his work clothes and armed with a grocery bag filled with things off the list hanging on Bruce’s fridge—a list he’s never even pointed out to Tony—and Bruce thinks of what else Natasha’s said.

He might not be totally ready, but maybe Tony’s ready in the ways he’s not.

Maybe the only kind of readiness is the kind that’s shared between them.

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Thursday afternoon, Bruce is late for a hearing for the first time in years.

He tries to blame a thousand different things for his own tardiness as he rushes down the back stairwell, the thick file shoved under his arm and his fingers stumbling through an e-mail letting Judge Smithe know he really is on his way. It’d started snowing a half-hour before he needed to take Miles to school, thick, sticky flakes that slowed his commute to and from Union County, and Miles’d groused about leaving the house at all. Worse, Tony’d woken up handsy and attentive, dragging Bruce back into bed twice and divesting him of his pajamas both times. Bruce’d eventually given in, his grumbling turning to groans once he could card his fingers through Tony’s hair, but then they’d dragged a grumpy twelve-year-old out of bed and started the long trudge toward sanity.

Tony’d ducked his head into Bruce’s office just after ten that morning. “Funny story,” he’d said, and
Bruce’d rolled his eyes with the knowledge that nothing Tony ever started with *funny story* actually turned out to be funny. “I promised Danvers I’d hop over there and help walk her through this stupid administrative standard of review thing she’s fighting with in an appeal, so I’m gonna be MIA ‘til probably dinner.”

Bruce’d reached under his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. The frantic e-mail from a local school social worker and its neon-green comic sans font was already starting to burn a hole in his retinas. “In English?”

“You’re the super-genius law school professor with the extra degrees and the bi-yearly ‘adjunct of the year’ award and everything,” Tony’d retorted. He’d wandered into Bruce’s office, and for a moment, Bruce’d just admired the sight of the other man in his expensive tailored suit. He’d suspected Tony caught him in the act, though, because the smirk that’d crossed Tony’s lips was maddening. “You really need me to explain section 507 of the Administrative Procedure—”

“On second thought, just go,” Bruce’d replied, waving a hand. Tony’d laughed then, full and shameless. Bruce’d found it impossible to stand on the smile that crawled up his own face, so he’d shaken his head through his own amusement. “Text me about dinner,” he’d commented as he turned back to the computer.

“I’ve got dinner,” Tony’d declared. When Bruce’d glanced back in his direction, raising an eyebrow, he’d been surprised by Tony’s strange, almost serene smile. “What?” he’d asked, holding up his hands. “Can’t a guy treat his guy and his not-kid to dinner?”

“You usually burn things,” Bruce’d pointed out.

“Usually, but not tonight.” Before Bruce could really protest, though, Tony’d leaned across his desk, smacked a kiss on the corner of his mouth, and stepped away. “Dinner,” he’d repeated, in case Bruce’d somehow missed the memo in the last ten seconds. He’d waved Tony off, but ended up watching him walk out of his office, anyway.

Bruce’d thrown himself into work after that, pausing only long enough to fish his lunch out of the fridge and heat it up in the break room microwave. He’d convinced himself that the focus was a good thing, a necessary step after literal weeks of cutting corners and falling behind, but he’d caught his mind drifting, too.

At one, he’d sent Jessica Jones a quick e-mail, asking about whether Matt’d made a decision about the guardianship.

And at two, Outlook pinged and informed Bruce he was due in Judge Smithe’s courtroom for a review hearing.

Halfway down the stairs, Bruce tries to reason through how he managed to forget an entire hearing, one that he’d obviously scheduled in Outlook with enough detail to include the case number and caption. The judge’s kept her docket light for the last few days, he knows, but he’s usually better at tracking his appointments.

Then again, usually, he’s not faced with a foster child who’s weeks away from needing permanency. He’s not faced with questions about whether he’ll adopt a twelve-year-old.

And he’s not faced with Tony Stark’s so-called third option, words that’ve swum around in the back of his mind since Saturday afternoon.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he says as he shoves into the courtroom through the double doors, his voice
echoing off the high ceilings. “I must’ve—”

The words die on his tongue when he’s all of four steps into the room, though, because he’s alone.

The only lights on in the courtroom are the automatic ones that flicker to life when they sense motion, and for the first few seconds, all Bruce can do is stare into the empty space. There are no briefcases or case files cluttering up counsel table, no sign of Judge Smithe’s usual legal pads and statute books on the bench, and the microphone system that records their hearings isn’t even switched on. Bruce frowns as he wanders through the gallery and then into the well of the courtroom, his footfalls thudding heavily in the silence. Behind him, he can hear the doors finally settling shut, but all he can really do is set his case file on counsel table and—

Well, and wait.

He digs out his phone and opens up his calendar there, just to double-check that the hearing’s set for Judge Smithe’s courtroom at two p.m. An alert pops up as soon as he unlocks the screen, reminding him about the event that no one else is actually present for.

He closes it out and opens his e-mail, but there’s no message from the judge or his assistant. There’re no e-mails from any social workers or other attorneys, either, and no motions to continue that he can find.

“You’re losing it, Banner,” he mutters to himself. He shakes his head, frowns at the alert on his phone one more time, and then rubs a hand across his face. “Actually losing it.”

When he turns to leave, though, he freezes in that very spot.

Because standing just inside the closed doors to the courtroom, his hands shoved in the pockets of his slacks, is Tony.

He’s wearing his full suit, not just his shirt and slacks, but his tie and jacket as well, and his hair is the usual dark mess it becomes when he’s spent all day running his fingers through it while he works. He smiles slightly, a little twist of his lips, and for some reason, Bruce feels his heart drop into his stomach.

“Is everything—” he starts to ask, but Tony pins him with a careful, soft-eyed glance.

“I cheated on a final my second year at MIT,” he says quietly, and Bruce can’t help but frown in confusion. Tony never moves, never steps away from the door or tries to close the distance between them, just lets his voice carry. It’s hardly loud enough to travel between them, a whisper Bruce strains to hear. “Went out with a couple friends, partied all night, crashed at around four in the morning, never cracked a book.” He shrugs slightly. “Guy in front of me sucked at covering his paper, and even though he wasn’t all that smart, I was at least sober enough to translate his answers into the right ones.”

Bruce rolls his lips together. “Tony, I—”

“When I was still working at Stark Industries—before I realized I was trying to prove myself to a dead guy and everything—I paid off a cop to keep from getting a speeding ticket.” He steps away from the door, one measured footfall followed by another, and Bruce tracks him as he walks into the gallery. He slides between two of the rows of chairs, his fingertips playing along the backs of them, and uncertainty slowly curls fingers around Bruce’s belly. “Would’ve been the third that year and I didn’t want to lose my license, so I convinced him to take a couple hundred bucks and let me off with a warning. And just to be sure, I donated to the Policeman’s Ball fund or whatever that thing’s
called for years. Just to be safe.”

Bruce watches as Tony’s tongue darts out to wet his lips, and then as he worries them together. For a half-second, he thinks he detects a flash of fear sliding across Tony’s features, but then it settles again, back into the same, placid, unworried expression that always resides there. Tony glances up through dark lashes for a moment, and when their eyes meet, Bruce feels like he can’t fill his lungs.

He presses his own fingertips to the nearest counsel table, a futile attempt to ground himself. He feels like he’s been dropped into a dream, confused and disjointed as everything suddenly feels, and his throat is tight when he swallows.

The weight that settles on his shoulders reminds him of the pressure before a thunderstorm, too heavy to shrug away. He feels as though he’s waiting for the first thunderclap and lightning strike, waiting for the skies to burst open.

He’s just not certain exactly what will wash over him when they do.

“At Cramer and March,” Tony continues, pausing in the aisle of the gallery, “we had three paralegals in my department before Pepper started. I wouldn’t be able to pick them out of a lineup now, but they were all young and cute and at least one of them was double-jointed.” He knocks his knuckles against the back of one of the chairs. “I knew Pep was somebody I could trust because she wouldn’t sleep with me. I mean, I tried—trust me on that, I really did—but she never gave in.” He smiles slightly, a tiny twist of his lips that settles around Bruce’s heart. “I should’ve known then that the one I couldn’t con into my bed was the one who’d end up helping save my life, right?”

Bruce drags in a breath, but in rushes out immediately. “Tony—”

“And then,” he presses, ignoring the tremble that sits in the back of Bruce’s throat, “there’s you.”

When Tony looks up at him, Bruce feels immediately like he’s drowning.

“I scare myself, sometimes, you know that?” Tony asks. “I scare the hell out of myself, and that’s the biggest secret I’ve ever kept from anybody, the fact that there’re some days I wake up scared out of my mind to be in my mind.”

His hands slide out of his pockets to settle against his legs as he closes the last few meters between them, the last stretch of distance before they’re standing face-to-face. This close, Bruce can read a hundred different emotions as they flicker across Tony’s expression, catching them on a loop as they appear and then die away like firefly lights. There’s fear and hope, there’s worry and helplessness, there’s the tiniest spark of joy alongside the brokenness Bruce will forever believe belongs to a different Tony altogether. His hands lift from his sides momentarily, then settle back down, and Bruce is forced to press his fingertips hard to the table to keep from reaching out.

He knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that there’s more to hear.

He knows from the way Tony pulls in a breath and the way his own lungs feel too tight that he’s absolutely not finished.

“There’re nights where I can’t sleep because I remember what it felt like to be on the pain meds, and then there’re nights where I can’t sleep because I wonder what it’d be like to take them again.” He purses his lips together and drags in another long breath. “I don’t drink alone, I don’t smoke anything, I don’t even let myself gamble because I wonder where the line is. I wonder whether I’ll wake up one day and find out that I’m chasing something else away, some other demon I can’t beat.”

He stops there for a moment, his mouth settling slowly closed, and for a moment, the only thing in
the universe is the silence stretching between them and the contours of his face. Bruce watches him carefully, memorizing the fine lines around his eyes and the wisps of gray in his temples like they’re strangers laying eyes on one another for the first time. He can’t remember the first time he ever saw the face of Tony Stark, whether it was in a magazine or a newspaper or whether it was the first time they met in person, but he knows now that it can be the most beautiful face he’s ever seen.

And right now, it’s so open and bare, he thinks he could drown in Tony’s gaze.

“But as much all of that scares me and as much as I scare myself, the only thing that scares me worse is the thought that I might wake up some morning and not have the only thing that’s kept me going in the last five years.” Tony’s shoulders lift in the world’s tiniest shrug. “Because I’ve thought about it a lot, Bruce, and the only constant I’ve had since the day I walked out of Four Oaks and into Nick Fury’s office is you.”

Bruce isn’t sure why that’s what causes him to drop his eyes to the floor, why it’s that particular handful of words that settles a boulder on his chest and heart, but he stares at the worn carpet and the shine of Tony’s shoes until the two almost blur together. “You had Pepper, too,” he says weakly, the words sticking in the back of his throat and sounding almost choked. “I— You can’t give me that kind of credit, not when—”

“Hey,” Tony interrupts, and when Bruce refuses to lift his head, Tony finally raises one of his hands and uses it to nudge Bruce’s chin up. He settles his fingers there for a moment, but then they slide elsewhere, brushing along the curve of Bruce’s jaw until he settles his whole hand on Bruce’s neck. Bruce wants to close his eyes and tip into the touch, but Tony’s gaze pins him until he can’t even breathe. “I had Pepper, sure. I had Pep, and Pep helped me start in the right direction, but what’s kept me from heading back down the darkest road I’ve ever been on is that I found somebody who’d weather all my crazy with me. Who’d come out and do stupid stuff with me at three a.m. and help beat that gnawing, lonely, empty feeling down with a stick.”

He wets his lips, and Bruce only breathes when his lungs start to burn. “I found you. And everything that’s happened after, all the good things I’ve done and we’ve done, that’s ‘cause I’ve got you.”

The distance between them disappears after that, fading into nothing but the hard crush of Bruce’s mouth against Tony’s and the strangled sound Tony makes when he kisses Bruce back. His fingers dig into Bruce’s arms until Bruce can feel the half-moons of his fingernails through his suit jacket and shirt, but Bruce hardly cares. No, he cares about the heat and taste of Tony’s mouth, of the bitterness of his coffee and the nearness of his breath, of the way his hair feels between Bruce’s fingers and the way their bodies fit together.

They kiss until they’re depending on the table for support, until Bruce thinks he’d scale Tony just to pull him closer, until he simultaneously wants to scream and cry through the emotions crashing over him like waves.

He wants to bleat out a thousand promises, wants to tell Tony he loves him until he can’t breathe for speaking, but somehow, when Tony’s fingers slide down his neck and over his chest before finding his arms, he knows the words aren’t actually what matters.

“I’m never gonna be good at this, Bruce,” Tony murmurs once they’ve pulled apart, his forehead pressed to Bruce’s and the burn of his goatee still close enough to feel. “I’m never gonna be the guy who says all the right things at the right times, or who never screws up. That’s not something I can be.”
He pulls back just far enough to meet Bruce’s eyes.

“But I can promise you that I’ll never keep another secret, that I’ll lay it all out there, all bare for you. Because if that’s what it takes to turn five years into ten or twenty or fifty, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Tony—”

“It’s you, Bruce. It’s going to keep being you. Okay? I need to know that’s okay with you, I need to know that’s a thing you can keep being, that it’s a thing we can be, I—”

When he stops in the middle of the sentence, his voice catching in his throat in a way Bruce’s never heard before, Bruce swears his heart stops, too. For full seconds, the room is absolutely silent, empty except for their shared, shaky breaths and the heat from Tony’s hands on his arms.

Bruce knows his mouth is standing open, but he can’t actually close it. In front of him, Tony swallows.

“Marry me,” he says, his voice hardly above a whisper.

And Bruce doesn’t even pause to think before he answers, “Okay.”

He can’t describe the emotions that cycle across Tony’s face in the seconds following his answer, but then, he’s not sure Tony can, either. Tony’s hands grip his arms and then release, and he watches as he takes one staggering step back. His mouth opens, his lips twitch, but then he frowns. His brow creases into a series of peaks and valleys, and Bruce feels for a moment like he might throw up.

Tony’s still teetering on that spot an arm’s length away when he repeats, “Okay?” The word shakes in a way that’s new and somehow terrifying. “You’re— As in yes?”

Bruce wets his lips and slowly nods. “As in yes,” he hears himself saying, but he’s not sure he recognizes his own voice.

What he is sure of is the way Tony’s expression softens into quiet, gorgeous smile. “Okay,” he whispers, and Bruce feels his whole face warm when Tony re-closes the distance between them. His broad hands are familiar and welcome against Bruce’s arms, sliding almost up to his shoulders before dipping down again. “Okay. Okay, that was a yes, and if that’s a yes it means you can’t take it back because you said yes.”

Bruce huffs a breathless laugh. “I guess?” he attempts, but the end of the word is strangled away by the heat of Tony’s mouth on his. He kisses him roughly, as needy as any kiss they’ve ever shared, and for a moment Bruce forgets that they’re in a courtroom at all. Instead, he surrenders himself to the heady, surreal feeling that’s surrounding him, the one that threatens to choke away his breath.

He wonders whether he’s dreaming, and when he’ll wake up. When Tony pulls away, there’s a half-second when the world is still narrowed to them and no one else.

But then, Tony steps away and shoves two fingers between his lips, filling the courtroom with an ear-splitting whistle. Bruce winces and opens his mouth to complain, but then the doors to the courtroom swing open.

And Bruce is suddenly reminded of Pepper’s words of warning about Tony Stark and surprises.

Because striding into the room is none other than Pepper Potts herself, followed immediately by Steve, Clint, Natasha and, bringing up the very rear, Miles. Somehow in the time between Bruce dropping him off at school and now, he’s lost his jeans and sweatshirt and replaced them with his
Thanksgiving outfit from weeks ago, the khakis and sweater he’d initially rolled his eyes at. He follows close behind Natasha, his hands shoved in his pockets and his back almost ramrod straight—at least, until he catches Bruce’s eyes.

Then, he smiles, as bright and sure as the very first time Bruce’d coaxed a grin from him. All the momentary uncertainty, all the confusion and inner conflict of the last few days, it all drains away like a stopper’s been pulled. Bruce smiles back, as warm as he’s able, and for the first time, he invites the helpless feeling that churns in his stomach.

He’s nervous, almost worried, but he’s pretty sure that’s because this matters. And when he glances over at Tony and takes in Tony’s brilliant, too-warm smile, all he’s really capable of doing is smiling back.

“Okay, so, I think you’re familiar with these guys, but a quick rundown to be sure,” Tony declares, his hands finally slipping away from Bruce as he starts to point to each of their friends in turn. “Cause we’ve got Mister Stephen Rogers, the amazing Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts, the nearly-disbarred Clinton Francis Barton—”

Clint rolls his eyes at that.

“—and the one-and-only Red.” Bruce suspects he’s the only person in the room who can hear the thin thread of nerves that knit Tony’s words together, or who catches the half-second pause when he reaches the end of the line. Miles shifts his weight from one foot to another, and somehow, it softens Tony’s too-big grin. “Plus, you know, our kid,” Tony says, and Miles ducks his head to stare at the carpet. “I mean, not presently, ‘cause the law works in mysterious ways—”

“The law works in predictable ways,” Pepper offers, but Bruce isn’t especially surprised to see the corners of her mouth lifting in a smile.

“—but I figure, once we do this today, and sign a lot of paperwork in the future, maybe then. Our kid.”

Bruce wants to focus on Miles, on the way his shoulders lift for a second and the tiny, hopeful glance he’s tossing in Bruce’s direction, but instead he discovers that his mouth’s gone dry. “Today?” he repeats. Each syllable trips off his tongue like he’s speaking an unfamiliar language. “You want to—Today?”

There’s a momentary pause then, a heavy silence in the room as their friends look at each other and Miles shifts his weight for the third time in as many minutes. Bruce tries to study each of them in turn—his best friends, Tony’s best friends, and the boy who sort of brought it all together—but his attention keeps drifting back toward Tony. Tony stands stock still, his hands in his pants pockets and his lips pressed into a tight line, and Bruce—Bruce is used to living a life where Tony steals his breath away, but this, somehow, is different.

“I have rings,” Tony says, and there’s something quiet and caught in his voice. “I have rings, there’s a marriage license on the bench, and Judge Smithe’s kinda on standby to kick this whole thing off. And if you don’t end up wanting to do this today, if you wanna wait and do it in a church or the botanical gardens or on a boat or whatever, we can hit pause and go do that, instead.”

A sliver of tongue darts out between Tony’s lips, almost nervy in its speed, and Bruce swallows around where his heart’s leapt up into his throat.

“But here’s the thing,” Tony presses, and Bruce watches as he closes the distance between them,
each step slower and more deliberate than any he’s ever taken. “We’ve spent five years—five really long, really good years—fighting tooth and nail to get from where we started off to where we’re standing right now.” When his hands find Bruce’s hips, Bruce can’t help but slide forward, to tip into the touch that’s become so common and expected in his life. “I think we kinda owe it to ourselves to, you know, make it permanent.”

“Today,” Bruce says, just one more time.

“Yeah,” Tony answers. His eyes dip to study Bruce’s mouth, then rise again to meet his gaze. “Unless, like I said, you don’t want to, ’cause if you don’t want to, we can do it another time, but—”

Bruce imagines there are a thousand more words where those came from, meandering, wandering words that tumble and trip over themselves to some sort of conclusion, but he’ll never hear them. Because instead of letting Tony finish, he eliminates the last inches between them and stops his lips with a kiss. It’s meant to be short, a two-second reminder that he’s already agreed to this life with Tony—that he’s already living a life with Tony, just one without labels and rings—but Tony drags him closer by his belt loops and refuses to let him go. He strings his arms around Tony’s neck, vaguely aware that Miles and Clint are each complaining about PDA while Natasha laughs at them, and loses himself in Tony’s touch.

In Tony, he amends, the same way he’s done for the last five years.

When they pull apart just far enough to breathe, Bruce feels like his entire body’s trembling. “You didn’t have to do any of this,” he says, but he knows as soon as he hears his own voice how wrecked and helpless he sounds.

“Yes, I did,” Tony replies, and presses his nose against Bruce’s cheek before he steps away and goes to get the judge.

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Bruce thinks he’s meant to memorize the next fifteen minutes, to record every word and touch and hold onto them for the rest of his life—but in reality, he can’t. Somehow, they’re both the longest and shortest minutes of his life, and he knows even as they flicker by that he’ll only remember them as snapshots, sudden bursts of light seared into his brain. He’ll never recall the exact words Judge Smithe asks him to repeat or the flowery run-up language; he’ll always wonder what the pen felt like in his hand as he signed the certificate, or which of his friends he first hugged afterwards.

But he’ll never forget the sheepish smile from Steve as he dug in his pocket and pulled out actual wedding bands that glinted in the courtroom lights, or the tiny, crooked smile that crossed Tony’s mouth when the judge asked them to join hands. He’ll never lose the shock of feeling Tony’s hand tremble as he fit the ring on Bruce’s finger, or the breathlessness in Tony’s voice when he’d actually tripped over Bruce’s full name.

And even though he might forget the actual vows themselves and the order in which he promised to love, honor, obey, and cherish, Bruce knows he will always remember the absolutely certainty in his own voice when he said, “I do.”

Miles and Clint hoot when Judge Smithe asks them to kiss, and Natasha wins the rock-paper-scissors battle to sign the marriage certificate as a witness. Bruce realizes only after he’s scratched his own
name across the bottom that Steve’s armed with his camera, snapping surreptitious pictures the entire
time. He blushes a little at that realization, and then at the fact that Tony’s first instinct after scrawling
his own name is to lean over and press his nose to Bruce’s cheek. It’s a nuzzle, pure and simple, as
familiar and demanding as the one on Halloween, and even though he’s blushing, Bruce smiles.

These, he thinks, are the details he’ll remember about the day he married Tony Stark. They’re the
details that matter: the heat of Tony’s breath against his jaw, the way Tony squeezes him around the
waist, and the smile Judge Smithe flashes him when she reaches out to shake his hand.

And even though he’ll never remember the second person he’d hugged as Tony Stark’s husband,
he’ll always remember the first.

Because that person is their son.

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“You threw us a wedding reception before I agreed to marry you,” Bruce says as he stands in the
middle of Tony’s living room, surrounded by all their friends.

“No,” Tony retorts, holding up a finger. “I threw a party that would either be celebratory or
consolatory, depending on the circumstances.” He presses his finger to Bruce’s nose. “You made it a
wedding reception.”

Bruce is allowed one blissful half-second to sigh and roll his eyes before Thor spots them. “The
happy couple!” he announces, his booming voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling and catching
everyone’s attention. The house is packed with all the usual suspects—the seven other assistant
district attorneys from their office, their respective trial assistants, plus Jasper, Rhodey, Miles, and
Dot— milling around the living room, but they all stop what they’re doing to turn and stare. Thor
abandons Jane beside what looks to be an enormous table of snack foods to come over and clap them
each on the shoulder.

Bruce tries not to wince at the force of the blow.

“We always knew this day would come,” Thor informs them both, but his voice still carries across
the whole of the living room. Tony reaches up and pats his thick wrist, but still he refuses to budge.
“Friends, I present to you the Starks!”

There’s the briefest of expectant pauses before everyone starts clapping, a staggered noise that ends
in a handful of cheers (Bruce suspects Clint’s behind that one) and a wolf-whistle (that he knows is
Jasper). He waits until Thor’s half-nudged, half-shoved them into the room before he mumbles,
“Please tell me you didn’t also decide I’m changing my name.”

Tony’s grin shines brighter than the reflection of the sun off the snow outside. “Lutefisk came up
with that one on his own, but I kinda like the sound of ‘Doctor Stark,’” he retorts, and then steps
away when Rhodey tugs him in for a hug.

The party carries on a lot like that, actually, the two of them passed from person to person to be
hugged, kissed, and otherwise lightly harassed. Pepper kisses him on the corner of his mouth and
squeezes his hands, her eyes the tiniest bit wet, Darcy nearly chokes him as she bounces in his grip,
Peggy and Maria each separately ask whether he’s had any recent head trauma, and Jane nearly
blinds him with her smile. Bucky turns a manly handshake into a hug, Steve doesn’t bother with the
pretense, Phil grips his hand a little too tightly, and Clint accuses Natasha of cheating at rock-paper-scissors, which just makes her laugh.

“You’re fucking crazy,” Jasper notes after he shoves a champagne flute into Bruce’s grip. Bruce isn’t entirely sure where the champagne came from, and he’s certain that Tony shouldn’t be allowed near the stuff. The investigator watches him closely for a moment. “But it kinda works on you two.”

There’s suddenly an arm around Bruce’s waist, dragging him close enough to bump hips. Bruce doesn’t need to glance over his shoulder to know who it is. “Still jealous that I won’t be making out with you at the Christmas party?” Tony asks, stealing the champagne right out of Bruce’s grip.

“Having experienced your tongue, I’m leaving that one to your hubby,” Jasper retorts, and Bruce bursts out laughing when Tony chokes instead of swallowing.

It’s not actually a wedding reception, Bruce decides as the surprising afternoon sun starts to dip below the horizon, stealing away the sparkling reflection of its rays across the fresh snow. A wedding reception involves speeches and dances, stilted shows of affection and bids for attention that Bruce knows without thinking that he’d never survive. There’s food and friends here, certainly, and Maria shows off her uncanny ability to pour booze like a professional bartender behind the kitchen island, but nothing feels stilted or off. Instead, it’s just another of Tony’s parties, filled to the brim with the people they care about, and it’s—

It’s right.

This life he’s fallen into, the one where he’s married his best friend after the world’s shortest engagement (if those ten in-between minutes count at all), it’s the life he’s maybe meant to have after all.

He’s standing near the back door as he thinks all this, a half-finished glass of champagne in his right hand. His left hand’s perpetually distracted, playing with the ring he’s not at all used to. He wonders momentarily how Tony managed it all—to secure a marriage license, to find and fit rings, to pick up Miles from school and convince him to keep a secret—when something impacts his hip.

“You lied,” Dot informs him, scowling. Behind her, Miles shoves his hands in his pockets and grins at the carpet. Bruce, for all his years dealing with one of the world’s craftier little girls, blinks. “About what?”

Her lip pops out, shaking for the briefest of seconds, and Bruce can’t help the spike of guilt that immediately climbs up the center of his chest. “You said I could be the flower girl when you and Uncle Tony got married,” she says, her tone sharp and accusatory as she glares up at him. “And you got married without me.”

When Bruce casts a glance in Miles’s direction, it’s in time to witness the boy’s innocent expression falter and fail. “She asked,” he defends, raising his hands as though he expects Bruce to scold him. “You can’t lie to a four-year-old.”

“Four and a half,” Dot corrects.

“See?”

Bruce chuckles and shakes his head, but when he reaches for Dot, she darts away. She crosses her arms over her sweater and sends him what just might be the world’s tetchiest look. “You lied,” she tells him again.
“Actually, you need to talk to Uncle Tony,” Bruce says, and he watches her glare soften as she processes this new information. “Uncle Tony invited everybody, not me. I didn’t even know you weren’t coming.”

He supposes he should feel slightly guilty about throwing Tony under the bus, but then, Tony’d assigned him the dubious duty of explaining how the dinosaurs became extinct a few months back. Dot frowns, her eyes narrowing. “Uncle Tony lied?” she asks. Bruce thinks she might not believe him.

“Not lied, exactly. just—”

“Oh, if it’s something he can lie about, Tony lied,” Peggy comments as she passes their conversation. It’s clearly the only prodding Dot needs, too, because she immediately zips out from between Bruce and Miles, making a beeline to where Tony’s talking to Clint, Pepper, Phil, and Natasha.

Bruce releases the laugh he’s been holding onto for the last few seconds. When he glances over, he notices Miles still standing an arm’s length away. The boy notices the attention and jabs his hands back into his pockets. “Hey,” he says, half-awkwardly, and there’s something so adorable about his trepidation that Bruce wants to reach over and drag him in for a hug.

Instead, he smiles. “Hey yourself.”

“Jess—Miss Jones, I mean, she said you need to check your e-mail.” Miles rocks back on his heels slightly, a sure sign that the smile’s dropped off Bruce’s face. “She came to sign me out of school, since you couldn’t because of the whole secret wedding thing,” he continues, shrugging a little. “She said, ‘Tell you foster dad he’s crazy and that he needs to check his e-mail.’”

Bruce snorts a little and casts his eyes down at his glass. “Apparently, half my friends think I’m insane,” he comments idly.

“I think it’s cool,” Miles returns. Bruce thinks for a moment that he’s downplaying whatever he’s actually feeling, another attempt at preteen face-saving, but when he lifts his head away from his glass, he sees that Miles’s smiling. “Tony said one time that you don’t always need to say the things that matter, because as long as it’s between two people, it’s enough. I think it’s kind of like ‘actions speak louder than words.’” He lifts his shoulders in another tiny, non-committal shrug. “Kinda hard to forget you love each other when you’re married and everything, right?”

Bruce casts his eyes across the room to watch Tony argue—or maybe the better word is “negotiate”—with his tiny blonde goddaughter. Their tiny blonde goddaughter, Bruce thinks, but then, he’s been Uncle Bruce for a lot longer than he’s been Tony Stark’s anything.

“Besides,” Miles adds, and the little grin that flickers onto his face is just on the wrong side of incorrigible. “I was there when my mom and dad got married, and now, I was there for my second set of parents’ wedding, too.”

“I—” Bruce starts to protest, but he realizes before the words leave his mouth that he’s run out of objections. He can’t claim that he’s not in love with Tony Stark, that he’s not Miles’s parent, or that Miles doesn’t already belong to them in some way. Because he knows without thinking that no matter what happens in the future—with his marriage, with child services, with Aaron Davis—that he’ll always be part of Miles.

Or maybe, more accurately, Miles will always be part of him.

Miles frowns slightly at his silence, and Bruce abandons his glass on the corner of the table to pull
the boy in for a hug. “I’m glad you were there,” he says quietly, squeezing him just a little tighter than necessary.

“Me too,” Miles agrees, and hugs him back.

They’re not quite done hugging before Thor manages to do something horrible to Tony’s ridiculous stereo, filling the room with loud static and white noise, and Miles rolls his eyes as he slides out of Bruce’s grip. “Wrong remote!” he yells across the room, and Thor swears as he somehow manages to turn on the television instead of turning off the stereo. Miles disappears then, darting over to help the very technologically-challenged Thor, and Bruce is left to his own devices.

As he wanders across the room and listens to his friends’ conversations drift around him, he tries to imagine his life without all this, a world in which he never fell accidentally in love with Tony Stark. He tries to picture himself that way, still living in his Union County apartment, still serving as a temporary placement for a few boys a year, teaching Wednesday night classes before coming home alone, and it all seems very lonely. Everything good that’s come of his life in the last few years—his place on the Urban Ascent Board of Directors, the townhome his friends helped him move into, the decision to become first Miles’s placement and now, inevitably, his parent—has come from Tony Stark.

He’s suddenly not sure he can pinpoint the day he fell in love. Maybe there wasn’t one.

Tony’s grinning with Clint and the others when Bruce walks up to him, and he reaches for Bruce without even breaking stride in the conversation. When the lines around his eyes crinkle and his head tilts back in a laugh, Bruce can’t help but curl his fingers in Tony’s shirt and pull him in for a kiss.

He tastes like champagne and something off the snack table, sweet and sharp all at the same time.

“If this wasn’t your almost-reception,” Clint complains, “I might throw up a little.”

Bruce is almost certain that the movement he feels is Tony giving their friend the finger behind his back.

This won’t all be perfect, Bruce knows. It’ll be messy and clumsy, filled with arguments and uncertainty and the living wrench-in-the-works that is Tony Stark. They’ll lose their temper with each other, with their jobs, with Miles, and at some point, dishware will probably break.

But whatever it is, it’ll be theirs.

In the end, that’s really all Bruce needs.

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It’s well after midnight when Bruce finally remembers his phone, buried in the pocket of his winter coat and completely forgotten. It’s still on silent, the battery almost drained, and he struggles to unlock it while Tony’s dragging him toward the stairs by his belt loops.

The whole house is a mess, littered with plates, cups, and all the other party debris, but Tony’d waved Steve and Bucky off when they’d offered to clean it up. “Wedding night,” he’d said, his shirttails already hanging out and his tie tossed in a corner, all thanks to the rousing rounds of Dance Central in front of the Kinect. Bruce’d glanced from where he was nudging Miles into his coat and
spent a little too much time studying the line of Tony’s neck disappearing into his open collar. “You take our kid, we’ll take our mess.”

“And we’ll drive him to school tomorrow,” Bruce’d reminded everyone involved.

“Shortest and least-sexy honeymoon ever, but yes,” Tony’d agreed, and Bruce’d rolled his eyes before kissing Miles on the top of his head and sending him out the door with Steve, Bucky, and an already-sleeping Dot.

“Wedding night,” Tony reminds him, whining this time, and Bruce laughs as he manages to display all the new messages. Tony’s hands wander along his sides and back, tugging at his already-wrinkled shirt until rough fingers find his skin, and Bruce nearly plows into the couch in the half-dark.

He’s still struggling with his phone, Tony’s face buried in the side of his neck and Tony’s lips leaving hot, wet prints on his throat, when he freezes.

His work e-mail is packed to the gills, but his personal e-mail contains only one message, sent from a J. Jones at Union County Child Services. The body of the e-mail is blank, but there’s an attachment.

“Stop,” he says, and bats Tony’s hand away when he reaches for the phone. He feels Tony’s frown in the near-dark of the house, but he’s too busy waiting impatiently for the attachment to download.

His eyes are drawn to the header the second he opens it.

The file caption on the document reads *In re Miles R. Morales*, and the document’s title is *Motion for Dissolution of Guardianship*. He feels his belly twist, suddenly warmer and fuller than any amount of champagne could ever manage.

And, very slowly, he tilts the phone in Tony’s direction until Tony can read what’s on display.

The glow of the screen in the dark room is nothing compared to the glow of Tony’s smile—or at least, the half-second of Tony’s smile Bruce is allowed to see. Because his phone falls to the floor as Tony presses him against the arm of the couch and crushes their mouths together, stealing his breath away.

As it happens, there’s a lot of celebrating to do.

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Chapter End Notes

This weekend, I will be doing a Motion Practice Friday on my tumblr, [the day where I answer real questions from real Motion Practitioners](https://example.com). However, as my parents and brother will be in for my law school graduation, I may not be super speedy on any questions you ask. Just know that they will be answered.

Confidential to anarialm: yes, you were right all along. Whether you believed my claims to the contrary, I do not know.
Right on Down the Line

Chapter Summary

Bruce has never been one to argue with the status quo. It’s brought him a rewarding job, dedicated students, caring friends, and, in some form or another, Tony Stark. He wants this life, surrounded by the things he loves, to stay the same. Permanent.

But Bruce, for better or worse, doesn’t always get what he wants.

In this chapter, Bruce witnesses a contest of sorts and rediscovers that the life he’s stumbled upon is the life he’s always wanted.

Chapter Notes

When I started this story, it was a mess. The reason it is no longer a mess is due largely to the efforts of Jen and saranoh. They deserve all the thanks and accolades in the world, and really, this story is as much their as it is mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That’s gotta be fifteen,” Clint says, peering at the television screen in the conference room.

“I thought the nose-scratch doesn’t count,” Miles argues.

Natasha hardly looks up from the police report she’s reviewing, but she shakes her head. “It doesn’t,” she says.

“It was genuine,” Phil confirms.

And in the doorway, Bruce demands, “What are you doing?”

It’s the Monday after New Year’s Day, a bright, sunny January morning that’s working hard to melt the last few inches of Christmas snow and warm the otherwise frigid earth. It’s also Bucky and Thor’s first docket since before the holidays, and both men are running through the office like proverbially headless chickens, shouting at their trial assistants for files and other information.

Twice, Bruce caught Darcy flipping Bucky off behind his back. Worse, he’s afraid Jane might hurt herself from rolling her eyes at her fiancé.

For his part, Bruce only intended to stop by the supply closet and collect a few expanding files—he’s received “heads up” e-mails from three different social workers warning him about potential cases—when he’d noticed that the television in the conference room was on.

And, more pressingly, that Tony’s voice was tumbling out into the hallway.

“One of the big failings of the whole Urban Ascent program’s been that it’s pretty narrow-scoped,” the Tony on the television explains. He holds his hands up in front of his face, parallel to one
another, and the flash of gold on his left hand causes Clint to mutter, “Sixteen.”

“No, now fifteen,” Natasha corrects, and Miles nods in agreement.

The televised Tony drops his hands, shrugging briefly. “And while I don’t think it’s an un

noble goal to focus in on serious programs for high school kids and then fluffy programs for kid-kids,” he continues, “I’m a big fan of filling in the gaps.”

The camera pans to a pretty newscaster with long brown hair. Bruce tries to remember her name—Ingrid? Imogen? Irene?—but instead just watches her study Tony over the rims of her glasses. “That’s the goal of the new summer program, then? To fill in the gaps left by the traditional Urban Ascent framework?”

“No,” Tony answers. When he lifts a hand, gesturing vaguely between himself and the newscaster, Clint mumbles another number. “It’s a start.”

Clint’s cell phone chimes then, and he grabs for it, effectively ignoring Bruce as he looms in the doorway. Natasha, Phil, and Miles—who is meant to be working on the last bits of his Christmas break homework assignment before school reconvenes the next morning, Bruce would note—follow his lead. When Tony touches his chin, though, Miles announces, “Seventeen!” with an air of overblown triumph.

Bruce crosses his arms over his chest. “Are you playing the interview drinking game without drinks?” he asks after a moment.

He thinks momentarily that it’s the first time they’ve noticed him standing there at all; Miles blinks, stares at him for a half-second, and then reaches for his pencil, and Natasha’s head lifts just in time for her lips to curve into a dangerous little half-smile. Clint, on the other hand, nearly knocks over his cup of coffee as he jerks his chair around to look at Bruce.

Bruce suspects that, up until that point, Clint had at least one foot on Phil’s lap.

“There’s a drinking game?” he demands. Bruce nods slightly, and watches as the other man’s eyes flick over to Natasha. “You never got me in on the Stark-centered drinking game?”

“He really hasn’t done many interviews since you started,” Phil points out, flipping to another page of the case file he’s reviewing. There are several other files stacked next to him, some covered in sticky notes and others carefully tabbed, and Bruce wonders what his afternoon’ll look like after two weeks of extra-light responsibility.

“Except that Killgrave nightmare,” Natasha intones.

Phil nods. “Except that.”

“I can’t believe you all kept me from a drinking game,” Clint laments.

“I can’t believe you just missed numbers eighteen, nineteen, and twenty,” Miles retorts, and Clint swears as he reaches for his cell phone again.

Bruce is seconds away from repeating his question for the third and hopefully final time when Natasha puts down the report and folds her hands on top of it. “Your kid informed us that Tony’d be on TV this morning,” she says, and Miles ducks his head in what Bruce can only assume is embarrassment. “Clint and Wade turned it into a wager.”

“Wade Wilson?” Bruce asks. Phil’s answering nod is shallow but serious.
“There’s a Mexican feast riding on how many times your husband flashes his wedding ring in the ten-minute interview.”

“We’re on twenty-one,” Clint explains without looking away from the screen.

Bruce resists the rising urge to roll his eyes. “There’s no way that’s accurate,” he argues. But even as he watches, Tony touches his chin again, a thoughtful gesture that causes his ring to catch in the studio lights.

Bruce pretends that the corner of his own mouth doesn’t twitch, and that there’s no warm feeling pooling in his stomach.

“Wade guessed forty,” Clint adds after a few seconds.

“Wade’s insane,” Phil deadpans as he reaches for another file.

Miles stops twirling his pencil to glance across the table at Phil. “We’re at twenty-two,” he says helpfully.

“I never said Tony wasn’t insane,” Phil retorts, and both Miles and Clint’s faces erupt in grins.

Bruce shakes his head and then leans his shoulder against the doorjamb, watching as Tony’s facial expressions and easy gestures dance across the big screen. They’d spent the last two days running over potential interview questions and pitfalls, Bruce playing the part of the intrepid reporter—“Who can get me on my knees if he plays his cards right,” Tony’d added, and Bruce’d elbowed him every time. They’d plotted and planned, Skyped with the rest of the Urban Ascent board, and even spent an hour on speakerphone with Obadiah Stane himself.

“You’re insane,” Stane’d accused at the end of the conversation.

“Insane like a fox,” Tony’d retorted, and hung up the phone.

“This is probably the most comprehensive sort of extra-curricular science education program in at least this part of the state, if not the whole thing,” Tony explains to the interviewer, and his lazy hand waves start Clint and Natasha on an argument over whether each wave counts as a separate ring “event.” “We’ve partnered with the local university, plus the museum and the planetarium, to offer decent classes to these kids. We’re covering five different subjects, we’re spanning at least grades five through nine but are aiming for all the way through high school, and it’s—” He pauses for a moment, frozen mid-stream as he searches for the right word. “It’s gonna be big. Unprecedentedly big.”

“Given the precedent—your father starting Urban Ascent with nothing but a cot and an idea—that might be hard,” the interviewer points out.

“Oh, Dad got the ball rolling, sure,” Tony admits with a shrug, “but I’m trying to sort of grab it and run with it, here.”

“This is a pretty enormous new program,” the interviewer presses. “It could fail.”

“Or succeed,” Tony argues, pointing a finger at her. His left index finger, Bruce notices, which counts as yet another gesture with his left hand. “It could change the way we look at summer school and getting kids who the system traditionally fails to actually exceed our stupid-low expectations.”

“But why reinvent a wheel that’s already turning?”
“Y’know, I think about that sometimes.” Tony scratches his goatee with his left hand for a split second, ring catching the studio lights for what feels like the tenth time since Bruce started playing along. “I used to just sit back and do it the same way we’d always done it, the whole ‘this is how Dad did it, and it worked out pretty well so far’ mentality. But programs like this one can’t be stagnant.”

He shrugs, a gentle lift of his shoulders. Bruce tries not to focus on the softness in his face, or the strange way his voice catches when he talks about his father.

“Cause maybe it worked out so far, but we’re not in a ‘so far’ kinda world. And every day, when we make judgment calls about things like how to expand the program or find more donors or whatever, we’re making those calls to move things forward.” He shakes his head for a second. “It’s about how my dad did it, but it’s also about making sure that the way I do it is something my kid can be proud of, and right on down the line, y’know?”

Bruce glances across the conference room table. Miles’s half-finished social studies homework is spread all around him, but his eyes are trained on the television screen. There’s something akin to wonder trapped on his face, a distant relative of awe, and Bruce feels his chest tighten.

It’s officially been a month since Aaron Davis last appeared in Miles’s life, and officially two weeks until they’ll appear at a hearing to terminate the guardianship. Bruce knows they’ll need to talk about it soon—formulate all the words for whatever Miles’s feeling and then wade through them—but today’s not that day.

Bruce tries not to worry too much about it.

It’s made easier by the fact that on the day after Christmas, Tony’d stopped on his way to the kitchen and turned to look at Miles. The boy’d been sprawled out on the couch and half-heartedly watching bad after-Christmas programming in the glow of the Christmas tree lights.

“You know we’re adopting you when this whole mess is sorted out, right?” he’d asked, and Bruce’d missed grabbing his coffee cup off the nearest end table. Miles’s eyes had lifted from the screen, and for a few seconds there’d been nothing but silence spooling out between them.

Bruce’d tried to read his expression, but it’d been hard to concentrate over the rushing of his own heart.

“Cause that’s a thing that’s happening,” Tony’d explained, and Bruce’d watched Miles press his lips together. “Our awesome marital powers combined, we’re gonna adopt you and keep you, and screw the social work agency that tries to stop us.” He’d paused, and Bruce’d felt something heavy in the room’s continued silence. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Miles’d agreed, and Tony’d nodded as he disappeared into the kitchen for a second cup of coffee.

When he’d come back into the room, he’d nudged Miles into sitting up on the couch, and Miles’d leaned against him for a few seconds longer than was maybe required. And after breakfast, Miles’d seized Bruce by his bathrobe and hugged him for much, much longer than usual.

The interviewer on the morning show steers Tony back into talking about the details of the summer program, and Miles twists to look over at Bruce. He grins, this flash of barely-contained joy, and Bruce smiles back. “Do your homework,” he urges, but Miles just rolls his eyes.

Bruce now realizes that they have plenty of time to figure out the future.
An hour later, as he’s refilling his coffee cup in the break room, a hand presses against his back. “Heard you joined in on the morning viewing party,” Tony says. His breath’s close to Bruce’s ear, hot and familiar, and Bruce grips the coffee carafe a little harder for the warmth. He glances over his shoulder to catch the curve of Tony’s smile. “You know, I heard on Fox News that watching morning TV’s the gateway drug to knitting circles and book clubs.”

“I’m already in a book club.”

“God, bad boys are sexy as hell.” Tony reaches around him, snags his mug, and helps himself to a swallow of coffee. Bruce tries to hold his smile at bay and to roll his eyes, but—

But he’s proud of Tony, and it’s hard to resist smiling at that.

“So, I’ve got a question about this morning,” Tony says after a few seconds. He leans over, his fingers dancing along the ceramic of Bruce’s mug, until he can meet Bruce’s eyes. His free hand spreads against Bruce’s lower back, pinning him there, and Bruce thinks he can read actual worry playing across his features. “And if you don’t wanna answer it, you don’t have to, but it’s the one thing that’s kinda been eating at me ever since I stepped foot into the studio.”


“Based on everything you saw on TV today, do you have a sexy husband, or the sexiest husband?”

There’s exactly one beat of confused staring before Tony bursts out laughing, voice warm and free across the break room. Bruce rolls his eyes and tries to dig an elbow into his side, but Tony’s already slipping away, too amused with himself for actual words. “I can’t believe I signed up for a lifetime of this,” Bruce informs the empty room once he’s thrown up his hands.

But when he turns around to head back to his office, coffee mug in hand, Tony’s standing in the doorway. He’s stripped down to just his shirt, tie, and slacks, and everything about him is easy and comfortable. Everything about him is Tony, Bruce thinks, the man he met, fell in love with, and married.

They stare at each other for a moment before Tony says, “But you did sign up.”

No joke or tease in the world, Bruce knows, is able to stop the full force of his smile. He feels his ears warm, but he’s used to that by now. “Yes,” he admits, “I did.”

Because the warmth of his flush is still nothing compared to the warmth of Tony’s grin.

He’ll never regret signing up for a lifetime of that.

Chapter End Notes

Thus officially ends Permanency, the second full-length story in the Motion Practice universe. The adventures of these characters continues in Admissions, Interrogatories, and Other Discoveries, debuting today. The posting schedule for the first seven chapters of the new story can be found here.

For the handful of people worried about what happens to Miles, he will be featured not only in a future one-shot entitled “In re the Adoption of Miles Morales” (or as I call it
“IRAMM”), but he will continue to be part of the Motion Practice universe. This surprises no one, I’m sure.

Thank you all for reading, commenting, and participating in all the insanity that this story and alternate universe has to offer. It was about a year ago that I started writing the story of Clint Barton, intrepid lawyer, and embarked on this ridiculous journey. I am constantly saying that I could not have done it without knowing people loved these tales, and that’s true. I couldn’t have. Thanks especially to my betas, to the friends I’ve met on here and on tumblr, and to everyone who encourages my crazy.

There is so much more to this universe, you don’t even know. I hope you’ll stick around for the next adventure.

Works inspired by this one: Paddy Warbucks by KayQy

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!