And So We Spiral

by DaScribbla

Summary

Tony Stark knows he should be acting as a mentor, as the responsible adult, the referee. But if he can barely handle his own problems, how can he also juggle Peter Parker's, all the while pretending that he doesn't notice the way the kid looks at him?

He never was much good at following the rules.

Tags updated as the story continues.
Hey, this fic contains references to past childhood sexual assault. Knowing this, if you need to back out, please feel free to do so. There are chapter specific warnings for it as well.
Tony Stark was not good at waiting. He’d been sitting in his Ferrari for ten minutes in the apartment parking lot, and his leg was finally beginning to do the jerk-shake routine that signaled impatience segueing into full-fledged boredom. Passers-by occasionally rubber-necked to get a good look at the car; he paid them no mind. His business was with one of the tenants inside.

He looked down at his phone and the last text that he had gotten.

Be down in a few

He typed a message of his own -- the stark train is leaving the station and you aint on it -- and let his finger hover over the glowing SEND button, but movement up by the building’s entrance made him hold off on following through. The kid saw him and raised a hand in greeting before slinking to the car, looking a touch self-conscious.

Tony unlocked the doors, and a moment later, Peter slid into the passenger seat. He was wearing khakis, a belt, a button-down, and a look that suggested that he’d been coaching himself on his way downstairs.

“Did I underdress?” Tony asked, eyebrow cocked as he pulled in an absentminded way at the collar of his henley.

“I told May that you were interviewing me for a scholarship.” Peter grinned ruefully as Tony started the ignition. “Feel kind of bad about it, actually. She got so happy.”

“Well, look, it’s not like I’m not willing to give you one, you know. That stickum-stuff you make’s gotta be worth at least a grant. Good job on the alibi thing, by the way," he added. "If anybody asks, that’s the story we stick to.” He gave him a sidelong glance as they pulled out of the parking lot. “You look good, by the way.”

“Are you kidding? I’m lucky she didn’t make me wear a tie.”

Tony’s lips twitched in the mirror. “How you feel about AC/DC?”

Peter shrugged, and Tony switched on his iPod.

“So, how about this Spider-guy?” Tony asked conversationally fifteen minutes later. They were packed into the corner of the restaurant. The chatter from the other patrons was loud; Tony had a sneaking, well-honed feeling at least a quarter of them were paparazzi. “How d’you think he’s
“Don’t do that!” Peter hissed. He put down his sandwich without taking a bite of it. “I’m -- I heard that he’s, like, kind of in a lot of danger. People looking for him.”

Tony paused with his own sandwich halfway to his mouth. “How old are you?” Peter shifted in his seat, looking defensive, and mumbled something. “How’s that?”

“I said, I turn sixteen in December.”

He took a bite of his sandwich, chewed methodically, and swallowed. He put the sandwich down.

“How’s that?”

“Peter Parker, pardon my French here, but what the fuck?” The kid just stared at him. “Quit,” he said. “Finish high school, let your frontal lobe develop a little bit more before you go back out there.”

“But I don’t want to!” Peter’s lower lip jutted out for a moment. It was easy to see the fifteen-year-old. “I’m helping people. And, I don’t know, it’s kind of fun, doing this? And scary. And --” he waved his hands vaguely -- “I don’t want to stop. By the way,” he added, clearly trying to steer the conversation in a different direction, “why are we eating in a Subway?”

“Hm? Oh, I hate rich people food,” Tony said vaguely. “Seriously, though,” he continued. "You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. And trust me, if you keep this up, you’re going to wake up one day maybe ten years down the line and wish that you’d gone into -- I don’t know -- plumbing, flipping houses, I don’t know --” he paused. “I don’t know.”

Peter was balling up his paper napkin, twisting it back and forth, back and forth. White fluff drifted softly onto the table. But his eyes were on Tony and were far more perceptive than they had any right to be.

“That what happened to you?” he said at last. Tony took a bite of his sandwich and didn’t answer. “I mean, don’t you save lives?” Peter pressed on. He looked confused, like he was thinking hard, like nothing Tony said was matching up with his worldview.

Tony picked some of the lettuce off his sandwich. “Allegedly.”

A shadow fell over the table, and he looked into the freckled face of a twenty-five-year-old with a notepad and a valiant attempt at a mustache.

“Since when does Subway have waiters?” Tony asked.

“Oh, um, I’m not -- I was just wondering if you could sign this?” He handed over the notepad with a shaking hand. “It’s for my girlfriend. She’s over there -- she’s a really big fan --” He was stammering. Tony looked to the table that the newcomer had nodded at, where a petite Latina girl was seated. She was blushing hard, eyes fixed firmly on her phone.

“What’s her name?”

“Ida.”

He signed the notepad and handed it back. “Best wishes,” he said. “Oh, and pro-tip --” he lowered his voice -- “next time, take her to Panera.”

The guy murmured something unintelligible yet awestruck and backed away. Tony glanced over at Peter, who was eating his sandwich with a concentrated air that recalled Ida from the other table.
“Does that happen to you a lot?” Peter asked eventually.

“Um, yeah.”

“Wow.”

“Wow.” The kid was staring around the lobby of the mansion with undisguised awe. “And this is where you -- where you all --”

“Yup.”

Peter gave a low whistle. “Like -- what do you all have in here? I mean, I’ve read stuff, but I mean, everything online is pretty inconclusive and vague, and just -- goddamn, this is so cool!”

Tony grinned at the kid’s unbridled enthusiasm. “Wanna see the lab for starters?”

“Hells yes.”

Per request, he’d brought the suit. Tony stretched one limp leg between his hands, watching the light filter through the spandex.

“I swear I washed it last night,” Peter said. He was sitting on the counter by the sink, shirt untucked and the top few buttons loose.

“Sorry that it's not more protection,” he said. "I was pressed for time when I knocked it together." Peter waved a hand.

“Seriously, it's not a problem," he said. It's cool as it is. I mean, sure, kevlar'd be great, but I have to be able to move --”

“-- and go about your arachnid way,” Tony finished. "Right. Still. I'd like to take another look at it. At least so I can rest in the knowledge that, if for some reason you are getting shot at, you're not gonna get yourself killed."

"I have a healing factor," Peter said defensively.

"That doesn't mean bullets don't hurt like a bitch, Parker."

Peter gave him a good attempt at a tough look. “What, you think I couldn't take it?”

Tony smiled, more to himself, as he stretched the suit around. “Cap would’ve liked you,” he said. Jesus, part of the ankle was already fraying. He really needed repairs.

When Peter spoke again, he sounded more hesitant. “If you don’t mind me asking… what happened? Like, you guys had the world at your feet and then…”

Tony groaned and put down the suit on the lab table, leaning against it and crossed his arms. “Basically, too much ego and not enough brain,” he said. “We all screwed up on some level.” He didn’t feel like adding the part about Steve dropping everything for the man who’d murdered his parents. The kid didn’t need to know that. “Let that be a lesson to you,” he added, trying humor. “Group work is hard.”
“So…” Peter screwed up his face. “Who’s actually an Avenger now?”

“That is a great question, and when I find out the answer, you’ll be the first to know.” He poked at the thin fabric of the suit. “Totally unrelated, when you’re out chasing your bad guys, what do they usually carry?” Peter gave him that perplexed look, raised eyebrows and wide eyes, that was rapidly becoming familiar. “Do they use their fists, are they firing AK-47s in the air, what?”

“Hm? Oh, anything goes, I guess.”

Tony gave him a look, frowning a little at the blasé attitude the kid had used but said nothing. It was highly unlikely the kid would listen to any word of caution that he gave him. “Okay,” he said at last, “think you can hold off from saving the world for a week or so while I tinker around with this?”

Peter tilted his head to the side. “Define tinker.”

“Would you say no to a bullet-proof suit?”

“Seriously!?” He looked like he’d just been told that Christmas would fall on his birthday that year. “Like, you mean, bullet-proof? Holy crap. You can do that? What am I saying,” he continued, “of course you can do that, but like, do you know how yet? ‘Cause, like, I love science -- and I mean, I wouldn’t want you to think I was just leeching off you or something -- I’d love to help out --”

Tony waved a hand, and the kid hopped off the counter to join him. “Take a look, young padawan,” he said. He held up one limp leg of the suit. “This is at best glorified spandex.” Peter nodded attentively. “I’m thinking that there might be a way we can reinforce this with titanium or something like it. And still find a way to keep it lightweight so you can still do that swinging thing.” He shrugged. “All guess-work, and still kinda hand-wavy, but I’ll figure it out. Shame Rogers took all the vibranium when he ran off to go screw his boyfriend, or whatever he’s up to these days…” He’d added that last part more to himself, but the kid had clearly heard because his head shot up.

“Hold up -- did you just -- is Captain America gay!?” It wasn’t so much incredulousness on his face as much as sheer delight. Somewhat amused, Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Some shade therein, yeah.”

“You’re telling me that Captain America -- Captain America -- is queer!?”

Tony gave him an amused smile. “You good?”

Pulling up a bar stool, Peter sank onto it, eyes huge. “I just had no idea that -- well, like, I mean, you’ve been out for ages, but I didn’t know there were more queer Avengers!”

“Well,” Tony reminded him, “Avengers is kind of a subjective term these days.”

“Yeah, okay, but are there more?”

“Let’s just say that it’s not outside the realm of possibility,” Tony said. He grinned crookedly. “What is it?” The kid was starting to turn red.

“I dunno --” he ran a hand through his hair sheepishly -- “it’s just, like -- ever since I started doing this, I was like, oh, I could be an Avenger one day, too bad I’m going to be the odd guy out, but now, it’s just -- wow.” Before Tony could figure out how to respond to that, he added, “So were there ever, like, I dunno -- inter-Avenger relationships?”
Tony tilted his head to the side and squinted as he pondered how to address that one. “Where’d you get that idea?” he said at last. Peter shrugged.

“I don’t know. I mean, you know, people make jokes about you and Cap all the time.”

Clearing his throat, Tony rolled his shoulders back. “Yeah. I’m aware.”

The odd, teasing BuzzFeed article about their bromance or whatever the kids called it these days was one thing. Someone -- Tony suspected Clint -- had actually printed it off and stuck it on the fridge, complete with little hearts drawn in metallic gel pen. They’d all laughed about it. But the tabloid headline from just a week ago proclaiming LOVER’S SPAT in neon pink had been a little too much too soon. Had Pepper been there, she would have quietly gotten in touch with the rag in question and gotten them to alter their phrasing. As it was, he let it go.

He mentally sloughed off the storm clouds and snorted. “Trust me, they all look great on camera, but they’re sort of assholes when you get to know them. Like, take Black Widow. Great woman, great addition to the team and all that, but she had this habit of watching security footage for fun, and it got really Orwellian after a while, like, Big Brother Is Watching, And He’s Judging.”

“Oh.” Peter nodded slowly for a second, digesting. “It’s weird hearing about your faves like this,” he added. “I mean, Black Widow isn’t -- wasn’t -- my favorite -- I mean, she’s cool, but --”

“Dare I ask who was?”

“Hulk,” Peter said without missing a beat. “Radiation. I can relate.”

“I bet.” Yet another friend gone by the wayside.

They sat in silence for a while. Then Tony looked over at the digital clock on the wall. 2:55. He slapped the counter. “Well, Spiderling. Better take you home before your aunt starts calling the cops.”

Peter stood up and stretched. “Hey -- do you think you can take a less conspicuous car?” he asked. Tony gave him a look of mock affront.

“Got a problem with my ride, Parker?”

“No, it’s cool, it’s really cool,” he said quickly, “it’s just that I don’t want people to start wondering why Iron Man is driving me around everywhere. I just want to stay anonymous.”

Tony looked at him for a moment. “You’re kind of freaked out, aren’t you?” he said at last. The kid didn’t meet his eyes, instead, he played with the suit’s left ankle and chewed on his lip. At last, he gave him a jerky nod. With his face downcast like that, it was suddenly easier to notice the dark circles under the kid’s eyes and the scrape on his temple, just concealed by his hair. Something constricted his chest, and after a moment, Tony recognized the feeling to be guilt.

“We’ll take a taxi, how does that sound?” he said at last.

Peter nodded again. “Thanks.”

They were nearly out the door when the kid stopped short.

“What?”

“It’s just -- I feel weird. Leaving without it. Sort of -- exposed.”
Tony reached out to touch his shoulder, then thought better of it and crossed his arms, leaned against the door frame. “You don’t need a suit to make the world a better place, kid,” he said.

“No,” Peter replied, “but it does make it a lot easier.” He sighed and chewed on his lower lip some more. “If something happens when you could have stopped it…”

“Yeah, and thinking like that is going to drive you crazy. You can’t be everywhere at once, Peter.”

He didn’t reply to that, eyes fixed on the floor, and Tony recognized the look of someone wandering into an ugly memory, getting lost there. He touched his shoulder tentatively. He jumped a little and looked up at him. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Just -- um -- yeah, I’m fine.”

Tony watched him for a moment longer, brow furrowed. Then he nodded. “Come on.” He ruffled his hair, snorting as Peter ducked to avoid his hand, face going red again. “Let’s get you home.”

The taxi ride was spent in silence, mostly, Peter watching the buildings go by and Tony pretending to read texts he’d gotten days ago. Several from Rhodey, and one, of all people, from Pepper: *talk to me if you need to.* Yeah. Not happening. Not dragging her back into this mess.

They pulled up to the apartment, and Tony watched the kid insist on nearly cleaning out his pockets to tip the driver. As he was getting out the car, Tony leaned over.

“Hey, you.”

He turned back to him, eyes wide in expectation. “Mr. Stark?”

“How’re you sleeping?”

The kid frowned for a moment, brows furrowing in confusion, and then shrugged. “Fine?” he said at last, waiting a moment too long, and then headed across the parking lot towards the large double-doors of the apartment building. Tony leaned back against the taxi seat and sighed.

He knew a liar when he saw one.
Evasion

Chapter Summary

If you ever need to talk...

Chapter Notes

I'm ba-ack...

I think we need to cut the bs and agree hat you're not doing as great as you say

Peter blew out a sigh, lay back on his bed, and tried to figure out whether it would be in his interest

to make a joke about the typo, or if he should just answer the text properly. It was an internal
dilemma he was used to having, right up there with figuring out how many of his injuries on the job

he could let May know about (a couple black eyes were one thing, a potentially fractured rib was

something else. Wing it?). He decided to go for the throat.

Ur not doing so great urself

Don’t think i can’t tell

The reply came back within seconds. Was Tony Stark, renowned businessman and philanthropist,

really so bored that he had nothing better to do than sitting around and texting him, of all people (not

that he was complaining. He was definitely, definitely not complaining)?

Were not talking about me

That's a surprise

Hey now

Dont pivot

What’s going on

Peter thought hard and then put the phone aside. It was the latest iPhone and far more than he could

afford on his own. Stark had presented it to him without comment, and he’d accepted it without

question. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth and all that. And May had been overjoyed because it

had a built-in graphing calculator, so that was one less thing she had to buy come back-to-school

shopping.

Okay.

Peter had a reputation as being smart -- well, nerdy, but that was shorthand for smart, wasn’t it? He’d

spent most of his school life knowing the answer to nearly every question asked and rarely raising his

hand. But that was beside the point; he was smart, and he usually, usually did the right thing.
Therefore, he figured he was entitled to some mega-level stupidity at least once and a while.

Even so, this... This was beyond the bounds of what even he was generally capable of. This way, his better half whispered, lay only despair and frustration and a lot of sleepless nights -- well, that, at least, was nothing new.

He’d gone as far as to look up his relationship status on an incognito tab just to prove to himself that there was no way this could possibly happen. To his horror, he discovered that Tony Stark was presumed single again.

It was like the world was conspiring to screw him over.

Because, dammit, men you’ve worshiped for years do not turn up in your apartment uninvited for no reason (he told himself). And yeah, he did stupid things sometimes, but he himself wasn’t stupid. He didn’t think so.

It was never going to happen. He got that. He knew that.

Still, that didn’t mean he had to stop his imagination. Didn’t mean he could at least pretend once and a while. Sometimes, after he came back from what were ostensibly check-ins to make sure he hadn’t gotten himself killed but sometimes felt more like Stark needing someone to talk to, he thought he could smell him on his clothes.

This was really bad.

“Hey, Peter, I’m home!”

He made a move toward the cell phone again but then changed his mind and instead headed out of his room to the kitchen where May was putting her purse down on the island and pulling her hair out of its ponytail. She worked a temp job in some dingy office downtown and hated it; typically, she would expound at length on the horror stories of the day, and Peter would listen with genuine interest, but lately, his thoughts had been elsewhere. Mostly on various surfaces of the bunker and once against the upholstery of a certain Ferrari, if he was going to be brutally honest.

This was all shades of wrong. At best, he was getting his hopes up.

“Takeout tonight okay?” May asked as she dropped into one of the chairs by the island.

“Yeah,” he said vaguely, leaning against the counter. She gave him a look.

“You doing okay?”

“Yeah,” he said and looked down at the floor.

“You know,” May said, and Peter immediately steeled himself because she had that tone of voice again, “if there’s anything you ever want to talk about, you can talk to me. You know that, right?”

“Sure,” he said. “But I’m doing fine. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You sure about that?” She cocked an eyebrow. “Plummer called during my lunch break today. Apparently, your AP Bio grades are --”

“Trig,” Peter corrected.

“Trig, that’s right. Can never keep them straight. Yeah, he called to tell me that you’re quote hanging by your fingertips from a C-minus unquote. Want to tell me what that’s about?”
Peter shifted uncomfortably. The truth was that between flinging himself from building to building, trying to doctor his own injuries both physical and emotional, trying to sleep, and not over-evaluating his personal life, schoolwork had taken a back-burner position. But, for obvious reasons, he couldn’t disclose any of that.

“Just been a little distracted lately,” he said.

“And you’re sure you’re not getting beat up on the regs again?”

“Yeah, that -- that thing a couple weeks ago -- that was an outlier.”

She nodded like she had more to say but would let it pass for now. “You want to call the restaurant?”

“Sure!” Relieved that she was laying off, Peter twisted around to reach for the phone, but her voice made him pause.

“Peter, I would never make you talk if you don’t want to, but don’t you think that maybe you ought to?”

“What?”

“If there’s anything you need to talk about to me -- or maybe not to me,” May offered. “We can find someone in the area -- I just want to make sure that you don’t feel like you have to bottle things up or pretend that you’re doing better than you are.”

At first, Peter’s residual guilt-cum-paranoia started screaming that she knew about his double life and was trying to get him to admit it to her. Then he realized that she had something else in mind.

“Is this about Ben?”

She nodded, not meeting his eyes. “It’s been six months,” she said. “And I know things were rough there for a while. And I know that you’ve stopped sleeping again --”

“Look, it’s not like we can afford a therapist, so, no offense, but why are we having this conversation?”

“I just worry about you sometimes, Peter, you get all quiet and --”

“Hey, not to interrupt or anything, but can I order this?” He pointed to the phone. It was rude, and in other circumstances, she might have scolded him for it, but as it was, she let it drop.

Later that evening, in the middle of their second episode of *House, M.D.*, Thai food steaming on the coffee table, Peter quietly slipped out of the den and into his bedroom to check his phone. Three texts, one an alert about the test next week from his Bio class’s Remind system. The other two were from Stark.

*Peter*

*Evasion is not going to work here*

He sucked in a breath and sat down in the dark on his bed. The screen was overbright and, to his sensitive eyes, felt like a slap in the face. To his horror, he realized he was considering opening up. *Hey, yeah, you were right. I saw a bunch of stuff six months ago and haven’t been able to sleep since. I keep having nightmares about Germany. Oh and, point of info, I kind of wish you’d get over*
here and make out with me, but, um, I won’t hold you to that. That’s totally your call.

As if.

I’m ok

Why wouldn’t i be

Ffs

You’re a textbook insomniac case

You’ve clearly got some residual paranoia

And frankly it gives me anxiety just looking at you

Peter tried to find some clever response to that but came up blank.

I’m ok

Ohh yeah. Way to sell it, Parker.

Stark replied immediately.

Is2g

His screen flashed up anew: he was now calling him. He answered and tried to close the door to his room as quietly as possible.

“You can’t be doing this,” he hissed, not waiting for Stark to speak.

“Why, what are you doing?” The question sounded entirely unfacetious.

“Watching TV with May and eating dinner? I can’t be fielding calls from you all the time!”

“Peter, do you feel okay?”

“It’s House, and Hugh Laurie’s about to roast the vegans, so can we please make this quick?”

“Well, in that case…” He could hear the lopsided grin over the phone and couldn’t help grinning back at it. He slumped onto his bed, his face burning up. “Seriously, kid. You’re a terrible liar.”

“So what?” It was such a juvenile response. Peter wanted to throw his phone at the wall, or maybe himself.

“So I know what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder looks like, and you’ve got it in spades, Parker.”

“Why do you care?”

“Cause I’m right there with you and given that I’m supposed to the responsible adult here --”

“Bitch, please --”

“Look, I said I was supposed to be, I never said I was any good at it.”

“Truest thing you’ve said all evening.”
“Don’t you sass me, Parker. You’ve got a problem, and I just want you to know that... well... if you ever need to talk --”

“Don’t hesitate to come to you?” Peter finished dryly. He rolled his eyes. Twice in one day. He needed a better poker face.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“Peter?” That was May calling from the den. “Peter, get out here or I’m eating your food!”

“Look, I gotta go,” Peter said more quietly. “Text me from now on, okay? I really can’t do this all the time.”

“Okay,” Stark said impatiently, “but if something happens, do you promise you’re going to say something to someone?”

“Remind why this is so important to you?”

“Because I’ve been here for a lot of years, and I know what I’m doing, and you don’t.” There was a pause, and then Stark kept speaking, in a flood as though he’d been rehearsing it. “I know you think that you’re invincible or something, but you need to slow down and keep up with yourself. Take care of yourself. It’s gonna bite you in the ass one day.”

Not for the first time, Peter got the sense that Stark had a lot more going on under the hood, as it were, than typically met the eye. He nodded, eyes closed until he remembered that Stark couldn’t see him. “Okay.”

“Peter, you’re missing the episode!”

He put his hand over the phone. “Coming!” Back to Stark. “I gotta go. But I’m doing fine, I promise.”

There was a crackle of static, as though Stark had sighed in exasperation. “Okay,” was all he said, though. “Okay, g’night.”

“Night.” The call ended, and Peter tossed his phone back onto the bed. He felt dizzy like he had stood up too quickly. It had been just friendly advice, the sort that a teacher might give a pupil, but to Peter, it had felt as heady as good perfume or tongue-kissing.

He left the bedroom in a thoughtful mood.

Later that night, as he lay beneath the covers with Mango shining brilliant white on his phone screen in the dark (he was trying to teach himself German; if he was going to have insomnia, he was at least going to make something out of it), he remembered what Stark had said about him being a terrible liar and wondered if he knew. He hoped not.

“Wie geht’s?” the speaker bot on the website said brightly.

He’d been told for most of his life that he was really easy to read; ever since he’d started doing his side-job, as he liked to think of it, he hoped that his poker face had improved. Still, vigilante work was one thing, and hiding your whopping great crush was quite another. He had no real reason to think that he’d improved at either.
“Mir geht’s gut!”

Why couldn’t he have a normal crush experience like everyone else in his classes? The people you idolize aren’t supposed to actually show up as a fixture in your life! It was probably in violation of some law of the universe somewhere.

His eyelids were getting heavy. His head dropped and then jerked upwards again as a fist swung out towards his cheek, and the Mango bot said *mir geht’s nicht gut* in a comically morose tone. He barely heard it, too busy trying to get his heart rate back under control.

*You’re in your room in Queens, you are not about to die. It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s fine.*

When he looked down at his phone, it was to find a new text from Stark.

*Talk to me if you’re up*

He sighed and tapped out a quick reply.

*Hi*

*Busted*

>You didn’t bust anything i could have ignored you

*As if you would,* Stark replied.

Peter sucked in a breath, but before he could really panic properly, Stark had added -

*If you need to talk…*

Swallowing hard, Peter thought and then sent out a quick series of messages.

*Fine*

*I dont like to sleep bc i get nightmares

*Ive only gotten 5 hours in the last week

*I know i shouldnt go back out there but i dont want 2 stop bc it feels like i have control

*Does that happen to u too

There was a long, long period of radio silence. Peter sucked in another breath and started to type out an apology, but another message finally sailed in, and Stark had beat him to it.

*I’m sorry. Shouldn’t have dragged you into our bs

*It’s ok!!!! Peter replied immediately. It’s not an issue!!!!

*Yeah no one using that many exclamation points is being remotely sincere

*You need help

*You’re the one staying up to midnight
Yeah. Never said I was ok either

Let me know when you get out of school Monday

I need to talk to you about this real time

Peter didn’t bother to question it.

3 PM. Where will you be

Around

White noise is good for insomnia btw

Turn it up loud so you can't think and just breathe

Keep a light on if it helps

And if it doesn’t happen it doesn’t happen, don’t try and force it

You still there?

Still here

Thanks

They were decent suggestions, but Peter didn’t sleep at all. Instead, he scrolled back through the logs of their conversation, reading and reading until his brain finally gave in and launched him into a light and uneasy doze.
Chapter Summary

It was terrible when your sentimental feelings and your daddy issues intersected.

Chapter Notes

Enter Rhodey!

The kid really did look tired. Tony had picked him up several blocks from his high school; now, seated in the backseat of the taxi they’d hailed, it was clearly all he could do to keep his eyes open.

“What’d you want to see me about?” he asked.

“You’re not sleeping,” Tony said. “You’ve got a lot to learn. The swinging around on buildings —” he stopped short, remembering the driver — “All that stuff, it’s fun, but trust me, it’ll come back to haunt you.”

“I swear, I’ve heard you give, like, eight different versions of that same sentence.”

“Don’t mock what I say, Parker.” To the driver, he added, “Stop here.”

Now they were seated on a bench on the sidewalk, Starbucks in hand. At first, the kid had gone automatically for the cheapest drink on the menu, but then Tony had talked him into ordering something more expensive, insisting that he’d cover it. They both took multiple espresso shots in their coffee.

“You don’t look so good,” Tony said. Peter ducked his head, rubbed the back of his neck, his half-full coffee cup in his other hand, and didn’t respond. “I can see the circles under your eyes, kid,” he continued. “You can’t fool me.”

“How’s the suit coming?” he asked abruptly. Tony gave him a look, which Peter returned with the kind of insolence that was only ever seen in people under twenty-five.

“Fine,” he said at last, relenting. “I may or may not have developed a brand-new fabric for you, although I leave the naming to your discretion. I don’t know what you’d call a titanium-kevlar-spandex hybrid.” Peter grinned crookedly and took a sip of his coffee, looking down at the sidewalk. Cars roared past on the street. “Just promise me one thing,” Tony added. “Promise me that when you wear it, you’ll find a way to blast that Sia song around the city?” Now the kid was laughing but still not meeting his eyes.

“Is it done?” he asked.

“As done as it’ll ever be.” In truth, he would miss working on it; it had been good to have a project
to keep his brain and his hands busy. Kept him from thinking about the stuff that Pepper would say was dragging him back into the pits. You know. If she were there. “We can swing by and pick it up if you like.”

“Sure.” Peter stifled a yawn. “Sorry.”

“You’re not the one who has to apologize, kid. I’m sorry.”

“I told you. This was happening way before you ever showed up. And anyway —” he shrugged — “I said yeah, so it’s on me as much as you.”

“You’re fifteen. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“It’s okay, okay?” He shook his head. “I don’t even think of it as a problem, honestly. It’s just kind of how I work, you know?”

“The human body is not supposed to work like that,” Tony told him. “And frankly, if you’re getting less than, oh, what was it, five hours of sleep per week, you really shouldn’t be swinging around buildings.”

Peter groaned and drank more of his coffee. “You sound like May,” he said. “She’s always trying to get me open up about stuff.”

“Good on her.”

“No, you don’t get it,” he said. “We can’t all get up on a podium and just announce our double lives to the world, unlike some people I could mention.”

“But you said the problems started before Germany.”

“Yeah, I’ve doing this for a while. You know that.”

Tony tilted his head to the side. “And before that — what? Science tests, math homework, debate club, what? Don’t tell me that you just hopped out of bed one day and decided to do this because nobody does that.”

Peter dropped his gaze to the sidewalk. He’d crossed his ankles together, and his fingers drummed a tattoo on the paper coffee cup. He didn’t speak.

“Okay, so don’t tell me,” Tony said. “But trust me on this, Peter.” He looked up at the sound of his name but didn’t quite make eye contact. “You don’t want to go it alone. Not with something like this. I know that you can’t go to your aunt, but I’d like to think that if you trusted me enough to let me kidnap you to Europe, you’d at least trust me enough to talk to me. You don’t want to go it alone,” he repeated.

Peter seemed to be thinking. “Who do you talk to?” he said at last. “You sound like you have the same problems.”

“Oh, I have a support system. Granted, most of them are MIA at the moment, but you know. Nobody’s perfect.”

His lips twitched. “I’ll think about it,” he said. “Can we go pick up the suit? I want to be back home before six.”
Somewhat endearingly, he seemed just as taken with the lab the second time around. As Tony dug around the supply closet from where he’d hung the suit on a spare hanger, he watched in his periphery as Peter ran his hand along the edge of the stainless steel counter as if marveling at the sensation.

“And voilà.”

He tossed the suit to him and watched Peter scramble to catch it. “It’s really light,” he exclaimed, stretching one of the sleeves experimentally.

“Yup. It’s not entirely vibration-proof, but if somebody hits you or if you fall, you should only get a light bruising, hopefully.”

“Cool!”

Tony watched him stretch the fabric back and forth, realized he was doing it, and then busied himself with straightening up the hangers in the closet again. “By the way,” he said over his shoulder, “have you considered applying for my scholarship?”

“What? Oh, well, that’s just for seniors, right?” Peter sat back on the counter, the suit in his lap.

Tony shut the closet door and leaned against it. “Nah, there’s a division for every high school grade level. You fill out the FASFA, and if you meet the requirements, you’ll get an email about it.”

Peter nodded, looking as if he didn’t quite know how to keep the conversation moving. Silence fell. His foot jerked involuntarily, and it seemed to snap the kid back to life. He shivered and stifled another yawn.

From the door, his arms crossed, Tony tilted his head to the side. “How’re you doing? Really?”

Peter started to reply. “It’s really not that —”

“— not that bad? Don’t bullshit me.”

The kid didn’t meet his eyes, instead staring somewhere in the region of his knees as he picked at a flap of dry skin on his lower lip.

“I didn’t sleep last night,” he said at last, almost guiltily. “Been drifting in and out all day. This is the most awake I’ve been since, like, lunch.”

Tony frowned. If things were still how they had been before, he wouldn’t have hesitated to have gotten Sam to go talk to him, give him some advice. At any rate, he’d be much more qualified than Tony, who only had personal experience to go on, not an actual degree. But Sam was off God-knew-where, along with Steve and the rest of them, and here he was, vastly out of his depth.

“How badly hurt do you get?” he asked. “When you’re out and about?”

Peter shrugged. “Just bruises, mostly. Had a bad fall about a week ago. Thought I cracked a rib, but according to MayoClinic, it’s just a really bad bruise. I was able to patch up before May came home, so…” Suddenly, Tony got a vivid impression of what it was like to be a homemade superhero: the mental image came unbidden of Peter in his tiny, cramped apartment bathroom, rummaging through the medicine cabinet with shaking hands and making do with Neosporin and Band-aids.

Lost in his thoughts, as he often was lately, Tony was only roused by a strange sort of sigh coming from the direction of the counter. He looked up just in time to see Peter pitch forward like a rag doll.
He lunged and caught him before he could hit the floor, and Peter’s eyes flew open groggily. Immediately, he scrambled back onto the counter out of Tony’s arms.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, “I just dropped out for a second… Hey,” he added, “do you think that I crash somewhere? Just for a little while?”

Tony let him have the sofa in the TV room several doors down. Within seconds, Peter was asleep, lying on his stomach like a child much younger than fifteen. After a moment of watching him to see if he would jerk awake — it was a restless sleep he was clearly having, his eyes moving behind his eyelids, brow furrowed — Tony grabbed a blanket and gingerly laid it over him.

The kid started, eyes opening.

“Only me,” Tony said.

He nodded blearily and settled back down. Tony squeezed his shoulder and headed away to get something to drink.

Rhodey appeared in the kitchen doorway while Tony was making coffee. He was getting the hang of his prosthesis pretty well; these days, he barely limped. “About the kid sacked out on our sofa,” he began, pointing a thumb over his shoulder. “What…?”

“That’s Spider-man,” Tony said matter-of-factly. “He’s camping out here for an hour or so.”

Rhodey had known Tony long enough that he didn’t question it, just leaned against the door frame and said, “Heard from Pepper lately?”

“No a word.” Tony poured himself a large cup of coffee and took a long sip. “Why, have you?” Rhodey shook his head. “Look,” Tony continued, “I know why you keep asking, and I appreciate it, but I don’t think there’s much point in it anymore. She’s not going to come back.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, too.” Tony didn’t look at him, instead staring into the depths of his mug. The coffee reflected his eyes back at him, distorted and strange. He took another sip. “I don’t suppose you’ve gotten word from Nat or any of the others?”

Rhodey shook his head. “Looks like it’s just going to be us for a while.”

“Yeah.”

Rhodey hesitated before he spoke again. “Listen,” he said, “Tony, it’s okay to show that you’re upset, you know that, right? You have more than enough cause —”

Okay, you know what? This conversation is done.” Tony headed for the door with his drink, but his friend caught his shoulder.

“I’m not trying to attack you,” he said, “or psychoanalyze you, or anything. But come on: you’re clearly not doing well. And it’s not exactly a secret why. Steve —”

“— is no longer a resident here, so I don’t know why we’re wasting our breath on him,” Tony finished firmly. “What happened with us is between us. I don’t have to talk about it to anybody.” He
headed out into the corridor.

“Yeah,” Rhodey called after him, “but you don’t have to internalize it either!”

Tony ignored him and kept walking. He paused to look in on Peter, who seemed to have gone out like a light. He barely stirred beneath the blanket. Tony headed upstairs, not really sure of where he was headed. As if his own mind were trying to fuck him over, he found himself staring at the closed door of Steve’s room — at least, the one he used when he stayed there. After a moment, Tony resigned himself, turned the knob, and stepped softly inside.

It still smelled like him. Tony supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised by that, given that it had only been a matter of weeks since he’d last inhabited it, but it was still jarring. It felt as though he’d only just left the room, that he’d be back in a matter of minutes.

Tony stared around the sparse furniture: bed, nightstand, dresser, armchair. Floor lamp by the armchair. Low bookshelves. A laptop that he hadn’t taken with him. It looked like a room that was easy to leave; Tony found himself wondering how long he had been planning to do just that. Probably ever since Barnes appeared for the first time in decades. That was almost certainly it, actually, given that Tony had spent a few nights in there across the months, and he remembered there being more stuff in it then. He must have started clearing out the moment he found out that Barnes was still alive. And thus, Tony went by the wayside. No matter that Barnes killed his parents. No matter anything.

He couldn’t stay there.

Outside the room, Tony breathed in and out deeply. Down the hall was the room they’d set up for Wanda. The little shrine she’d built for her brother was still there, of course. Tony would have found a way to get the photographs to her, but there had been no return address on the envelope of the note that Steve had sent him. That quick, business-like note. Because Steve Rogers was a soldier, one from another time, and that meant no emotional expression of any sort; barracks in the Forties weren’t kind places. But… that wasn’t quite true, was it? He remembered the great kerfuffle of 2001 when they’d found the infamous Rogers-Barnes letters. Countless historians rising up to insist that, no, those words don’t mean what you think they mean when everyone knew damn well that they did. So maybe it was more that Tony just didn’t count enough.

He tried. He really did. Trying usually ended up being shorthand for fucking up, but the principle remained. And every time he did something else wrong, there would Steve be, giving him that look of sad-faced disappointment that was uncomfortably reminiscent of his father. Except his father had been mostly exasperated by the end. It was terrible when your sentimental feelings and your daddy issues intersected.

Usually, Tony survived by pushing away his uglier feelings and pretending that whatever hurt didn’t. But today, it seemed that sheer denial wasn’t working hard enough, and Tony could feel his depression, piss-yellow and oppressive, settling over him once again. Even with all his own problems, he envied the kid sleeping downstairs. He had been more or less a willing participant in all the fuckery of before, but he wasn’t complicit in the fall-out. Not like Tony.

Peter was awake when Tony came back downstairs, seated on the arm of the couch and talking animatedly to Rhodey.

“… really sorry about your leg,” he was saying.
Rhodey waved a hand. “I can still get up in the air. Speaking of which, those were some crazy moves you were pulling out there.”

“Yeah,” Tony said from the doorway. “Mad skills.”

Peter jumped and went red, sliding off the armchair to land on his feet. “Oh — hi.”

“I can call a taxi if you need to get home,” Tony said.

“Probably a good idea,” Peter said. “I got homework.” Tony remembered the flight to Germany, which had mostly been spent watching Peter frown at three different textbooks simultaneously, scribbling things down on a piece of scratch paper, bearing down on the cover of a fourth textbook that sat in his lap.

He was conscious of Rhodey’s eyes on him as he left to dial the number in the corridor. The feeling left him self-conscious and prickly, as though he’d been caught with one hand in the proverbial cookie jar. As a result, he was a little short with the woman on the line. He looked up and realized that Rhodey had departed and Peter was standing in the doorway, watching him with a strange expression.

“Hm?” He cocked an eyebrow.

“You seem kind of on edge,” Peter said. His hair was tousled from sleep; his backpack hung from one shoulder.

“You’re going to mess your back up if you keep wearing your bag like that,” Tony said.

Peter bit his lip, frowning, and didn’t respond to the comment. “Can I ask you a question?”

Tony waved a hand — vas-y — and Peter cleared his throat.

“Why’d you bring me over here?”

He asked it so innocently, with such an air of bewilderment, that for a moment, Tony couldn’t remember either. Ostensibly, it had been to give him advice about the sleeping problem… but what exactly had they done about it, except let Peter take a nap on his couch?

He cleared his throat and deflected with humor.

“You complaining?” he said.

“Nononono!” Peter said hastily. “I just… nevermind.”

“Yesre?”

“Yeah. Nevermind.” He cleared his throat and rolled his shoulders. “Should go,” he muttered and headed down the corridor before Tony could respond, leaving him to wonder just what he had done wrong.

Later that night, while The West Wing played on the TV and they sat eating their dinner, Rhodey glanced over at Tony. His prosthesis stretched out onto the coffee table.

“You ought to be careful with this whole Spider-Man thing,” he said.
Tony frowned. “How so?”

“The kid *clearly* worships you,” Rhodey began, “and frankly, I’m not so sure that now is the best time for you to be picking up a new project.”

“What do you mean, *new project*.”

“I’m just saying that this better not be like the suits.”

Tony sighed and dragged his hands over his face. “You’re not being fair.”

“No, I’m being logical. You *always* do this when you’re upset, Tony. And I’d rather you do it to me or at least someone else who isn’t going to get nearly as hurt by it.”

“Change the subject now.”

“Tony —” Rhodey began ominously.

But he’d already stood, gathered up his dishes, and left the room.

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You okay?

Sure!

*Pardon me if I take that with a lb of salt, Tony typed. I’ve been thinking*

Ok…

*I don’t want you flying around in the shape you’re in right now*

It’s fine

*So if you want to go out, shoot me a text and I’ll go out with you how does that sound*

I’m ok!!!

*No you’re not. You need supervision*

You don’t have to do that

Peter

*I’m serious*

*If you want to stay anonymous, the last thing you want to do is smash into a *building*#

It was a long time before Tony got a text back — nearly midnight. He tried not to think about the kid lying awake hour as the hours crawled by.

Ok, it read. *I have a bunch of tests this week so…*
Maybe next week?

Ok

It’s not that I don’t trust you

You’re just taking a huge risk

Thanks

You know you’ve really been helping me a lot

And I really appreciate it

Thanks

Tony smiled crookedly at the texts that came in rapid succession and told himself that this was the right thing to do.

Who else was there to help the kid out, anyway?
I wasn't ready

Chapter Summary

On the other hand, he was a very poor kid with a very wealthy crush, and he was terrified of jeopardizing the strange sort of partnership they’d created.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait. But I'm back! You’ll have to forgive the tea I spill in this chapter over the treatment of mental illness in the public school system :P

It was an interesting experience, getting punched forty-five minutes after landing in a foreign country. Peter had often dreamed of traveling — one day, he’d have the money, one day, one day — but his initial international venture had not gone as he’d imagined it would.

He had gotten punched before, a few times by bigger guys in middle school and a few more times on the clock. But he’d never gotten punched like this. A long history of getting picked on didn’t count because if you stayed down and stayed small and limp, you got out okay. Here, he had to fight. And he wanted to.

It was just a little strange to get punched by people you’ve looked up to all your life.

Fighting hurt. The action movies didn’t show that part.

For one thing, Cap been wearing gloves, which hadn’t looked so bad at first, but up close seemed to have the same crushing force as a pair of brass knuckles — and Peter knew what he was talking about. His face throbbed; his ears ached like they had an infection.

More things: crushing weight up above — just because he had enhanced strength didn’t mean holding up a car didn’t hurt — burning pain in his shoulders and calves and red mist in his vision.

Trying to get up, the blood draining from his face, stumbling back onto the asphalt. His legs were gelatin. And he couldn’t seem to get his breath back, like he’d just run a mile with asthma, that same shallow, lightheaded, hollow-chested panic —

Peter’s eyes snapped open. Blankly, he stared at the jumble of papers and textbooks on the table in front of him — he’d stayed after school to study, somewhere in his head, he dimly understood that — but the text was just a mess of black squiggles, blurry and about as comprehensible to him as Sanskrit.

His heart thudded in his ribcage, and he realized he was having to think about breathing. In and out, in and out, in and out — laboriously, as though his body had amnesia and couldn’t remember how to do it properly.
Someone spoke behind him. Startled, he yelped and swiveled around to see the librarian, Ms. Hunter, coming toward the table he’d claimed in the silent study section of the media center. Her brow was furrowed in concern. Her lips moved.

*Peter? You look white as a sheet.*

Then someone deep in his mind punched him again, and Peter seemed to feel it in his chest instead of his face, because he was instantly on the ground beside the table and chair, clutching at his sternum and praying he wasn’t dying as around him, other students stood up and craned their necks to get a look at him, and Ms. Hunter lunged forward —

*Peter. Breathe. Breathe. In… two, three, four… and out, two, three, four.*

*Peter. You are o-kay. Just calm down.*

*Peter, do you want me to call your parents?*

*Don’t have parents,* Peter mumbled shakily, and that was how he knew he was through the worst of it.

Against all probability, even the school nurse with her significant lack of medical expertise was able to recognize a panic attack when she saw one. She put his head between his knees and held his hands as he shuddered, cried, and privately hoped he wasn’t going to find videos of him freaking out on Instagram when he got home.

When he’d calmed sufficiently and his vision had stopped graying out, the nurse gave him a plastic cup of water so cold it made his teeth throb and then escorted him down to the guidance office.

Dr. Nicks was quite gentle where she sat behind her desk, nodding encouragingly. Peter avoided her eye, fixing his attention on the poster on the wall behind her desk of a kitten swinging from a tree branch: *hang in there!* He hadn’t thought those prints were actually real. Weren’t they just a joke, or something? Maybe it was ironic.

“Any problems at home?” she prompted. Peter shook his head and said nothing. He felt like he’d been arrested. *You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law… “You live with your aunt, right?”* He nodded. “And your uncle passed some time ago, is it that right?” He nodded again, not looking at her. “Peter,” she said, “if you don’t talk to me, we can’t figure out what’s wrong.”

*Exactly,* he thought. Out loud, he said, *“There’s nothing wrong.”*

Frowning, Dr. Nicks leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner. *“What you say stays in this room, okay, Peter? Not even your aunt has to know about it if you don’t want her to.”*

But Peter just shook his head. *“I’m fine.”* His heart was beginning to thud ominously again. Gritting his teeth, he willed it down and rubbed at his sternum ruefully.
“If you don’t mind my saying, your grades tell a different story.” He sighed and looked down at his dirty tennis shoes, kicked the chair leg. “You look tired, too.”

“I’m okay, Dr. Nicks,” he said. He looked up at her, testing her reaction, to find her giving him a long, sad sort of look. Behind her, the kitten on the poster gave him a saccharine smile, full of teeth.

“If you ever need to talk,” she said, “my door is always open.”

“Can I go now?” asked Peter.

“If that’s what you want,” said Dr. Nicks. “Oh, and before I forget —” she was rummaging through one of her desk drawers — “take this, would you?”

She handed him a thin, glossy brochure creatively entitled PANIC ATTACK! that showed on the cover a guy in a neutral school uniform who bore a passing resemblance to Andrew Garfield and looked about as old. He was seated at a desk, raking his fingers through his hair in a pantomime of stress, features contorted in a grimace.

Believing in basic courtesy, Peter waited until he was crossing the school commons to drop the brochure in the trash.

The attack had really taken it out of him. He walked aimlessly for several blocks, listening to Rihanna on his iPod and thinking. At times like this, he usually would get the suit and swing around for a little while until the adrenaline cheated him into thinking he felt better. But he’d told Stark he wouldn’t do it unless he was under supervision.

He was conflicted. One the one hand, he wanted to go out, and he resented these attempts to rein him in, as though he couldn’t handle things. Hadn’t he been doing fine for months now?

On the other hand, he was a very poor kid with a very wealthy crush, and he was terrified of jeopardizing the strange sort of partnership they’d created. It would be better to listen to him and do nothing.

It would be better still to not to get his hopes up.

He’d applied for the scholarship, and also for the grant. It never hurt to start early, had been his rationale to May, who’d been impressed with his initiative. Oh, if she only knew.

He felt guilty for sneaking around, but it wasn’t as though he could tell her what was going on with any of it.

“You’re a fucking loser,” he muttered to himself beneath the music.

It was May’s day off, so when he got home, he found her ironing laundry in the living room while The Santa Clarita Diet played on the television.

“Hey, you. You’re home late,” she said. Peter dropped his backpack in an armchair with a grunt.

“Wanted to study for midterms,” Peter said casually.

A disembodied arm flew across the television screen. Peter crossed to the hangers of ironed clothes and gathered them up, putting his back to the television. “Lemme get these.”
“Thanks, Peter.” May sounded gratified and a little taken aback but seemed too busy to question it. “You know,” she called as he headed out of the room for her bedroom, “you’ve really been on a roll lately. You’ve been so motivated and, I gotta say, I’m really proud of you.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess.” Now in her room, he took his time in hanging up the clothes. He could feel his aunt steering the conversation in the direction of places he didn’t want to go.

“There’s some more laundry out here you can hang up,” she called. Sighing and giving up his efforts at evasion for a lost cause, he went back to the living room. May had paused the show — with Drew Barrymore looking quite blasé about the gore all over her face — and had put down the iron.

Peter read the storm signals and quickly made for the laundry. “Lemme just hang this up —”

“Peter, did anything happen at school today that you’d like to tell me about?” May asked.

For a moment, he did consider opening up to her, at least about the panic attack. Then he thought about the inevitable fallout, the forking out of money they didn’t have for a therapist he’d never be able to tell anything to, and thought better of it.

“Nope. Not really,” he said, deciding to be casual about it. “History was good today. Talked about the French Revolution.”

“And you’re sure the only thing of note that happened this afternoon was Marie Antoinette losing her head?”

He feigned confusion. “Yeah? Yeah, I guess.” As he reached for the laundry, he noticed the house phone lying on the coffee table beside the unironed pile of shirts, away from its charger. Someone had called her recently.

Oh. Of course.

So much for not even your aunt has to know about it.

Sure, he hadn’t specified, but still. He should have known.

May was looking at him. “Peter, if something were going on, I’d like to think that you could confide in me.” Right on cue, his heart, still fluttering from earlier, thud-thud-thudded in his chest.

“Clearly I don’t need to,” he said pointedly.

May groaned and took off her glasses, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Maybe, but I’d rather hear about this stuff from you —”

But he was already heading to his room.

To his relief, Stark picked up on the first ring.

“Whatsoever happened to no calling?”

“Yeah, I know. I just felt —” He broke off and bit his lip. Stark’s voice in his ear made it hard to think.

“Trapped?” Stark suggested. All the sarcasm had left his voice, leaving only concern and, perhaps, a bit of empathy.
“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, that’s actually a really good word for it.”

“What’s going on?”

Sinking down on his bed, Peter explained about the panic attack and everything that had come after. “I feel like I’m in a fishbowl,” he said. “And I’m running on fumes.” His stomach was tying itself in knots again, although whether that was with the effort of recall or just the stress of listening to Stark’s voice and all the while knowing, he couldn’t say.

“You better not be thinking of going out right now,” said Stark.

Peter shook his head and then remembered he was speaking on the phone. “I thought about it, but no.”

“Want me to come get you? Get you out of there?”

“Yes,” said Peter before common sense could get in the way. “Yes, please.”

“Where’re you headed?” May appeared in the doorway of the living room as he made for the apartment door, navy blue jacket slung over one shoulder.

“There’s a group project I have to work on. I’ll be back for dinner.” He was ashamed of how easily lying came to him these days.

“Peter.” She caught up to him and put her hand on his shoulder. She’d painted her fingernails earlier, and there was already a little dent in the deep purple varnish on her ring finger. “I’m sorry about earlier,” she said. “Your counselor called and I got worried about you. I didn’t know you’d get so upset about it.”

He sighed. “She said she wasn’t going to do that.”

“I’m sorry.” He let her pull him against her chest and held him there for a few second, the way she would when he still celebrated birthdays with single digits. Then he was twisting out of her arms.

“I really have to go.”

May gave him a lifted eyebrow and a knowing smile. “Let me guess: does this project happen to involve a certain Miss Liz Allan?”

“Um — sure, yeah —”

He bolted before she could press or tease him further.

Stark had parked two blocks away and, characteristically, was immediately visible. When Peter reached his car, he tapped on the window, and, starting, Stark unlocked the door to let him.

The upholstery was leather, of course. Peter sank into the passenger seat, feeling self-conscious. Stark was wearing a suit, like he’d come straight from a meeting. Beside him, in his BB-8 T-shirt, Peter felt maddeningly infantile. Why can’t I get on his level? he wondered. The inside of the car smelled like coffee and the sort of aftershave that Peter would only be able to afford in his dreams.

“How’re you doing?” asked Stark, blissfully unaware of the struggling raging in Peter’s head.
“Not so good.” It felt like the most honest thing he’d said all afternoon.

“Yeah. No offense, but you don’t look so good either.”

“Yeah?”

“Like a vegetarian coming out of a hot dog factory.”

“Oh.”

Peter’s mind was divided into two: rational and irrational. The rational part was what made sure he turned in his homework come hell or high water; the irrational part was what made Peter decide that swinging around buildings in a onesie was the behavior of a well-adjusted individual. It was also the part of his brain that, currently, was whispering for him to throw caution to the winds, seize Stark by his pearl gray lapels, climb in his lap, and do terrible things.

Instead, he curled his hands into fists, did not look at him, and said:

“Do you think I’m ever going to be able to tell people?”

Stark was watching him; he could see it in their dim reflections in the windshield.

“Would you like to?”

“I — I don’t know.”

“Know the feeling,” said Stark. “You hear about all this stuff that you did, and the world keeps on turning because nobody knows it’s you. And you don’t know if you want the recognition or to just keep festering in anonymity.”

“And there’s no take-backs.”

“Nope. Haven’t stopped being Iron Man since that damn press conference.”

“Do you wish you hadn’t done it?” Peter looked at him when Stark didn’t immediately reply and found him staring at the steering wheel, a furrow in his brow. “Mr. Stark?”

He looked up, and Peter looked away. “Lately?” Stark said. “I’d prefer to be the old me.’

Peter coughed, unsure what to say.

“I like saving people,” he said at last. “I like doing good stuff, being a hero, all that. But all the other stuff — the threats, the fights, all the dreams and the flashbacks and the stuff that comes after —” he interrupted himself. “I saw my uncle get shot six months ago.” In his periphery, Stark sat up straighter. “Burglar. One minute he was on his feet, next he was on the floor with brains all over the fridge…” He trailed off. “It fu — screwed me up for a while.” He cleared his throat, voice growing hoarse as his nose burned. “And then I decided I wanted to stop people from seeing what I saw.

“But I guess I just wasn’t ready. For everything that comes after.”

Then, to his horror, he burst into tears.

Stark reached across the transmission and fished a packet of Kleenex out of the glove compartment. Peter took it but didn’t use it, just clenched it in his fist. Slowly, as though he were afraid of what Peter would do, Stark laid a hand on his back.
Through the haze of mortification and memory, Peter thought: *he’s touching me!* Holy shit, he’s actually —
rubbing circles into his back.

“Just let it out. It’s okay.”

“‘m sorry —”

“Hey, don’t give me that.”

“I just —”

“You’re just having a perfectly natural response to several highly traumatic events,” Stark finished. “It’s not something you need to apologize for, Parker.”

“I can’t even go into the kitchen without seeing it all over again — May wants to move but we just don’t have the money —”

“How much?”

Peter looked up at him, several tears dripping off his jaw. He wasn’t sure he’d heard him correctly. “What?”

“I asked, how much? How much do you think it would cost to get another apartment and move in?”

“No,” said Peter, before he could think. “No, no, no, absolutely not.”

“Peter —”

“If you start randomly forking out cash to us, people are going to start wondering who I am and why you’re doing it — *May* is going to start wondering why — and that’s just not something I’m equipped to deal with at the moment!”

“Ohkay,” Stark held his hands up in surrender, and Peter realized that he’d still had his hand on his back up until then. “Okay, then we won’t do that.”

There was silence. Above them, the street light switched on as the sky darkened. Inside the car, it was even darker, and Peter found he liked the anonymity it afforded.

“When’s your aunt expecting you back?”

“I told her I’m working on a group project. Probably not for an hour, at least.” He pulled his knees to his chest, realized he had his shoes on the upholstery, and then apologized. Stark just waved a hand, but Peter still put his feet back down on the floor.

More silence. His irrational thoughts made more unhelpful suggestions, which he ignored or, more accurately, filed away for future examination.

“You won’t let me spend money on you,” Stark said. “Is there anything I can do?”

The words left his mouth before he really thought about them. “I want to be an Avenger.”

By now, it was too dark to tell, but somehow he was aware of Stark raising his eyebrows.

“An Avenger?”
“You need more, right?”

“Sure, but…”

“What do I do? Are there tests, trial by fire, that kind of thing?”

Stark shifted around to face him entirely. “Now, I’m not saying no,” he said, “but I gotta ask: why?”

When he spoke, he chose his words carefully. “Because I think I need to belong to something. And I know that I need some support. And because I think you need that, too.”

“Not for you to tell me what I need, Parker.” He switched on the light on the car ceiling, and Peter squinted in the yellow brilliance. It was jarring to see anew just how close they were. As if also aware of it, Stark shifted back so he was more or less leaning against the door. “So you want to be an Avenger.”

Peter fumbled for a tissue in the Kleenex package, blew his nose, and nodded. “Well,” Stark continued, “frankly, I’d consider YouTube your resumé and Germany the job interview, so as far as I’m concerned, you’re in.”

He stared. “Just like that?”

“Sure. Move in when you turn eighteen, if you want. Other than that, I don’t know what to tell you. You’d have to sign the Accords, but aside from that…”

“This doesn’t feel right,” Peter said. “Shouldn’t there be some kind of ceremony involved?”

“Are you criticizing my system, Parker?”

“No! I just…” He shrugged. “It’s just not what I expected.”

Stark nodded. “We get that a lot. Oh, and feel free to attend Saturday movie nights. It’s Pixar marathons next time, so bring tissues.”

“I don’t believe this,” said Peter. “Is this what it was like with the others? It seemed like such an official… I don’t know… thing.”

“Yeah.” Some of the humor had left Stark’s voice. “Yeah, I know it did. All this time, only held together by the power of friendship. Who knew.”

“And other things?” He couldn’t have stopped himself for love or the promise of free tuition.

“Hm?”

He knew he was blushing and hated it. “Other things beyond friendship?”

Stark studied his face for a moment that seemed to stretch into a full hour. “Yeah,” he said at last. “But seriously, Parker. You don’t need to drag me that hard.”

He flushed. “Sorry.” Over the weeks, he’d managed to infer what had happened between Stark and Cap; he didn’t know whether to envy Rogers or pity them both.

“Should probably be going,” he said at last, shifting in his seat.

“If you want.”
He paused, one hand on the handle of the door. “Any word of advice?”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” said Stark.

There was a brief pause as they both chewed on what he’d said.

“Okay, don’t do anything I would do,” he amended.

Peter frowned. “Okay…”

Stark sighed. “You know that kind of gray area in the middle?” he said at last.

“Okay, point taken. Thanks.” Peter opened the door and made to step out, but the sensation of Stark putting his hand on his shoulder made him freeze.

“Hey,” Stark said. “Want some real advice?”

“Sure.”

Stark gave him a look that seemed strangely sad in the sharp lighting of the street light and the light in the car. “You’re still really young,” he said. “Take care of yourself, okay? If it gets too much for you, or —”

“It won’t,” Peter said. He could feel Stark’s fingertips on the edge of his collar, just brushing his neck. “Thanks for the talk. We head out next week, right?”

“Yes.” Stark let go of his shoulder and started the car’s ignition. Then he looked back at Peter. “I’d shut the door, if I were you,” he said.

“Oh! Right.”

He watched the car pull out of the parking lot and go merging into the rest of the evening traffic. It was cold; he put his jacket on and watched until Stark’s car was indistinguishable from the rest of them, just a pair of yellow taillights among hundreds of others.

He walked home.
Rain poured down the huge kitchen windows in thick rivulets like bubbles in glass panes. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Blowing out a sigh, Tony turned back to face Peter, who was perched on the island, his backpack sitting beside him.

“So much for going out,” he said.

“My suit’s waterproof,” Peter offered glumly.

“Yeah, and mine’s iron.” Tony shook his head. “I go out there, people’ll start calling me rust-man.”

“Yeah, right, and you and I know perfectly well that your suit isn’t even iron.”

“That’s a technicality,” Tony said. “It’s not happening.”

Peter gave him an incredulous look. “I can’t believe that the Avengers get derailed by bad weather.”

“This Avenger does,” said Tony.

The kid looked better than he had the last time Tony had seen him, although granted, that bar was set shamefully low. At the very least, he looked like he’d showered. And it was possible that he looked marginally less exhausted than usual. He was dressed a little better, too. Jeans and a button-down.

Peter noticed his eyes on him and flushed. “Picture Day,” he explained.

“Good Lord, they still put you through that?”

“Guess so. Goes quick, though.”

There was another burst of thunder outside. They both looked out the window. It was an ugly day, with gray-black clouds and rain lashing across the windows with each puff of wind. Peter cleared his throat.
“You promised.”

“I know.”

“You said you’d let me go out,” Peter pressed.

“I know,” Tony repeated.

“You know,” he continued, “I don’t need to listen to you. The adhesives still work in inclement weather. So does the webbing.”

Tony nodded, smiling crookedly. “Mm-hm. And yet here you are.”

“Yeah, well —” Peter shrugged — “it’s hard to dry the suit out.” Another rumble of thunder punctuated his sentence. There was a crescendo on the roof as the rain beat harder. He looked down at his shoes, kicking them back and forth against the side of the island.

Tony hummed. “Wouldn’t want you to head home in all this,” he said musingly, mostly for Peter’s benefit. “Say — have I ever shown you the gym?”

Peter looked up from his shoes.

The gymnasium in the mansion was beneath the building proper and wasn’t remotely the size of the one at the new compound — Sam couldn’t fly around the way he could there — but with mats on the floor, punching bags hanging from the wall on the sides, and a now pointless archery range, it did the trick reasonably well. The kid’s eyes had lit up almost comically when he saw it.

Now, rain roared on the roof several stories above them. Peter had his fists up, both bandaged and his thumbs now on the outside, courtesy of a correction from Tony, who stood several feet from him, his own bandaged fists raised.

“Oh, I thought I was,” said Peter, sounding genuinely confused. Half-smiling to himself, Tony thought that he was far better at this than he himself would have been at that age.
He’s a lot better at this than you are now, a niggling voice in his head whispered.

“Keep going, or have you had enough?” he asked.

“Hang on.” Peter had half-turned away, was unbuttoning his shirt. He shucked it off and tossed it in a ball onto a nearby metal bench, then turned back to Tony. His undershirt was faded with lots of washings. He put his fists up, shifting from foot to foot. “Let’s go.”

Tony put his fists back up. “After you.”

“Don’t mind if I do —” Peter threw a punch, aiming for Tony’s face. Tony caught his arm and pushed him back the same way Peter had earlier. Peter grabbed him by his arm and shoved backward.

“Good!” called Tony, waverering on his feet. Then he caught Peter in the belly with his free hand. With a hiss, Peter’s grip on his arm slackened, but he made up for it with a jab of his foot in Tony’s shin and by grabbing his other wrist. Tony grunted in pain.

They swayed on the spot, each one’s arms caught in the other’s grip, eyes locked. Peter’s arms were trembling, his teeth bared.

A tremendous thunderclap shook the building, and Peter flinched. With a growl, Tony shoved his full body forward and sent Peter sprawling onto the cobalt blue mat, where he half-knelt, half-reclined, panting.

“You good?”

“Yeah —” he managed — “yeah, I just need a second —”

“Take your time,” said Tony, who was a little short of breath himself. “You did good.”

Peter pushed himself to his feet. He’d already broken a sweat.

“Can we do that again?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” He hadn’t had a workout like this in near to a month and had forgotten just how much he’d liked the burn of his muscles during a good fight. He and Steve would spar sometimes, late at night when neither of them could sleep and neither of them felt inclined toward sex.

But he wouldn’t think of Steve, not now, when the kid in front of him was waiting so enthusiastically, his fists already raised.

Tony threw the first punch, going for his head just to see what would happen. Peter jerked out of the way, caught Tony’s arm, and slammed his fist into his belly.

“Good one!” Tony wheezed as his eyes watered. Peter threw in another one. “Go for my legs!” Peter kicked his shins, and Tony yelled.

“You asked!”

“I didn’t mean break my tibia!”

“Oh. Sorry.” Peter let go of his arm and stepped back, looking sheepish and dragging a hand through his hair.

Tony threw a punch at his stomach, and Peter dove to the right to avoid it. Tony grabbed him by one
arm and twisted it behind his back.

“Madja look,” he said.

“Oh, come on!”

“So,” he asked conversationally as Peter struggled against him, “what colleges’re you thinking about?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said through gritted teeth, “I’m a sophomore!”

“Come on —” he caught his other arm and brought it behind his back — “you must have some idea.”

“I don’t know —” he was still fighting it, weaving back and forth against Tony’s chest — “I like MIT — but you know —” with a grunt, he aimed a backward kick to Tony’s calf but didn’t quite land it — “no way I could get in outside of a scholarship — ah —!”

Tony had taken pity on him and loosened his grip just enough to let Peter wriggle free. He turned back to face him, fists up and face flushed.

“You really want to deck me, don’t you?” said Tony.

“Don’t tempt me,” Peter said and lunged for him. Tony ducked his right-hook and pushed him over onto the mat again.

“Had enough?” The kid was clearly getting tired; he sat back on his heels and ran a hand across his sweating forehead.

“Just give me a second —”

“Tony Stark, please tell me you’re not beating up a minor.” They both looked up to see Rhodey in the gym doorway, watching them.

“He is not!” Peter panted defensively. “I’m just letting him win.”

“You’re not fooling anyone,” Tony told him, although he knew the kid was probably right.

“If you want to beat Tony, you gotta learn how to brawl,” Rhodey advised. “He’s a pampered rich kid, he’s never been in a bar fight.”

“Hey,” said Tony. “You don’t know my life.”

“Yes, I do,” said Rhodey.

“Yeah, you do,” admitted Tony.

“To be fair,” Peter managed, “I’ve never been in a bar fight either.” His tank top was nearly soaked through, and Tony realized that his own henley was clinging damply to his back.

He stretched a hand down to the kid. “Call it a day?”

“Yeah.” He let Tony pull him to his feet.

“Hey, kid,” said Rhodey. “No offense, but you look like you need a shower.”
“Huh? Oh, yeah, actually. That’d be good.”

“Guest bathroom’s on the second level,” Rhodey said. “Sixth door on the left.”

“Right.” Frowning, Peter looked from Rhodey to Tony, who was giving Rhodey a questioning expression. “Thanks.”

Once he’d collected his shirt, which was by now a hopeless mess of wrinkles, and disappeared up the flight of steps that led to the rest of the mansion, Tony motioned Rhodey down to join him

“What’s this about?” he asked, untying the bandages around his knuckles. “Why’d you send him out?”

Rhodey coughed. “You just fielded a call from the Secretary of State,” he said.

He looked up from his hands. “Did I? And I didn’t even notice.”

“By proxy, though me,” Rhodey said. He sighed. “There’s a problem.”

“A problem,” Tony echoed.

“With the kid. Come on. Let’s talk about it someplace else.”

Up in the kitchen, while Tony splashed water over his face in the sink, Rhodey sat at the table, prosthesis up on another chair. Tony couldn’t help remembering the last time they’d really used the table. When they’d had their first real argument. He pushed the thought away and tried to concentrate on what his friend was saying.

“He hasn’t signed the Accords,” he explained. “And now the Powers That Be want to know if he plans on signing them, or if he intends to go rogue like the others. Apparently, they’re looking for His Highness as well.”

Tony frowned and leaned against the sink. “Contracts signed as a minor aren’t legally binding, right?”

“Two things,” Rhodey said, holding up two fingers. “One, I’d love to hear you make that case to the UN because — and this is the second thing — they don’t know that he’s a minor.”

Tony hummed. When he didn’t say anything, Rhodey continued. “It doesn’t end there,” he began. “Okay…”

“I may have confirmed to Ross that you were the one to bring him into action,” he said. “Which may put you in violation of the Accords as well.”

“The Accords are purely for ‘the Avengers,’” Tony said slowly, making air quotes.

“That’s the problem, Tony. Nothing was ever put in writing, so nobody knows what constitutes an ‘Avenger.’” Rhodey copied his air quotes. Tony sagged against the sink and dragged his hands over his face, cursing under his breath.

“And I suppose they want to have a meeting.”

“Yep. Two weeks hence.”
He turned to look out the windows. The rain had lightened to a drizzle, and his shins throbbed where Peter had kicked them earlier.

Right on cue, Peter appeared in the doorway. Tony saw it in the blurry reflection in the window. He turned around. Peter was back in the button-down which, sure enough, was badly creased. His hair was dripping onto his shoulders.

“Everything okay?” he asked hesitantly, looking at them both. Tony and Rhodey exchanged the quickest of glances, all that was needed to affirm that they were both thinking the same thing.

“Just fine,” said Tony. Peter frowned but didn’t question it, just went to the backpack that was still sitting on the kitchen island. “Hope I didn’t hit you too hard.”

“Just you wait for next time,” said Peter.

“There’s going to be a next time, is there?” There was a loud hissing sound against the windows and the roof. The rain was growing harder again. “Well,” he added. “I was going to get you home, but —” As if proving his point, lightning flashed in the distance.

“That’s okay,” Peter said easily. “Hey,” he added, already unzipping his backpack, “mind if I do some homework?”

Tony waved his hand expansively.

While Peter set up shop at the table — how many textbooks did a high school sophomore need, honestly? Or binders? — Rhodey jerked his head in the direction of the door. Tony followed him, making a vague excuse to Peter, who was already frowning down at his Physics textbook and took little notice of their leaving.

“Something else?” Tony asked when they were in the corridor and safely out of earshot.

“Yeah. Not an official thing, just —” Rhodey waved a hand. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Seldomly.”

“I mean with…” He jerked his head in the direction of the kitchen. “He’s a kid. He doesn’t need to get indoctrinated in this stuff just yet. Hell, neither of us got started until we were in our thirties. Late thirties.”

“Don’t think I haven’t told him that,” Tony said. “He wants to keep going with it, and frankly, there’s very little I can do to stop him.”

“He’s — what is he — seventeen?”

“Uh, fifteen, actually,” Tony muttered.

Rhodey sucked in a breath. “Jesus, Tony.”

“I know, I know. Don’t think I don’t.”

“And nobody knows?”

Tony opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by the voice of FRIDAY the AI.

— Sir, the Secretary of State is phoning again. Shall I put him through?
“Yeah,” Tony said. “Yeah. Hang on, I’ll take it in my office.”

Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross sounded put-out when Tony hit the speaker button on his office phone, and wasted no time in expressing his feelings.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve getting Rhodes to do your dirty work for you,” he said. Tony sank into his chair and mouthed a thank-you to Rhodey as he closed the office door.

“Yes, well, I apologize for that,” he said. “Indisposed. Other duties. You know how it goes.”

“Then I assume Rhodes filled you in on the situation?”

Tony hummed, making a show of flippancy. “Something about the Accords and some Man-Spider?” Ross started to speak, but Tony continued. “Don’t misunderstand me, I absolutely recognize that there’s an issue that needs resolution, but frankly, now is just not a good time.”

“Mr. Stark, I know you seem to think that all this is a joke,” Ross said severely, “but you signed the Accords in good faith, which legally requires that you follow the rules. I realize the concept may be unfamiliar.”

“Do not recite the deep magic to me, Mr. Secretary, I was there when it was written.”

But Ross didn’t seem to share his humor. “No, you weren’t,” he said. “I was. You just signed the damn thing and then decided to disregard its rules.”

Tony held up a hand, ignoring the fact that Ross couldn’t see it.

“Not to be rude, Mr. Secretary, but the meeting’s been scheduled and all that. Are you sure this call isn’t just to have the satisfaction of verbally slapping me on the wrist?” There was silence on the line, just a faint hum from the phone itself. Tony snorted. “You’re a petty little man.”

“Thursday, week after next. Be there at eleven. And Stark?” Ross added.

“Mr. Secretary?”

“Kindly remember who you’re dealing with. Some basic respect wouldn’t go amiss.”

Ross hung up with a click, and Tony leaned back in his creaking office chair. He had a headache coming on.

As he saw it, there were several looming problems: chiefly, Peter’s age, but also his anonymity. How can you put your name on a document when no one’s supposed to know your identity?

Moreover, was he meant to tell Peter what was going on? At one point did the situation escalate enough that you have to tell a kid he’s potentially an enemy of the United Nations?

Tony could feel the bureaucratic pissing contest looming inevitably in the future and didn’t look forward to any of it.

Rhodey was due for a physical therapy appointment and had left while Tony was on the phone, so Tony returned to the kitchen. Peter was still working, head bent over his books, when he strode back inside. In his periphery, he saw him look up at him and then transfer his gaze back to his work.
Tony went to the sink, filled two glasses with water, and set one down by Peter on his way to the window. It was still raining, with thunder purring perhaps a few miles farther than before. The sort of day that made Tony want to lie on his bed and do nothing. If Pepper — or Steve, sure — were still there, he would have spent the morning there; he liked sex on gray, lazy mornings when no one had to go anywhere or do anything. Somewhere else, perhaps, Steve and Barnes were doing just that. The thought made him feel bereft, as well as slightly obsessed.

A rustle of pages made him turn back. Peter was flipping through his textbook, frowning.

“Trouble?” he asked.

“Can’t find Ohm’s Law,” he muttered distractedly, more to himself.

“Ohm’s Law?” Tony frowned. “What is that, a-squared plus b-squared —”

“That’s Pythagorean Theorem. This is Physics — oh, here we go,” he added, stopping at one page “What —? Oh come on, this is easy!” He looked up at Stark indignantly. “How could you not know Ohm’s Law?”

“I can calculate gravitational force in my head, and you’re getting bent out of shape because I can’t remember some little theorem?”

Peter waved his hand dismissively and reached casually for the water glass at his side. “I don’t know,” he said, “I just had this weird impression you could do math.” He took a sip, eyes already back on his work. The rain sliding down the window panes cast odd shadows around the room, gray and white streaks on the walls, the furniture, and on Peter’s face as well: shadows moving steadily down his forehead, over his nose, his lips, down his chin and neck into the glimpse that his partially unbuttoned shirt afforded of his collarbone and the little dip in his throat.

Then he realized Peter was gazing back at him. Lips parted, something bright in his eyes that Tony had seen mirrored in the eyes of countless debutantes, models, CEO’s sons, and actors across the years.

Tony’s water glass sat forgotten in his hand, the rim inches from his lips.

He broke their eye contact to take a large gulp of water and wet his throat again.

“We’ll wait for the rain to stop, then we’ll go.” He placed his still mostly full glass on the gleaming counter and beat a retreat for the door. Peter’s chair squeaked as he twisted around to watch him leave.

“Mr. Stark?”

He knew that tone, too.

“You keep working,” Tony said. “I’ll come get you.”

He fled to the safety of his workshop, feeling the heat of the kid’s gaze on his back all the while.
The other thing

Chapter Summary

It was just a look. He had to stop making it seem like more than it was.

Chapter Notes

So, guess who finished her next chapter far more quickly than she’d anticipated?

Thank you to William Shakespeare for existing, to Donna Tartt for the beautiful line “and our eyes met in that way eyes will,” and to my friends for all those entertaining J.C. conversations.

“Peter, are you with us?”

The voice of his teacher seemed to come from a mile away, and Peter’s head snapped up from where his attention had been fixed on his phone screen. Several classmates turned to look at him. There were a few snickers from the back of the room.

“Yes, ma’am!” he said.

She gave him one of her knowing looks. “Then I’m sure you wouldn’t mind taking the headphones out.” She tapped her left ear and, flushing, Peter obeyed. The video on his phone still played, silent now: jerky and poor quality, taken by someone who wanted to run away as much as they wanted to stay and film Peter, in the suit, winding webs around the legs of the colossus that Cap and his friends had dug up from God-knew-where.

He pushed the memory away — flying around, getting to do something instead of festering in class every day — and tried to make himself listen to the teacher’s lecture on Roman virtues. Julius fucking Caesar. Jesus Christ.

“Peter,” his teacher said, and he looked up again. It seemed he wouldn’t catch a break this block. “Since you’re with us, why don’t you read Marc Antony?”

Peter paused the video, swallowing a groan, and pulled his copy of the text toward him. Marc Antony. Let’s see. Oh, of course the monologue would take up an entire fucking page.

He coughed and began reading. “‘Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears…”’

Even as he tripped through the lines — forcing students to read Shakespeare cold ought to be illegal, he thought — he couldn’t help ruminating on yesterday. The ride back to his apartment had been uncomfortable, with Stark trying to make small talk when both of them were both clearly mortified. He hadn’t meant to stare, and he certainly hadn’t intended to get caught doing it.

What he’d anticipated less was for Stark to be staring back at him. Not at his face, but at his neck.
Okay, sure, he’d left the top two buttons of his shirt undone just because, but it was like casually trying to seduce your math teacher — it was fun, and it made you more sartorially conscious, but you knew it wouldn’t come to anything. It was more about seeing how far you could go.

The math teacher wasn’t supposed to actually, you know, look.

It was slowly occurring to him that maybe he’d miscalculated. What was he supposed to think about it? The obvious, safe, sane thing to do would be cut off all contact and go their separate ways. But...

It seemed stupid to do something so extreme over a glance or two. Besides, even if that glance meant what he thought it might, Peter wasn’t at all sure that he minded.

But was more mortifying was that Stark knew now. Peter could tell from the way he’d all but bolted from the kitchen.

So now what?

He stumbled through the last few lines — “‘My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar, / And I must pause till it come back to me’” — and leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief. There was a smattering of applause, led by his teacher, but he suspected it was more commending of his ability to get through it than of his delivery.

As several of his peers began reading the citizens’ lines, his gaze slid back to his phone. YouTube had tossed up several recommended videos for his perusal: one of them, to his horror, was a TED talk that Stark had given several years ago. Did he dare? In class?

He clicked on the video and hit the watch later button just as Ned, beside him, said “‘There’s not a nobler man in Rome than Antony,’” and pointed two finger guns at him, which Peter returned. And then it was time for him to read, again, another interminable block of text.

All evening and all morning, he’d been compulsively checking his phone, but Stark had yet to text him anything. Afraid that he might jeopardize the extremely delicate situation, Peter was loath to make the first move.

But somehow he still wanted to.

If he’d been savvy about it, he would have knocked the water glass over, asked him for homework help, or just done something so he’d stick around longer. A vision arrived in his head unbidden of them cleaning up the water from the hypothetical broken glass, their hands brushing in that way hands will, and from hands, they could move to kissing, and from there…

He finished the monologue and tried not to imagine Stark’s fingertip dipping into his collar.

Late last night, unable to sleep, his curiosity had gotten the best of him, and he’d Googled the age of consent in New York. Seventeen. Could he really hold out for two years, technically one year? Perhaps a better question was this: if they were both willing… did it matter so much? It was a dangerous thought, but Peter couldn’t have stopped it if he’d tried.

If Stark didn’t text him in the next fifteen minutes, he’d text him during lunch, he told himself.

He was roused from his thoughts as the entire class recited, ‘The will, the will! we will hear Caesar’s will.’

Peter opened his mouth to read the next line but was interrupted by the teacher, who said, “Y’all sound like you’re about to sacrifice Caesar. Let’s try that again.”
“'The will, the will! we will hear Caesar's will,'” the class recited again, with marginally more enthusiasm.

“I'll take it,” she said. “Keep going.”

“'Have patience, gentle friends, I must not read it…'” Peter continued. Beside him, Ned was strumming one fingernail down the pages of his own copy of the play. The sound, quiet as it was, was like a termite boring through a wooden board to Peter. “'You are not wood, you are not stones,' — can you not? Thanks — 'you are not stones, but men…'”

He wondered what he would text him, if he did have to make the first move. Obviously, he couldn't take the direct route and actually bring up yesterday. Perhaps he should be enigmatic, start with a simple hey, and let Stark do the work?

“'Tis good you know not that you are his heirs; / For, if you should —'” He broke off as his phone suddenly flashed up with a text from Sunglasses emoji, German flag emoji. He caught his breath. Holy shit it's happening it's happening it's fucking happening...

He cleared his throat. “'— for, if you should, O, what would come of it!'”

Citizen Four started reading his line, only to be cut off by the lunch bell. With sighs of relief, students leaped from their chairs to shove their books in their backpacks and flee the classroom. Peter seized his phone and opened the text: Hey, u mentioned —

“Hey, you coming?” asked Ned. Resisting the urge to throttle his friend, Peter gave him a tight smile and pocketed his phone.

“Sure.”

“… but if you ask me, it looks like Brutus and Cassius had a lot more going on than just tyrant-stabbing, amirite?” Michelle was saying between bites of her sandwich.

“Excuse me,” Ned interjected, “but are we just gonna ignore Caesar and Marc Antony?” He turned to Peter, who was wolfing down his fries as quickly as he could. “Help me here.”

He waved a curly fry. “I'm not getting into it.”

“Come on, that monologue was so gay.”

“What monologue?”

“Your monologue,” said Ned. “'Oh, let me just sob on my daddy's grave for like an entire scene.'” Peter coughed hard and reached for his Deer Park bottle, eyes watering.

“I'm kinkshaming,” said Michelle.

“Can we maybe change the subject?” Peter suggested.

Michelle gave him a sidelong glance and snorted. “You are bright red,” she told him. “We need to find him a date for homecoming,” she added to Ned, who snorted.

“The only person I can think of is you or me,” he said. “And sorry, Peter, no offense or nothing, but you are deep in the friendzone.”
“Yeah, and I know better than to ask you,” Peter said to Michelle.

“Damn right. Anyway, don’t get discouraged,” she added, with the unintentionally comic timing that came naturally to her. “You’ve got, like, well over a month.”

Peter thought about the phone in his pocket and longed for Michelle to get back into the lunch line so he could read Stark’s text without worrying that she would ask why the contact name was nothing but emojis — the sort of detail she would inevitably seize upon, especially when she was sitting right next to him. “Hey, u mentioned —” the text had begun. Mentioned what? What did Stark want to talk about?

“Peter…” Ned began uncertainly, “… what are you doing to that poor fry?” Peter followed his gaze and realized that he had been tearing it into tiny pieces of violently orange potato. He dropped what was left back into their cardboard container, his appetite vaporized. Then he eyed the large trash can several feet from their table.

Neither of his friends commented when he stood up with the remains of his fries to drop them in the trash. And nobody noticed when he lingered there and casually took out his phone to check his messages.

*Hey, u mentioned mit yesterday. There’s a party in 2 weeks. Host is a friend of the dean of admissions. Feel free to tag along if you don’t mind nepotism*

Oh.

Peter bit his lip and tried not to feel disappointed. What had he expected, really? A virtual tell-all? An invitation to hop into bed with him? Really, he should have been grateful that he’d thought of him at all. It was just that… well…

College wasn’t nearly as exciting as certain other things.

He dropped heavily back into his seat at the table.

“There you are,” said Michelle. “We were debating whether or not you were going to throw yourself in.”

“Just might,” Peter muttered.

By the time he reached home, he’d concluded that he would take Stark up on his offer. Reason number one: it was an excuse to spend time with him without sneaking around. Reason number two: he’d never seen Stark in a suit in person. Sue him, he was shallow. And reason number three: he was poor as fuck and any chance to get a leg in with the staff at his reach school was not to be ignored.

A few months ago, the third reason would have occurred to him first. Not these days.

Then he arrived at the apartment and remembered the one flaw in his plan.

May wasn’t home yet, but she’d left a note for him on the kitchen island that said: *Paycheck’s here. We’re going out for dinner tonight.* Peter frowned down at her handwriting.

He couldn’t rely on her to say yes. The word *party* in the mouth of someone like Tony Stark conjured up mental images that didn’t quite equal *minor-appropriate*. And beyond that… Could he really expect her to buy that, a month after their first meeting, Stark had remembered him enough to...
invite him somewhere for college reasons?

He pulled up the text again and, leaning against the kitchen island, stared at it for a while. Then he typed out a quick reply.

I'll ask May

Not five seconds later, a reply flew in.

K

Peter sucked in a breath and resisted the urge to hurl the phone at the wall. Using k as a response was the ultimate insult — what was he supposed to do with that? Make a potassium joke?

Were they really just not going to talk about it? As if by not discussing it, it would go away?

It was just a look. He had to stop making it seem like more than it was.

But he’d seen the way Stark had looked at him before, and it hadn’t been like that. He wondered if he’d even really been aware of the lust in his face. It had been heady, being the subject of a gaze like that; and suddenly all that mattered was finding a way to ensure that he got that gaze again.

He prayed May would say yes.

But when May returned from work an hour later, she seemed too tired to deal with permission slip questions. She dropped her purse on the island, pushed her hair out of her eyes, and said, “I’m getting changed, and then we’re going for burgers, capisce?”

“Capisce,” said Peter, lowering his phone. He longed to send Stark something to make him show some sort of emotion, but the risk of even trying to send a message was suddenly too great. The stakes were too high. If he did send one, it would have to be the right one.

The restaurant they went to wasn’t anything fancy, but they’d been going there for years, and the waiters remembered both their names and orders: chicken club for May, burger with extra tomato for Peter. He waited until their food had arrived, and his aunt had gotten through at least a quarter of her sandwich before broaching the subject.

“So… I heard from Mr. Stark today.” She looked up in interest and motioned for him to continue. “He said there’s an, um, an event going on from — and,” he tripped over his words, “the woman who’s running it, she knows the Dean of Admissions from MIT? He said he could arrange an introduction.”

May cocked her head to the side. “Hmm. An event? What kind of event?”

Damn. “Like a party?” Peter said cautiously.

“Like a party,” she repeated, just as cautiously.

“Yeah,” Peter said. “Look, I’m sure it’ll be okay. He wouldn’t have asked me along otherwise.”

Then he remembered Cap leaving him under the truck and took a quick sip of his Sprite to kill the hot wave of anxiety that spilled into his stomach.
“I’ll think about it,” she said.

“It’s in two weeks,” he pressed. “Can you maybe think about it sort of quickly?”

She smiled crookedly. “Does it really mean that much to you?”

Peter nodded hard. “Yeah! Yeah — MIT’s the one.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said again, but with a marginally more promising tone. She took another bite of her sandwich and then wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Things haven’t been entirely quiet my end of things either,” she continued, and the care in her tone made Peter tense.

“Oh?” He pushed his second tomato slice around his plate.

“Yeah. I — um —” she seemed to be chewing on her words — “I met a guy at work.”

Their positions had suddenly flipped. “A guy,” Peter repeated.

She nodded. “His name’s Nathan.”

“And… are you and Nathan…?”

“It’s nothing serious,” she said. “Not yet. But we’d like to see more of each other. And I wanted to make sure that you were okay with that.”

Peter blinked. This wasn’t what he’d expected. “Oh. Well. I mean… I don’t want to, like, control your dating life…” he said uncertainly.

“I appreciate that,” she said. “But…” She lowered her voice. “I know that you miss your uncle.” Peter looked down at his plate and said nothing. “And I want you to know that no matter what happens, I miss him just as much. We’re always going to. And I don’t want you to feel like I’m trying to replace him, or —”

“I get it!” Peter broke in hastily, mostly because if she’d continued, he would have made a fool of himself in the middle of the restaurant, much like he had the first time they’d come after Ben had died, and the staff had insisted they eat free. “It’s okay. Really.”

“It’s not too soon?” she pressed.

“Yeah, no! It’s okay. I’m okay with it.”


“So… are you like… dating him?” he asked awkwardly.

Her grin grew wider. “I’m aimin’ to, partner.” She polished off the rest of her sandwich and then reached over to steal some of Peter’s lettuce. “So, any way I can get in touch with Stark before zero hour?”

“Well…” Peter shifted in his seat. “I do have his number.” Realizing how bizarre it sounded, he added, “He texts me about grant stuff. I’m on a mailing list.”

She beckoned with her fingers. “Let me call him.”

“Um. Okay. Hang on a sec.” Peter dug out his phone and hit the call button beside Stark’s name. Holding a hand up to May, he put the phone to his ear.
Stark sounded surprised by the call. “Peter, what’s going on?”

“Um — hi — my aunt wants to talk to you about the MIT thing…” May was beckoning to him again. “I’ll let her talk.” He relinquished the phone.

“Hello, very nice to speak to you,” she said. “Yeah, Peter mentioned something about a party…?” There was a pause. “The seventeenth? And it starts at nine? Oh. Hm. That’s a little late for a school night,” she said. Peter glared at her. “Uh oh,” she continued, grinning at him. “I’m getting a look.” Brief pause. “Yes, I agree, it would be a shame. He’s always been so dedicated — yes, agreed. Then we’re on the same page.” Another pause. May laughed. “Okay, good to hear. I think we can make that work. Good talking to you. ‘Bye.” She handed the phone back to him. “All right,” she said. “He’s assured me that they quote ‘keep the bacchanals to a minimum.’” Peter stared at her. “You can go,” she clarified. “But you’ll need a suit, and you’d better be home by ten-thirty.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay. Thank you. Thank you.”

“Quick question, slightly unrelated,” she added, “but, um — sunglasses and the German flag?”

Peter blushed.

Later that night, as Peter sat on his bed, mired in Spanish homework, the text flashed up. Peter dropped his pen, pushed his work aside, and seized his phone. His heart nearly stopped.

*About yesterday*

Here it came.

Yeah…?

It was a full ten minutes before he texted back, and Peter, while trying to make good use of his time and finish the back of the worksheet, could barely concentrate on Juanita and her six *gatas* for panicking. Finally, it flew in.

*Dont freak out*, it read, *but there may be some legal problems abt germany. Im taking care of it*

Peter frowned. Again, this wasn’t what he’d expected or, truth be told, wanted.

*What does this have to do with yesterday??* he asked.

*Its what Rhodes sent you out for*

*Im taking care of it*

*What kind of legal trouble??*

Visions of the police arriving at the door and dragging him away amid his aunt’s screams of protest filled his head. What had gone wrong?

*Stuff with the accords. You havent signed them*

*Just stay off the streets for now*

*Anything else?*
Be a friendly neighborhood spiderman please

I know you want to get in the thick of it again but run before you can walk ok?

Peter huffed and glanced at the clock by his bed. 8:51. Which meant he had another three hours until his body gave out and maybe fifteen minutes until May went to bed.

U took me to germany cause u needed backup, he texted.

And u trusted me to do that
And i was scared but i still really want to back out there
Cant i just sign them?

Not that simple, came Stark’s reply. Ill handle it.

Peter decided to throw caution to the winds and called him.

“I love doing this,” he began in a rush. “I love doing this, and I don’t want it to get taken away from me just because of some legal problem —”

“Nobody’s going to try and take it from you,” said Stark, sounding weary.

“Then why can’t I just do what I was doing —”

“Because that’s not how the Accords work, Peter —”

“Okay —” Peter stood up and began to pace, all hope of finishing his Spanish homework abandoned — “You know what? Screw the Accords. I don’t care.”

On the other end of the line, Stark groaned. “You do realize who you sound like right now, right?”

Peter’s resolve faltered at the sound of his voice. He dropped back onto the bed with a little squeak of bedsprings. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “It’s just that… I’ve grown up watching Cap and — and you — and all the others — and I just… I want to be like you.” I just want to be around you, he added silently. Surely you get that part, right?

There was a susurrus over the line that Peter eventually recognized as Stark breathing in and out. He closed his eyes and listened to it, swallowing at the little ripples of heat that it sent to his core. He sounded as though he were right there in the room with him. Next to him.

“I know,” Stark said at last.

“I remember the Battle of New York,” Peter continued slowly, trying to pull himself out of his fantasy. “May and I were stuck in a Target. And I saw you flying around outside and…”

“I know.”

“… and I just wanted to be like that. To do stuff like that.” He laughed shakily. “And then I get lucky, and suddenly I can do stuff like that. I just don’t want all this to go to waste. I don’t want to be able to do this stuff and not use it.” He swallowed and remembered his uncle’s head snapping backward with the force of the gunshot. “I just don’t want it to be like last time.”

There was a long silence.
“I’m going to try and make this work for you, okay?” Stark said at last. “But I need you to do something for me.”

“Okay.”

“Just —” he sighed — “just don’t do anything stupid, okay? Use your head.” When Peter didn’t immediately reply, he added, “Promise me?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I promise.”

“Okay. Now go to sleep so your aunt doesn’t kick your ass.” And he hung up.

Right on cue, Peter was startled by a knock on his door. May called — “Who are you talking to?”

“Um — Ned!” he called back. “Homework stuff!”

“Okay, I’m going to bed. See you in the morning. Don’t stay up too late!” she added.

“Okay, I won’t. Love you!”

He looked back at the phone, now lying innocently on his pillow. Somewhere, there had been a shift in the script, and Peter now couldn’t say for certain whether they’d been discussing the Accords or the other thing.

He told himself to get a grip and began gathering up his homework.
Run before you walk

Chapter Summary

There was too much to consider: the party, the scholarship and the grant, hell, even the merits of texting the kid back took on a completely different light.

Chapter Notes

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Thaddeus Ross was probably not human, Tony reflected as he descended the staircase that led to meeting room 12A, where he would be facing the music in less than five minutes. Rather, the secretary of state seemed to be one of those weird reptiles who could survive in Arctic temperatures with no trouble. New York was cooling off unseasonably early, and so Tony had worn a thicker jacket, but not even that was protection against the icebox that was Ross’s offices.

Seated at the long, slate-gray table within 12A was Ross himself, as well as a red-haired woman with her back to the door who seemed to carry herself in a way that felt uncomfortably familiar —

Tony took the third seat at the table, across from the woman and her open laptop, and realized that his fears had been correct. Ross. That sly bastard. It was probably his idea of a joke.

“Potts,” he said. “Aren’t you a little overqualified for minutes-taking?”

Pepper gave him a tight smile. “A job’s a job, Tony.”

Ross cleared his throat from his place at the head of the table. “If we’re through the pleasantries,” he said, “we might as well get to it. Now —” he cleared his throat and shuffled the bundle of paperwork before him— “does — what do they call him — Spider-man — have a representative?”

“That would be me,” said Tony. He glanced at Pepper, but her eyes were fixed firmly on the screen of her laptop, typing away with the smoothness he’d always found somewhat intimidating and not a little sexy.

“I think we’d better take this from the top,” Ross said. “Mr. Stark, not six hours after signing the Accords, you brought an anonymous enhanced individual into a situation he was not given clearance for. With respect to his identity — well. We were hoping you could help us there.”

Tony frowned. “Hold on,” he said. “Is this a ruler to the wrist, or are you trying to add names to your list of Persons Known, Believed To Be Armed?”

Ross coughed and did not directly respond to the question. “If you’re not willing to impart his identity, then tell us why he won’t sign the Accords. Is he an Avenger?”

Tony screwed his face up. “More or less.”
“Then as an Avenger, he is subject to the legislature put in place by the United Nation, as you know very well, Mr. Stark. Either this Spider-man signs the Accords, or he retires.”

Tony held up a finger. “Couple questions, Mr. Secretary.” Ross raised his eyebrows but said nothing, which Tony took as an invitation to continue. “Spider-man can’t reveal his identity for safety reasons. And beyond that, really, in our legal system, how much is the signature of a minor worth?”

In his periphery, Pepper lifted her head. “Hold on, how minor are we talking?” she asked.

“He turns sixteen this year.”

Pepper and Ross exchanged glances in a way that reminded Tony uncomfortably of the looks that his parents would give each other when he’d done something especially in-character. Moreover, he could feel the waves of frustration coming off Pepper, a familiar feeling that he recognized from too many instances during their relationship. He could just feel the words Tony, I swear to God struggling on her lips.

“I have it under control,” Tony said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. Ross fixed him with an unimpressed look.

“We have multiple witnesses saying that someone dressed in red and blue caused a disturbance at a demonstration of the Westboro Baptist Church three weeks ago. Apparently, several key members were webbed to various lamp posts.”

Tony guffawed. “Really?” He leaned back as much as he could in the uncomfortable metal chair, grinning to himself. “Look at him, fighting the good fight.”

Ross leaned back too, steepling his hands together. “This goes beyond politics, Mr. Stark. We have an unregistered E.I. on our hands, and you know how the public gets when people start reinterpreting ‘free speech.’”

“That’s not what free speech is,” Tony began, but Ross continued to talk.

“Something needs be done.”

Tony cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “I’ve spoken to him. He’s made it quite clear that he doesn’t intend to stop.” Made a few other things clear too, he added silently. But he couldn’t think about that right now: not about the words with too many interpretations that he’d whispered through the phone line, not about the party he’d invited him to (why, oh why, oh why had he done that?), not about any of it.

It had been two weeks since that conversation, and he could still hear his voice in his ear.

Pepper’s eyes were on him, her brow furrowed, and Tony realized that he’d lapsed into silence. He coughed again. “He can’t sign for reasons I’ve already explained.”

The table was quiet for a few moments. Then Ross stirred.

“If he can’t sign the Accords, he can’t be an Avenger. This isn’t a difficult concept.”

He heard Peter’s voice, tinny through the phone’s speakers: I love doing this, and I don’t want it to get taken away from me just because of some legal problem.

Two weeks later, and he could still remember it verbatim.
“Because the Accords are specifically for the Avengers?” he said. Ross inclined his head. Pepper was still typing, but now there was a little smile pulling the corners of her mouth that said she knew he’d found a way out. He caught her eye and felt a little tug in his ribcage: still not over her, it seemed. Would he ever be?

“Mr. Stark, you have something to add?” Ross prompted.

“Yes,” he said, jerking himself out of his reverie. “I think I see a way we can all win.”

Peter was going to kill him.

As he’d grimly expected, Pepper caught up with him after the meeting on his way up the staircase again. At the sound of her heels clicking on the lino, he turned.

“I would never criticize your professional decisions,” he said, “but seriously? Ross?”

They’d stopped on the landing. Pepper crossed her arms. She was wearing a white suit with pale blue pinstripes that looked familiar, but Tony couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen it.

“You know that’s what I heard when I took your job, too, right?” she said. “‘Oh, Virginia, what are you doing with yourself? A girl with your skills could be working in the White House.’ And know what I told them?”

“That you didn’t want your life to be an Aaron Sorkin drama?” Tony suggested.

She almost smiled. “You remember that story?”

“Course I do.” He wanted to smile, but it didn’t feel appropriate to the situation. She seemed to sense the awkwardness.

“I,” she began carefully, “heard about Rhodey. How is he?”

“Doing better,” he said, dropping his gaze. She was pretty as ever. “Doctors are saying he’ll be able to start flying again in a few months if all goes well.”

Pepper wet her lips. She seemed to be mulling over something, and Tony could guess what. “I also heard about Steve,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“You haven’t been answering my texts, so I’m going to assume you don’t need anything from me, but I just wanted to say…” She sighed. “I wouldn’t have cut things off so completely if I had known what was going to happen. I figured he’d be there for you.”

Tony shivered in the frigid air of the corridor. “I don’t need pity, Pepper.”

“Okay.” She was trying to keep the peace, using the tone that Tony recognized from his more erratic days post-Battle of New York. “Just — if you ever need anything — I know we didn’t really talk about it ever, but…”

Yes, it had been a weird, unspoken thing they’d had, and, ironically, it had begun with her. Tony, laughing, doing up his tie in the mirror one morning: So, what you’re saying is that if I were to climb in bed with Cap, you wouldn’t object? Pepper, watching him from the bed: Are you kidding? I’d probably be cheerleading. Then came the little pause as they both realized the other was completely
serious.

But nothing took off until months later, when Pepper was out, and Steve had knocked on his bedroom door, and Tony let him in, seeing only the muscles, the Valentino jaw, and the same sort of emptiness in his eyes that Tony saw when he looked in the mirror some days — and no hint of what would happen so soon down the line.

There had been very little talking that night, each one silently accepting and welcoming the other’s presence.

He found out the next morning that Steve had cleared the whole thing with Pepper in advance. It was hard to stay angry at someone who did things like that, but Tony was doing his damndest, at least when he wasn’t utterly weary of the whole affair.

“I see what you’re trying to do,” Tony said. “Just… it’s over, Pepper.” He swallowed. “It’s all over.”

She was still ungodly pretty. It was surreal, standing with someone you’d slept with for ages and knowing that you couldn’t get back to that time. It just wasn’t the same.

She nodded, eyes lowered.


“Good to see you, Tony.”

“You, too.”

He returned to the mansion within fifteen minutes, feeling low and slightly unclean, the way he often did after meetings in which deals were struck. He didn’t look forward to the moment that he’d have to break the news to Peter; perhaps he could find a way to do it after the party tomorrow evening, once they were alone?

But to his surprise, the kid himself was waiting in the TV room, sitting on the sofa he’d napped on weeks before. It felt like years. He was reading some book — looked like Shakespeare, something school-related — but snapped it shut and shot to his feet when Tony walked in.

“Good Lord,” Tony said, pausing on the threshold. “Where’d you materialize from?”

“Oh, FRIDAY let me in,” Peter said. He’d started wearing long-sleeved T-shirts in deference to the weather. This one was charcoal-colored and had a print of the Death Star on it.

“I see.” He was going to have to have a talk with that AI. “You know, Peter, it’s not that I don’t enjoy our time together, but… what are you doing here?”

“May wanted to know if she was supposed to drop me off tomorrow evening, and if so, where precisely?” He rattled off as though from memory, eyes on the ceiling.

Tony frowned. “You couldn’t have texted me?”

“Oh, well — she texted me just now, and I was right around the corner, so I —” Peter swallowed and dropped his gaze — “I thought I’d just go on in. Face-to-face communication and all that.”

Tony looked at him for a long moment, watching him watch the carpet beneath his scuffed sneakers. The truth was very obvious, and the kid didn’t seem to be making much effort to hide it.
He shook himself and stepped into the room all the way, dropping his phone on the coffee table.

“Well,” he said. “You can tell her that she can drop you off at the mansion, and I’ll take you to Dot’s. You’ll get to ride in one of the fun cars,” he added, “so enjoy that.”

“Thanks.” Peter’s tone was clipped, but it sounded less rude than awkward.

“You’ve got a suit, right?”

“Yeah,” Peter said. “We figured we might as well shop homecoming early.”

“Good. By the way, since I have you here —” Tony dropped into the armchair across from the sofa and gave Peter a look. “You going to keep standing there?”

“Oh. No.” He sat back down, back straight, a far cry from the relaxed state he’d been in when Tony had run across him. “While you’ve got me here…” he prompted.

“Right,” said Tony, snapping back to the present. “I just got back from my meeting about the Accords.” Peter nodded vigorously, leaning forward. “Now… I have some good news and some bad news,” he continued cautiously. “Which do you want to hear first?”

“Bad news,” Peter said without hesitation.

“Actually, know what, it’s better if I do it the other way around. Good news: you can keep your job, Spider-man,” Tony said. “Bad news is… You’ve been demoted.” He pressed his lips together.

“There’s going to need to be some limits.”

Peter frowned, brow furrowing. “Demoted?”

“In the eyes of the government, you’re now an Avenger-to-be,” Tony explained. “Training wheels, as it were.”

Peter stood up, dismay scrawled across his face. “Training wheels —?!”

“I know it sucks,” Tony began, “but, believe me, this is the best deal I could wring out of —”

“And what does training wheels mean here, exactly?!”

“You patrol like normal, but no physical combat unless it’s a defensive measure. And you report back directly to me,” said Tony. He remembered Ross’s parting words: and don’t think we won’t be checking in from time to time.

“So, basically, you’re putting me on a leash,” Peter snapped.

“One call with every patrol, and you try not to get your ass kicked,” Tony said. “That’s not a very tight leash, Peter.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Look, I know you want to be out in the big leagues, but frankly — as much as I hate to agree with him — Ross is right.” Tony stood up, the kid’s pacing making him nervous. “You’re fifteen. Once you’re of age, feel free do what you want. Be an Avenger, sign the Accords. Or don’t and be a fugitive. But until then… If this is what you want to do, this is the compromise. And frankly,” he continued, “it would make me feel a hell of a lot better. Just saying.”

“I’ve been doing fine on my own! I made it six months without anybody’s help!”
“Yeah, ‘cause checking all your injuries on MayoClinic definitely comes under the heading of doing fine.” Peter glared at him and turned away, and, groaning, Tony put a hand on his shoulder. “We’re trying to keep you safe,” he said.

Peter twisted around to look at him, eyes blazing. “And what if I don’t care about being safe?”

And there it was. The look that Tony had been trying to convince himself he wasn’t seeing: hero worship and awe and lust rolled into one, and, as of now, shot through with fury.

_Take your hand off his shoulder_, his consciousness whispered.

“Peter.”

“I don’t care about being safe,” he said in a rush. “I don’t care about being smart, or — or using my head — or anything. I just — can’t I just be really stupid?”

_Take your hand off him. Now._

“The Accords,” Tony began weakly, but Peter cut him off.

“Fuck the Accords. You know what I mean. Just —” he made a frustrated sound in his throat — “can we not talk in code? For once?”

_Dammit, what is wrong with you, takeyourhandoffhimrightnow —_

“Peter —”

“You know. I know that you know.”

“Peter —”

He was looking at him with those huge eyes that made Tony feel sick inside.

“Get a grip,” he told him. _Get a grip, he told himself, and stop touching him._

He couldn’t seem to obey.

“I don’t want to,” Peter whispered.

And he rose up on his toes and kissed him.

It lasted only a moment, and Tony was so taken aback, he hardly reacted. Somehow, stupidly, he hadn’t expected it to get this far. Zero to a hundred, in the amount of time it took to blink.

Peter was staring back at him, looking mortified and frightened and hopeful all at once.

Then one hand wrapped around Tony’s collar and drew him down again for another kiss: really, lots of little kisses made up of teeth and eagerness — he was such a teenager, trying to kiss the way the movies showed it — and everything about this was misshapen and ugly, but Tony closed his eyes and let himself have it anyway, this point of warmth, Peter’s lips moving against his own and the little shock of contact when their tongues flickered against each other —

Peter’s body pressed against his, the kid himself squeaking in surprise, and Tony pulled away to find that they were against the wall, right beside the TV. Pinned there like a butterfly, dark eyes looking him up and down in a way that made Tony more uncomfortable than ever. His body roiled.
“You,” he said at last, “are in way over your head.”

“And you’re not?” Peter shot back. They hadn’t moved apart at all, and Tony finally became conscious of his left hand at the kid’s jaw, pushing his face upward so it could meet his, and his right hand on his chest, left over from when he’d pushed him against the wall.

He removed his hands, stepped back, and turned away.

“You need to go,” he said.

“But —”

“No excuses,” he said. “You need to leave. Now.”

“But — but —” His voice was growing raw and dismayed, and Tony told himself he would not, would not, turn back and look at him: not at his flushed face, not at his eyes, not at the little red marks that his beard had left on his chin and cheeks. “But you kissed me,” Peter finished brokenly.

“Go home.”

“No.”

That took him aback. Forgetting himself, he turned back to face him and found Peter staring at him, red-eyed with a trembling lower lip. “Peter,” he began, trying to stay reasonable and focused.

“No,” he insisted, “I’m not going home, I’m not listening to you, I —” he was beginning to cry — “I couldn’t — I’m sorry — I just couldn’t help it — I was so upset, and you were right there, and I just wanted —”

“Peter —” He wanted to put his hands on his shoulders, but the mere thought of touching him again was like handling nitroglycerine. “Peter, look at me —”

“Did you want to kiss me?” he demanded. “Did you want to?”

He opened his mouth to deny it. It would be so easy to deny it. Four words: no, of course not. And it would be true, to a certain extent. Kissing him had never crossed his mind.

But now that he’d done it, he wanted to do it again. And again. And again. And again. Grab him by his hair and dirty him up. No, better: hope some of the clean would rub off on him. And he wanted to feel liked, wanted, relevant again.

But that was bullshit.

The kid was slumped against the wall, a fist pressed against his mouth, crying hard. “I’ve fucked it all up.” His sobs made it sound almost as though he were laughing. “It was perfect, and I fucked it up —”

“No, no, don’t think like that, don’t —”

“What do you want?!” he cried.

“I want you to get a reality check!” Tony snapped. “I’m old enough to be your father!”

His voice reverberated around the room. “I don’t care!”

Tony had never had the opportunity to be in the same space as a rebellious teenager, but he’d heard
stories. According to friends of his parents, he himself had been a holy terror at that age: running around with boys and not keeping it to himself, running around with girls and not talking enough about it, drugs, booze, the whole bit. Now, he was understanding a little of what it must have been like to raise his adolescent self, and it made him pity his parents just a bit more.

Still, He’d never been fool enough to do this.

As though he were reading his thoughts, Peter said, “I know, I know, I know. I know it can’t happen, but I just looked at you, and you were so close, and I wanted to — I wanted —” He broke down into fresh sobs.

“I know.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Okay.” He held up his hands as though surrendering. “Okay, just —”

“And then you kissed me back, and —”

“Peter.”

“You did!”

“Peter —” He wanted to deny it so badly, and Peter seemed to sense it.

“Your tongue was in my mouth,” he said through gritted teeth.

Tony’s stomach lurched, and he turned away again, pressing his hands against his temples. A headache was coming on.

“You need to leave,” he repeated.

“No.” But the angry, bitter kid of before had already been replaced by the sad kid with the red eyes and the tears. “No, please. Please don’t make me go.”

“You know that you need to.”

“Please, I don’t want to go, I want to stay —”

“Peter —”

“I want to stay —!”

His lips burned the same way that his insides did, with the same toxic combination of desire and guilt. Thoughts and images flashed through his mind, too many at too great a speed to really see: kissing him again, biting his earlobe, putting his mouth on all the marks from the tears, pulling his hair so he could hear that squeak again — Unthinkable that a few kisses could do this. Had it been the kisses at all, or had the thoughts always been there, and he’d not been able to recognize them for what they were?

But he recognized them now. There was no escaping them, any more than there was escaping the migraine settling around his brain.

“Please,” he said softly. “Please leave.”

His voice was small, hopeless.
“But…”

“The best thing you can do for us right now is to just go, okay?” He tried to stay gentle, but his panic made it hard to be sure of just how it came across.

There was a terrible silence, broken only by the sound of Peter stifling his sobs, seizing his backpack from the sofa, and, at last, his retreating footsteps.

Tony had the terrible urge to go bandage his hands and punch something until he felt better. *Just once*, he told himself. *It was just the one time, and obviously, you’ll never do it again. Obviously. Obviously.* Like a madman, he silently chanted the word to himself. Of course he wouldn’t do it again. He wasn’t that sort of person. He had self-control, and beyond that, he was a *decent fucking human being who didn’t think about making out with minors.*

One minor anyway.

There was too much to consider: the party, the scholarship and the grant, hell, even the merits of texting the kid back took on a completely different light.

Anxious thoughts filled his head like smog. What if he told someone? What if someone found out? What if he lost control and did it again, this time without the flimsy excuse of Peter initiating it to hide behind?

The party was tomorrow evening.

They were well and truly fucked.

“FRIDAY?”

— *Sir?*

“Wipe security footage from the last fifteenish minutes from this room, would you?”

— *Yes, sir.*

There was silence, which Tony chose to interpret as FRIDAY executing the order and *not* short-circuiting from what she found in the cameras.

Well. That was that. Before, he’d had a few options as to how he could handle it, what sort of man he wanted to be. Choosing to wipe the footage meant wiping out ninety-nine percent of those options. It meant admitting guilt.

“Why’d you have to do it?” he muttered out loud, and he couldn’t figure out if it was directed at Peter or himself.
Chapter Summary

“I shouldn’t be too ashamed, Anthony. It’s all rather Classical, don’t you think?”

Chapter Notes

NOTE: we are retconning Iron Man 2 for the purposes of this fic, so forget the MCU’s Justin Hammer. MY Justin Hammer looks, sounds, and carries himself roughly like Charles Dance. Watch this for reference if you're not familiar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wygaDt2261E

“Hey, May?” Peter called miserably from his bedroom. “Do we have a Xanax somewhere? I think I’m about to be sick.”

His voice echoed a little in the sudden silence of his room. His Spotify had just cut off, the last strains of Galway Girl only a memory as he tried to tie his tie with unsteady fingers.

May appeared in the doorway. “What was that? Oh, you look good,” she added. She herself was wearing one of her nicer dresses, red cotton with a chunky belt.

“I asked if we have any Xanax?” Peter said. The tie was fighting back and winning; he pulled it free of his neck and dropped on his dresser with a huff.

“Nervous?” asked May.

He nodded, pressing his lips together so he wouldn’t say as fuck. He’d spent the entire day zoning in and out of his classes, his mind alternately fixed on yesterday and the evening ahead.

He felt sick with apprehension.

He felt like he could leap off the ground and never come back down.

He felt terrified.

What would have happened if he hadn’t chickened out? Peter couldn’t help wondering. Would he have kept kissing him? He’d shoved him against the wall — Peter couldn’t stop thinking about that part, how he’d done it as though he weighed nothing at all. Would he have fucked him there, if things had gone differently?

What sort of thread count did the sheets at the mansion have?

Before, he could hold the thoughts at bay (sort of), but now that he’d been stupid enough to actually touch him, he realized everything he’d been missing, and in the thoughts came, like a herd of horses, wild and unstoppable.
He felt like the universe had just been unlocked.

“Yeah. There’s gonna be a lot of people there,” he muttered.

But, of course, all of that was a moot point because there was no way any of it could happen now. He’d gotten a text from him around midday confirming that they were still on for the party. No mention of yesterday. No emotion. Just a cold, terse couple of words. The story had ended before it had time to properly begin, and Peter was paying the price of his impulsiveness.

May had just asked him something. He closed his eyes and opened them again. “Sorry, what?”

“Is this about Nathan?” she repeated. After they dropped Peter off at the mansion, she and Nathan were going on a date. He’d be there at the apartment any moment. In a normal situation, the prospect of meeting his aunt’s boyfriend would have been the all-encompassing event of the evening, but now it was barely the icing on the shit cake. He shook his head.

“Nah, it’s not that.”

“Let me do this.” She plucked his tie off the dresser and motioned him forward, making short, expert work of the knot that had been giving him trouble. “I think we’ve got some left,” she continued in response to his earlier question. “You really think you’ll need it?”

“Uh — yeah.”

“Okay. You know where they are.” There was a knock on the apartment door. “That’ll be Nathan.” She rushed off, and Peter ducked across the hall to the bathroom to open the medicine cabinet and fish one tiny pill out of the orange Xanax bottle. He tucked it into his wallet for later.

“Peter!” May called from the den. “Come say hello!”

He sucked in a breath and left the bathroom.

Nathan was older than Peter had expected, with graying temples and faint lines around his eyes, like he laughed a lot. He also walked with a cane that, paradoxically with the graying hair, he seemed too young for. As he and May spoke, he saw Peter standing awkwardly in the doorway, jacket slung over one arm. “Hey, you must be Peter.” Peter came forward and shook his free hand. “Nathan Lubensky.”

Peter somehow found his tongue. “Good to meet you. I’m not going with you,” he added hastily when he saw Nathan looking questioningly at the suit. “I —”

“Yeah, May mentioned the MIT thing. Good on you, getting an early jump on that,” he added.

“Let me just get my jacket,” said May, heading in the direction of the coat closet and conveniently leaving them alone.

“So I guess you’re into science, then,” Nathan said, clearly trying to make conversation. Peter nodded. “What d’you want to be, do you think?”

Peter had always hated questions about his future, and ever since he’d taken on his second identity, the idea of holding down a normal job one day seemed laughable. He shrugged.

Nathan waved a hand. “I wouldn’t stress it,” he said. “You’ve got plenty of time.”
Peter nodded, looking at the gray carpet. He couldn’t think of anything to say. His mind was fixed on the evening ahead — how angry was Stark? Would he even speak to him?

What if this was the last time they’d spend together?

May had reappeared. “Ready?” she asked Nathan.

“Just waiting on you,” he said amiably.

What if this was the last time they’d see each other? Or what if, from now on, it would just be businesslike meetings, short mission reports, conversations held with someone else in the room, or else with at least two yards of space between them so nothing in-ah-pro-pre-itt could happen…

“Peter?”

They were both looking at him, gathered at the door. May had her arm threaded through Nathan’s, supporting him on his other side. “Time to go,” she said, grinning. “Someone’s a little nervous, I think.”

He followed them out the apartment door, trying not to flush and trying not to panic.

They dropped him off at the mansion right on time, and Peter felt his stomach clench as he went to the keypad beside the vast double doors and called in. It repeated his message back to him for confirmation, and he grimaced at how childish he sounded: *hey, I’m Peter Parker — uh — I’m here to see Mr. Stark?*

He looked over his shoulder. The taxi they had taken was already gone. No way out but through.

The lock on the huge glass doors clicked, and, with a glance of trepidation up at the huge tower above him, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The lobby was just as polished and palatial as the building’s exterior had suggested it would be. It was also deserted. Shakily, Peter sank down on the nearest metal and glass bench and tried to remember how to breathe normally.

Footsteps on the marble floor. He shot to his feet, only to find that instead of the man himself, the newcomer was a heavyset man in a day suit who looked vaguely familiar. Was Peter disappointed or relieved? He couldn’t tell.

“Mr. Parker,” the newcomer said. “Harold Hogan.” They shook hands. Now Peter remembered him; they’d met briefly on the way to Germany. “Mr. Stark will be down shortly.” With a nod, Hogan disappeared down the corridor, leaving Peter feeling as though he were a prisoner on Death Row. How long would it be… how long would it be…

He sat back down on the bench and took out his phone. No texts from Stark himself: just one from Ned asking about their Spanish homework, and another one from Michelle, who wanted to know if he’d be down for a *Sense8* marathon over the weekend (*come on we need an xcuse to be gay*). He was about to text her back when new footsteps put him on the alert again. He looked up.

Stark was coming towards him, hands in the pockets of his suit pants. Royal blue tie. Silk shirt. Hair fashionably mussed. Jacket on.
Peter stood up but didn’t dare meet his eyes, keeping his gaze trained on his own shoes — scuffed already, God, he wasn’t going to do any of this right…

“Long time, no see,” Stark said. His tone was light, but it was the sort of lightness that sounded as though he were testing the ice. Peter bit his lip and nodded, still not looking. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Peter.” He lowered his voice, and Peter looked up at him. He was so close. “Let’s just get through tonight, okay?” Stark said. “Everything that happened yesterday…” He waved a hand. “Worry about it later.”

Peter nodded, looking anywhere but his face. He drew in an unsteady breath. “Sorry.”

Stark was silent long enough that Peter found himself unable to continue not looking at him. When he met his eyes, his gaze made Peter feel at once frightened and anticipatory.

Stark shook his head and turned away. “Let’s just get through tonight,” he repeated. “Come on.”

Just as Stark said they would the day before, they took one of the sports cars. Peter supposed there was a certain image to maintain. But it didn’t matter to him. Trapped in the passenger seat, he could barely concentrate on the evening ahead for Stark’s presence at his side — as a matter of principle, he always drove himself in the evenings, he explained.

Why were they doing this, again? A better question: why had he agreed?

Silently, Peter took his wallet out of his pocket and swallowed the Xanax pill dry, grimacing at the bitter taste it left in his mouth. If Stark saw him do it, he didn’t comment on it.

His phone lit up: a text from May.

*Everything ok?*

_Fine U dont have to keep texting me btw_

She didn’t reply, and he assumed she’d taken his advice. Slowly, inevitably, his gaze slid over to Stark in the driver’s seat. His jaw was set, his eyes fixed firmly on the road. The scent of his aftershave left the car smelling clean and peppery, and it put Peter in mind of those hypermasculine slogans for men’s beauty products: *if your grandfather hadn’t worn it…*

Stark’s eyes flicked over to him. Caught, Peter dropped his gaze and texted Ned and Michelle back to give himself something to do with his hands.

And then they were inside some Upper East Side building, and Stark was ushering him into the glass elevator.

“Nervous?”

Peter nodded tightly as Stark pressed the button that would take them to the penthouse on the top floor.

“Just breathe,” Stark said. “If you do that, you’ve won half the battle already.”
“Mm-hm.”

The elevator doors slid shut and chimed as they launched upward. “Smile, laugh when everybody else laughs, and you’ll do fine,” Stark continued. “It’s mob mentality.” Peter nodded and gulped. His back ached with the effort of keeping it straight.

“We don’t have to stay long,” Stark added. Was it just him, or did it seem as though Stark was trying to ensure they spent as little time as possible together? If that were the case, could Peter really blame him?

The elevator chimed, the doors slid open to reveal the apartment itself, already bursting with New York royalty: vampires in jewel-toned evening gowns and Italian suits, silk ties.

Peter wished suddenly that the Xanax lasted longer.

Stark laid a very light hand on the center of his back — Peter shifted at the sensation — and escorted him out of the elevator and into the fray. “Just stick with me,” he said. “I always move counter-clockwise. Breathe,” he added again, and Peter immediately took a huge lungful of air.

“Tony!”

They were immediately accosted by several suits who, to Peter’s eyes, all bore the same lined face and same gray hair. The same handshake, as well; Peter found himself wanting to wipe his palm off on his suit pants afterward.

“Tony, it’s been ages —”

“Whatever happened to the Iron Man thing —”

“Yeah, and who’s the kid?”

Stark put a firm hand on Peter’s shoulder. “This is Peter Parker, he got one of the grants.”

There were impressed murmurs all around, but mostly, they were interested in Stark. After a minute or two of fugue-like conversation, Stark executed a smooth escape and moved them into the next clique, mixed company this time. Peter was conscious of the teeth bared down at him; he felt not unlike a puppy someone had brought to a piranha tank. At any moment, someone would realize that this poor kid from Queens didn’t belong in an Upper East Side penthouse. Then he realized that they almost certainly were aware of his position already, thanks to Stark’s mention of the grant. His stomach clenched. If the Xanax had kicked in, he couldn’t tell.

As if sensing his discomfort, Stark pointed out faces in the crowd for his benefit, trying to contextualize him. “And that guy with the beard,” he said as they left one group, “he makes pillows, I think?”

“You can get rich from pillows?” Peter said incredulously.

“Apparently. And I think there’s supposed to be a Rockefeller floating around here somewhere, but they tend to keep to themselves, mostly.” He hadn’t taken his hand off his shoulder, but Peter was past complaining. It felt grounding.

Several women crossed into their path: two past fifty, and the latter significantly younger, with highly manicured eyebrows.

“Dot,” said Stark, shaking hands with one of the older women.
“Tony! Glad you could make it.”

“This is Peter, the one I was telling you about.”

Peter shook her hand and did his best not to wince when her scarlet nails scratched his palm. “I understand you’re interested in MIT?” Dot said. She was dark-haired, with an exceptionally Roman nose.

“That’s right, ma’am.”

Dot laughed as though he’d said something delightful. The other two women watched them with brilliant, lipsticked smiles. “What would you like to study there?”

“Engineering or chemistry, I think?” he said. “Although I really like physics, too. I don’t know, it’s hard to decide.”

Down came Stark’s hand on his shoulder again. “And might I add that that Parker here has quite the natural gift for manufacturing original substances.”

Now Dot looked exceptionally impressed. “Really? Well, Peter, you know, I happen to know the Dean of Admissions for MIT. I might just have to have a word with him. You’re, what, a junior?”

“Sophomore.”

“Well, never hurts to start early,” she said.

Peter flushed. “Thank you, ma’am—” He broke off, distracted by the expression on the younger girl’s face as she looked at Stark. That had to be some of the most blatant eye-fucking he’d ever seen someone do publically.

The other older woman coughed delicately into her fist, the diamonds at her wrist glittering in the lamplight. “It’s wonderful to see you out and about again, Tony.” She spoke with a decidedly Georgia accent. “Such a shame about earlier this year. We would have so liked to have met Captain Rogers, wouldn’t we have, Cory?” This last was directed to the girl beside her, who gave them—no, gave Stark—a smile crimson with Revlon and said nothing.

Stark seemed to stiffen at the mention of Rogers, and Peter resisted the urge to press back against him. “Yes,” Stark said shortly. “It’s a shame.”

“Well, no matter,” said the woman from Georgia. “Just as long as you’re back in society.”

The girl, Cory, smiled again. “Parties just haven’t been the same without you.”

“I second that,” Dot put in. “Do you know, there are people who actually refuse to come unless they know that you’re planning to show up? I can’t tell you what hell that is when you’re trying to organize an event.”

“Yes!” the other woman said. “I remember — what was it, two years ago? — I was putting together a charity dinner after the Hebdo attacks, and let me tell you, it was a challenge filling those seats after you’d RSVP’d and declined. No fault of your own,” she added quickly. “I’m sure that—”

But Peter had stopped listening to her because Stark’s fingers had just dug into the meat of his shoulder, and when he glanced up at him, he saw how tight his jaw was. It took most of his willpower not to reach up and cover his hand with his own.
What was he, suicidal?

They tore themselves from the conversation with inane excuses, and Peter bit his lip, deciding to take the bullet. “You okay?” he asked as Stark snagged two glasses from a nearby waiter and handed Peter one without looking. An experimental sniff told him that it wasn’t water.

“Fine,” Stark said, not bothering to make it convincing. “Shit, what am I doing — that’s champagne, nevermind.” He took the flute out of Peter’s hand. “Let me get you some water or something —”

“Anthony!”

He looked up to see a tall, skeletal figure striding purposefully toward them in a black tuxedo that put Peter in mind of some of those pictures of Victorian undertakers he’d seen on the internet. And that face… It was like something you’d see commanding the Death Star.

“Justin,” Stark said wearily and shook his head. “Peter, this is Justin Hammer. Fellow entrepreneur. Justin,” he continued, the reluctance quite plain in his voice, “this is Peter Parker. He’s one of my grant recipients.”

Hammer lifted an eyebrow. “Is he now? Lucky boy.” He was English, by the sound of it, and when he shook Peter’s hand, it was with a disconcerting firmness. He shifted as Hammer looked him up and down. Was it his imagination, or was Stark holding onto his shoulder a little more tightly? “Saw you speaking to Dot just now, so I can only imagine that you’re begging for a slot at MIT as well.”

Peter pressed his lips together and said nothing. He’d never met anyone who made him quite as viscerally uncomfortable.

“Champagne?” Stark offered Hammer the flute he’d originally given Peter.

“Don’t mind if I do.” He took a sip, eyes never leaving either of them. “So, what have you been doing with yourself, Stark?”

“Bit of this, bit of that,” Stark said noncommittally.

“Going into educational philanthropy, I see,” Hammer noted. “I’d be careful not to make a habit of that. Have you seen what some of these schools charge in the way of tuition? But then, I imagine Mr. Parker here could tell you all about that.”

Peter swallowed. “Yeah,” he said weakly. “Yeah, it’s a lot.”

“But I suppose that to a protégé of Tony Stark’s, nothing is impossible, hm?”

It took Peter a moment to realize that Hammer was addressing him personally and was expecting a response. “I suppose,” he said awkwardly. He didn’t want to look at Stark; it was hard enough feeling the heat of his body so close to his own, somehow different from that of everyone else in the room. He could nearly hear his heartbeat.

“I was very sorry to hear about your Avengers,” Hammer was adding to Stark.

“I don’t know that they were my Avengers, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

Hammer half-smiled. “You seem very defensive.”

“That’s what happens when your band breaks up.”

“Yes, I was particularly saddened to hear that Captain Rogers had left with the others. I understand
you two were close. Hope you haven’t been suffering too much, especially since I also understand Miss Potts is no longer in the picture,” he said. “Although —” and he tilted his skull to one side — “perhaps you’re not as lonely as we all think.”

His eyes flicked quite unmistakably to Peter.

Stark cleared his throat as the blood filled Peter’s ears. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

But Hammer just waved the long hand that wasn’t holding the champagne. “No need to play coy, Anthony. Anyone with eyes could understand.”

*What does he mean, anyone with eyes? Is it that obvious? Can people tell that we made out? Do people think that we fucked — that we are fucking?* Peter was seized by a vision of the rumors reaching May’s ears and shivered at the flood of nausea in his belly.

The intimation was clear enough that anyone within earshot could have taken Hammer’s meaning, but Stark still played dumb. “I don’t see what you’re trying to say,” he said.

“I think Mr. Parker does,” Hammer said. He took another dignified sip of his champagne. “I shouldn’t be too ashamed, Anthony. It’s all rather Classical, don’t you think?”

Peter had had enough. He didn’t bother to make excuses as he turned away, ignoring Stark saying his name and slipping through the crush of bodies around him — *too close, too close, too close,* he thought — until he finally found a bathroom off the main room and stepped inside, locking the lacquered black door behind him.

His face was flushed when he braced his hands against the marble sink and looked in the mirror, and his reflection was that of a stranger’s: who was this kid with the suit and the shaking hands and the blush and the thoughts he couldn’t stop if he tried? What was he doing here, in this penthouse, in this bathroom that looked a ballroom in Versailles? Shouldn’t he be back in his apartment in a T-shirt, playing video games or watching Netflix?

Was he really so obvious?

*There’s no way he’ll ever do this again, he thought miserably. He’s never going to meet me again, he’s never going to speak to me, there’s no way, his reputation can’t afford it…*

After all, what did the feelings of one hormonal teenager matter to a Captain of Industry with a hell of a lot to lose?

*But he kissed me back…*

God help him, he couldn’t get those kisses out of his mind. He’d only been kissed once before, and that had been Liz back in seventh grade, and he barely counted it because neither of them had a clue what they were doing. But it hadn’t been that way with Stark, who’d left him weak in the knees the moment his tongue had slipped into his mouth, and who’d stolen all his air when he’d shoved him against the wall. Pushing his chin up for better access, his hand on his chest, the scrape of his beard against his face, Christ, how he *wanted* —

He shucked off the jacket, loosened his tie and collar, and splashed water on his face and neck, trying to cool the heat that had risen under his skin — whether from embarrassment, anger, lust, or some amalgamation of the three, he didn’t know.

*Stop it,* he told himself. *You know better. You do. You do.*
Someone knocked on the door, and his heart leaped into his throat.
“Don’t play with fire,” Tony said at last, once he could find his tongue within his dry mouth.

Warning in this chapter for brief sexual language in reference to a minor, some generally distasteful conversation, and a somewhat compromising situation again involving a minor.

Reminder that this is Justin Hammer à la Charles Dance. I encourage you to visualize accordingly.

When he was younger and his father still tolerated him, Tony would sometimes listen to his father’s anecdotes about the war. Amid the stories of espionage and weapons manufacturing, one stuck out particularly in his memory: when his father and Peggy Carter had gone out into the field to retrieve several injured soldiers because there was no one else on hand to do it. Tony could still hear his father telling the story, the smoker’s voice he’d developed later in life roughing up the already rough words.

“… and I go to grab one — and he’s just a kid, ‘bout as old as you are — and I realize that both his legs have been blown off. But he’s still alive. I try to pick him up, but Peggy stops me. And I’ll never forget what she said to me. ‘There’s no point in saving someone who won’t last another hour. Triage, Howard. Triage.’"

Triage, Tony. Triage, he told himself as he retraced Peter’s path through the crowd. What would last longer — his reputation or the kid? Probably the latter, but who was he kidding; the minute Peter had stormed off, he’d known he’d go after him. And go after him he had, barely pausing to mutter an apology to Hammer, who merely said, “Everything all right?” and watched them go with placid curiosity, champagne glass held in hand.

He knocked softly on the bathroom door. “Peter?” There was a little intake of breath from inside.

“Um — yeah —” came Peter’s voice. “Is that you?”

“Yeah.” Thank God they were in a corridor off the main part of the penthouse and not in the middle of the action, with dozens of people listening in. “You okay?”

“Just — needed to breathe —”

“Listen, if this is about Hammer —”

“No, it wasn’t that at all!” Peter said unconvincingly. “There was just… just a lot of people.”
Tony sighed. “Want to open the door?”

There was silence for a little while, and then the knob clicked, and the door swung open on oiled hinges. Peter, jacket off and collar loosened, looking unhappy.

“I’m not coming in there with you,” said Tony, who didn’t miss the kid’s look of disappointment, however quickly he concealed it. “But you come out when you’re ready.” Peter just nodded, biting his lip, which turned a deep berry red as he reached for his jacket on the towel rod. Tony looked at his shoes so he wouldn’t have to look at him. Every time Peter so much as appeared in his periphery, he mentally returned to the wall of the TV room at the mansion. The last few months had worn him out; now, he could fight either his thoughts or his physical desires, but not both. So, if the thoughts and the memories came, he let them.

Peter was fumbling with his tie, turning what had been originally a decently-tied knot into a mess.

“Here. Let me.” Tony gently pushed the kid’s hands away — Christ, the jump in his pulse, why was he like this, why, why, why — and undid the knot altogether. Peter closed his eyes. His throat bobbed as he finished the tie off. A Windsor, different from what he’d had before, but no matter. “There you go.”

“Thanks,” Peter murmured, his eyes averted. Tony squeezed his shoulder.

“I need to go find Hammer,” he said. “Will you be all right on your own?” Peter gave him an uncertain look that Tony suspected was worn by deer right before you struck them with your car.

“I… don’t know…”

Tony led him back to the outskirts of the party and scanned the crowds. “Okay,” he said at last. “You see her?” He pointed surreptitiously to a skinny, elderly woman in a navy evening dress, her skin mottled with liver spots, who stood in a lonely nearby corner. “She’s okay. She’s a bit doddery so she’ll probably think you’re one of her nephews. Oh, and if she offers you anything out of her purse, just make like Nancy Reagan. Got that?”

Peter nodded determinedly, lips pressed together as he ran a hand through his hair and headed for her. Meanwhile, Tony scanned the party again, this time looking for Hammer’s head towering above everyone else’s —

A hand alighted on his forearm, and he looked down to see the girl from earlier, Cory, looking up at him through her lashes.

“I couldn’t help noticing that you disappeared,” she said. “I hope everything’s all right —”

“Yes, everything’s fine,” he said distractedly. “Hang on, I don’t suppose you’ve seen Justin anywhere?”

“Justin Hammer?” She looked around, brow furrowed exquisitely. “I think I saw him slip out onto the balcony a few minutes ago. I expect you want to talk business?” She snagged two champagne flutes from a passing waiter with practiced grace and handed him one.

“Something like that,” he said, giving the French doors that led onto the balcony an anxious look.

“But it’s a party,” said Cory. “You can talk business anytime. And anyway —” she leaned closer so her Revlon-red mouth was right by his ear — “I’m only going to be in town for tonight and tomorrow.”
Tony tried to think of a response and failed. “Fascinating,” he said at last. “But if you’ll excuse me…” He brushed past her and made a beeline for the balcony.

Outside, he closed his eyes and breathed in the night air. The sky was reddish-black, and the buildings around them glowed neon, the roads glittering with car headlights. By the railing, Hammer spoke to some anonymous couple. He caught Tony’s eye and made his excuses to join him.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” he said. Tony just hummed. “I hope that boy of yours is all right.”

“He’s not mine.”

“Really? I don’t think I saw you let go of him once this evening.”

Tony groaned and set his champagne — he’d taken it with him — on the railing. “Whatever you’re trying to imply,” he said, “you’re wrong.”

“Anthony, please. You should know by now that the wealthy always operate in stereotypes. I blame it on all that blue hemoglobin.”

“I am not —” Tony dropped his voice — “I am not in a sexual relationship with my grant student. Okay?”

Hammer grinned and shook his head, taking a sip of his champagne. “Just like you weren’t in a sexual relationship with Captain Rogers?”

Low blow. Tony set his jaw and looked away. Hammer chuckled. “You really are endearingly predictable,” he said.

“I’m not —”

But Hammer cut him off. “Anthony, Anthony. Society may change — I remember when we were convinced the Soviets were going to bomb the hell out of us, and now look if we aren’t blowing them behind the desk — but the attitudes of the affluent stay essentially the same.”

Tony took a bitter sip of his champagne. “I’m not even going to pretend I know what that means.”

Hammer waved a hand. “Sure, a few bombs go off, your little Avengers club, or whatever it was, lands in the shitter, the world changes — but some things, Anthony, some things just… don’t.”

Tony sighed wearily. “And I suppose you want me to ask what doesn’t change.”

“It’s a very simple equation, Anthony.” Hammer leaned against the railing, watching him, and Tony did his best not to push him off the balcony altogether. “Rich men need something on their arm. Poor boys love rich men. And, if you’ll permit me to be vulgar,” he added, lowering his voice for the first time that evening, ”no man refuses tail like that. Especially when it follows you like a kitten and hangs on every word you say.”

Tony gulped hard against the rise of bile in his throat.

“You’re trying to get a rise out of me,” he said with a tone that was decidedly more blasé than he felt. “Good luck with that.”

“Am I? I’m merely saying that you seem rather preoccupied.” Hammer tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially. “Don’t be. We understand.”

“Do you now.”
“A man of your reputation turning down the advances of What’s-Her-Name in there? Oh, yes,” he added at Tony’s look of protest, “I saw that through the door. People notice that sort of thing, Anthony. And anyway, we’re not children here. We all know what protégé really means.”

“You used the word, not me.”

“You never corrected me.” Hammer squeezed his shoulder. “I shouldn’t lose sleep over it. Although, God knows,” he added wryly, “I can’t imagine you’re doing much sleeping anyway.”

He squeezed his shoulder again and strode back inside the penthouse, leaving Tony feeling hot and nauseous. Hammer had left his champagne glass on the railing. Feeling spiteful, Tony knocked it into the darkness beyond the balcony and then finished his own drink, listening for the satisfying chink as the glass struck the pavement far below.

He should find Peter, make their excuses, and leave. Everything was hot and cloying; every conversation had been tainted by the money lining their pockets, and no doubt that had been doubly apparent to Peter, who was probably desperate to leave by now. They could order a pizza, so they’d have a proper meal, and then get a taxi to take Peter home. Damn what Hammer thought. Damn what any of them thought. It wasn’t like that, he knew that —

— so, really, why did he have to work so hard to convince himself?

Back inside, Peter materialized suddenly at his elbow. Tony wondered if he had been waiting for him and, if so, how long. He was startled by how welcome the sight of him was.

“Mr. Stark, how long do we have to stay?” He asked it quietly, with a fake smile on his face, but his desperation was clear enough. “I think that lady tried to offer me acid…?”

“Yeah, she does that.” He made to touch his shoulder but then thought better of it. “If you want to leave, we can leave.”

“Yes, please.”

“Let’s blow this joint.”

But they’d barely reached the center of the crowd, where Dot was holding court, before Cory reappeared amid the crush of people, and put one manicured hand on his arm.

“Already leaving?”

“Afraid so,” he said shortly. Peter was a little ahead of him; now he stopped and turned to look back at them.

He was good. Tony had only caught the slightest suggestion of envy before it vanished behind a disarming cold poker face.

Cory was not to be shook off, it seemed. “I was hoping we could see each other again?” she said.

“Hm. I’ve got a very full schedule. Might be a challenge to fit you in.”

“Like I told you: I’m not here that long. How about tonight?”

Tony was suddenly aware of another pair of eyes on them — Hammer, speaking to a crowd of dark-suited men with haughty gazes, giving him an amused smile. What was he had said? A man of your
reputation turning down the advances of What’s-Her-Name in there? People notice that sort of thing, Anthony.

The decision was shamefully easy to make.

“You know where my place is?”

“Doesn’t everyone?"

“Say, eleven o’clock?” That gave him half an hour to get Peter home. She flashed him a smile, red lips against her white teeth.

“Okay. See you, then.”

He brushed past her to reach Peter and automatically hooked an arm around his shoulders. But Peter angled himself away, and by the time they’d made their excuses to the hostess, Tony had given up and removed his hand.

The elevator ride they took down to the ground floor was palpably chilly. Tony didn’t dare touch him; he could feel the cocktail of emotions swirling within the kid’s amygdala. Anger, first and foremost. Envy, of course. And probably a fair amount of self-loathing, too.

Not for the first time, as he watched the floor numbers click downward, he thought about how strange it all was, how they were both so aware of each other and yet also willfully oblivious, as though if they pretended enough, it would just vanish on its own.

That’s one hell of an elephant in the room, Tony thought. It sounded like something his dad would say.

He glanced over at Peter, but the kid’s gaze was fixed resolutely on the metal floor.

Things only seemed to get worse once they got in the car. Even though his eyes were supposed to be on the road, Tony couldn’t help sneaking glances at the boy in the passenger seat, seething and determined not to be caught at it.

Traffic lights turned their faces different colors. The radio, which Peter had probably switched on to distract from overwhelming silence, played The Doors.

They pulled up to the apartment building, and Tony pulled the car into a spare parking space, sensing that there was talking that would be done.

They sat there. Peter made no move to open the door.

On the radio, Jim Morrison sang about how mankind hurt the earth.

Peter drew in a shaky breath and blurted out, “I’m sorry!”

Tony sighed and rubbed at his temples. “Kid…”

“I know it’s stupid, I know I don’t have a right to expect — I just can’t help it…” He sounded close to tears.
“Peter,” Tony said, “I want you to go inside, get something to drink, and calm down. You can’t keep thinking like this.”

“I just have to know,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard him, “if it had been —”

“Don’t go down this road, Peter —”

“If it had been me instead of —”

“Peter —”

“Instead of her, would you have…?” He didn’t finish the thought.

Tony sighed again. “Don’t make me answer that,” he said at last, wearily. Somewhere in his head, he could hear Hammer laughing in derision.

“I kind of want an answer.”

He looked over at him at last. Peter was a black shape in the passenger seat, save for the orange street light that illuminated the wet tear marks on his face. The urge came over him again — press him into the seat, it whispered, kiss him, make him squeak the way he did yesterday — but he dug his nails into his palm and resisted.

Peter was still looking at him.

“It would be okay,” he said softly. “You know that, right?”

“You’re too young.”

“And if I wasn’t?”

“Peter, that’s an academic question that I don’t have to answer.”

“I want an answer,” Peter repeated. Tony didn’t dare look at him. It was bad enough just knowing that he was there, with the heat of his body radiating from barely two feet away. All he had to do was lean over a little. He could only imagine what it must be like for Peter himself, who, with his expanded senses, probably felt as if Tony was directly on top of him already.

There was no already. He had no intention of going nearer.

“You’d do it, wouldn’t you?” Peter whispered. “If I was older.” There was a brief pause and a rustling noise, and Tony broke his own rule and looked up at him. Peter had pulled his tie loose and was now undoing the buttons of his own collar with shaking fingers. “It’d be okay.”

He should put a stop to this. He knew that. It would be easy, too, to make him rebutton his shirt and go.

Easy, and yet so hard.

The Windsor knot from earlier now hung over the kid’s sternum. He’d undone the first four buttons of his shirt, and his clavicle shone brilliant orange in the streetlight; the hollow of his throat and the shadow of his open collar were purple-blue, the sort of contrast seen in comic books or Andy Warhol prints.

He looked too good. Like something you paid an ugly amount of money for on the internet.
“Behave,” Tony said weakly.

But Peter just edged closer so that he was directly against the transmission. His eyes glimmered in the dim light the same way that the marks from his tears did on his cheeks.

He laid a tentative hand on Tony’s upper arm. It felt almost electric, that point of contact, and suddenly, Tony couldn’t stop himself.

His cheek was soft against his fingers, and wet from his tears, and Peter tilted his face into the caress. Shaking fingers took Tony’s hand and traced a fingertip lightly over his palm.

Tony shivered, unable to look away.

Almost nervously, Peter’s eyes flicked up to his. He licked his lips.

He pushed the tip of his index finger into his mouth. His tongue was warm against his skin, his teeth gently scraping Tony’s nailbed. He pursed his lips around his knuckle and sucked, eyes on his like some wet dream. His tongue slipped over his finger, pressing it against the silken flesh at the floor of his mouth as he mouthed at him, a not-so-innocent come-on for something else — of which Tony was all-too-aware, and of which Peter couldn’t not have been aware, not with the way he gazed at him, the invitation in his eyes and the eagerness with which he hollowed his cheeks…

He took another finger into his mouth with an unnerving methodicalness, nibbling on his knuckle like a kitten. The thought brought him back to Hammer’s earlier insinuations — especially when it follows you around like...

Tony yanked his fingers from his mouth. Parts of him throbbed in ways he didn’t like, and it was only made worse by the sight of Peter’s wide, dismayed eyes, his mouth open, saliva shining on his lower lip and threatening to drip down his chin —

“Don’t play with fire,” Tony said at last, once he could find his tongue within his dry mouth. “Get inside.”

“Mr. Stark —” Peter began, but Tony couldn’t stand to hear him speak.

“Peter, I am begging you.”

“But it’s okay —”


He was starting to cry again, and the desperate, broken sound tugged at something inside Tony. “I can’t help it,” Peter whispered. “Can’t I just…” He didn’t finish the sentence. Tony remembered the feeling of his lips around his fingers and shivered.

He wanted to lose control. Pull him into your lap. Shove his mouth where you know you want it to go.

“Please,” Peter said miserably.

Tony lost his patience.

“Get inside, now.”

“But —”
“Peter, I won’t tell you again.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Peter shoved open the door and fled into the night, his footsteps echoing around the silent parking lot.

Tony closed his eyes, leaned back against the headrest of the seat, and tried to clear his mind of Peter’s gaze, of the desire that slammed through his veins and howled that he should never have let the kid leave the car, that it was a waste of time and sheer performative potential.

There wasn’t enough brain bleach in the world.

He hated the man he became around Peter. And yet, and yet, and yet.

Cory was waiting for him on the mansion’s ground floor when he arrived, seated on the arm of the leather couch with her clutch on the cushion.

“There you are,” she said. Tony made a show of glancing at his watch.

“I thought we agreed thirty minutes?”

“I’m not very patient,” she said.

She tasted like lipstick and champagne when he kissed her. Everything with Peter should have dulled his hunger for this sort of thing, but rather, to his shame, it seemed to have increased it. If he closed his eyes, he immediately returned to those moments against the wall, and the warmth of Peter’s tongue against his fingers. Christ. Could the kid have done anything more intimate?

Well, yes. Tony’s mind was awash with the possibilities.

He picked her up, hands against her bare buttocks — no underwear, not quite the thing for a Southern debutante — and carried her in the direction of the elevator.

“Why not there?” she asked, her mouth somewhere in the region of his left ear.

“Because I have a roommate, and sex on the couch often offends.”

“Iron Man has a roommate?”

He didn’t want to hear her talk anymore. In the elevator, he set her down and let her kiss his neck and palm him through his trousers while he breathed in her rose petal hair conditioner and imagined someone different.

Once they were in his bedroom, things progressed much as they always had: clothes off and get off. And yet… An ugly little moment mid-thrust and breathy moan, when Tony realized that the starry-eyed look of wonder in the girl’s eyes was piercingly, achingly familiar.

Later that night, once she was asleep, he got up, put on his robe, and poured himself a scotch. Somewhere out there, Peter Parker was probably crying himself into a stupor. He hadn’t meant to be so blunt about it. He’d just panicked. That, he tried to reassure himself, was probably why he was safe.

He glanced back at the girl curled up like a cat in his bed. She looked twenty-one, maybe twenty-two if he wanted to be generous. Easily half his own age. There was a wonderfully descriptive word for
when you fucked pretty debutantes that made the May to your December. Overcompensation.

What a stereotype. Hammer’s voice came back to him suddenly: *you really are endearingly predictable.*

Yes, he was. Because, as he stood there looking at the girl and thinking about the boy, Tony’s body flared up with all the symptoms of yet another panic attack, familiar and somehow nearly comforting.

He sent the text around the three the next morning, once his body was through the worst of the anxiety.

*Come over if you have the time. We need to talk this through.*
A matter of interpretation

Chapter Summary

"What?" Peter snapped. "What am I?"
Stark snorted. "A headache."

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes some sexual content involving a minor. Use your discretion (although if you’re not comfortable with this sort of thing, I’d suggest reading a different fic).

Also, just a note for future reference: updates will becoming every Thursday for the next few weeks.

He’d read the text once, twice, twenty times, and the tone remained elusive.

Come over if you have the time. We need to talk this though.

Was he angry, or weakening? Peter knew he’d gone too far last night. What had possessed him — sucking on his fingers, all but throwing himself at him? It had been absolutely out of line.

But the look on his face when he’d done it… For a half a minute, he’d thought Stark would seize him by his tie and yank him into his lap.

He wasn’t stupid (he didn’t think). He knew that no adult should ever look at someone his age the way he had. But when it was because of him… when the look happened because of something he’d done…

He felt dangerously powerful and dangerously out of his depth. Like both the tidal wave and the swimmer about to die in it.

May hadn’t yet returned when he’d made it back to the apartment, for which he’d been grateful. Upset, embarrassed, and altogether unprepared to see anyone, he’d stumbled into his room to cry into his pillow until he heard the apartment door open and May and Nathan murmuring happily to each other, and feigned sleep for when May looked in on him.

As always, his insomnia kept him awake, but that night, he didn’t try to distract himself with some pointless project. Instead, he’d stared up at the low ceiling and wondered why he had to be so stupid. Mulling over the night’s events. Envisioning what might have happened if Stark hadn’t pulled away.

And then his phone had lit up the darkened room with that cryptic message, and Peter gave up hope that he would sleep for the next week. Perhaps even the next month.
“Did you get the notes?” Michelle didn’t bother to lower her voice amid the post-bell clamor as students shouldered backpacks and made desperate bids to reach the door of the classroom first. Many complained loudly about the three pages of problems they’d been assigned out of the textbook, despite it being a Friday. Peter knew he’d never finish it.

“What?”

“I asked, did you get the notes?” Michelle repeated impatiently. She still looked half-unconscious. It was first block Physics, and, because of that, she could probably be excused her habit of sleeping through the majority of the lecture. It was a mystery to everyone, Peter included, how she maintained a 4.0.

“Yeah, I missed a couple of slides, but —”

“Peter?”

He jerked his head around at the sound of the teacher’s voice.

“Dr. West?”

Dr. West was wiping the morning’s calculations off the white board. “Think we could have a word?” Peter glanced at Michelle, who was busy untangling the cord of her headphones, and mouthed, I’ll catch up. She nodded unconcernedly and headed out the door, still battling with her headphones.

He went to Dr. West’s desk.

“Hey, thanks for taking a pause.” Something about the friendliness of his tone put Peter on the alert. “How’ve you been doing?”

Peter frowned suspiciously. “Okay…?”

“I just wanted talk to you for a second because, well, frankly, Peter —” he consulted his computer screen, a furrow appearing in his brow — “I’m getting a little concerned. You were doing great the first few months, but now you’re starting to slip. Hard.” He fixed Peter with an earnest gaze. “Is there something going on? Anything that we should be aware of?”

Peter did his best to keep his expression blank as he replied, “No?”

“I took the liberty of speaking with your counselor,” Dr. West continued. “She mentioned that you’d had some sort of attack a few weeks ago?”

The panic attack. It felt like years ago, not weeks.

“Yeah,” he said. ‘But that was, you know, an isolated incident.”

Dr. West nodded, frowning. “And you’re sure that there aren’t any problems at home?”

“Nope. No problems.” Did that sound too glib? If it did, there was no way to fix it now.

West looked perturbed. “Well, in any case. You know that they don’t usually put sophomores straight into Physics. They made a special case for you and your friend. If there’s really nothing wrong —” he gave him a meaningful look that Peter didn’t know how to interpret — “then I’m going to need you to put in a little more effort and pull your grade up.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, sure. I’ll do my best.” He tugged his backpack more firmly onto his
shoulders as the late bell rang. “If that’s everything, can you maybe write me a pass?”

West nodded and scribbled the time and his initials on a sticky-note, which he then handed to Peter. “If you ever need to talk about anything, my door’s always open,” he said.

Peter gave him a noncommittal smile and left for his next class.

As she had the other day, FRIDAY let him in the moment he called in at the mansion. Now, nervous and uncertain what to expect, Peter tiptoed through the corridors of the second level, his footsteps echoing off the white walls. Clean, with little decor to interrupt the blankness. It reminded Peter of hospitals, or perhaps an emergency room.

He’d met Happy downstairs, who had told him that he’s in the office, but just be on your guard, he’s in a mood.

Of course, Happy had conveniently forgotten to tell him where the office was. As he peered through open doors — all the while trying not to look like he was lost — Peter wondered about what he’d said. He’s in a mood. Did that mean that he’d been thinking about last night? Stupid question. What person wouldn’t be? But was it Peter or the man from the party, Hammer, who’d upset him? Both? Maybe that girl had had something to do with it, too.

If he was honest with himself, what Hammer had said had bothered him as well. But then, everything about him had.

“Parker.”

He whirled around to find Stark himself in the doorway of a room that Peter was pretty sure had been closed off before, a hand in his pocket and a furrow in his brow.

“Hi!” Peter said perhaps too loudly.

“Hey.”

Peter waved his phone haphazardly. “You, um, you texted me…”

“Yeah.” Stark jerked his head upward. “Come on. Let’s talk somewhere else.”
Somewhere else turned out to be the dining room, a large, ultramodern structure dominated by a long glass table in the center and the art deco chandelier that hung above it.

“You actually eat here?” Peter asked, momentarily forgetting himself.

“Nah, I save it for the business functions.”

Peter turned to look at him and crossed his arms, feeling suddenly vulnerable. “Is that what this is?” he asked tentatively. “A business function?” Even as he said it, he realized the true reason that Stark must have taken him to the dining room: there was no door, destroying any privacy they might have had elsewhere. Peter told himself to get a grip.

What does it matter if he takes you to the dining room versus somewhere else, it shouldn’t matter to you, can you maybe be normal for once…

“I have no idea,” Stark said flatly.

“Is — um —” Peter cleared his throat — “is she still here?”

Stark looked confused for a moment. Then his expression cleared. “Oh, no. She left earlier this morning.”

Peter nodded to himself and walked to the large window that granted him a view of the skyline, so he could be distracted from his feelings. He had no right to be jealous. In his head, he understood that, but his body kept slipping up.

“You wanted to talk to me?” he asked after the silence had stretched to three minutes.

Something creaked. Stark had sat down in one of the chairs at the table. Peter looked back at him. “Yeah,” Stark said. “Yeah, we need to talk.” Then he added: “Do you want to maybe sit down?”

Peter gulped. “I think I’d rather stand, thanks.”

“Okay.”

Silence.

“Look,” Stark said at last. “You’re a good kid —” and something in Peter’s chest deflated at that word, kid — “and you’re freakishly talented, and I will absolutely keep training you — in fact, I have to, thanks to Ross — but… this whole thing needs to get sorted out before any of that can happen.”

“Sorted out,” Peter repeated.

Another few seconds of silence ticked by. Stark coughed. “Full disclosure,” he said at last, with the sort of tone that told Peter he was trying desperately to keep control of the situation. “I don’t like how I feel about you.”

Peter gulped. “And how do you feel about —”

But Stark held up a hand. “Now you. We’ll work up to questions.”

Flushing, Peter studied the hangnail on his left ring finger as he said, “I don’t like how I feel about you either. Can I ask you a question now?” he added. “Full disclosure?”

Stark nodded. He wasn’t looking at him either.
“If I were eighteen, would things be different?”

Letting out a sigh, Stark scrubbed a hand over his face. “Probably. How long has this been a thing, for you?”

“Full disclosure?”

“Full disclosure.”

Peter screwed up his face. “Since I was, like, ten? But that was, like, a celebrity crush. It didn’t really — you know — until lately.”

“When’s lately?” asked Stark. He seemed to be searching for something in his answers, but Peter couldn’t tell what he wanted to find.

“About since the time you showed up in my bedroom, unveiled all my secrets, and then asked me to come to Europe with you.”

Stark’s lips twitched, and he raised his eyebrows. “Well. When you put it like that…” Peter almost grinned. He laughed shakily and leaned back against the window, facing him. Something in the atmosphere seemed to shift, get lighter.

“Can I ask you something else?” he said. Stark nodded, and Peter wet his lips. “How angry were you? After I…” He didn’t continue, but he didn’t need to; he knew they were both thinking of those few moments in the TV room and the other few moments in his car. Specificity was irrelevant.

Stark coughed and didn’t meet his eyes. “I wasn’t angry,” he said. “Not at you. Do you regret it?”

“Honestly?”

“That’s what full disclosure means, last I checked.”

Peter flushed. “No. Sometimes I think that I do, but then… then something will happen, and I’ll remember, and… and then I think that it was a little too good to regret. You know?”

Was it only his imagination, or did Stark almost nod?

“Can I ask you something else?” he added. Stark’s eyes flicked toward him again.

The question flew straight out of his id, unimpeded by common sense.

“Would you do it again?” Instantly, he covered his face with his hands, turned on his heel, and walked away toward the opposite end of the table. “Sorry. Ignore that. I didn’t mean it.”

But all that Stark said was: “Full disclosure?”

He stopped in his tracks, took his hands from his face, and looked up at him. Slowly, he nodded.

Stark sucked in a breath. “Can’t stop thinking about it,” he said.

Peter bit his lip, afraid to look at him but afraid that if he looked away, he would miss something vital. “If — I mean, if you were — if —” He broke off helplessly. “I don’t know what I’m trying to ask anymore.”

“Take your time.”
“I just —” He sighed in defeat, covered his face with his hands. “I’m done. I don’t think I have anything left to say. Like —” he groaned — “in my head, I know what I want to say, it’s just…” saying it.” He closed his mouth and gazed at him, as though he would find the words he wanted scrawled across Stark’s face.

Stark looked away first, shaking his head. “Kid…”

“I know it’s bad, I just…” He shrugged, defeated. “Do you know what I’m trying to say? ‘Cause I don’t know if I do.”

Stark cleared his throat, and the sound seemed to bring Peter back to himself.

“I think I can guess,” he said.

More silence. It stretched past the one minute mark. Stark wasn’t looking at him, instead studying the shiny edge of the glass table.

Abruptly, he sighed and buried his head in his hands. “I can’t keep this up anymore,” he said wearily, more to himself than to Peter.

His chair scraped back as, with no preamble, he stood, strode to the wall near the doorway, and tapped a complex code into the keypad mounted there. Peter tensed, half-expecting an army of bots to materialize to throw him out the window for his own impudence. But Stark just turned back to look at him.

“Security cameras just went conveniently on the fritz,” he said. Part of Peter wanted to say, “You can do that?” but the rest of him stifled the impulse because Stark was coming toward him and because he’d just grasped the significance of what he’d said. One of his hands curled around the back of the nearest chair for support.

Stark came to a cautious stop a foot from him and reached up to touch his cheek. Peter remembered the evening before. Sucking on his fingers.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” Stark said cautiously.

His response was immediate. “Yes. Yes.”

“Just the one,” he murmured, moments before his lips brushed against his.

Already, he’d forgotten how delicious this was. The feeling of his lips on his, the scratch of his beard against his skin — he parted his lips just a fraction and felt Stark’s tongue slip into his mouth. He reached out and grabbed Stark’s collar just before his knees gave out, and he slumped back against the side of the table. Their lips left each other.

Peter stared up at him, breathing hard, still holding onto his collar. Stark looked horrified, although whether the feeling was directed at Peter or himself was difficult to tell.

“How long will the cameras not work?” Peter asked.

“Ten minutes.” He seemed unable to take his eyes off him.

“You said just the one…” Peter bit his lip. “Can we make that stretch?”

For an awful moment, he thought he would say no.

Then Stark nodded, the tension leaving his shoulders. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, we can.”
One hand threaded through Peter’s hair — pulling at the roots in a way that made his nerves come online — and Stark tilted his chin upward with one hand to kiss him again, Peter’s mouth falling open, his heart hammering in his ribcage. His hands slipped from his collar onto his chest. Stark’s mouth darted from his lips to a spot between his right cheek and his chin, moving diagonally over his jaw to the place beneath his ear. One hand sat heavy against his neck, his thumb stroking his cheek, and the other slipped down his side, over the back of his thigh to hoist him onto the table, his legs apart and Stark between them with his lips on his jugular, one hand on his knee. Peter leaned his head back and stared up at the smooth white ceiling, breathless, chest rising and falling. *Can we make that stretch,* he’d said, but this seemed like so much more than a mere extension of time.

Stark’s fingers hooked around the collar of his T-shirt and pulled it down so he could press his lips to the stretch of skin beneath his collarbone.

“Christ,” he murmured against him.

His response was immediate. “Please don’t stop.”

“We can’t keep going like this,” Stark said softly. He glanced at the doorway, and Peter followed his gaze; it would grant an unimpeded view of the table to anyone unlucky enough to pass by. But he was pressed against him, and Peter could feel the want thrumming in Stark’s body almost as clearly as if it were his own. The pounding of his blood. When he was close enough, he could hear his heart work.

“How long do we have?” Peter pressed.

“Peter…” It was a word of protest, but uttered faintly, with little feeling. He was already leaning in for him again.

“Please.”

“Show me,” Stark whispered, his mouth so close that Peter could have kissed the words from his lips.

Peter kissed him again, laid his hands over Stark’s, and pushed them to his hips, to the band of his jeans. It was bold — far too bold — but he felt drunk on adrenaline of kissing him, the sort of feeling he usually had to leap off a building to achieve.

“How long?” he asked again.

“Six minutes? Maybe seven?” Stark whispered.

“Can we?”

“Peter —” he was holding his hands at his hips with a controlled firmness, as though terrified that they would act independent of his will — “this isn’t a good idea —”

“I know, I know…” He swallowed. “Just the one time?”

“Peter…”

“Just once.”

Stark gazed at him for a long moment.

He nodded.
It wasn’t what he’d expected. Self-consciously, he’d pictured some luxurious hour spent in a bed with sheets that had a higher thread count than he had hair on his head. Seated unceremoniously on a dining table, breath catching in Stark’s neck as Stark unzipped his jeans with one hand and trailed kisses over his forehead, having a time limit, wasn’t what he’d had in mind.

Stark took Peter’s hand, pressed his lips to the back of it before bringing it into Peter’s open jeans, and he forgot all his disappointment. He looped his free arm around Stark’s neck, his fingers digging into his shoulder, as Stark palmed him through his boxers with Peter’s hand.

“Whoa – okay – wow –”

Stark shushed him briefly and tucked his chin over his head. The musk of his aftershave made his throat burn, but somehow, it felt like protection to Peter, who bucked his hips upward and murmured through the red haze of sensation, “Pull my hair.”

“What?”

“Pull my hair.”

Stark kissed the top of his head and wrapped a hand in his curls to yank upwards. Peter caught his breath at the pain in his scalp and whimpered. Stark’s teeth scraped the top of his forehead, and Peter felt an answering jolt between his legs. He tugged him closer, and Stark pulled a handful of his hair again as, with his other hand, he moved Peter’s hand against his erection, against the growing wet stain in his boxers. The glass table rattled beneath him.

Peter’s back arched, and his vision grayed out, with Stark’s voice in his ear: “Good boy — just breathe — you’re doing fine —”

All but blind, he kissed the underside of Stark’s chin and set his teeth there., but Stark jerked his head away, only to kiss him on the mouth, as if to placate him. But Peter hardly felt it, because his orgasm had risen inside him like a wave, with Stark palming him faster and, ohh —

He opened his eyes. His heart hammered in his chest as though he’d just run a mile.

Stark was gazing at him, a furrow in his brow, his hand now relegated to the far safer location of his shoulder.

“Okay?” he asked. “You went all quiet.”

Peter nodded shakily. He felt fine. Great, in fact.

“Yeah – yeah, that was good, really good…”

He stretched upward to kiss him again, trailing a hand down his chest and breaking the kiss to glance down meaningfully at the clear bulge in Stark’s jeans.

Stark took his hand and pushed it gently away. “That’s okay.”

“I don’t mind, really —”

“Peter, it’s okay. ” He sounded desperate.

“But…” Wasn’t this supposed to be a give-and-take arrangement? “Okay…” he said uncertainly.
Stark went to a nearby side table to pluck several tissues from an ornate dispenser and handed them to him with a shaking hand. Biting his lip, only now blushing, Peter cleaned himself off and walked on unsteady legs to the wastepaper basket near the door to toss the tissues out. He did up his fly facing the wall and tried to remember how to breathe properly. The sex — did he dare call it that? — had made his body more aware of its customary state of exhaustion, and he felt flattened.

It had happened — ish.

So what now?

He went back to Stark, who was seated at the table and looking at the spot where Peter had been perched just moments before. Peter laid a tentative hand on his where it rested on the glass.

Stark brushed his hand away and touched Peter’s shoulders. “Peter…” he began. “We can’t keep this going. You know that.”

“But —”

“Peter.” His tone grew a little harder. “We can’t. We can’t do this again, and we can’t ever talk about it. You understand that, right?”

“Look, I’m not stupid,” Peter began slowly. “I know that this isn’t, you know, legal. I know that it’s really risky, but…” He broke off, unsure of how to put his feelings into words.

“Peter.” Stark was using the voice that Peter remembered from the airport in Germany. You’re done. “Don’t do this to yourself. You’re smart, you know that it can’t happen. That it shouldn’t.”

Peter groaned and rubbed at his eyes. “I do know that, but pretending that it never happened is pretty messed up, when you think about —”

“What? And this —” Stark gestured furiously between the two of them — “isn’t? Just what is your definition of messed-up, Parker? ‘Cause I think we might be using different dictionaries.”

He looked away, eyes stinging.

What had they really done, when he really took the time to consider it? He’d let him pull his hair, and he’d let him put his hand in his pants, but he had more or less gotten himself off, hadn’t he? And Stark seemed determined that letting Peter touch him was asking too much.

A furtive groping, and now he was being shown the door.

Nausea bubbled up in his stomach, and he turned sharply to leave, throwing his hands up as if in surrender. “I’m done,” he choked around the growing lump in his throat. “I’m out.”

A chair scraped back behind him, he heard his name, and then Stark grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face him. “Don’t go just yet.”

“No, hang on—”

“Peter —”

“Can you just listen to me for three seconds?” he snapped.

“Lower your voice!”

“Fine,” Peter hissed through his teeth. “I know that I’m a broke teenager,” he continued with
exaggerated levelness, “and that you’re way too old for me, but – God –” he was starting to lose his composure again – “you’re the only person I can talk to about — about anything. And believe me, I wish I could make that go both ways because then you couldn’t fuck me over like you’re doing right now and not know how it feels!”

“Peter, if you think that that’s what I want —” Stark stopped and started again. “I don’t think you understand what’s going on,” he said. “You’re —” But again, he stopped short.

“What?” Peter snapped. “What am I?”

He snorted. “A headache.”

He said it almost affectionately, as though, in a different setting, it might have been paired with a crooked little smile and a chuck under Peter’s chin. But his face was too bitter for that, and the hand that wasn’t holding Peter’s arm remained at his side.

“A headache,” Peter repeated. “Yeah, well. Maybe you should have just stayed out of my fucking apartment two months ago. Would have saved us both a hell of a lot of trouble.”

He fled.

Two buildings away from the mansion, he ducked into a deserted alley and pulled his suit from its customary place in the front pocket of his backpack. He changed quickly, not especially concerned if someone saw him, and then slipped up the nearest wall. It had been ages since he’d done this, and only now did he realize just how badly he’d missed it: battling gravity, the burn in his muscles, this was all he needed, this, this, this, this, nothing else, nothing else…

With barely a grunt of exertion, he swung himself onto the roof and looked around the city. Skyscrapers, Stark’s tower rising high above the rest, white and angelic, and God, Peter thought he might be sick.

In his head, he knew that Stark was right, that what had happened should never have been done — but God help him, he wanted more of it, and Stark’s adamance that it could never happen again made him feel grotesquely impure, like the hormonal teenager that he self-consciously knew himself to be.

He hated the hypocrisy, he hated Stark’s half-assed attempts to keep himself out of the fire — using Peter’s hand instead of his own, as though that made it all okay — and God help him, he hated the way that he, Peter, had thrown himself at him. But could he even blame himself? He’d been living unnaturally fast for the last six months; seeing his uncle get gunned down in their kitchen had impressed on him how quickly things ended.

Beyond that, he wasn’t sure how to interpret those few minutes in the dining room. Had Stark been humoring him? Was that the most Stark would allow himself to do?

Or had Peter been taken advantage of?

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Or had Peter been taken advantage of?

For the first time, he realized the inherent danger of any relationship with Stark. How could he say for certain what his motives were? He was suddenly aware of his heart beating faster.

He didn’t want to think that Stark was capable of that.

His past was blotted with a lot of stupid decisions, but this was possibly the stupidest one he’d ever
made.

He wanted to hurt something. And he hated that, too, because he shouldn’t be using his abilities to make himself feel better, that’s not what Ben would have wanted.

Thinking about his uncle opened up the gates to the rage that he could usually keep beneath the surface. Not now.

Fuck being safe. Fuck whatever had been agreed without his say.

He wanted to hit someone.
Karma

Chapter Summary

By now, he should have been better at accepting his past mistakes. And he was getting better (he thought, he hoped, he wished). It was just that this one mistake was so much harder to forgive himself for.

Chapter Notes

Longest chapter yet!

Thanks to dinochickennugget for giving me all that information on deep vein thrombosis that I didn’t end up using. You’re great.

Warning in this chapter for some slightly graphic descriptions of physical injuries and some self-harm.

We're just going to assume that Tony rebuilt Dum-E after Iron Man 3 for sentimental reasons.

What was there left to say?

Quite a lot, if you were Tony Stark.

To Steve, he might have reminded him a few times how good they’d been for each other, and how much he hated waking up alone and immediately wishing that Steve was doing the same.

To Pepper, any shade of *maybe we should think this through before we do something drastic? Maybe you don’t need to give the entire company back?*

To Peter —

Anything from *don’t get carried away by your fantasies to were things otherwise, you’d already be in bed with me, probably still wearing that stupid grin that I like for some godforsaken reason.*

Because it was absolutely true, he realized. It had taken all his willpower not to ravish the kid any more than he already had — his stomach twisted when he remembered unzipping his jeans and the brief sensation of his hardening cock under his hand through his plaid boxers. The little moans in his ear, the little whimper when he’d pulled his hair.

He’d been delicious. The impossibility of putting their encounter out of mind made him panicky and snappish to Happy when he asked him to drive him back to the compound several hours later.

He should have known better than to lose control. He should never have scheduled that meeting, and he should never have reached out to him. He should have stopped the kid long before he angled the
conversation in its inevitable direction. The kid had been right: if Tony had had the good sense to just leave him alone and never get involved in his life, none of this would have happened.

But he hadn’t. By now, he should have been better at accepting his past mistakes. And he was getting better (he thought, he hoped, he wished). It was just that this one mistake was so much harder to forgive himself for.

The compound was silent, and the first floor was deserted when Tony arrived. He threw his coat onto a nearby table and strode into the kitchen. His legs were shaking, and he felt as though eating something might trick his nerves into calming down.

But being in the kitchen meant that the metal table would be right there in front of him. The place where Peter had been sitting when Tony had first recognized his worship for what it was. He couldn’t see it without thinking of him, wet from his shower, eyes downcast, collar loose. The kid seemed to have permeated every room of the building. He couldn’t go anywhere without remembering something that had happened there.

And now it would be the same at the mansion.

He had wanted him then, and he wanted him still, try hard as he might to assure himself of the contrary. No amount of high society hook-ups would change the reality of his feelings, it seemed.

He thought about Justin Hammer and his reputation, rumors of which often oozed between sips of Long Island Iced Teas at cocktail parties.

Tony surveyed the scant contents of the fridge and gave up his plan as a lost cause. Instead, he made himself a coffee and drank it black, facing the window that overlooked the city.

He had no intention of becoming another Hammer. To be frank, he’d always liked his partners a little older, particularly his men – he’d have to, wouldn’t he, to go for a ninety-year-old. It was probably another, slightly more embarrassing facet of his residual daddy issues. So it wasn’t his youth that attracted him (although, God help him, there was something about the kid’s fresh-facedness that left him weak in the knees).

It was just him.

He sipped his coffee and watched the cars crawl over the roads below.

If he forgot himself, he could still feel Peter’s lips on his, his hands on his chest. It had taken more self-control than he generally though himself capable of to refuse his offers. Peter had been so willing – he always was. That was the trouble.

He finished off his coffee and set the cup on the table.

He had the terrible urge to hit something. Instead, he resisted and dredged up enough executive function to wash out his coffee cup and replace it in the cabinet.

Rhodey. He needed to talk to Rhodey. Not about Peter – he couldn’t tell anyone about him – but just to have someone look at him and not have an inkling that he’d just put his hand down the jeans of a fucking child…

… who’d looked at him like he hung the goddamned moon.
Wasn’t he better than this?

Without preamble, he drove his fist into the nearest wall. Icy rivulets of pain shot up and down his arm, through the bones of his hand, up into his shoulder.

“FUCK!”

His voice reverberated around the kitchen and startled him into awareness of his surroundings. For the first time since he’d arrived at the compound, he realized how alone he was.

Blood was welling up from several abrasions on his knuckles, warm and sticky. He stared at it, not quite comprehending what it might mean.

Whatever it is, you deserve it, he thought scathingly.

Then he punched the wall again.

He was about to go for a third one – now able to aim at a neat little dent – when a voice behind him said, “Hey, how about we not do that?”

Footsteps sounded at his side, and then Rhodey grabbed his fist before he could hit the wall again.

“Seriously,” he said. “I think you won that round.”

All the tension left his body at once. He allowed Rhodey to lead him to the nearest seat at the table. Rhodey took the seat next to his and looked at him with an air of patient expectation.

“Take as long as you need,” he said at last.

Tony stared down at his bleeding hand. It looked as though the knuckles were already beginning to swell. Pain radiated up and down his arm.

“Or do you want to get that looked at first?” Rhodey added.

Tony shook his head. He probably deserved the pain.

“Let me guess,” Rhodey said. “You haven’t taken your medication today, have you?”

No, Tony hadn’t, he’d left all of it at the compound, figuring he’d go directly back there after the party. He hadn’t banked on either the girl or Peter. But, of course, that wasn’t the problem.

Rhodey’s chair scraped across the floor as he stood up, walked out of Tony’s line of vision, and then returned with a pill bottle in hand. As though a pill was going to magically fix the fact that he’d put his hand down the jeans of a goddamned teenager.

He stared at the pills.

Back in the old days — how awful was that, that the reality of just two months before was now the old days — they all made sure everyone took their medication, each unofficially adopting their buddy, like Secret Santas for the mentally ill. Tony looked after Rhodey, who looked after him in return; Bruce, forever stubbornly self-reliant, left himself post-it notes; Clint, as the only one who really had clearance for that sort of thing, took care of Natasha, who in turn seemed to have taken Wanda under her wing. Thor was typically MIA, but it easy to imagine him doing the Asgardian equivalent of meds-monitoring for his batshit brother. Meanwhile, in addition to helping Rhodey, Tony, with Sam’s help, kept a weather eye on Steve.
And Steve… Steve had taken care of all of them: listening to them when they needed to talk, reassuring them at the right moments, and, like Rhody, giving them their medication when they needed it. Tony wondered if he now did that for Barnes.

He imagined if Steve discovered were to discover what he had done and immediately shied away from the idea. He’d never survive the shame.

But he’d known Rhody for much longer. And it would be so much worse.

He swallowed his pills dry – and left-handed – and closed his eyes.

“What’s going on?” asked Rhody.

He sighed. They’d been friends for too long to lie to him, and yet also too long for him to ever tell him the truth. “I fucked up,” he said at last. “You don’t need to know how, or why, or – or any details.”

“Can’t help you if I don’t know.”

“I don’t need you to help me, I need you not to prod the wound.”

Rhody sighed, and Tony glanced up at him. “You need to at least get that checked out.” He nodded to Tony’s swelling hand.

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not, you’re going to mess up your joints, or your tendons, or something.”

“I’ll put Neosporin on it.”

“Sarcasm’s not going to save you, Tony. You need to get that checked out. Come on.” He stood up and beckoned to him. When Tony didn’t obey – born out of some adolescent need to rebel which, when he considered it, probably was yet another facet of his daddy issues – Rhody fixed him with a look.

“What would Steve say. Or Bruce. Or literally anybody.”

Tony gave him a glare. “Low blow.”

“Hell, even Clint’d tell you to get to an ER.”

“No, Clint would just turn off his hearing aids and give me the finger.”

Rhodey considered it. “Yeah,” he said at last. “You’re probably right. But he’s not here right now. I am.” He coughed. “I’m your best friend,” he said. “Please tell me what’s going on. Or at least come with me.”

For a terrible moment, Tony envisioned what the conversation would look like if he were to tell the truth. He remembered Peter’s fury (he could hardly blame the kid; he suddenly remembered Sam’s voice from two months earlier: how long are you going to keep playing both sides?), watching him storm out the door. If he told the truth, he’d see Rhody do precisely the same thing. The thought alone was enough to make him choke.

He wanted to punch the wall again.

Instead, he sighed in acquiescence and followed Rhody out of the kitchen to get their coats.
Mercifully, the ER was more or less deserted — unlikely for a Friday evening, but Tony would take what he could get. The fewer people there, the fewer to see him and gawk at him in his misery.

He looked down at his watch, his left hand shaking. Just after six-thirty. They’d been in the ER’s waiting room for over ten minutes. Beside him sat Rhodey, who was giving him not so surreptitious glances out of his periphery every few minutes as though ascertaining that Tony was still there. There were numerous reasons he’d come along with him: Happy was still at the mansion, more or less housesitting now that Pepper was gone, and so Tony needed someone to drive him; he was concerned about his well-being; and, above all, he wanted to make sure that Tony actually arrived at the intended destination. That adolescent urge to rebel was only exacerbated by a poor mental state. Tony wasn’t at all sure that Rhodey was medically cleared to drive yet, but he wasn’t about to question it in the face of his steel-eyed determination.

Tony tried not to resent it, knowing that Rhodey was in the right, just sighed and shored up some of his customary sarcasm.

“I could take care of this at home, you know.”

Rhodey didn’t miss a beat. “Sure. I’d love to see Dum-E bandage that up.”

“Dum-E’s at the mansion, where he belongs. And here I am, at an ER, where I don’t belong.”

Rhodey blew out a sigh. “Everybody goes to an ER at some point, Tony. Don’t give yourself airs.”

More icy pains in his wrist. Glancing down at his bruised, swollen hand, he thought about the last thing of note that he’d done with it and figured that this was probably some sort of karma.

He really didn’t deserve to get treated.

Behind their heads, the glass doors to the ER swung open. Uneven, hasty footsteps on the linoleum that made Tony’s head turn.

He froze.

May Parker, face devoid of makeup and a worn men’s overcoat thrown hastily over her clothes, was pushing her nephew forward toward the receptionist’s desk, one arm wrapped around his shoulders, his face turned away with one of his hands covering his mouth and nose.

Blood dribbled between his fingers.

One of the women behind the desk saw them, shot to her feet, and immediately came around the desk with a steel-gray wastepaper basket in hand.

“I’ll take him,” she told May, who was struggling to sign in on the clipboard with shaking hands. May nodded to her, and the secretary ushered Peter firmly to the chair directly across from Tony’s row — of course. The wastepaper basket thunked onto the linoleum in front of him, and Peter immediately leaned forward over it, head down, gripping the rim with one hand. Blood dripped onto dated spreadsheets and refused appointment reminders.

May hurried over to him, and the secretary returned to her spot behind the desk as May sat beside him.

Tony felt frozen, indecently exposed, raw.
But neither Parker took any notice of him, with May murmuring to him and stroking his hair, and Peter suddenly ducking further downward to retch into the wastepaper basket. The knuckles of the hand that clutched the rim were white beneath the bruises.

Rhodey caught Tony’s eye and gave him a furrowed brow as if to say, what happened? Tony lifted his own eyebrows in return, trying to play it cool, as if his entire body weren’t lighting up in an awful cocktail of panic, horror, and, for some reason, guilt. No idea.

But before he could do anything, one of the metal doors opened, and a pretty nurse in pale blue scrubs appeared, frowning down at the clipboard in her hand.

“… Tony Stark?” she said at last, slowly, as though she were three-quarters convinced she had the wrong name.

Peter’s head jerked up at the sound of her voice, blood glistening from his nostrils down his upper lip.

His face was a Jackson Pollock of bruises.

Peter caught Tony’s eye, clearly mortified, with an additional emotion that looked a little too close to fear. Tony looked away almost immediately as he stood, coughing, and strode in the nurse’s direction.

The nurse’s eyes widened at the sight of him, but she recovered her professionalism within seconds. “Right this way, sir,” she said, making an after you gesture.

He could feel the kid’s eyes on him as he headed into the corridor, nursing his hand.

“What happened?” said the nurse, once they were in an examination room, Tony had been positioned somewhat reluctantly on the paper-covered table — something about those things always took him mentally back to age seven — and she’d prodded at his throbbing hand for a nearly a minute.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Punched a wall.”

She nodded as though she’d expected something of the sort. “You’d be amazed how many guys we get in here with the same problem,” she muttered. “Well,” she continued more distinctly. “Looks like a boxer’s fracture. Doesn’t seem to be too bad since your range of motion’s good. I’m going to put you in a splint just in case, though. Most of it’s stemming from your pinky?” Tony nodded. “How bad’s it hurting?”

In some other examination room that couldn’t be too far from this one, Peter Parker was undoubtedly being asked the same question, and his response would be quite different.

What had happened? Well — what had happened was obvious. It was the how and the why that concerned Tony. His fucking face…

He screwed his face up and tried to remember the question. “From one to ten? About a seven.”

“‘Kay. We’ll throw in some pain medication as well.” She glanced up from his hand to his face as though she wanted to say something else, but she just went to the cabinet over the sink and produced a black and royal blue cast encased in plastic. Was Peter going to need a cast as well, he wondered?
A few hours ago, he’d been fine — in as much as a teenager who’d just been assaulted by an adult could be fine — and now here he was covered in bruises, blood streaming from his nose, cloistered in an ER.

An even better question: would he be okay?

Karma had a certain way about it, that was for sure.

Once the nurse had fit an exceptionally constricting cast around his dominant hand and given him a prescription for painkillers you couldn’t get over the counter, he strode from the examination room into the narrow corridor outside, scanning for any familiar faces. Well. One familiar face, anyway.

But business had heat up while the nurse was inspecting his hand. If Peter was anywhere in the vicinity, it was virtually impossible to tell. Besides, Tony’s presence was attracting too many curious glances.

He was about to retreat to the waiting room when from around the corner came a familiar figure, supported by another nurse in blue scrubs: Peter Parker, looking even worse than before in the harsh fluorescent light.

He looked up, caught Tony’s eye, and froze, doubling over slightly. The nurse at his side asked him something, no doubt wanting to know if something hurt. Peter waved her off, mouth moving, but there seemed to be a layer of cotton around Tony’s ears; he could barely hear a thing.

Throwing caution to the winds, Tony strode over to them, glancing briefly at the nurse before saying, “What happened to you?”

“What are you doing here?” he asked Tony. The nurse glanced at Peter, apparently taken aback by her fifteen-year-old patient’s exceptional social connections.

“What? I punched a wall. What happened to you?” Tony repeated. God, it was so much worse up close. Puffy face, bruises rising underneath the skin in a watercolor of deep purple-black and earthen red, and the sort of pink blotchiness that meant he’d been crying hard. He walked stiffly, partially bent over, and pressing some gauze to his nose, which still oozed blood.

“I did something stupid, can we not talk about it in detail?”

“Why didn’t you call?” he asked. “If you were in trouble?”

Peter gave him a scathing look. “I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me,” he snapped and let the nurse escort him further down the corridor.

Rhodey would be waiting for him outside. Like the nurse had said, they didn’t have time. Still, he followed them a certain ways down the corridor. “Text me,” he called.

Peter didn’t hesitate. His reply came sharp and furious, thrown over his shoulder. “I have to go get a CT scan so they can make sure my spleen isn’t ruptured,” he snapped. “but, you know what, I’ll get to it when I can, sure —”

He caught his breath and doubled over, face blanching. The nurse caught him before he hit the floor and called for assistance. Several other nurses rushed over, obscuring Peter from view, but Tony
waited until the little army had disappeared down the corridor toward an elevator before he turned away and covered his face with his good hand, trying to remember how not to worry.

Rhodey and May were sitting together when Tony returned to the waiting room, talking quietly. The tableau was so surreal — the two halves of his life colliding — that he had to stand there for several seconds and accept its reality before he joined them.

May had been crying. The moment she saw Tony approaching, she blew her nose hastily on a Kleenex pulled from the dispenser on the side table nearby and blinked hard.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” she said, getting to her feet to shake his hand (it was an odd phenomenon that he’d noticed over the years, how people would stand up to greet him or even when he entered a room, some sort of Elizabeth II deal). Then she noticed the cast on his hand and awkwardly lowered her own, giving him a tight smile instead.

“I saw your nephew in there,” he said by way of reply. “Everything okay? He looked —” he paused, trying to find an apt descriptor and failing — “He didn’t look good.”

She sighed. “Somebody jumped him on the way home,” she said. “At least, that’s what he told me. Personally, I’m inclined to think that it was a little more than one person.”

She was tearing at the faux-leather of her purse handles with her fingernails. “A complete stranger brought him home. Must have been at least eighty. Said he’d found him in a back alley by an ATM around Fifth.” Slowly, she sat down again. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, honestly.” She said it more to herself than to Rhodey or Tony.

Rhodey cleared his throat. “Is there any way we can help?”

But she shook her head firmly. “This isn’t your problem.”

Tony swallowed hard, privately doubting the veracity of that, and then glanced over his shoulder as the door opened again, emitting another clipboard-bearing nurse.

“Ms. Parker?” May’s head jerked up. “You’re needed in the back.”

Chewing her lip, May stood and quickly followed the nurse into the corridor beyond. Tony watched her go, anxiety making his heart rate flutter.

Perhaps she was absolutely right, and this wasn’t his problem, and there was no correlation between what they’d done in the dining room and Peter’s new injuries. But the overwhelming guilt settling in his stomach told Tony otherwise.

“Sorry about the wait,” Tony said as they walked through the parking lot to their car.

“Nah, read *People* for a while and then went over to talk to his aunt. Told her I was a friend of yours. She sounded pretty shook-up.”

“Can’t say I blame her,” said Tony. “I mean, if my kid —” He stopped.

His face kept swimming to the surface of his mind. Beat-up, bloody. He’d have bruises for weeks.

*I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.* How badly had he fucked up, if that was the impression
he’d left Peter with?

“Not criticizing,” Rhodey said at last, after the silence had stretched into about thirty seconds, “but weren’t you supposed to be monitoring him?”

Tony coughed uncomfortably. “Yeah.” They reached the car, slid inside, Rhodey in the driver’s seat again. He started the ignition.

“He came to the thing last night, right?” he said.

“Yeah.” It seemed to be the only thing he could say. Rhodey seemed to be chewing on something, his brow furrowed in a way that was extremely familiar to Tony, who had seen that same look too many times. Usually when Tony had made or was on verge of making some stupid decision.

“It’s just that, with you coming home pissed and then him showing up looking like he just took on eight pro wrestlers and lost…” Rhodey cleared his throat. “Did something happen?”

Yeah, I helped him jerk off, and then we fought about it.

He coughed again. “We argued about it. The deal I made with Ross. You know. He wants to get the shit beaten out of him, I won’t let him, so I’m the asshole.” His words felt uncomfortably familiar, reminding him of things his father would say after they argued in front of guests, and Tony had retreated to his room in tears, as he inevitably did.

Don’t worry about it.

He’s in the rebellious phase.

He’ll come around when he sees he’s not getting any attention.

And later, when it was only close family friends —

Just our little cross to bear.

“To be fair,” Rhodey was saying, “that’s gotta suck. He could do whatever he wanted until we showed up.”

They drove in silence for a while. City lights flashed past the window. Somewhere out there, Peter was getting tested for the sorts of organ damage that Tony could imagine all too well. What if tests and screenings came back positive? He pushed away the visualization of Peter in a hospital gown, hooked up to machines, hollow-cheeked, his bruises fading to green-brown-yellows.

He’s young, he told himself. He’ll bounce back.

Then the nastier part of his brain added: oh, he’s young, is he? Interesting how you remember that when he gets hurt, but not when it’s morally inconvenient for you.

It felt like years since those scant minutes they’d spent in the dining room. Even more time since the party, with Hammer’s insinuations and Peter crying and Cory.

He thought about what May had said.

Without preamble, he asked Rhodey, “You know of any ATMs near the mansion?”

Rhodey frowned, the streetlights throwing his features into sharp relief. “I think there’s one a few blocks off, yeah. Why?”
Tony just frowned.

“What?” asked Rhodey. Then he added, with something rather ominous in his tone: “What are you thinking, Tony?”

He leaned back in the car seat. His hand was still throbbing, a deep ache that went right to his bone. Perhaps he could make some adjustments to the splint — something automated that would let his hand breathe while it still locked his ring and little fingers together. Of course, in the suit, the splint wouldn’t be an issue…

“Tony?”

“Hm?”

“What are you thinking?”

He closed his eyes. “Karma,” he said.

“… well, Mr. Secretary, if you’re taking statements, I haven’t got one. This is the first I’ve heard of it. … I’m sorry you feel that way, but I can assure you, I’ve been in my home all week. … Yes, I agree it’s weird how close it was to my own front door, but like I said, I’ve been at the compound since Friday afternoon, and even you have to concede to mere coincidence at some point in your career. … Yes, I’m sure it’ll all get sorted. … As a matter of fact, I do remember the provisions of the Accords. Good-bye, Mr. Secretary. Try not to start any wars. Ta.”

Tony hung up his phone and leaned back in his office chair with a loud sigh of relief.

In hindsight, tracking down a couple ATM thieves — news had come out fairly quickly about a couple of miscreants with the alleged involvement of a certain masked vigilante — and leaving them outside said ATM for the law to find come morning hadn’t been the wisest decision. Particularly when all of the criminals-cum-victims bore contusions that suspiciously mirrored the fist pattern of a certain billionaire’s iron suit.

But what did it matter? He’d done it, and God help him, it had made him feel better.

There had been no word from Peter in the six days — fuck, was it nearly a week since they’d done it? Tony told himself not to pry. He had a life outside of this. He would come back when he was ready.

Assuming Peter wanted to come back at all. Assuming he could come back and wasn’t holed up in a hospital room. Or worse.

Tony got on with his life and tried not to dwell on how badly the prospect hurt.

The simple fact was that he had gone so far that turning back now seemed a less viable option than just continuing on to whatever was waiting on the other side of the line he’d crossed.

And he had a pretty good idea what.

He picked up his phone and frowned at the screen. The message slot marked Parker was conspicuously dated, the last message that Peter himself had sent was from over a week ago, before they’d even kissed each other yet.
That was in reference to the Accords. The rest of it was odd, awkwardly formal texts from Tony, mostly giving details about meetings. Looking at it like this, framed within their messages to each other, Tony felt uncomfortable and predatory.

If he sent another message, there was the possibility of changing things.

If he did nothing, they could go back to how things were before and pretend it was all fine. After all, there was little that couldn’t be fixed by a Band-Aid and sheer denial.

He sighed, told his anxiety and residual shame to fuck off, and hit the call button.

Who was he kidding?

Chapter End Notes

Since I’ve seen some debate about this in the comments, I’m going to make a blanket statement and say that for the purposes of this fic, Peter is fifteen going on sixteen and Tony is somewhere in the vicinity of forty-five. Age difference like whoa.
“Impossibility is just a kiss away from reality”

Chapter Summary

Back in his car a little over a week ago, Stark had told him not to play with fire, but it seemed he’d done it anyway, and now both of them had gotten burned.

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is a beautiful quote from season one of Sense8. I’m sorry I used it for such morally suspect purposes.

“Hey, you want Sriracha on your popcorn?”

There was a duet of affirmatives, and Michelle disappeared into her apartment’s kitchen again. In front of the television, Ned was kneeling with the remote, scrolling through Michelle’s queue on Netflix. Peter had offered to do it, but both his friends had flatly told him no, so instead, he lay reclined across the sofa, feeling useless.

It had been about a week since the incident, as Peter had taken to calling it, and while the medical screenings had yielded up nothing more serious than a slightly bruised pancreas and a nearly broken nose, everyone around him insisted on treating him as though he were constructed from glass. He hadn’t made it back to school until yesterday, a Wednesday, and much was made of the bruises scattered across his body, as of the large, still-black mark of a boot in his stomach, which had revealed itself in the locker room to the awe of all.

Peter remembered getting it.

He hadn’t slept in a goddamned week.

There had been several of them, robbing an ATM. He didn’t remember much more than that — ever since that night, his brains felt scrambled, which had made May worry he had a concussion, which was distinctly possible.

He’d run across them more or less by accident after he’d come down from the building. It had been a feral moment, with no thought involved, just sighting and hurling himself at them. But here was the thing about fighting a bunch of people at once: nobody waited their turn. They just piled on at once and turned you into mincemeat. Stark’s additional innovations to the suit must have done their job, however, because Peter was still alive, at the very least. *How hard must they have been hitting, he thought for the hundredth time, if the suit wasn’t enough to keep me from bruising?*

Thinking about it made him want to vomit (again), so he chanted a little mantra to himself — *Imfinethisisfinesfinesfine* — and then forced his attention onto the TV screen. *Sense8*, middle of season one. From the kitchen came a call of “Don’t you dare start without me!”

Michelle materialized bearing a giant bowl of popcorn, which she deposited onto the coffee table
before flopping onto the opposite end of the couch in the gap between the couch arm and Peter’s feet.

Truthfully, he’d been able to go back to school by Monday at least, at least physically, but normal people didn’t have an increased healing factor. It was for that reason that May had made such a production of getting him upstairs into Michelle’s apartment, despite the fact that he could walk perfectly well.

Onscreen, Max Reimelt punched a gang member in the face and then wheeled around to kick another one in the testicles.

Turning back to reach for the communal popcorn bowl, Ned asked Peter, “Hey, is this going to be okay for you?” He sounded concerned. Peter nodded, waving a hand.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Movie fights didn’t bother him; they weren’t close enough to the real thing.

“‘Cause we can totally switch to, like, Galavant, if you need us to —”

Michelle snorted into her popcorn. “You are so gay.”

“You’re the one who watched San Junipero on a loop a week ago,” Ned retorted, “so you don’t get to call me out.”

She cackled. “No regrets.” She leaned back and propped her feet up on the coffee table. “Okay. Fuck, marry, kill. The sensates. Go.”

Ned pointed to the TV screen, where Reimelt was now cracking open a safe. “Well, for starters, I’d fuck that. Then… kill Will, marry Lito.”

Peter raked his hands through his hair. “Fuck Kala, marry Capheus and Hernando, kill none.”

“Hernando’s not a sensate,” Ned protested.

“I’d still marry him.” Peter grinned. “God, I love having a wider dating pool than you two. Michelle?”

“Polygamous marriage with all the ladies, ignore everyone else.”

Snorting, Peter reached forward for a handful of popcorn, but a dull ache just under his lower ribs made him hiss and pull back sharply. He healed quick, but the pain liked to linger.

Michelle half-rose from her seat, and Ned actually stood up.

“You okay?” they asked in unison. He waved them off.

“No, yeah, it’s fine.”

“You sure?” asked Ned, who had ignored his hand wave and was halfway over to the sofa.

“Yeah, it’s okay. Just my pancreas.”

Michelle was giving him the look that he was pretty sure passed for concern, one eyebrow furrowed, the corner of her mouth quirked upward.

“… you know there’s probably nothing just about your pancreas hurting, right?”

“Seriously, it’s fine, they said it was fine.”
“Okay…”

Neither of his friends seemed convinced, but they each settled back again, giving him and each other worried looks when they thought his focus was back on the show. He fought the urge to roll his eyes. May did the same thing at home, continually fussing over him, and while part of him liked the attention, the rest of him wanted to be left alone.

He had things to think about.

As the conversation died and the episode continued on the screen, he remembered everything that had come before the fight, and everything that had come after.

The last thing he’d wanted was for Stark to see him beaten-up, particularly after how they’d argued. What was he supposed to make of the horror on Stark’s face when he saw him? Had it been a result of concern for him, or was he more unsettled by the reminder of what he’d done? And what was he supposed to make of that, either? He wanted to believe it, those scant minutes in the dining room, but how could he? Back in his car a little over a week ago, Stark had told him not to play with fire, but it seemed he’d done it anyway, and now both of them had gotten burned — what was it that he’d said? That he’d punched a wall? It didn’t seem like a stretch to believe that Peter had been the cause of that, too.

Ned and Michelle were talking again. “Isn’t your dad freaking out that you’re hanging out with a bunch of guys while he’s at work?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? He was so relieved I’m socializing with people my own age, he didn’t even question it.”

On screen, Kala was preparing for her wedding. Ned craned his neck to look back at Peter. “Keep it together,” he said. Peter gave him the finger and was about to reply, when his cell phone hummed from his back pocket. He jumped and carefully lifted up his body so he could pull it out and check the ID.

German flag emoji, sunglasses emoji.

“Oh, fuck,” he said out loud. Both his friends looked at him, startled.

“What’s going on?”

“What is it?”

He hauled himself off the couch, ignoring the myriad complaints in his body and the surprise of his friends. “I gotta take this,” he said, “you guys go on.”

“Is everything okay?” Ned asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine, I just — “ He stopped as he entered the kitchen and hit the answer button on his phone’s screen. Pressing a hand to his other ear to block out the sounds of the show in the other room, he took a deep breath, leaned against the kitchen counter, and said, “Hello?”

Stark managed to sound tired, relieved, and frustrated all at once. “There you are. Hi. Thought you were just going to let it ring.”

“Thought about it,” Peter lied. He glanced in the direction of the den to make sure neither Michelle nor Ned were listening in. “What are you doing?” he added.
“Wanted to make sure you weren’t dead,” said Stark.

Peter sighed. “I’m not dead,” he said. “Anything else, or was that it?”

“You’re angry at me. We need to clear the air, or…”

“Or…”

“— we need to clear the air,” Stark repeated after a moment’s pause. “I don’t think we’ve been communicating right.”

“Well… what do you want me to say?” Peter asked.

“I don’t know,” Stark admitted. “I don’t know that there’s anything to say.” A brief pause. “What happened? I’m going to assume you’re not in critical condition if you’re talking to me.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m doing better.” He didn’t want to open up about the ATM thieves in case it led to a lecture about the Accords that he didn’t want to hear. “How’s your hand?”

“No idea, haven’t seen it in a week. Still attached, I assume.”

Peter half-smiled. He could sense that Stark was trying to defuse the situation with humor, and against his better judgment, it was working on him. He cleared his throat and dropped his voice to a murmur so there was no chance of his friends overhearing.

“Can I ask you a question? Full disclosure?”

“Okay.” There was trepidation in Stark’s voice, and rightfully so: those words had a connotation neither of them would be able to escape for a while.

“Was it —“ he hesitated, trying to find the best way to phrase what had been preying on him for over a week — “Was it real?” His voice shook.

“Real,” Stark repeated cautiously.

“You know, was it — legit.” When Stark showed no signs of understanding, he groaned and began to pace back and forth, albeit slowly. “What we did,” he said, trying to choose his words wisely. “Was it because we both wanted to, or because I was there and I was convenient? I mean — do you — are you taking advantage?”

There was silence on the other end, and for a moment, he wondered if Stark had hung up, more or less answering his question by not answering. Then Stark coughed.

“That’s not what happened,” he said.

“But how do I know?” Peter pressed. “I can’t take your word for it on something like this!”

“I don’t know, Parker, you tell me,” he said. “For what my word is worth, I didn’t want to hurt you. You’re not just convenient to me.”

Peter felt a fluttering smile pull at the corners of his lips, warmth rising in his chest. He stopped by the microwave at the far corner of the kitchen and leaned against the counter, in need of a break from moving. “I’m probably the opposite of convenient, right?”

Silence. He listened to the pattern of Stark’s breath in his voice and tried to pace his own to his rhythm. In, out. In, out. In, out.
“What are we going to do?” he asked after the digital clock on the wall showed that two minutes had passed.

“No idea.”

Peter huffed a laugh. “You’re the adult, don’t you have any ideas?”

“Watch it, Parker.”

More silence, deep enough that Peter thought he could probably drown himself in it. Words lined themselves up on his tongue, but he didn’t dare say them. Bad idea, bad idea, he told himself. Instead, he played it safe — even though safe and unsafe were becoming increasingly irrelevant descriptors.

“I can’t forget it,” he said. “You know, two months ago, I never would have believed this could have happened. That — you know — me and you —“

“I know.”

“What I’m trying to say is… I can’t put this aside.”

“I know.”

“And I know this is such a bad idea, but I can’t… I just can’t let go of it.”

“I know.”

“And if you say I know again, I’ll kill you.”

Stark coughed. “Look, Peter. First thing is that you need to understand this isn’t nearly as easy for me as it is for you — and I know it’s not easy for you, believe me,” he added as if he could sense Peter opening his mouth to protest. “You are young. And I’m not. There’re words for people who do this sort of thing.”

“If you want to stop before we get in too deep,” Peter whispered, “just say it.”

“Well, here’s the thing,” he said. He cleared his throat. “I don’t necessarily want to stop. And I don’t think I can keep up the pretense any longer.”

“Oh.” Peter suddenly felt faint. “Oh.”

“But I know I should, and I know it’s not going to be good for either of us, but…” He didn’t finish, and the sentence seemed to do better that way. But, and yet, even so, nevertheless… It seemed to sum up their situation better than anything else could.

“I get it,” Peter whispered. The words lined up on his tongue again; he pressed them back, back, back…

“It’s your choice,” Stark said. “I won’t blame if you say no. I won’t blame you if you want to back out completely and tell me to fuck off.”

“Yeah, but the Accords and —“

“Not a problem,” Stark said with mock-cockiness. “I’ll tell ‘em that you’ve got an independent streak a mile wide and that you’ve run off to join forces with that maniac in Hell’s Kitchen.”
“That won’t be enough to stop them from asking questions, let alone cracking down on me —"

“Take it easy, Parker, I’d handle it!” Stark said. His tone softened. “Seriously. You won’t have to worry. I’ll take care of it. You’ll be able to do what you want, when you want… Just…” He sighed. “Don’t get beat up like you did before, okay?”

Peter hated the Accords. He hated the deal that had been struck without his input, that restricted him and kept him from doing everything he’d originally set out to do. Giving people directions and rescuing cats from trees was fine, he supposed, but it wasn’t what he wanted. That wasn’t what he’d been thinking about when he saw his uncle get killed. He’d been thinking, *If I had been quicker, if I had worked harder, this one’s on me.*

The deal with Ross prevented him from healing from that moment.

But… and yet… nevertheless…

“I didn’t say I wanted to quit,” he said softly.

Stark didn’t reply, but Peter was conscious of his breathing pattern ceasing abruptly, as though with his words, Peter had knocked the wind from his lungs.

The words lined up again, and this time, he couldn’t stop himself from saying them.

“May’s going to be out Monday night,” he said in a rush. “She and Nathan have a date. If you wanted to drop in —” Just as quickly as he’d begun, he stopped short. “If you wanted to drop in, it would be okay. With me.”

There was no reply. *Oh God,* he thought, mortified, *he really did hang up this time.*

“Hello?”

“Still here,” Stark said after a moment.

“Did you —“

“I heard.”

“Okay.”

A long pause. A susurrus as Stark inhaled. “*Text me the time,*” he said at last. “*I’ll be there.*”

Peter slid down the cabinets until he was seated on the linoleum floor, phone still pressed to his ear. He didn’t know what more to say, so he just said, “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“Can’t stop thinking about a week ago.”

“Yeah. Neither can I.”

There didn’t seem to be much left to cover. The silence left Peter feeling overexposed and embarrassed, as though he had said too much.

“I probably oughta go,” he mumbled at last.

“Okay. ‘Bye.”
“Bye.”

The call ended, and Peter leaned back against the cabinet, phone held against his chest, feeling as winded as if he’d just gone for a run.

His entire life, he’d been the nerd who always got home by seven PM, never skipped homework, and made his grades the center of his universe. And then the power came, and Ben died, and now here he was arranging a — a — he couldn’t think of an appropriate word and so skipped it — with a man at least thirty years his senior.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had just joined the shadowy, infamous ranks of sexually active high school sophomores. The thought was a strange one, and he couldn’t tell if it frightened him or made him feel sort of… well… important wasn’t the word…

Cool?

He was startled by footsteps outside the kitchen and shot to his feet, automatically springing into a defensive position — just before Ned reappeared around the corner, the popcorn bowl in hand.

They stared at each other wide-eyed, both surprised by the other’s presence.

“Hey!” Peter said a little too loudly, relaxing.

Ned gave him an odd look, head tilted to the side and his free hand pointing to the cabinet behind Peter’s head.

“I was just getting more salt?” he said cautiously.

“Oh, yeah, um — yeah —” Peter moved out of the way to let Ned pass him, replacing his phone in his pocket.

“Hey,” he added as he turned back around, “is everything okay?”

Peter frowned, unsure of where the conversation was headed.

“… Yeah?

“Like, you’ve just been acting kind of weird lately, and…”

“No, yeah, everything’s fine!” His voice was several octaves higher than normal. What the fuck, he told himself, act normal…

“Who was calling you?” asked Ned.

“What? Oh. May wanted to make sure I was okay.” He shrugged, making a what-can-you-do face.

“You’re about to miss the wedding!” Michelle called from the den. “Stop making out and get back in here so I don’t have to watch this alone!”

“We’d better go,” Peter said, glad of an excuse to end the conversation.

“So you’re sure you’re okay?” Ned pressed.

“Yeah, can we maybe get in there before Michelle drags us back?”

“Seriously, whatever you’re doing in there, stop doing it and get back here!” Michelle called.
Ned looked back at Peter. “Yeah, we’d better go so she doesn’t murder us.”

They finished the episode and began another, only to get sidetracked by conversation. Peter was reminded that he hadn’t even tried to get a date for Homecoming, which was only a few weeks away — “Seriously,” said Ned, “did you try Liz?” — and Peter reminded his friends that they hadn’t made much effort either.

“I’m saving myself for marriage,” said Ned.

“When Gwen Stacy turns gay, call me,” said Michelle, now sprawled out on the floor by Ned, giving Peter the room to spread out on the sofa. “Until then, I’m going to spend an hour of Homecoming actually at Homecoming, and then I’m going to go home and watch Deep Space Nine for, like, a week.”

Ned shook his head. “I still can’t believe you’re a Trekkie.”

Peter carefully angled himself so his cheek rested on the seat cushion and closed his eyes. Every other kid his age — with the possible exception of Michelle — was looking forward to Homecoming on some level, but not him, for the simple reason that it didn’t feel real anymore. What did feel real were the flashbacks he got at night, the random spikes of anxiety he got throughout the day, and the fact that he’d just set up a meeting with Stark at his apartment. If he got caught, May would lose her shit.

By comparison, a cheap party with people who mostly didn’t like him wasn’t much of a big deal.

The sofa was faux-leather and softer than what he had at his own apartment. Peter breathed out and let the fatigue that had been tugging at him take him where it wanted to go, his friends’ conversation fading out of earshot.

When he opened his eyes again, he found the den deserted. The clock on the mantel showed that it had been about a half hour. Blinking in the light that still streamed through the windows, he sat up gingerly and ran a hand through his hair.

He was suddenly aware of voices in the kitchen. He froze, hackles rising automatically as he strained to hear. Ned and Michelle, speaking in an undertone.

Thank God for enhanced hearing.

“I don’t know,” Michelle was saying. “You know how I am with social stuff. But it’s been weird to me, too.”

“So I’m not crazy,” Ned said. “He keeps telling me everything’s fine, but honestly? I don’t really believe him?”

“And factoring in the part where he gets, like, jumped…”

“Yeah. Do you think there’s something going on that we don’t know about?”

“I don’t know. He’s kind of a closed book,” said Michelle. “If there is, he hasn’t said anything to me. You want me to talk to him?” Carefully, Peter eased himself off the couch.
“Michelle, we want to make him feel safe, not scare him off,” Ned was saying.

“Maybe he needs a logical approach? Give me some time,” she said. “I’ll try and get him alone this week, see if I can get him to say something.”

Peter appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, wearing a look of pretend-ignorance. “Hey, guys.”

Ned and Michelle, who had been standing together by the counter, jumped at the sound of his voice.

“Hey.” Michelle was hard to read, given that her expression only seemed to change when the moon was full, but Ned was a quick study. He was already going red.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” Peter asked.

“You looked like you needed to sleep,” Ned said guiltily. From the looks of it, he’d probably been the instigator; Peter could imagine him silently pulling Michelle into the other room. “Hey, can I ask you about something…”

He was conflicted. He’d only met Michelle earlier that semester, but he’d been friends with Ned since forever, and he was clearly worried. Like May was, like his teachers were. Out of all of them, Ned was the safest bet, if Peter were to tell someone.

Maybe.

Ned was great and everything, but he had a habit of blurting things out at the worst possible moments.

And none of Peter’s secrets were things he could afford to have broadcasted to the world at large.

Swallowing hard, uncomfortable with leaving his friend uncomfortable, Peter leaned against the counter, listened to the other two make innocent conversation, and tried not to feel too guilty, or too victorious.
Hail Mary

Chapter Summary

He had tried as hard as he knew how not to end up here. But here he was anyway.

Chapter Notes

Hey, this is where #Underage seriously comes into play. If anybody feels uncomfortable with this, feel free to back out, or at least skip this chapter. You won’t miss a great deal plot-wise. For the record, I don’t condone this sort of thing in real life.

Also, this story has a playlist! It’s not in any particular order, and it’s fucking enormous, but feel free to listen: https://open.spotify.com/user/joannscribbles/playlist/2X18NQVjKOc57MJ6dCBaGi

“Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”


Tony was not good at waiting. He’d been seated in his Camaro, the least obtrusive car he owned, in the next parking lot over from the apartment complex for nearly fifteen minutes, his left leg going numb, his right leg beginning to shake in a way that heralded boredom.

He’d thought he’d crossed a line before in the dining room, the first time he’d really laid hands on him. Now he was discovering that there was a new line beyond the first one and that he was dangerously close to crossing it, too.

He had tried as hard as he knew how not to end up here. But here he was anyway.

On the passenger seat, his phone hummed.

May just left. Give it ten minutes then you can come up

He tapped out a quick reply — will do — and put the phone down.

There would be no coming back from this. But who was he kidding, there had been no coming back from this the moment he’d pinned the kid against the wall of the TV room, the moment he’d unzipped his jeans.
If you’ve gone this far… he thought.

His heart was beating faster. He told himself it was perfectly natural, recited a few Hail Mary’s in the half-hearted hope it would absolve him of what he was about to do, and then checked the clock. Eight minutes. Close enough. It would probably be ten minutes by the time he reached the apartment building.

There was still time to chicken out and go home. He could go back and be a better man for it.

But then he remembered Peter waiting up there for him.

He’d broken a lot of hearts in the past. Maybe, if he didn’t break this one, that would undo some of the hurt.

Incredibly, none of the passers-by took notice of the man wearing sunglasses indoors on his way through the low-ceilinged halls. One of the lights, the one right by the Parkers’ door, was dying, flickering strobe-like against the ugly, beige-colored walls. Tony planted his feet beneath it and closed his eyes, lifted his fist.

*Hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary.*

He knocked, and the part of him that insisted on humor as a means of self-defense made him call, “Pizza!”

Footsteps sounded inside the apartment, and then just a second later, the door opened. Peter. He looked like he’d just showered, his hair dripping onto the shoulders of his navy T-shirt and the back of his neck.

“Hey,” he said, clearly breathless and yet trying to affect a casual tone. The mess of bruises that had mottled his face the last time they’d seen each other had all but faded.

“Hi.” The humor vanished. He swallowed hard, watching the kid watch him.

His throat bobbed.

“Come in?” Peter suggested at last.

The door shut behind them with a snap. Peter’s eyes were still on him. His back to him, Tony looked around the small apartment and found that it had managed to shrink since the last time he’d been there. A few differences here and there: the living room had been rearranged, and there were new curtains. A room away, he could hear a washing machine running.

“How long will she be out?” he asked, still not facing him.

“She said not to wait up for her.”

Tony nodded to himself. The floor creaked, and then Peter was moving into his line of vision, sitting on the back of the sofa, eyes on him warily.

This was so bad.

Four steps forward. That’s all it would take.

*Hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary, hail Mary.*
He touched his knee, and Peter rolled his shoulders back and looked up at him with a little sigh. It was the same look he’d had back in the dining room, and it sent Tony’s heart pounding.

“You don’t need to do this if you don’t want to,” he said.

Peter nodded. “I know.” Those eyes wouldn’t leave his face. His throat bobbed again, and then he tilted his face up to kiss him, pulling him down by his collar. Tony tasted spearmint; the kid must have gone through every mouthwash in the apartment. Tony’s tongue slipped into his mouth as Peter reached for his hands and guided them up his thighs to his hips. Sweatpants — easy to take off. He’d clearly planned ahead. Tony moved his lips to Peter’s cheekbone, then the shell of his ear, the side of his face pressed against his own. He took his lips from his ear but lingered there, just as Peter had let go of his collar but left his hands on his chest.

“You’re not gonna hurt me,” Peter whispered. “It’s okay.”

“Peter —”

Peter took a hold of his collar again and shook it just a little, making him look at him. “It’s all okay,” he insisted.

Then he kissed him again and wrapped his ankles around Tony’s calves, pulling him closer against himself. The impact nearly sent him toppling backward off the back of the sofa, and Tony wrapped an arm around his waist to catch him. The movement pressed them even closer together, and he felt the bulge in his sweatpants against his thigh, Peter’s knee nudging him in a way that sent all his blood coursing south.

So, so, so bad.

Another kiss, with Peter biting his lip and running his fingers through his hair. “If you want,” he began between kisses, “you can — it’s okay.” The little pause left out the two words he clearly hadn’t wanted to say, and that Tony hadn’t particularly wanted to hear out loud, but that they both understood.

Tony jerked his head, just once, and, before he could think any further about it, he hooked his fingers around the hem of Peter’s T-shirt and pulled upward. He didn’t allow himself the luxury of looking at him but laid his hands on his bare shoulders and dragged his lips down his neck, kissed the hollow of his throat, and then nibbled lightly the skin just above his left nipple.

Peter hissed and all but threw himself into Tony’s arms, his own arms around his neck.

“Please —”

“Yes.”

Tony carried him into the bedroom down the tiny hall, and Peter struggled out of his arms, closing the door and leaning against it to watch Tony toss his wallet on the cluttered nightstand and kick off his shoes. Then he pulled Tony onto himself again. More kisses, fingers fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, Tony trying to help him, their fingers tangling together.

“Fuck — fuck —”

“There —”
His belt landed on the carpet after his shirt with a metallic sound that seemed to startle them both into sobriety. They pulled apart and stared at each other, eyes dark and lips already swelling. With a trembling hand, Peter reached forward and touched the scarred flesh from where the reactor had been, seemingly in wonderment. His fingertips were warm.

Tony cleared his throat. “You don’t have to go further,” he said, “if you don’t want to.”

His eyes, big and dark like small planets. “I want to.” Breathless. “I want to.” With a little jerk, he tugged at the zipper of Tony’s jeans, only to falter, fingers curling back in hesitation. In the end, Tony slid out of them, all too conscious of the hard-on showing through his boxer-briefs. Peter was looking, too, lips parted, a little tendril of saliva connecting them. It was unnerving: aside from their other few encounters, Tony hadn’t had much cause to see him any other way than as the sweet kid who got excited about science and punching bad guys. This new person, with the blown pupils and the bad, bad gaze, was unanticipated. But he shouldn’t have been surprised. It was remarkably easy to forget what it was like to be fifteen. Fifteen with sensory issues, everything dialed to eleven, God, Jesus Christ, Tony was going to hell…

He kissed him again, a hand sliding down his spine, the other up one thigh to swing him back into his arms, legs around his waist.

“Say it,” Tony said weakly. He knew the response already, he just needed the words themselves. Then, perhaps, he could forgive himself for whatever came next.

“Fuck me.”

Tony’s mouth dried out, heart hammering in his chest; it was a wonder Peter couldn’t hear it. Perhaps he could. The words had been immediate and spoken with barely a hint of embarrassment, as though he’d been practicing in front of a mirror beforehand — a distinctly plausible scenario.

The springs in Peter’s twin bed weren’t meant to handle this much weight. They squeaked madly as Peter landed hard on his back, Tony kissing him and trying to wrestle him out of his boxers simultaneously.

“Have you done this before?” he asked as two pairs of underwear landed softly on the carpet behind them. Peter hesitated a fraction of a second and then shook his head. “You at least know how this works, right?” Tony pressed.

Looking frustrated, Peter nodded. “Yeah? Yeah, of course. I did everything —” He sat up and twisted around to search within his nightstand drawer. When he turned back around, he dropped a small bottle of lube into Tony’s hand. Part of Tony wanted to ask how he’d gotten a hold of it, but the rest of him told him to just shut up for once.

“Tell me to stop and I will,” he said. Peter nodded. “Okay — um — lie back —” Gnawing his lower lip slightly and furrowing his brow, Peter obeyed. For the first time, Tony allowed himself to really take him in: running his hands over his thighs, up his flanks, over the taut muscles in his stomach. In some ways, he reminded him a little of Steve — but no, he wouldn’t think of Steve now. Which would be worse, he wondered: thinking about Peter, or not thinking about him?

Peter reached up for him, but he gently pushed his hand back down against the mattress. “Just let me do the work, okay?”

To his surprise, Peter flushed and nodded. Tony bent his head down and kissed him as he flicked open the bottle with his thumb. He was so hungry and eager, legs already falling open so Tony could kneel properly between them. They were both trembling, and Tony swore he could feel Peter’s pulse
jumping in his chest.

He reached down with a few wet fingers and felt Peter tense beneath him. Kissing the side of his neck, he murmured “It’s okay, it’s okay, I’ve got you —”

He didn’t know why that was supposed to make Peter feel any safer, but he didn’t stop, and Peter didn’t ask him to. Looking was beyond him, so he found his opening by feel, tracing a gentle circle around his rim before pressing forward, eyes on Peter’s face, waiting for the smallest sign of discomfort.

His throat bobbed; he closed his eyes. With his free hand, Tony pushed Peter’s hair back and kissed his forehead.

“Okay?”

After several moments — Tony carefully moving his finger back and forth, trying to let him acclimate to the motion — Peter nodded shakily.

“Okay.”

He craned his neck upward to bring their lips together and hissed when Tony wrapped his other hand around his erection.

“I’ve got you —”

Peter made a high-pitched sound in his throat and bucked his hips upward. Lips on his neck again, Tony continued both motions; he felt Peter’s jaw fall open and saw one hand grab onto the side of the bed.

“Shh… shh…”

“I — ” But whatever he was going to say got lost because Tony made another pull, and Peter arched upward against his chest, head against his shoulder as his legs shook through the second orgasm Tony had ever brought him to.

Peter opened his eyes.

“Wow,” he said weakly. “That was — that was good —“

Somewhere within the apartment, a door creaked open and closed with a snap, and footsteps clunked on the floor.

“Peter?”

Peter sat bolt upright, shoving Tony out of his way as, cursing under his breath, he leaped off the bed, wobbled a moment as he tried to get his bearings back, and then scrambled for boxers and a T-shirt.

“Peter?”

It was May. Peter paused in pulling the shirt over his head and called, “Um — yeah — hang on —”

He slapped at the light switch, plunging the room into darkness, and stepped out into the hall, arms crossed not-quite-casually in front of him to hide the stain soaking through his T-shirt. Tony knelt there on the bed, not daring to move. Outside, he could hear a pair of voices, one of them Peter’s.
“Thought you were going out with Nathan?”

“Forgot my wallet. Everything okay here? I saw the light on when we pulled up."

“Yeah, I was — I was just turning in — into bed.”

They lowered their voices. The last thing Tony made out was Peter calling, “Have a good night!”

The bedroom door creaked open and shut.

“We’d better not turn the light back on,” Peter whispered. There was a rustling sound in the darkness, as of clothes coming off, and then the bed undulated beneath Tony as he climbed back on with another complaint of springs. A second later, he had a lapful of Peter, and he was kissing his open mouth, one hand sliding down his spine to squeeze a buttock.

“You’re shaking,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” Peter said back. “Just — just freaked out for a second there.” He lifted his chin and let him rove into his neck, nibble his earlobe. They were rocking back and forth in a strange simulation of sex, the scent of Peter’s hair in Tony’s nose.

Tony laid him back across the bed, added more lube to his fingers, and brought them back to his opening, adding a second finger. It was nearly impossible to make out his face in the darkness. Peter laid a hand on his shoulder, fingers digging in. Tony pressed in more deeply, and kissed him as one fingertip brushed against something familiar —

Peter hissed and bit Tony’s lower lip.

“Do that again,” he gasped. Tony nodded without question. His lip throbbed, and there was a bloody tang in his mouth, but that was no matter; he’d caught sight of Peter’s face in the dim blue light that filtered through the window blinds, and all that mattered to him now was bringing him to that same wide-eyed ecstasy again.

The third finger was more difficult, and Peter was clearly grinding his teeth together against the discomfort. He added more lube, tried it again, and Peter seemed to take it better. He was getting hard again. Lube trickled down the inside of Tony’s wrist. He kissed him and found the knot within him again; with a little mew and a flex of his hips, Peter pressed closer, his mouth directly against Tony’s ear.

“Sometime — unh — sometime tonight?” he suggested, breathless. “Seriously, if you keep doing that, I’m gonna — I’m gonna come again.”

Tony nodded, eased his fingers out — squeezing his knee at Peter’s whimper — and reached with his other hand for his wallet on the nightstand to fish a condom out of one of the pockets. Lying in a heap, legs open, Peter watched him roll it on, pulse jumping visibly in his chest and with enough trust in his eyes that Tony felt sick even as he stroked himself, and lust boiled within him. He hadn’t realized how badly he’d been craving it until now.

Peter craned his neck to watch him line himself up against him, but Tony threaded his fingers through his hair and tugged his head back down against the pillows.

“Just relax,” he told him. “I’ve got you. Anything feels bad, you tell me, okay?”

Peter nodded and laid one leg on his shoulder, his other leg wrapping around his waist to dig his heel into the small of Tony’s back. Momentarily forgetting what they were about, Tony frowned.
“Are — are you sure you’re comfortable like that?”

“Yeah?” Peter sounded confused that Tony would even ask.

He sighed in defeat. “You’re too flexible.”

“You like it.”

He grinned crookedly and grabbed his hips more firmly. “Damn right I do.” Then he sobered. “Anything feels bad, you tell me; if you want to stop, just say —”

“I know,” said Peter urgently, “I know. Just do it.”

No more stalling. He kissed him, licking into his mouth, and Peter melted into it with a sigh, distracted enough that he could ease inside.

He hissed and dug his nails into Tony’s shoulders.

“Go easy — go easy —”

“I will, I am — shhhh…” He was, limiting himself to slow, careful movements of his hips, ignoring the shrill desires of his body. It was difficult to tell if the little sounds that Peter made were prompted by enjoyment or discomfort. And it was impossible to ignore how frightened he sounded. He stroked the thigh that draped over his shoulder. “I got you, I got you…”

With another thrust, Peter’s grip tightened even more. “Oh —”

He stopped short, suddenly worried. “Okay?”

A terrible pause, and then Peter cleared his throat.

“Um, left a bit?” he said softly.

Tony obeyed and was rewarded by a cry, somewhere between pleasure and surprise. He clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Shh, don’t want anyone to —”

Peter pulled his fingers away. “If you don’t keep going right now,” he said unsteadily, “I’ll kill you.”

His back arched with the next thrust; Tony buried his head in the space between his neck and his shoulder, holding Peter’s knee hard enough that it would probably bruise. His teeth scraped against his skin, and Tony tasted salt.

He was perfect.

With the effort it took to pace himself, Tony didn’t realize that Peter was speaking until a full minute later, words coming out in gasps between thrusts.

“Go harder — go harder — yes, like that — like that — oh — mmph — oh —” There didn’t seem to be a way to shut him up, but Tony didn’t especially want to. The stream of words felt reassuring somehow, that he wasn’t just taking the kid for all he was worth, with no consideration for his feelings.

“Please — harder —“
“Don’t want to hurt you —” Tony began, pausing in his rhythm, but Peter shook his head.

“I can stop a bus with my bare hands,” he said breathlessly, “and you think this is going to be a problem?” It was too dark to really make out his face, but Tony could see just enough to know that it was the expression he couldn’t say no to. Big, pleading eyes. “Please?” he whispered.

Tony relegated his hands to Peter’s hips and pushed in again, more deeply than he had before. Peter caught his breath with a little yelp and grabbed one hand from his hip to lace his fingers with his.

“Okay?”

“Don’t know,” he gasped. “But you’d better keep doing it so I can — find — out — oh —” Tony was picking up the pace — “yes — yes —” He made a sound in his throat, lower than usual and hungrier than expected, eyes closed and head thrown back.

Tony bent his head down and licked his jugular.

There proved to be a simple way to get Peter to stop talking — and that was to fuck him speechless. His fingers ached where Peter clenched them, but that was a small price for Peter’s desperate ah-ah-ah’s in his ear as the bed springs squeaked rhythmically with the movements of their bodies, undulating beneath them.

Peter exhaled hard against his neck, shuddering through another orgasm, and Tony rose up on his knees and pulled him into his arms as easily as he might a doll, letting him limply wrap his arms around his neck, his legs around his waist. He felt his own orgasm rise in him a full minute before it happened, with Peter’s breath hot against his throat, no longer even making the sounds that had driven Tony mad. His eyes were glassy, his mouth hanging open. They were losing their rhythm; Tony made an uneven thrust, deeper than he had been, and Peter actually sobbed into his neck, raking his nails down his back. The scratches burned hot and cold all at once.

Tony closed his eyes and sank his teeth into Peter’s shoulder.

Afterward, they lay in silence side by side on the bed, pressed close by its absurd size: Peter on his back, and Tony on his stomach. Peter’s chest rose and fell hard as he panted, blissed out, one hand in his hair.

“How’re you doing?” Tony murmured.

Peter nodded. “Okay.” He looked very small where he lay at his side, still breathing hard. His eyes looked wet.

“You ought to take a shower,” Tony told him. “You’re gonna be sore tomorrow.”

Peter pushed himself up with a frown, running a hand through his hair again, and Tony sat up with him, a hand on the small of his back. “Take your time.”

“We gotta take care of all this…” Peter gestured weakly at the now heavily-stained bedspread.

“I’ll do it,” Tony assured him. “You go on. Shower. Sleep.” Nodding, Peter swung off the bed and then froze, almost swaying. Tony couldn’t see the expression on his face, but he could guess.

“Take it slow,” he advised. “Walking might suck for the next day or two.”
Peter bent down carefully and grabbed his boxers. “Worth it,” he said and limped across the hall into the bathroom, leaning a hand on the wall to support himself. A few seconds later, the water started.

The bedspread was three minutes into a quick cycle in the washing machine, the condom tucked beneath several tissues in the wastepaper basket by the desk, and Tony was buttoning up his shirt again — after mopping up his back, where Peter had drawn blood — when Peter himself reemerged, hair dripping and boxers loose enough to expose two prominent hipbones.

“You’re going?” he said sleepily, leaning against the jam of the door.

“Unless you’re prepared to do a lot of explaining to your aunt.”

He stole into the room and craned his neck to kiss the corner of Tony’s mouth.

“You need to sleep,” Tony murmured.

“I always need to.” He seemed too worn-out to fight him on it, however. The bed springs squeaked in complaint as he lay on the bed again, pulling Tony with him by one hand. As he sat beside him, Tony thought about how he’d grabbed his hand earlier right before he’d fucked him senseless and immediately pushed the thought away.

Peter licked his fingertips, then bent his fingers forward to bite him gently on the knuckles. With a sigh, he lowered his head and closed his eyes. Tony stroked his hair and tried to remember what he had been doing fifteen, call it sixteen years ago. Building up the company, perhaps? A headache thumped in his temples, and he put his head down beside Peter’s, close enough that his lips just brushed the back of his neck. He couldn’t have been very old when he announced his identity as Iron Man.

The digital clock on his nightstand read eight-fifteen in glaring red LED.

He wondered what he was doing.

Peter’s breaths had evened out. Tony traced his fingers down his shoulder and his upper arm, kissed the back of his neck. He smelled a little like pine-scented shampoo and a lot like sex. In sleep, he nestled against him, and Tony pressed a careful kiss to the skin behind his right ear.

He waited until the bedspread had finished its cycle and come warm out of the dryer, then laid it over Peter — briefly waking him: he hummed at the heat, nuzzled his cheek against Tony’s hand, and then rolled over again — and beat a quick retreat to his car the next parking lot over before the panic could overtake him completely.

Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary.
Perfect

Chapter Summary

Funny to think that the line had been drawn at last, that everything he’d already done was BEFORE and whatever came next would be AFTER.

Chapter Notes

I’d just like to take this moment to say that this story will incorporate elements of the new film, but overall, it’ll be functioning in its own ’verse (hence #Alternate Universe: Canon Divergence).

Peter woke up with aches in places he hadn't thought it possible to have aches in. Groaning, he delicately shifted position and breathed in the scent of his pillowcase. It smelled grown-up and slightly dangerous. Stark’s aftershave, certainly, and something else that he couldn’t identify but knew intuitively to be him.

He might have kept on breathing in the aroma of the evening before — he’d always considered that idea sort of disgusting, but perhaps it was just different when it was you — but his alarm clock shattered the spell. No matter what he did the night before, there would always be the daily grind to welcome him back to reality.

Still, none of that stopped him from pausing in front of the mirror as he dressed to take stock. Good God. His body was a war zone. A raw-looking bite mark on his shoulder, another one above his nipple, yet another one on his neck, the crescent moons of nail marks on his hips, and, the crowning glory, the clear mark of a hand stretching across one knee. Fingermarks and everything. He’d have to dress even more conservatively than usual.

So this was him now. His post-virginity self. Funny to think that the line had been drawn at last, that everything he’d already done was BEFORE and whatever came next would be AFTER.

Before he headed to the kitchen to grab breakfast, he glanced at his phone. There were a few texts from Ned, two of which must have arrived while he and Stark had been… in the middle of things. Weird to think about.

Nothing from Stark himself. He told himself not to worry about it. The last thing he wanted was to look desperate. If he didn’t hear from him within the next three hours, he’d text him. An emoji, maybe. Something safe.

Miraculously, May didn’t seem to notice anything amiss when he arrived for breakfast. He’d tucked his collar up as high as it could go, and that still wasn’t quite enough to hide the love bite on his neck. Later, he raided her makeup drawer and inexpertly daubed on some of her concealer, but the tone didn’t blend in with his own skin tone, and he eventually gave it up as a lost cause and washed
He discovered the real hell of it once he reached school and was sitting in first block. The teacher’s voice was barely even background noise; he lost track of the notes he was meant to be taking and found himself checking his phone compulsively. No new messages. It was just as well that Michelle was asleep as usual since the last thing he needed was something to divide his attention further.

He glanced up at the white board, where the teacher was drawing a parabola, gesturing from it to several equations on the far left.

“Oh, because this is an equation and not an expression, of course…”

Peter promptly lost interest again.

He shifted in his seat — carefully, yikes — and glanced down at his phone. Still nothing. He really didn’t want to make the first move in case he was bothering him or something, but…

He tapped out a quick message.

Hey

Oh yeah. Killer opening gambit. He sent it anyway.

The teacher passed out a worksheet. Peter completed it mechanically, his mind focused other places, like the back of his sofa, and his bed, the springs of which he was certain were now permanently damaged.

His phone screen lit up. He had a reply.

How are you

He grinned, biting his lower lip and tapped out another message.

Sore

Really sore

But it’s good

After a few seconds, he sent another one.

Should I thank you??

Or would that be weird

The bell rang before he could get a reply.

“Did you get the notes?” Michelle had woken up, was putting her things back in her backpack.

“Um, no, not today,” he said guiltily.

She paused and peered at him. It wasn’t the first time she’d done it to him, and this time, as always, he felt as though he were going through a metal detector.

“Why’re you blushing?” she said at last.
“I’m not blu —"

“Yeah, you are.” She gave him a look. “You’d better not have a crush on me.”

“What? No.”

“Good. That’d be embarrassing.”

His phone lit up.

*I’d really rather you didn’t*

He was just beginning to type back, shrugging on his backpack with his free hand, when another text came in.

*But you’re okay?*

He grinned to himself again, then realized that Michelle was still watching him.

“What?”

“Are you high?” she asked.

He shrugged, feeling his grin get wider of its own accord. “Yeah,” he said. “High on life.”

She gave him something that may have been a smile. “Nice hickey,” she said and headed out the door.

By lunchtime, Ned had also asked him if he was high, and several teachers had told him that he was free to stand at the back of the room until he woke up properly. Even so, he was able to ride the high of the residual adrenaline rush from last night through most of it. Not even the pop quiz in third block could sour his mood.

It all went to hell the moment he stepped into the locker room.

To his knowledge, nobody actively looked forward to PE, Peter least of all. It was simply too much work to pretend that he could barely break five push-ups. Now, today, he realized the other danger.

His gym shorts didn’t cover the handprint.

He blew out a sigh and tugged the hem of his shorts down, to no avail. Cursing under his breath, he dragged his hands over his face and reached for his T-shirt — the collar of which, he quickly discovered, wouldn’t do anything to hide the love bite on his neck. No secret was safe from the locker room, it seemed.

Beside him, Ned was pulling on his own T-shirt and talking about something that had happened in his first block. Peter wasn’t really listening; he was wishing that he’d used May’s concealer after all.

“And then Flash goes — what the hell —” Peter looked up as Ned’s tone suddenly changed and realized with a start that his friend was staring at his neck, mouth agape. Too late, Peter reached up and covered the bite.

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” he said, as Ned dropped his voice and hissed, “Is that a _hickey_?”
Peter opened his mouth to deny it again, only to realize that he would inevitably be asked what it really was. He ran through the possible explanations, but the only one that came to mind was curling iron burn, which wouldn’t work for any number of reasons.

He realized Ned was waiting for an answer. “Yeah,” he muttered, dropping his gaze. His ears blazed red.

“Holy shit, who’d you hook up with?”

But the whistle of Coach Wilson had sounded outside the locker room, and they had no choice but to follow the pack out into the gymnasium. Wilson stood in the center and clapped his hands together.

“Five laps! Go!”

They fell grimly into pattern. On a normal day, it took most of his self-control not to outstrip the jocks, but today, just keeping pace with Ned was a challenge.

“Who was it?” asked Ned as they ran.

“Can’t tell you.”

“Oh God, tell me it wasn’t Michelle,” he said. “I refuse to be the third wheel.”

“Michelle’s gay.”

“I heard my name,” came a familiar voice behind them. A moment later, Michelle herself jogged into place on Ned’s other side. “What’s going on?”

Ned didn’t waste a moment. “Did you and Peter hook up?”

“What?” She craned her neck to look over at Peter. “What have you been saying?”

“Oh my god, so it was you?”

“No!” Michelle and Peter said it simultaneously. “What’s going on?” added Michelle.

“Peter’s got a hickey, and he won’t say how.” They finished the first lap. Peter’s entire face was red, barely from the exercise.

“Yeah, I know,” said Michelle. Ignoring Ned’s squawk of disbelief, she added, “My money’s on Liz.”

“Uh, she would never go for me,” Peter said, even as the girl in question jogged by, flanked as usual by a coterie of friends.

“She did in seventh grade.”

“Yeah, but that was back when we were still in the same grade, and anyway, everyone knows that middle school doesn’t count.”

“Gwen,” said Ned.

“Nope.” Peter finally relented, but only slightly. “For the record,” he said, “it was a dude.”

Michelle gave Ned a look of suspicion, but Ned shook his head. “I thought we established that he’s not my type,” he said.
“Who else do we know that’s gay?”

“Harry.”

“Oh, I so would, but no,” said Peter.

Ned snorted, and Peter knew he was no longer taking the matter seriously. “I got it,” he said. “Flash.”

Peter cracked up. “Oh my God, what would that even be like.”

“Jesus,” added Ned as they rounded a corner. “Your knee. There is literally a handprint. On your knee.” Peter blushed and didn’t look at him. “Who was this guy?” They were coming up on the end of their second lap.

Peter was rapidly realizing that he would need to find some sort of excuse to get out of naming someone. “You don’t know him,” he tried. “He doesn’t go here.”

“Does he have a name?” asked Ned. Then he added, “Or is that like a safety issue?”

Peter seized on it like a fish on a lure. “Uh, yeah, actually, he’s still in the closet, so it’s a little…”

“Gotcha. Okay.”

They jogged silence for a while.

“I can’t believe you lost it first,” Ned said after a while. “No, actually, wait a second,” he continued. “Skinny, white, conventionally attractive — of course you lost it first.”

“Are you taking him to Homecoming?” asked Michelle.

“Um — no, closeted, remember?”

“You still haven’t answered the million dollar question,” she added.

“I haven’t?” Peter asked, suddenly on edge again.

“Yeah. You know. Was it good?”

Peter thought back to the long hours spent waiting, pacing back and forth in his hastily spruced-up room, not eating dinner, nearly making himself sick with apprehension, all for the moment that Stark would show up in the doorway of his apartment. And, yeah, it hadn’t quite gone how he’d expected, and yeah, he was still aching from it — go harder had proved to be a phrase that carried a great deal of physical penance in proportion to immediate gratification — but there was no way he wouldn’t choose the same way again.

He’d spent all that time imagining what it would be like with him, but all the scenarios he’d conjured up his mind while he’d been waiting, the what-ifs and fears and dark, furtive hopes, had proved separate from what really happened. He didn’t panic, he didn’t make a fool of himself (he didn’t think), he didn’t even cry until right near the end, and that had been the overstimulation, not really anything that Stark had done.

But he couldn’t put all that into words, so he just said, “Invasive, but good. Like, really good.”

“Aw,” Michelle said, “you’re a baby hoe.”
“I’m not —” Peter stopped. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

A torturous hour and a half later — he was really starting to regret the eagerness of last night — Peter was back in the locker room with the rest of his class, scrambling for his phone and then his clothes, yanking off his shirt with one hand while checking for new texts.

So where do we go from here?

He bit his lip and set the phone down. A good question, although he wasn’t quite sure why Stark had asked him. He changed back into his regular clothes as quickly as he could manage without dipping into his extra abilities and then fired off a response.

No idea

For what its worth I really really want to see you again

The reply came on his way out of the school.

I know

He slowed to a stop on the sidewalk in front of the main double doors, frowning.

What about you? he texted.

Do you want to see me again

Had something gone wrong that he hadn’t been aware of?

Of course I do, came the reply, and Peter breathed a sigh of relief.

We need to be careful though

What we did last night means we crossed a line

We cant come back from that ok?

I know

Still… cant we enjoy right now for a second?

There was no immediate reply, which Peter chose to interpret as Stark being called away by something important, and not him being deliberately ignored. He stuck his phone back in his pocket, vaulted the gate — Jesus Christ, bad idea, bad idea — and started out for the deli nearby.

By the time he’d gotten his sandwich (Delmar behind the counter had tapped his own neck with a fingertip and given him a thumb-up and a grin), Stark had texted him back. He settled on a bench outside, ostensibly to eat, but he reached for his phone first.

Sure, he’d written. And then:

I keep thinking about what you looked like

Peter grinned to himself, biting his lower lip.
There was another pause, lasting just a few seconds this time.

*Great*, the message read.

*You were great*

*I want you again,* Peter texted.

*You too*

*I wish you wouldn’t go right after though*

**That might be difficult to arrange**

*I want you to stay,* Peter typed, but then he deleted it all because it reminded him too much of a song on his iPod, and anyway, it felt a little too personal. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to test the bounds of what they had (whatever it was) just yet. Still, even if he couldn’t admit it to Stark at the moment, it was impossible to deny how much he wanted to be held until he slept, to wake up and have the other person still there (the only sour part of the morning had been when he’d opened his eyes and, not quite awake yet, had wondered where Stark had gone).

He settled for:

*I can smell you on me*

And then:

*Was i really good?*

*Yeah*

There was a pause, and Peter wondered if perhaps Stark was chewing on what to say next.

*This is a lot for me to deal with so details are kind of difficult right now, the next message read, but i can’t get those sounds you made out of my head*

Heat rose up in his face and neck, his ears burning. He’d been well aware of how much he’d talked, but his mouth had been operating independently of his brain, and he couldn’t possibly stop himself.

*Sorry I ramble in awkward situations*

*Not that*

*After you shut up*

*Oh*

*I want to see you*

*We’ll figure something out*

*This is okay for you? Peter texted after a moment’s thought.*

*I don’t want you doing something if you feel weird about it*
Peter had finished his sandwich and started on his homework by the time he got a response: a call, not a text.

“Hi,” he said, feeling shy all the sudden and not really understanding why.

“How are you?”

“Can you talk right now?”

“Yeah, I’m — nobody’ll care.”

“Just felt better speaking real time.” Stark sounded tired, but his tone was warm. “Listen — I don’t want you to worry about me. You worry about you and nobody else, okay?”

“But I don’t want to force —“

“Nobody is forcing anyone into doing anything,” Stark said. “At least, that’s what I understood last night. Am I right, or am I wrong?”

Peter flushed. “Yeah. That’s… what I understood too.”

Silence, and for once, when he heard him breathing on the line, he didn’t feel guilty for closing his eyes and dreaming. Christ, his mouth was watering just listening to him.

“How sore are you? Really.”

“As fuck,” Peter said, suppressing a smile as a passerby glared at him. “I think I can feel it in my internal organs.” After a moment, when Stark didn’t reply, he added, hesitantly, “Can you say it to me? Out loud?”

“Say what?”

“That it was good?”

He heard him take a shuddering breath. “You were perfect,” he said at last. Peter set down his pencil, taken aback. “And all I’ve been able to think about since then is when can I do that to you again.”

He tried to think of something to say, but all the words stuck in his throat, and he found his eyes welling up, his lower lip quivering. Why was he crying?

“You okay?” Stark asked, sounding wary.

“Fine,” he whispered, staring fixedly at the tree across the street as the first tear rolled down his cheek. “I’m fine.”

Did people really cry when they were happy? Or was it because he knew that what they were doing was terribly, horrifically immoral?

He knew himself better than that. It had been the breathless need in Stark’s voice, coupled with a misery he couldn’t disguise, and even as Peter tried to suppress the tears that were already falling, he knew that there was no return from any of what they had done.
Uncontrolled descent

Chapter Summary

It felt as though he’d taken Peter’s childhood from him, right along with his virginity. But words like childhood made him sick, so he tried to avoid the idea.

Chapter Notes

So, how about that Infinity War trailer, huh? :D This chapter was posted early for the sake of my own schedule (and also because if I had to work on it any longer, I would scream). The next chapter will go up Thursday of next week as usual. I have nothing else to say about this chapter except that it was literally fighting back as I wrote it, and I am damn relieved to see the back of it.

“Did you get laid?”

Tony forced his pulse back under control and looked back at Rhodey. It was evening in the compound, and *Gladiator* played on the TV, the image of Russell Crowe facing off with a tiger flickering over their faces.

“What makes you say that?” he asked, playing it cool.

“There’s a thing that you do.”

“I do not have a *thing.*”

“How long have we known each other?” Rhodey fixed him with a look. “Yeah. You’ve got a thing. You do this —” He let one corner of his mouth twitch in a lopsided smile — “all the time.”

He rolled his eyes and looked away. “Maybe,” he said noncommittally.

“Uh-huh. And I bet you want me to believe that you bit your own lip that hard.”

Absentmindedly, Tony ran his tongue over his lower lip, where Peter had drawn blood the other night. It still tasted raw.

“I’m gonna have to plead the Fifth on that,” he said.

“Look, I’m not judging,” said Rhodey. “I’m kind of relieved, honestly. I was waiting for you to hit the rebound zone.”

“I plead the Fifth,” he repeated and pointedly turned his attention back to the film.

As time passed — three days, three miserable, blissful days since they’d done it — Tony had become aware of the two halves of his mind: the one that had conducted that phone call, that had huskily
whispered *you were perfect* to him over the line, the one that keened for more even as he sat there with Rhodney and watched the film; and then the half of him that couldn’t move past the fact that he’d taken the kid’s virginity in *his fucking bedroom*.

Oddly, it was that detail he continued to flagellate himself over. The kid’s bedroom, with the posters on the walls and the cluttered corners. How fitting was that? He’d managed to sully the kid’s one haven from the rest of the world. *His goddamned bed.* Where he’d *sleep every night.* There was something absurdly sickening about that. He and Pepper had slept in the same place they had sex. So had he and Steve. But this was different; nobody except them knew that he, Tony, had fucked him there. Hard enough that he’d had to hold his hand through it. Hard enough that he’d been limping for days.

It felt as though he’d taken Peter’s childhood from him, right along with his virginity. But words like *childhood* made him sick, so he tried to avoid the idea.

Sometimes, a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Peter’s would whisper things like *can’t you just push aside your misgivings and focus on the good?*

“*Are you not entertained?*” Russell Crowe roared at the crowds in the Colosseum. Tony shifted in his seat and reached for his phone to scroll through his messages. One from Peter earlier that morning: *dreamed about you last night.*

Last night. Coincidentally, he’d dreamed of Peter as well, and had woken up hard enough that he’d had to palm himself off like a — — well. Like a teenager.

At the worst moments of the day, he found himself imagining sliding into him again, kissing the moans and whimpers from him, the little squeak when he got too deep…

Tony licked his lips and fired off a quick reply: *save it for next time.*


“Um, I —“

“Yeah, I know, you plead the Fifth.” He heard the bitterness in his friend’s voice and put down the phone.

“What is it?”

Rhodney bit his lip, shaking his head. “You’ve been closed off a lot lately. And you’ll have to forgive me if that makes me worry.”

“There’s no reason to worry.”

“Then can I have some reassurance that you’re not having some sort of manic episode?”

Tony reached for the remote and paused the film, sighing. “Are you worried I’m going to kill myself or that I’m going to set the building on fire?”

“I don’t *know,* Tony, and that’s what worries me.” Rhodney shook his head. “I don’t think you’re self-aware enough to realize that you’re behaving in a way that’s…. really cagey.”

“I think that’s putting it kind of strongly —“
“You took your cast off two weeks before you were supposed to —“

“Rhodes, seriously —“

“I’m fucking worried about you, okay?” Immediately, Rhodey covered his face with his hands. “Look, I’m sorry I yelled,” he said more levelly. “But just answer me one thing, so I can cross it off my list of things to worry about — are you drinking again?”

Tony breathed out unhappily and leaned his head against the back of the sofa. “No,” he said honestly. “I’m not drinking.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

They sat in silence for several minutes. His phone lit up: Peter had texted him back. He resisted the urge to immediately open it.

“I’m sorry I’m worrying you,” he said. “Stuff’s been going on.”

“Stuff,” Rhodey repeated. He breathed something that may have been a laugh. “Don’t make me put on that suit and have to break another building to get you off your bullshit, okay?”

“That is definitely not necessary,” he said. He looked back at the TV screen. “Are you done with this? I’ve getting sorta tired.”

“Yeah, we can stop.”

On his way upstairs, he opened the text Peter had sent him.

*Can i see you tomorrow*

“Hey,” came Rhodey’s voice from behind him, “just so I know, how long are you going to be here for?”

“Um, actually, I’ll be heading back to the mansion tomorrow,” he said distractedly. He looked up and saw Rhodey looking at him in dismay. “I’m sorry,” he added. “I know it’s been really back-and-forth lately.”

But all Rhodey said was, “If you need anything, I’m a phone call away, okay?”

But Tony could feel the frustration under the surface.

*Come to the mansion after school

I’ll be there*

Tony remembered not especially clearly the first time he’d gotten drunk. The circumstances themselves were hazy — sixteen years old, some inferior rich friend’s party, vodka and lime, *excelsior* — and the physical details were even hazier. Really, all he recalled was the little war in his head right before he’d taken the first drink and the world had slid to the left.
Do it — no, let’s think this through — do it — Dad’ll lose his shit and Mom’ll look at you like you
fucked Gloria on her French Heritage couch — you’ll regret this tomorrow — fuck it.

He was bad at resisting temptation. Always had been, probably always would be. It wasn’t that he
didn’t hear the thoughts screaming in his head to make a U-turn; it was just that all the white noise
became merely that: white noise. Annoying for the first few minutes, then something he could tune
out at his will.

This matter with Peter (as he had taken to thinking of it, as though by using genteel, emotionless
words like matter he could divorce it from the need and heat and revulsion to which the mere
thought of Peter was inextricably linked) was different.

He couldn’t tune out the instincts telling him to back out, but somehow, all the screaming inside
seemed less consequential. If he concentrated, he could just do it anyway despite everything in his
head.

On his way to his room, he ducked briefly into Steve’s room. The idea of moving everyone’s things
into storage had been toyed with and ultimately abandoned. It wasn’t as if they were in desperate
need of space, and anyway, well.

There was always the chance that some of them might come back.

Why didn’t you just swallow your goddamned pride and sign the blasted Accords? Tony thought at
the empty room, at the old war photos beside the bed, at the clothes still hanging in the closet. If you
could just have been content with what you already had, you wouldn’t be gone, and I wouldn’t be
trying to scrub a fifteen-year-old off my conscience.

Sure, pinning the blame on somebody else didn’t hurt either.

Two emails were waiting for him when he reached his room: one from Ross, and the other from
Justin Hammer, of all people. Between the devil and the deep blue sea, he thought and then clicked
on Ross’s first.

It was a quick read: rumors of a potential sighting of Captain Rogers somewhere outside Wakanda,
and did Tony have any glowing insights on this? He typed out a quick reply — nada — and then
turned his attention to the other one.

Uncharacteristically, Hammer’s email was only a few sentences long.

Anthony —

Are you free for dinner on the 30th? There are a few matters I’d like to discuss.

— J. H.

Hammer Enterprises

Tony had done business with Hammer before, mostly in his pre-Iron Man days, and he’d realized
early on that Hammer had an uncanny ability to tailor his messages for the recipients, always
knowing what buttons to press in order to induce the desired response. It was almost Pavlovian, a
superpower of sorts. To Tony’s shame, Hammer still knew how to play him, dropping in just enough
information that his interest would be piqued and he’d have to accept the invitation — there would be no point in questioning him long-distance, Hammer would only evade the point.

*Let him rot,* he thought and made to delete the email along with Ross’s.

Then he blew out a sigh.

*Where and what time,* he typed, hitting ENTER with more force than was necessary. At the same moment, his phone lit up, heralding a text from Itsy-Bitsy (God, he really had to change that).

*Cant sleep,* the text read.

He settled back in his chair to reply. There was something reassuring about having the kid there on the opposite end of the line, in the same way that there was something undeniably charming about the kid himself. Charming and sickening all the same, like candy so sweet it made your teeth hurt.

Early the next morning, he left for the mansion. He’d tried to time it so that Rhody wouldn’t be awake, but there he was at the kitchen table, coffee mug in hand, staring down at his reflection in the table’s surface with an unreadable expression.

“Everything okay?” Tony asked hesitantly. Rhody looked up at him and blinked slowly, as though trying to make sense of what Tony was doing there in the doorway.

“Fine,” he said.

“You’re sure?” Tony pressed. There was something worn-out in Rhody’s face, and it made Tony feel a fresh wave of guilt. It was so easy to forget that he wasn’t the only player in his life, and that he wasn’t the only person dealing with trauma. His best friend had taken a fall, a bad fall, and just how much had he done to help him? A fresh rush of guilt ran through him. “If you need me to, I can stick around,” he said. He could text Peter and say… fuck it, he’d already had sex with him, he could trust him with the truth, couldn’t he? He’d get it.

But Rhody waved him off. “It’s fine,” he said.

“But —“

“Tony, go. Seriously.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but Rhody was giving him a familiar look of determination, eyebrows raised as if to say *are you going to test me?* Tony nodded and let the matter drop.

“So you’re heading out?” Rhody asked.

“Yeah.” It was hard to look at him. Tony strode to the fridge on the pretext of searching for something to eat, but in reality, it was just to avoid his gaze. “How’s therapy going?”

“Not too bad,” Rhody said.

Tony stared at the contents of the fridge for a few more seconds and then gave up. “I guess I’ll be seeing you,” he said, turning back. Rhody nodded, sipping his coffee. “Call me if you need to, okay?”

“Back at you,” he said.
And that seemed to be it.

He reached the mansion in the middle of that morning to find a new email from Hammer, confirming them for seven-thirty at his place. Tony sent back a quick message just say that he’d marked it all down, and then found himself pacing back and forth, nervy and self-loathing.

Hours passed as he marinated in his uglier feelings, until all of that whisked away the moment FRIDAY coughed and said —

— Sir, Mr. Parker has arrived.

“Let him in,” Tony said. “And turn off the cameras.”

— Where, sir?

“Just —“ he floundered — “everywhere.”

He was downstairs in the lobby, talking animatedly to Happy, who wasn’t having any of it. But the kid either didn’t care or hadn’t picked up the cues, and Tony watched him from the top of the staircase in some amusement. The tableau was reminiscent of the evening of Dot’s party, when he’d stood in this same place, watched him sit and fret, all the while shoring up his own courage…

Much like now.

In the end, he stayed a few moments too long, and Peter looked up past Happy and spotted him, breaking off mid-sentence.

Tony descended and steered Peter away (Happy mouthed an emphatic thank you to him) in the direction of the back stairs that would take them up to the lab. Their fingers brushed together as they walked, a little electric point of contact, and Tony wrapped his arm around his shoulder. Peter pressed against him just slightly, hip to hip.

The lab door closed with a click, and Tony turned back to look at him. There was a heavy thunk as Peter dropped his backpack on the lab counter. He caught his eye, anticipation mixing with uncertainty in his gaze. There was a smudge of bright blue face paint on one cheekbone; Tony tapped at the same place on his own cheekbone and gave him a questioning look.

Peter grinned and looked away almost shyly as he absently scratched the paint with a fingernail. “Spirit Week,” he explained. “We had the pep rally today.”

Tony leaned against the door, content for the moment just to watch him talk. “How was that?”

“I have no idea,” said Peter, “I didn’t go. All the screaming. You know. But Michelle told me it had a quote ‘serious pep deficiency,’ so…” He grinned. “Missed you.”

A grin of his own pulled at Tony’s lips. “You too,” he said. It was uncanny, the way Peter could simultaneously increase and decrease his stress levels.

“How’d you sleep?” asked Tony.

“Not too bad, considering. I got there eventually.”
Peter’s eyes flicked from his face downward over the rest of him, finally stopping at his own shoes. Then he chanced another glance up, as if to ascertain that Tony had taken the point.

Tony strode over and kissed him: brief, chaste (as if anything about this could be considered chaste). Peter’s hand found his collar and pulled him closer.

“I want to see you more,” he said. Tony pulled back just enough to see his face.

“I know.”

“Do you think we could just… I don’t know…” He sighed. “When you took me to Berlin, you said it was an internship, right? Can’t we do that again?”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You want me to whisk you off to Berlin again?”

He grinned, splayed his fingers across Tony’s chest. “Is that an option?”

“Probably not a great idea.”

“Yeah, well. This isn’t either, is it?” said Peter. “But here we are.”

“Yeah,” Tony whispered. “Here we are.”

Peter tilted his head up to kiss him again and pulled him forward by his collar as he stepped back, essentially trapping himself between Tony and the table. Tony nibbled on his lower lip, hands in his hair, and when one of Peter’s hands slid down his chest and his stomach, making for the growing bulge between his legs, he smoothly caught his wrist and brought it up to the side of the table, pinning it there with his own hand. If Peter was at all disappointed, Tony didn’t notice because he’d begun to kiss his neck, and his hum sounded nothing but contented.

“I missed you,” Peter murmured again, eyes closed.

Tony hummed and kissed him again, grinning in spite of himself when Peter’s tongue slipped into his mouth. It shouldn’t have been so enjoyable, really, any of it.

With a little whimper, Peter rolled his hips against his thigh. “Really, though,” he said, punctuating each word with a kiss, “isn’t there something we can do? Like, another internship, or something, so I can, like, just stick around —”

Tony pulled back just enough to look at him, smiling crookedly. “You already looking to move in?” Now bright red, Peter laughed.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “I just — I want to see you more. What, do you not want to see me?”

“Of course I want to see you,” Tony said. Relinquishing his hold on his hand, he slid to his knees, placed his hands lightly on Peter’s thighs. “We just need to be smart about this. And before you say it, I know we’re already failing step one.” Peter just looked him, an odd mix of want and frustration in his eyes. Blown pupils. God, he really was gorgeous, in a way he should never have been. “Listen,” he said at last, once he’d looked away. “I’ll see what I can do. No promises, though, okay?”

Peter nodded. “Thanks.”

Tony leaned forward and pressed his lips to the inside of his right thigh. “Course I want to see you
more,” he murmured, more to himself than to Peter, who groaned and stayed impressively still, even as Tony kissed his way along the line of his leg, stroking his thumb over his knee. “Whatever you’re feeling, I’m feeling it too, okay? You don’t need to worry about that.” He chanced a look up. Peter’s eyes were wide, wet.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” he whispered.

Tony undid the zipper of his jeans, and, before he could think any harder about it, put his mouth against his erection through his cotton boxers.

Peter’s knees buckled.

“Take it easy,” Tony murmured against him, and Peter whimpered, holding onto the edge of the table for support. Tony hooked his fingers around the band of his boxers. “Yes?”

Peter nodded emphatically, and Tony pulled his jeans and his underwear down around his knees, closing his eyes as he dragged his lips up his left thigh, over wiry curls until the tip of his tongue touched hot, smooth skin, and Peter actually growled, shaking, one hand settling heavily on Tony’s head —

Peter’s phone rang.

“Oh, fuck.” Unsteadily, he reached one hand behind himself for his phone where it was tucked in the front pocket of his bag.

“Can it wait?” asked Tony.

“I — “ Peter glanced at the caller — “oh fuck, I forgot.” Hastily, he pushed Tony away and pulled his jeans up with one hand, already answering. “Hi, May, I know, I’m so sorry, I was studying for English in the library and I lost track of time — yeah, I know — on my way right now — okay, I’ll see you. Bye.”

Now presentable, he tossed his phone back into his backpack and looked back at Tony, who had stood up, startled by how events had progressed. “I gotta go,” he said. “May’s boyfriend is having dinner with us tonight, and I was supposed to be there like half an hour ago to get ready, so — “ he paused for breath — “I gotta run.” He stood up on his toes and stole a kiss from him, impressively hungry for how short it lasted. “Don’t forget about what we were talking about,” he said, heading for the door. “I really meant it.” Then he seemed to change his mind and darted back to Tony for another kiss, this one even hungrier than the last. Tony cupped his jaw in his hands, letting himself enjoy it, but Peter was already drawing back, stars in his eyes. “I want to fuck in a bed again,” he said breathlessly.

And then he was gone, the door was open, and Tony left with alone with his now-fading arousal and the words that hung in the air, as heady and as dangerous as drinks taken at a party decades ago. The feeling reminded him of the wormhole, somehow: pulled relentlessly back, back, back. Or perhaps, this was how Rhodey had felt when he’d taken the fall. That seemed like a better analogy.

Certainly they, too, were moving too fast to be saved.
Homecoming

Chapter Summary

“Here’s the thing. You don’t want us to know anything about this guy. To me, that sounds like there’s something you’re really trying to hide.”

Chapter Notes

Surpri-ise...

Thank RedFlagsAndDiamonds for this, filthy enabler as she is.

Peter’s life had become a whirlwind of activity.

Nothing could ever happen one thing at a time, he discovered: it could never just be Spirit Week, the pep rally, and Homecoming; it also had to be his sparkling new relationship (dare he call it that) with someone several times his age, the announcement on the part of his aunt that things were now “serious” with Nathan, and the now-confirmed prospect of an internship of unspecified length with Tony Stark, billionaire, just days after Thanksgiving. He’d almost dropped the phone the moment he’d gotten word.

You really set this up for me? he’d texted.

It’s not like we won’t be doing the work, came the reply.

But yeah

He’d gone through approximately thirty drafts of one text, only to eventually surrender and just say what he felt.

I can’t fucking wait

But he’d have to wait because there were things he had to get through first. Like the quiz in Spanish, the assembly the school had had on drinking and driving, and now, Homecoming night.

He was standing on the steps in front of the school in his suit, feeling at once debonair and ridiculous. The music inside the commons was loud enough that he could feel the bass line pumping deep in his ear drum even from outside.

The car pulled away from the curb, and at that moment, Peter’s phone buzzed. Probably May; it would be like her to text him a full ten seconds from dropping him off…

It wasn’t from May, but Stark, but Peter didn’t get a chance to read it because there was a sudden call from behind him and —

“Hey!” Ned barreled into him in a suit of his own, hugging him tight. “Goddamn,” he said, holding
him back at arms’ length to look him over. “James Bond, much?”

“Speak for yourself,” said Peter. “Daniel Craig better watch himself.” He spotted Michelle over Ned’s shoulder, who was standing there looking disdainful in something unexpectedly floral. With no change of expression, she gave him the finger and nodded to him when he returned the gesture.

“You don’t look terrible,” she said.

“Back at you.”

She looked past him, craning her neck. “Oh, man,” she said. “Don’t look now, but someone is about to set the school on fire.”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Liz Allen in a short, bright pink party dress, ducking inside on the arm of someone whom Peter vaguely recognized as the captain of the swim team.

“Almost enough to make you regret letting that go, huh?” Michelle said.

“Are you kidding?” Ned said. “Peter’s got a sexy secret boyfriend who’s giving him all the dick he could possibly want, so I think he’s okay.” Peter choked on his own saliva, his eyes watering. “Come on,” Ned said, pounding his back. “Let’s go.”

Inside, the sound was a wall, and Peter felt as though he had just run headlong into it. If the bass line of the songs had been palpable from the outside, it was now throbbing in his ribcage, his temples, the roots of his teeth in his gums. On top of that, the crush of everyone he’d so much as glimpsed yelling to be heard over the noise.

His palms were suddenly damp, and he remembered the phone in his hand. Hastily, not wanting anyone to look over his shoulder, he opened the text.

*Have fun. Don't get drunk*

He grinned, tapped out a quick reply — noted — and stuffed his phone back into his pocket. Across the commons, now in the sea of dancing couples, Liz caught his eye and gave him a wave, which he returned with a grin.

“Aw, she’d totally still go for you,” Ned called over the noise.

“Oh, please,” Peter scoffed. “Come on, let’s go —“

— find a spot that’s not so close to the fucking speakers, Jesus.

They carved out a spot at a miraculously deserted table across the commons, the tablecloth already covered in abandoned plastic cups of water and purses. Peter moved a pair of red satin stilettos off a chair and sat down heavily. The constant sound, loud enough to be a physical presence, was beginning to make him feel ill.

“You’re not going to dance?” Ned asked.

“I’ll dance when they play Nicki,” said Peter.

“Come on, you can’t just sit here all night.” Ned beckoned to him with both hands. Peter glanced at Michelle, who had also sat down. “I don’t believe you two,” he said.
“What?” Michelle said, somehow managing to make herself heard over the din without shouting. “The power with which *Uptown Funk* can command a room is endlessly fascinating to me. I can only appreciate it from the outside.”

Ned shook his head in disappointment. “Well. I’m going.” And he melted into the crowd just as the music changed from Bruno Mars to a Hey Violet song that made Peter feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Everybody was there: Flash and his poor date, who didn’t look like she was having a very good time; Liz dancing first with her own date, then with Betty Bryant; the occasional glimpse of Ned and some of the other kids from the decathlon; Harry Osborne spinning his boyfriend under his arm; a brief glimpse of blonde hair that might have been Gwen…

His hands were shaking, his throat parched. He reached for the nearest cup that still had water in it and took a sip, hoping the coldness would cure some of the nausea beginning to spread through his belly. But the heat of the room with so many bodies in it had turned it almost bathtub warm. He grimaced as he swallowed and pushed the cup back across the table. Beside him, Michelle had taken out a small sketchpad from her purse and begun to draw despite the poor lighting — and God, that was another thing, the flashing lights, was this what seizures were like?

He pulled out his phone.

*Hey don’t think i can do this???

To his relief, a reply came in seconds. To his frustration, it wasn’t what he was after.

*The internship or the dance*

He gritted his teeth together.

*I think im dying

Its so fucking loud*

The song changed again. Flo Rida, *Low*. Something in the music — perhaps the synthesizers? — made his temples pound. He groaned out loud and put his head down in his arms, breathing carefully to try and alleviate some of the nausea.

“You good?”

He looked up at Michelle, who was watching him with her brow furrowed. When she saw his face, she put her pencil down. “What is it?”

“I gotta —” His stomach lurched. With another groan, he stumbled to his feet, only to have his head swim with the sudden change in gravity. The world swerved to the right, and he tried to support himself on the table, but Michelle was faster; she grabbed him by his arm and more or less frogmarched him away from the commons in the direction of the nearest boy’s bathroom. He broke into a run for the last fifteen feet to burst into the first stall he saw and heave out his guts into the toilet.

Once he’d emptied out his stomach and heaved some more for good measure, he sat back on his heels and flushed the toilet.

Vomiting was never fun. Vomiting in a school restroom was somehow even worse.
Michelle was waiting for him outside the stall, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. She watched him rinse his mouth out under the faucet, then splash water on his face.

“Thanks,” he said once he felt like he could talk again. The bass was shaking the walls, it seemed.

She shrugged with one shoulder. “Are you drunk?”


“Ah, a fellow SPD kid. I wondered.” She waved his phone. “I got this, by the way.”

His heart skipped several beats as he all but snatched it out of her hands. “Thanks — thanks.” To his relief, the lock was still intact, but somehow, he wouldn’t have put it past her to have figured out his password.

“You okay?” Michelle had cocked her head to the side.

“Yeah — fine as I can be right now, you know?”

“I mean, you just seem sort of defensive all the sudden. In fact, you’ve been acting kind of weird lately anyway.”

Peter thought back to what seemed like ages ago, sitting in Michelle’s apartment and listening to her and Ned talk. Here it came.

He shrugged, not making eye contact with her as he washed his hands. “Stress. You know.”

Michelle cleared her throat. When he looked at her, he found her gazing at him with an expression he hadn’t seen before: somewhere between suspicion and what might even have been concern.

“Can we talk?” she said.

“… we are talking.”

“I meant in a place where people won’t be hooking up in like ten minutes.”

“What’s going on?” asked Peter.

“Funny,” said Michelle. “That’s what I was going to ask you.”

They slipped out the doors and around the side of the school. The temperature had dropped since they went inside; they were both shivering as they sat down on the cement, gazing out at the nearly empty parking lot. A streetlight shone orange on the windshield of the car parked beneath it. Peter breathed in the raw evening and tried to relax.

“Okay, look,” Michelle said at last. “You told us that you’re hooking up with somebody, but you won’t tell us who. You straight-up told us it was a guy, and anyway, you’ve been out for ages, so it’s not the gay thing. So, I’m going to guess that either we know the person and you’re just really embarrassed, or for some reason, you feel like you can’t tell us.”

“Michelle,” Peter began uneasily, “I told you, he’s not out yet —“

“Yeah, and you also told us that we don’t even know him. So how can we out someone we don’t know?”
Peter floundered. “I don’t know, I’m just doing what he —“

“I know what’s going on with you.”

He blinked, heart beating faster.

“Oh…”

“Or at least I can have a pretty educated guess.” She cleared her throat, the way she did at practice before she answered a question. Liz called it ‘getting her pedant on.’ “There has to be a logical reason that you don’t want us to know who he is,” she said. “I don’t buy the closet thing. And factoring in the part where you’re Spider-man —“

“Michelle, what the fuck —“

She fixed him with an appraising stare. “Yeah, I know about that.”

“Nobody knows about that!”

“Peter Parker goes on a super special internship program with Tony Stark out of the city right before Spider-man’s spotted in Berlin. Circumstantial evidence, sure, but it gets sorta suspicious when Peter Parker is also getting beaten up on the regs —“

“Okay, okay, you’ve made your point.”

“So you’ve got a lot going on.” She cleared her throat again. “Here’s the thing. You don’t want us to know anything about this guy. To me, that sounds like there’s something you’re really trying to hide. As we already established, it’s not the gender, so it must be something else.” She lifted an eyebrow. “You got something to say?”

Peter looked out into the parking lot so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact with her.

“Nah,” he said, voice drenched in sarcasm. “Keep on going, you’re on a roll.”

She missed the sarcasm. “You fucked somebody you really shouldn’t have. And if we brush aside internalized homophobia, we’re not left with many options. Or — maybe I’m looking at this the wrong way — did you…” And her voice became marginally more delicate. “You know. Did you want to?”

“Whoa.” Peter swiveled around to face her. “What you’re implying — that definitely did not happen.”

Her lips twitched humorlessly. “You’re sure? Some of those bruises looked pretty intense.”

“Certain,” he snapped. “It was completely consensual, okay?”

“So that just leaves Possibility Number Three,” she said. “How old was this guy?”

He froze, staring at her with wide eyes.

He looked away.

“Ah,” Michelle said. She sighed heavily. “Twenty points to Ravenclaw.”

Silence. A couple stumbled toward one of the cars in the parking lot. The car door slammed, reverberating around the lot, and then it pulled out of its parking space and rumbled off into the night.
“Are you going to say anything?” he asked at last.

Michelle shrugged. “It’s your life, Parker. I’m just saying, I think you’re making a really stupid decision, but, you know. Like I said. Your life.”

Silence.

“Like, seriously, how old?” she added.

Peter sighed. “He’s like… forty…” he whispered at last.

“What?!” Her voice echoed around the parking lot. “I thought it was, like, a college student.” She shook her head. “You gotta quit.”

“I don’t have to listen to you. And anyway, what happened to, it’s your life, Parker?”

“Parker, it is ten at night and fifty degrees out here. I’m not going to break down for you why fucking a guy three times your age is a bad idea.”

“You — okay, look.” He groaned and rubbed at his temples. “You don’t have context for this. You don’t understand —“

“Who is it?”

“I — what?”

She crossed her arms. “You didn’t want to tell us his name. Ergo, we would at least know him by name. Who is it?”

Peter pushed to his feet. “Fuck off.” He headed back toward the main entrance, but footsteps sounded behind him.

“Let’s see,” Michelle said. “It’s somebody we’d know or at least recognize. None of the teachers at this school are hot, so that rules that out. But, oh, hang on, you’re Spider-man —“

“Can you stop saying that out loud —“

“And if YouTube is to be believed, you made contact with a bunch of extremely attractive people above thirty in Berlin not too long ago on that quote internship unquote —“

He spun around.

“Michelle, I need you stop.”

She fell silent, just looking at him. They were outside the main doors again. The music had stopped; Peter wondered if they were crowning the Homecoming court.

They stared at each other until Peter was forced to look away first.

“Oh my God,” Michelle said softly. Her throat bobbed. “Can I take one guess?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She groaned, ran a hand through her hair. “Clearly, you’re not going to listen to reason here — and you know what? Fine. I probably wouldn’t either — but…” She shook her head. “You are really walking on a tightrope right now?”
Peter didn’t look at her, not wanting to admit that everything she was saying made perfect sense. “It’s going fine,” he said weakly.

“And how long d’you think that’s going to last?” She shook her head. “This is going to blow up in your face.”

Peter said nothing. How long did he think that’s going to last? He didn’t want to consider that possibility, the idea that something like this could ever sour.

Inside, the music started up again.

Sometimes, he wished he were less self-aware. Then he’d be able to do whatever he wanted without knowing that he was being willfully self-deceiving, willfully blind to the problems inherent in the decisions he’d made. First, he’d decided to put on the suit and as a result, his mental health was even worse than it already had been. And then he’d thrown himself at someone both decidedly out of his league and out of his age range, and now he felt as though he were treading water in a pool that was too deep for him: his head was above the surface now, but once he got tired…

“Does Ned know?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nobody does.” He hesitated. “Can I trust you to keep this between us?”

For one frightening moment, he’d thought she would say no. Then she nodded. “Yeah. I won’t say anything. He’s going to want to know what’s going on, though,” she added. “I’ll tell him about the spider thing.”

“Michelle —“

“What? He’ll be over the moon.”

“I know, and then he’s going to say something at precisely the wrong time and —“ He broke off as the doors opened, emitting Flash and his date, who was in angry tears.

“No — no — I’m done — I’m out —“ she was saying.

“Why do you always have to go psycho on me?” Flash demanded. And then they rounded the corner and disappeared from view.

“Fucking Flash,” Michelle muttered.

“Fucking Flash,” Peter agreed. Then he shrugged. “Tell him if you want. To be honest, I’m kind of tired of keeping secrets from you two.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She headed toward the doors, only to stop and turn back, one hand on the handle. “Just be careful, okay?” she said. He nodded, unable to meet her stare. “I know I’m not that good at emotions, or showing emotion,” she continued, “but it would suck if something happened to you.”

“What do you think’s going to happen?” he asked, almost bewildered.

“I have no idea,” she said. “Coming in?”

He shook his head, and she disappeared into the commons again with a brief swell in the volume of the music. Sounded like Ed Sheeran — take me into your lovin’ arms…

Inside, it was couples slow-dancing, and outside, Peter watched them, bitter that he was shut out, and
bitter that he didn’t have a right to be angry because he’d closed the door himself.

Homecoming more or less opened Thanksgiving Break, to Peter’s relief; he didn’t know how he would have made it through school with Michelle’s judgmental stare and Ned’s questions (he’d gotten a flurry of texts late that night after he’d gone home, Ned showering him with questions, the most of notable of them being why didn’t you say something before? It was almost a relief to have it out in the open, but the now constant worry that one of them would let something slip spoiled that). It had been bad enough when he’d mentioned that he’d be doing an internship with Stark. Ned had offered congratulations, and Michelle had just looked at him.

Beyond that, there was the more startling news that Liz’s dad had been arrested. No details, but he was somewhat selfishly glad that there was no school anyway; he wasn’t sure what he would be expected to say to her, if anything, and the decathlon meetings would be subdued, awkward.

Usually on Thanksgiving, Peter and May would cook something small in the apartment and laugh at the bad Hallmark movies on television. But that year, Nathan had them come to his place, where they all chipped in making dinner — Nathan handling the turkey, May the pie, and Peter the rolls — and then crowded (like sardines, Nathan said) around the tiny apartment dining table. He found that he was warming to his aunt’s boyfriend, who had used to write music and had some pretty good stories from when he was a little younger and had played live in bars down in Hell’s Kitchen. It was also abundantly clear that things were serious now between he and May. It made Peter feel at once embarrassed and somewhat lonely.

And then it was Sunday afternoon, and May was driving him to the mansion.

“You’ve got money for a taxi home, right?” she was saying.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Are you excited?”

“Definitely.” He curled and uncurled his fingers, slowly breathing out against the chest pains that heralded anxiety. “Yeah, definitely.”

They pulled up to the curb outside the towering building, and May unlocked the doors. “Have fun, do good work,” she said. Then she pulled him into a hug. “I’m really proud of you,” she said. Something in her tone made his guts twist in hot guilt, and he hugged her more tightly. This is wrong, he thought. This is a really, really shitty thing to do...

And also: we’re moving too fast.

“You take care,” she said at last, patting his shoulder.

“Will do,” he said, squeezed her hand, and then opened the car door and stepped out. “Love you, May,” he said through the rolled-down window.

“You too.”

And she drove off.
Like most of the times he’d come to the mansion, he met Happy first, who told him with the usual mix of surliness and sarcasm that Mr. Stark was upstairs in the lab and that he didn’t want to be disturbed.

“That’s okay, Happy.”

Peter whirled around. Somehow, Stark had managed to materialize behind him without making a sound.

“Hey,” he said weakly.

“Hey, kid. Good to see you. Come on.” He motioned to him, and Peter followed him without another thought, upstairs in the direction of the lab.

“So, what exactly are we doing?” he asked as they walked. “I mean, aside from, — you know. I mean, in the lab.”

As if in answer, Stark put his hand on his shoulder, steered him away to push him against the nearest wall, and kissed him.

“Was that hello?” Peter managed once they came up for air. He hadn’t expected Stark to make the first move, let alone so directly.

“It’s good to see you again,” Stark said. He kissed him again, teeth scraping his lower lip, and Peter tilted his chin up, letting his mouth fall open.

“Yeah — yeah, you too.”

“What you said last time,” he murmured. “Does that still apply?”

“I don’t remember what I said last time,” Peter said. His voice was barely above a whisper, in the off chance they were overheard. “You said you wanted to fuck in a bed again.”

“Wow, I said that? I mean, yes, definitely.” He grabbed the front of his shirt. “Yes, please.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Please.” Glancing around the corridor to make sure they were alone, he pressed himself against him. “Please fuck me.”

“Do you practice that in a mirror?” Stark asked. “Cause you’re way too good at it. Come on.” He was steering him up another flight of stairs, around a corner, up to a door with a keypad next to it. Stark typed a quick code into it, and there was the muffled click of something unlocking. Stark pushed the door open and stood back to let Peter in first.

Peter stepped inside and stared.

It was Stark’s bedroom — well, as far as Peter knew, it was just a bedroom, but really, when he looked at it, could it have been anyone else’s? One wall was almost completely window, with a sliding glass door that led onto a balcony that looked out over the city. Another door presumably led to a bathroom, and what that looked like, Peter couldn’t begin to imagine. A huge closet with a metal door. A television mounted on one wall.

But what dominated the room was the criminally enormous bed. Peter tried hard not to stare and
failed utterly.

“Holy shit,” he whispered. “You — I knew you were rich, but you’re rich. I mean — look at that thing — that’s like an island for sleeping —!” He looked back at Stark. “You’re rich,” he repeated. He couldn’t seem to stop saying it. How could one person have that much money…

“You good?” Stark asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, I just…” He cleared his throat. “Wow.”

Stark didn’t reply; his eyes were saying everything he needed to, staring at him hungrily, as though he could ever be satisfied from just looking.

Peter seized him by his collar and dragged him down to kiss him, then wrapped an arm around his neck to swing himself upward into his arms, legs around his hips. “Please,” he said. “Please.”

He landed on the bed with a whoomph and then continued to sink downward. A feather mattress. Of course. Stark was above him, kissing him.

“Hang on,” Peter said, “I think I’m drowning — in this mattress — this is it — this is how I die —”

“Nobody has ever died in this bed as long I’ve used it,” Stark told him. “You’ll be okay.” Then he pulled up his T-shirt to kiss his sternum, licking one nipple, and, as usual when confronted by a host of good sensations at once, Peter’s common sense shut down.

More, more, more seemed to be the only thing he knew how to say, was his only thought as clothes came off, and Stark pushed him further toward the center of the bed, rolling him onto his stomach and sliding his hand beneath the band of his boxers, his weight heavy above him.

Peter pushed his hand away, then rolled onto his back again. “I like it like this,” he said and kissed his knuckles before bringing his hand back where it had been. “Like this…”

Stark pressed his forehead against his, and Peter closed his eyes, bucking upward against him, gooseflesh rising as Stark worked his boxers off him, then reached over to the nightstand with one hand for lube and a condom.

It was easier to do this the second time around, now that he knew exactly how things would go. His body seemed to blaze every time Stark touched him; he got lightheaded the moment he felt him press against his opening and thought he might pass out during the first thrust, slow and long. Stark’s cheek was pressed against his jaw and his neck, beard scratching him in a way that should have been uncomfortable but only seemed to make things more somehow. He found he liked listening to him, distant as he was through the haze of sensation — the desperate groans and the gasp when Peter rolled them over and sank down on him again.

By the time they were both spent, just a heap in the pillows, he was too tired to think, let alone talk. A weary nod when Stark asked him a question, a weary smile.

“You know,” he murmured lazily, after several minutes of Stark just holding him and not saying anything, once he’d regained his tongue, “if this room were to flood right now… I think we’d survive as long as we were on this thing.” He patted the bed with a weak hand.

Stark rolled his eyes. “Maybe discuss the merits of an Alaska King bed in survival situations some other time?” he said. He brushed Peter’s hair back from his face. “For right now, I would kill for some sugar,” he added. “Want a cookie? I want a cookie.” He swung off the bed and began to dress again. His fingers were shaking, Peter noticed, as he did up the zipper of his jeans, but when he pretended not to have seen when he caught Stark’s eye.
He propped himself up on one arm.

“Lab?” he said.

“Sure, get your clothes on.”

With a groan, Peter stood, stretched his arms over his head, and then set to finding his clothes where they lay scattered across the floor.

“Hey, by the way,” Stark said, “maybe go a little easier next time? I still have scratches from the first time.”

Peter flushed. “Sorry…”

“We don’t all have accelerated healing, you know.”

“Okay, okay, it’s not that accelerated. It took like a day to lose the bruises that time.” He pulled his shirt over his head.

“That long, huh?” Stark’s response sounded more distant.

Tugging his shirt down, he found himself alone in the bedroom. But the bathroom door was open — holy fuck, it was palatial — and Stark was standing in front of the huge mirror, running water through his hair.

He came up behind him and laid his head against his shoulder. “This is nice,” he said softly.

Stark didn’t reply immediately. Just stood there, allowing the contact.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “Yeah, it is.”

Peter closed his eyes and breathed in his scent, their breaths slowly synchronizing.

Slowly, Stark turned and dipped his head to kiss him, letting Peter press him back against the vanity. It seemed to him that he was a passenger in a speeding car: aware that he was moving too quickly, but when he glanced out the window, it seemed as though he were stationary and the world was moving for him.

All he had to do was hang on.

“Lab?” he said at last, once they’d come up for air and he’d laid his head against Stark’s chest.

“Lab.”
Chapter Summary

Pride goeth before destruction.

Chapter Notes

Reminder that my Justin Hammer looks/sounds/carries himself like Charles Dance.

Shout-out to that one scene in Casino Royale that I’m basically contractually obligated to recreate in every other fic I write.

Finally, I’m pleased to say that updates will be coming on Thursdays AND MONDAYS for the next few weeks!

“More wine?”

“Please.”

There was a clinking of glasses, and Tony thought regretfully of the Sauvignon Blanc that was being wasted on an evening with Justin Hammer. He had been shoring up that bottle for a special occasion; this evening most certainly did not qualify.

If they had stuck to the original plan, he could have at least had the pleasure to drink Hammer out of his best vintage, but, true to form, he’d received an email just the day before announcing out of nowhere that they’d have to reschedule slightly and make it six-thirty at Tony’s place. Happy had nearly gone mad with the stress of planning a dinner with less than twenty-four hours to spare, muttering that he didn’t know what things were like across the pond, but over here, you don’t reschedule one day prior to the event.

At the opposite end of the table, Peter was looking uncomfortable in his hastily-borrowed suit. He was seated where Pepper usually sat at these functions (a realization that made Tony feel several things at once), sipping his water and not eating much.

It had been an odd few days. Within less than a week, Tony had discovered that there was, indeed, a cure to gut-wrenching shame: time and saturation. Peter had been over every day since Sunday, seemingly insatiable for whatever Tony was willing to give him.

On Tuesday, they had worked first, but that had proven to be dangerous given that they were both prone to hyper-focusing; hours and hours could slip past without their notice, barely leaving time for anything else. That evening, they’d sneaked upstairs — after Peter called May to tell her he’d be running late — and taken advantage of the dark’s anonymity. At first, Tony had tried to pretend the other silhouette was someone considerably older and more accessible, but the already-thin illusion would shatter the moment he heard that tremulous whisper in the gloom as he reached for him. “Mr. Stark…” It was Peter, no one else.
By degrees, he found he had no desire to pretend otherwise.

“I must apologize again for springing this on you on such short notice,” Hammer was saying. “I’m afraid something unexpected came up, and my place hasn’t quite been up to the task of receiving guests.”

“Quite all right,” Tony said through his teeth. They were using the business dining room — the one with the glass table. He could tell from the way that Peter wasn’t making eye contact with him that he was thinking hard about what had happened the last time they’d been there.

This entire evening was a nightmare. Peter was never supposed to be in so much as the same room with Hammer, but the timing had gone to hell when FRIDAY had announced Hammer’s arrival while Peter and Tony were still upstairs in his bedroom, trying to get their breath back.

There was no chance they could sneak him out, so Tony had quickly explained the situation and given Peter the smallest suit he could find. Oh, Justin, I hope you don’t mind if my intern joins us.

Hammer had bared his teeth and said not at all.

And so there they were: seated grimly around the glass dinner table, with Tony and Peter picking at their food, Hammer making idle conversation; whatever it was he wanted, he was clearly willing to take his time about bringing it up.

“Did you hear about that man Toomes?” he asked. “The weapons dealer they caught?”

Tony coughed. “Heard something about it, yeah.”

“Very unfortunate, I thought,” Hammer said. “He had the makings of a proper businessman. I knew him briefly. He owned a salvage company then.” He shook his head. “He understood the running of a business quite well, even if his attitude at times…” he trailed off and shrugged. Then he laughed. “Pride goeth before destruction. Still, I suppose if there’s a market for it… One can hardly blame him for making money where he can.”

Across from where Tony sat, he saw Peter bite his lip.

“I think it was selfish,” he said quietly. “I know his daughter. She had no idea… She’s having a hard time.” He lapsed into silence when Hammer turned his gaze on him.

“I’m afraid you’ll find that it’s a wicked, wicked world, Mr. Parker,” he said. “And some of the people in it, no matter how unassuming they appear, would be all too eager to lay a hand on precious things such as yourself.”

Tony coughed hard. “Have some more wine, Justin.”

“Thank you, I have some.”

“I insist.” They held each other’s gaze for several seconds until Hammer half-smiled.

“Very well then.” Tony had won that one, but the condescension in Hammer’s tone made it feel the other way around, which was only exacerbated by having to pour out more of his wine. “How have you been, Anthony?” Hammer added. “You’ve been uncharacteristically out of the public eye of late. One would think there had been a death in the family.”

Tony shook his head, a smile pasted on his face. “Just work, Justin. Just work.”
“Work and money, money and work.” Hammer laughed softly. “The two things that make the world turn, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Parker?” Once again, he turned to him, and Tony felt his hackles rise as Peter offered him a weak, sick-looking smile in response.

“Peter,” he said immediately, “if you go into the kitchen, I think dessert’s chilling somewhere in the fridge. Would you mind?”

He clearly wasn’t concentrating; he shot out of his seat at a speed that could barely be called human. “Yes — I mean, no — “ he stammered, sounding relieved, not looking at anyone — “of course —”

He disappeared through the doorway and into the kitchen beyond, and Tony immediately turned to Hammer.

“I suppose you’ve never heard of the idea of keeping your eyes to yourself,” he muttered.

Hammer arched an eyebrow, thin lips curving into a smile. “I shouldn’t worry,” he said. “I have no designs upon that which is so clearly your own.”

Tony opened his mouth to reply, an angry flush rising under his collar, but at that moment, Peter returned with three bowls of something chocolate that was simple enough to have probably cost a fortune of Monte Cristo proportions — fucking rich people food — and quickly handed them out, all but leaping past Hammer’s chair for Tony’s.

“Thanks,” Tony murmured to him. Peter flashed him a quick smile that didn’t reach his eyes and then beat a quick retreat to his own chair.

“So, Mr. Parker,” Hammer began, smiling benignly in the face of Tony’s glare, “let me guess — it’s MIT you’re banking on?”

“That’s right.” His voice was clipped.

“No need to stay in the US, you know,” Hammer said. “ETH Zürich has an excellent academic program, from what I understand. Niklaus Wirth went there. So did Einstein. Think of that — you could be the next Einstein.”

The skin around Peter’s eyes tightened, and he drained his water glass, set it back on the table with a clunk. “I’m more of a Tesla,” he said at last, unsteadily, with an equally unsteady smile.

“Or a Stark,” Hammer replied.

“Or a Stark,” Peter whispered. He caught Tony’s eye, and something rose up in Tony’s chest, warm and intolerable. With a cough, he looked away.

The rest of the dinner passed in relative silence until Hammer stood, his chair scraping back as he murmured something sarcastic about powdering his nose, and left the dining room.

“Clear up?” Tony asked Peter.

“Yeah.” His voice sounded hoarse.

They gathered up the plates to move them into the kitchen, and Tony paused at his side. “You okay?” he asked in an undertone.

“Yeah.” Peter laid his head against his shoulder for a brief moment and then continued toward the kitchen. Then he paused. “Hey, Tony?”
He looked up from where he was stacking up plates.

The day before, he had told him he could use his first name. Peter had been genuinely surprised by the idea, even after Tony had pointed out that they had more than reached first name basis. Hearing it now from his lips was it shock, and Tony had to resist the urge to kiss him.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Thanks for sending me out.”

He didn’t know how to respond, so he just nodded to him. Peter disappeared into the kitchen, and Tony began stacking up the silverware that hadn’t been used.

On Monday of that week, they’d been working in the lab when Peter had casually mentioned that his birthday was coming up next week. Sweet sixteen. Tony had covered up his discomfort — as awful as it was, it was so much easier to do this when he wasn’t confronted by the reality of Peter’s age — and asked him what it was he wanted.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he’d replied, and given him a crooked, impish smile. “Why don’t you make the choice?” And then, contradicting himself, he’d added, more quietly, “You should tie me up.”

He wondered sometimes if Peter knew about the constant war he waged with himself and chose not to ask about it, or if he genuinely had no idea what words like that did to him. Peter made him into the sort of man he hated — no, he wasn’t going to think that way. He refused to pin the blame on Peter.

CRASH!

Startled and momentarily distracted from his thoughts, Tony flew around the corner into the kitchen. The first thing he saw was Peter, hands aloft, staring in shock at the shattered glass sprayed across the tile. Then he spotted Hammer at the other side of the island, looking rather amused as he poured out the last of the sauvignon blanc into a wine glass that had been spared the fall.

“What were those? Riedel’s?” Hammer asked. “Ouch.”

Tony glared at him and put a fleeting hand on Peter’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” he told him. “You take a break.”

Peter’s hands were visibly shaking, his face blanched. “Sorry,” he muttered distractedly, not meeting his eyes, and brushed past him.

His footsteps echoed farther and farther away. Tony glanced at Hammer, but his guest was as impassive as ever.

Glass crunched under the sole of Tony’s shoe. He rolled his eyes and reached for a dish towel to scoop up the largest pieces. He’d get one of the bots to clean the rest up later.

“Why are you here,” he said at last, flatly, once the worst of the glass was in the trash. Hammer cleared his throat with a delicate, aristocratic cough.

“We’ve done business with each other enough that I think you know I don’t like beating about the bush the way I have been all evening,” he began, “so why don’t we stop wasting each other’s time and get to it?”

“Oh, yes, let’s,” Tony said, making a cheap jab at his guest’s syntax to cover up the sudden drop in
his stomach as he leaned back against the kitchen counter.

The corner of Hammer’s mouth twitched. “I’m going to assume by the cringing manner with which you handled the subject of he who hath just departed that affairs haven’t changed since the last time we met.”

Tony frowned. “Come again? Maybe not in iambic pentameter this time?”

Hammer smiled crookedly again. With an air of condescension, he said, quite softly, “I assume you’re still fucking him?”

Tony stared at him for several seconds. At last, he said, “Peter’s a minor.”

“Nice customs curtsey to great kings,” replied Hammer lazily.

“Charming. What proof do you have?”

Hammer set his wine glass down on the island. “I hope you don’t think I’d make an accusation like that without probable cause,” he said. “First of all, the looks you two have been giving each other all evening are frankly indecent.”

“And what looks are those?”

Hammer arched a white eyebrow. “They're the sort of thing you only see around newly-weds — which, may I say, was not in any way augmented by how you sent him into the kitchen to get him away from the big bad wolf earlier this evening.” He cocked his head to the side. “Can’t tell if you were being commanding or paternalistic. Neither prospect’s especially comforting, but what can one do.”

Tony didn’t respond, and Hammer cocked his head to the side as though gauging his reaction.

Tony cleared his throat.

“I thought you were headed to the bathroom,” he said at last.

“I made a detour.”

“Clearly.”

Hammer half-smiled. “Do I detect a note of possessiveness?”

“Detect all you like, but I’m afraid you’ll have to give me something more than tone of voice.”

“Certainly,” said Hammer. “How does the bite mark gracing the left side of your neck sound to start? And if that’s not enough for you, there’s the very slight but no less obvious limp of Mr. Parker himself — what do you put that boy through? You must be fucking him within an inch of his —”

“Do you — does this have a point?” Tony walked toward the sink and began to pile dishes into it, needing something to with his hands.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Hammer said distractedly. Tony turned to find him pulling out his phone, typing something into it. “This.” He held up the phone so Tony could see the screen.

Tony went cold.

His phone was playing a grainy yet unmistakable video of Peter in his suit, a red-blue blur swinging
between buildings.

Tony let the plate in his hand slide into the sink with the others.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” Hammer said softly. He lowered his phone and paused the video. “Quite impressive. Is he always so flexible?”

“Where is this leading?” asked Tony, trying to keep his tone level.

“It’s very simple,” Hammer said. “You have secrets. A lot of them. It would be a poor businessman who didn’t take advantage of that.”

Tony pressed his lips together and leaned back, mimicking Hammer’s relaxed posture to disguise the sudden anxiety that swept through him. “Blackmail, Justin?” he said. “Surely you can do better than that.”

Hammer didn’t waste time denying it. “The process would be about as simple as it could be,” he said. “A simple payment each month, and in return, Mr. Parker’s identity is preserved, as is his family’s peace of mind. What man in your position wouldn’t want the best for his boy?”

“Never mind the part where you get to line your pockets,” said Tony sarcastically. “And you’re fine with profiting off someone else’s dirty laundry?”

Hammer rolled his eyes. “I think you know that’s hardly the worst thing I’ve ever done. In the name of good partnership,” he continued, “I’ll give you something on myself. I had ties in the Toomes affair. His arrest has not done my financial position any favors. I’ve taken a bad hit. But then I remembered you and your own… situation. You give me a cushion, and I give you protection. What could be more perfect?” He held out his hand. “Call it symbiosis, if you like.”

Tony kept his hands resolutely at his sides. “How do you know I won’t go to the authorities and inform them of your so-called ties?”

“Because you’d only do that if you wanted to have your private life splashed across every major news outlet in the country.”

Tony sighed. “How much?” he asked.

“One million.” He raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth to respond, but Hammer added, “To start.” Then he saw Tony’s expression and added, “Come now, you’re a billionaire, surely that won’t bleed you dry.”

“It’s not a question of money,” Tony said slowly, “it’s a question of principle.”

“Principle,” Hammer scoffed. “You relinquished the right to talk principles the minute you dragged that little lamb into bed with you.”

“I am not paying money to cover up my sins.”

“You won’t, but perhaps he might. He has a secret of his own, doesn’t he? Oh, he’s poor as a church mouse, I’ll warrant,” Hammer continued, “but we both know that our mutual friend has more to offer than money.”

Tony stared at him. “Explain,” he said coldly, not needing him to.

“I was merely thinking,” Hammer said placidly, “that if you were to lend custody, as it were, I might
see myself forgiving at least half the present sum.”

Tony stared at him, uncertain that he’d heard him correctly.

“Only for a few nights, you understand,” he continued when Tony didn’t reply. “I’ve no wish to steal him away permanently.”

And then all his anger boiled over.

“You sick son of a bitch —” he seized Hammer by his lapels and threw him against the island. “He’s not a fucking bargaining chip!”

“All right, you’ve made your point —“

“The hell I have,” Tony snarled. “If at any time, I find out that you’ve so much as looked at him in a way I don’t like, I’ll knock your goddamned teeth out myself. I don’t need a suit to deal with pieces of shit like you.”

“If you did,” Hammer said calmly, “I guarantee you that every inch of your torrid little affair, as well as his side-career, would be in the news from coast to coast within six hours. But by all means, do go on. Assuming he’d even tell you if something were to happen. Nobody wants a bowl of cream if somebody else’s fingers have already been in it.”

Tony punched him. It was quick — too quick — and his already-fragile knuckles blazed cold in complaint, but Hammer’s head snapped back in a particularly satisfying manner. Tony seized his collar and punched him again, this time hearing a distinct crack of cartilage.

“What happened in here before I came in?” he snapped.

Hammer shoved him away and brushed off his clothes with one hand, the other pressed to his face. “Nothing you need worry about,” he said, voice coming muffled and nasal. Tony felt a flicker of pleasure in seeing the flash of bright red blood on Hammer’s fingers. “It’s up to you,” he said thickly. “Pay a lot. Or take up my other offer and pay a little. I wouldn’t have any objections to either scenario.”

Several mental images appeared in Tony’s mind that he would have gladly paid any sum to be rid of. Swallowing bile, he groaned, defeated.

“When do you want the money?”

There had never been any question what he would choose.

Hammer left, and upstairs, Tony found a borrowed suit in a crumple on his bedroom floor. The shower was running in the bathroom. He knocked on the door and heard a distant come in.

Peter was an indistinct shadow through the fog on the shower’s glass door, positioned near the floor. When Tony slid the door open, he found him seated on the tile, arms around his knees, looking at nothing as the spray hit his shoulders and his back. The water was blazing hot; with a wince, Tony reached inside and switched it off.

“Hey,” he said, feeling uncertain suddenly. “Everything okay?”

Peter nodded, not looking at him. He was beginning to shiver.
“Did…” Tony trailed away, frightened of phrasing something wrong, frightened of what Peter’s answer might be. “Did something —”

“Nothing happened,” Peter said, answering his question for him. “It’s okay. Just… just wanted to shower it all off.” With a groan, he stood up and ran a hand through his hair. Water cascaded down his shoulders and his chest. “Can you get me a towel?”

Tony handed him one off the rack, and he wrapped it around his waist as he stepped out of the shower.

Then he wrapped his arms around Tony, who, startled by the sudden display of need, froze momentarily and then returned the embrace.

“Sorry,” Peter said, voice muffled in his neck. “’m getting your suit all wet…”

“I don’t care about the suit,” Tony murmured, stroking his hair. “Just let it out.” But he wasn’t crying.

“Listen,” Peter said, “I’m really not — I’m — I don’t know if I can go home like this? May’ll worry…”

“Stay here,” he said immediately. “You don’t even have to ask me.”

“I’ll call her.” He brushed past him and disappeared into the bedroom.

He made the call while wrapping himself in one of Tony’s bathrobes, Tony stripping down to boxer-briefs and trying not think of what Hammer had said. You relinquished the right to talk principles the minute you dragged that little lamb into bed with you. That wasn’t what had happened… not at all… wasn’t it?

Peter put down the phone on the nightstand. “She said it’s okay.” He offered up a slight smile, which Tony tried to return. One million to keep this between ourselves. Just who was he becoming?

“If it’s okay with you,” Peter was saying as he sat down on the edge of the bed, “I don’t think I want to do anything tonight? I just don’t feel like I’m in my own body, you know?”

Tony crossed to where he sat and knelt down in front of him. Touched his cheek.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing,” he insisted. “I’m just not doing that great up here, suddenly —” he tapped his temple — “and then that shows up on my face, and — that’s why I didn’t want to go home? ‘Cause May’s going to see me and she’s going to worry and…” He trailed off, staring somewhere past Tony’s face.

“Did Hammer do something?” Tony asked.

“What? No. No, it wasn’t anything he did, it was just him and…” He sighed. “Actually, could we?”

“What?”

“Do something.” He kissed him briefly. “Please?” Another kiss. “I just kind of… I don’t know, can you just make me feel something?”

Tony nodded through the next kiss and reached down to undo the strings of his robe. Kissed down
his neck — hail Mary, hail Mary — and kept moving downward, listening to Peter breathe as he leaned back, hands braced against the bed.

Kisses down his stomach.

“Oh, fuck…”

Tony gazed up at him, suddenly struck anew by his youth. He remembered Hammer’s earlier suggestion and felt his stomach clench. What difference was there between them, really? And how could he hope to protect Peter when he was the very thing endangering him? Brush aside the trivialities of their relationship, and Tony became nothing more than a predator.

And other words beginning with “P.”

Peter’s grin slackened as Tony continued to gaze at him. “What is it?”

He looked away, studied the fading bruises from earlier in the day on Peter’s hips, his thighs. He imagined a set of different finger marks around Peter’s hips — Hammer’s finger marks — and felt choked by the thought.

With little preamble, Tony brought his head back up and kissed him hungrily. “Mine,” he whispered when he came up for air. Another kiss, and he sucked on his tongue, liking the resultant whimper. Tony felt his hand on his spine.

“What’s going on?” Peter whispered.

“It doesn’t matter,” Tony said and kissed him again. He had him. There were to be no reveals, no tears, no bruises. Just a money transaction and safety.

Part of Tony whispered that he was using Peter’s security as an excuse for masking his own misdeeds, but he pushed the thought away, just as he pushed away the prospect of telling Peter. He’d want to play the hero, insist that Tony not pay. But that was out of the question.

Peter pulled away, laid his hands on his shoulders when he tried to follow.

“I… actually, I’ve changed my mind?” he said uncertainly. “I just don’t think I can do this tonight.”

With a nod, Tony moved back a few inches, let Peter tie up his robe again. “Whatever you want.”

“I thought it would help, but it just didn’t.” After a moment more of silence, he tilted his head to the side. “Are you going to come up here?”

“You want me to?”

“More than enough room, right?” He laughed. “You could probably fit most of my physics class on here.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that.” He sat down next to him and put an arm around his shoulders. When Peter leaned his head against him, he tucked his chin over his head. His hair was curling up.

“Did you use my body wash?” he asked after a few moments of sitting there, rocking gently back and forth.

“Sorry.” Peter sounded embarrassed.

“Don’t worry about it.”
Peter nestled closer to him, and Tony moved around so he could put his head on the pillows. After a moment, Peter joined him, pressing his back against his chest, warm and tactile as always. Their hands linked together.

*What the fuck am I doing?* Tony wondered.

“What’s going on?” Peter asked. “You’ve been acting weird ever since you came up.”

“It’s nothing,” he mumbled into the back of his neck. “I just want to keep you safe.” Peter’s pulse thumped beneath the hand he laid on his chest.

“Seriously,” he said. His voice was growing thick, drowsy. “What is going on?”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I promise. It’s all okay.”

There was silence for a while. Peter nestled more closely against him, shivering, and Tony pulled the duvet over them both. He sighed and reached down for Tony’s hand. “What’s going to happen to us?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Tony told him. Peter tilted his head back against his shoulder to kiss him, and he repeated it against his lips. “Absolutely nothing.”

It was only after Peter had drifted into a doze there against his shoulder, with Tony petting his hair, that Tony realized he had made a promise he couldn’t possibly keep.
It was still dark out when Peter opened his eyes. There was panic for several moments at not waking in his own bedroom until he remembered that he had stayed over with Stark — Tony.

Tony. Tony Tony Tony Tony.

He could hear him breathing next to him, steady, in and out. Slowly, so as not to wake him, he rolled onto his stomach and watched him in the bluish-purple light that filtered through the gaps in the vertical blinds. He was curled in the fetal position, a furrow in his brow. Peter carefully leaned forward and kissed his forehead. He didn’t wake.

Was this what normal couples did? Fall asleep together, listen to the tide of each other’s breathing?

This was good healing for last night.

He lay back down, closer to him, and then, feeling a little bolder, wrapped one arm around himself. Tony stirred against his back; a moment later, Peter felt lips against his shoulder.

“Hey,” he whispered.

“How’d you sleep?” came the reply, still drowsy.

“Pretty well,” Peter whispered back. It was surprising how much having another person there at his side had reassured him; if Tony hadn’t been there, he felt quite sure that he would never have fallen asleep.

“When do you need to get up?” asked Tony.

Peter propped himself up on one elbow to glance at the digital clock across the room. Icy blue numbers.

“In, like, an hour.”

Rain rattled against the windows, the roof. He groaned and slid back into Tony’s arms. Bare skin. Warmth. Tony’s mouth in his hair.
“Can I skip?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Come on, I could still be productive.” Peter rolled over so he was facing him. “I could help you out in the lab, email my teachers for my work like I’m supposed to…”

“What happened to Peter Parker the nerd?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged and grinned. “I had sex?”

“Do me a favor and at least let me look like a responsible adult,” said Tony. His tone was light, but there was something underlying it that made Peter think back to last night. Something had clearly happened after Peter went (well, fled) upstairs. He remembered the things Tony had said to him. “I just want to keep you safe…”

“Can I ask what happened last night?”

Tony didn’t look at him as he replied, “If I can ask you the same.”

Sitting upright and crossing his legs, he gave him the most open face possible. “I told you. Nothing.”

“And nothing happened with me either.”

They held each other’s gaze, each suspecting the other of lying and unable to prove anything to the contrary.

“Come here,” Tony said at last, beckoning to him with a flick of his hand, and Peter settled into his arms again. They stayed that way for several minutes, Peter’s head against Tony’s shoulder, and Tony rubbing a thumb over his knuckles absently.

Then Peter cleared his throat. “Are you ever going to let me get you off?”

It sounded as though Tony had just choked on his saliva. “I’m sorry,” he coughed, “what was that?”

“I mean it. I mean, I don’t have a problem being a pillow princess, this is really nice, but you know, I was just wondering —“

“I do like variety,” Tony allowed, “but you don’t have to do that.”

“What can I do, then?” asked Peter. He grinned. “Put on panties and give you a lap dance?”

“You bring along something you neglected to mention, Parker?”

He grinned. “No. I’ll remember for next time.”

“Seriously. Don’t feel like you have to do that,” said Tony.

“Do what, the lap dance or getting you off?”

Tony seemed to wince in the darkness. “Any of the above.”

“Okay,” said Peter, “but what if it’s not that I feel like I have to and more that I actually really want to?”

Tony grinned and squeezed his shoulder, kissing his temple. “Don’t feel obligated. You’re a
beautiful princess.”

Peter rolled his eyes and reached for a pillow to throw at him.

Breakfast was weirdly domestic, with both of them reaching for different things in the kitchen at once, hands brushing together, Tony in his bathrobe and Peter in his clothes from yesterday (he’d taken a long, self-indulgent shower before dressing, taking advantage of the incredible water pressure to work out of some of the knots in his neck).

Tony squeezed his shoulder in passing, and Peter pressed against him insistently.

“You’re going to be late,” Tony told him.

He hummed, eyes closed. “It’d be worth it.”

With a huff of laughter, Tony brought Peter’s wrist up to his mouth and sank his teeth into the flesh of his forearm, near his wrist.

“Ow!”

“Consider it motivation,” he said, and then kissed his forehead to make up for the pain.

And then Happy arrived (the two of them springing to an appropriate distance apart) and drove him to school, and Peter told him to let him off at the corner so he wouldn’t get stared at.

School crawled by, with the only events of note being English class with Flash’s admittedly inspired reading of Chapter Three of *The Lord of the Flies* in the voice of Ralph Fiennes, and the decathlon meeting after school. It was Liz’s first day back since her father’s arrest, and she was subdued and solemn-faced, but no less driven. For once, nobody stalled the review process, and the jokes were kept to a minimum. Even Flash was unusually quiet.

To Peter’s utter surprise, Michelle stayed behind after the meeting to talk to Liz, their voices too low to make out anything, but Michelle’s expression was unexpectedly sympathetic. Then she stepped closer, reached out, and gave Liz a hug.

“You know she’s straight, right? Not to mention a senior?” Peter said to her later as they walked through the commons toward the main entrance. Things had been awkward between them since Homecoming, and while he understood that she was right on virtually every count (of course she was), part of him still felt spiteful.

Michelle gave him a look like she knew what he was thinking and rolled her eyes. “A girl can dream,” was all she said.

On Peter’s other side, Ned said, “Hang on a sec, don’t tell me you’re crushing on Liz.”

“It’s not a crush,” Michelle scoffed. “I just have eyes.”

“And honestly, even if she weren’t straight,” Peter added, “I couldn’t see it.”

“How so.”
“’Cause, pro tip here, nobody likes it when people deduce everything about their private lives with no warning.”

Michelle’s pace slowed slightly. “I could see that,” she said. Then she added: “Besides, the NHS president and the weird AF art student? Not going to happen.” Her tone was clipped.

Ned laughed uncomfortably. “Although that would make a great trope. Maybe they’ll roll it out for the next big teen movie.”

“Still,” Peter said — and he could feel himself crossing the line, he just couldn’t stop himself — “I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

Michelle’s ears were flaming, and Peter realized too late and with a sick sensation in his stomach that her lopsided smile had vanished.

“You want to talk about stereotypes, Ned, you oughta talk to Peter,” she snapped. “He could write a fucking book.”

She broke into a run and was out the door before either Peter or Ned could say anything. They stared after her, shocked.

“Did we go too far with that?” Ned asked at last.

“Probably.” Peter felt awful already, but he wasn’t yet prepared to apologize.

“What did she mean about you?”

He shrugged, feeling more manipulative than ever. “No idea.”

“It’s just…” Ned frowned. “Are you guys fighting? It’s been really weird around you two, lately.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Peter.

After that was, of course, patrol. He hadn’t mentioned this to Tony yet, but on some level, he suspected he didn’t need to; he was pretty sure that Tony had spotted the cowl in his backpack the other day. It was an unspoken compromise, of sorts: if Peter followed the rules that Tony had set up with Ross, Tony wouldn’t have to supervise. It was essentially a trust fall.

He hadn’t realized until he’d gotten back into it how much he’d missed web-slinging. That rush of adrenaline, freedom, even. It wasn’t better than sex, but it was certainly on par with it.

And after that, it was back to the mansion. Happy informed him that Tony was in the lab, Peter charged past the lab for the stairs to Tony’s bedroom to take another shower so he was no longer covered in sweat, and only once he felt presentable did he arrive in the lab, toss his backpack in the corner, and greet Tony not with a kiss as usual, but by sliding under the counter on his knees, putting his hands on Tony’s thighs, and saying, “Can I level the field?”

Tony looked dismayed, but he nodded, and Peter wasted no time in unzipping his fly, tugging down his jeans and his underwear, and — well — wow. Blowjobs were a lot harder than they looked. Like self-induced asphyxiation. By the end of it, he had Tony so far down his throat that it took a moment to realize that he was mid-orgasm.
He fell back on his heels, cock slipping out of his mouth, and wiped his lips. His eyes were streaming; unsteadily, he got to his feet and reached for the tissues beside the sink.

“You know,” he said, once he’d regained control of his breath, “it’s so much bigger up close.”

There was a huff of laughter behind him. “You mean to tell me that all the times that you’ve been yowling for it, you never realized.”

Peter turned red. “I don’t yowl,” he said indignantly. “And for the record, it’s really different when it’s — you know what, I’m stopping this conversation.” He glanced over his shoulder to find Tony’s eyes on him as he leaned against the counter, and felt himself melt. “Hi,” he murmured.

Tony jerked his head. “Come here,” he said, and Peter wasted no time in going to his arms, letting him hoist him onto the counter, shoving designs out of the way to lay him back, his legs over his shoulders. He kissed him and closed his eyes.

“So, how was school?” May asked as she made dinner. The kitchen was filled with smoke, and Peter was sitting at the island, concerned that what had started as an innocent attempt at jambalaya was going to end up as a rescue courtesy of the fire department.

“Okay,” he said, deciding to omit the part about the disastrous aftermath of the decathlon meeting (Michelle still wasn’t responding to his texts).

May went to the kitchen sink and began straining the rice. “And how about that internship?”

Peter’s brain had a mild short circuit — *oh, it went fine*, he thought, *Mr. Stark threw me on the lab counter and basically put a hand in me* — and he coughed hard. “It went okay,” he said noncommittally.

She gave him an amused look over her shoulder. “Just okay?”

…and then he’d leaned over him once Peter was a sobbing, trembling wreck on the counter and murmured, “And you said you didn’t yowl.”

He had to stop thinking about it; he was getting red-faced. “Yeah, you know. Normal stuff. Usual stuff.” Ice cubes, polar bears, blizzards, penguins, cold things, cold things…

She was still looking at him, her eyes narrowed in a way that reminded Peter suddenly of Michelle. Uncomfortable, he shifted in his chair.

“Is everything okay?” she said at last.

“Yeah?” He faked a laugh. “Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

She shrugged. “It’s just bizarre with you out of the house so much now. I feel like I never see you anymore. You’re so quiet these days… You know,” she continued, “if there was ever anything you needed to tell me… I hope that you know you could.”

Fresh guilt twisted around his innards, snake-like and oily. “What do you mean?” he asked uncomfortably.

“Nothing!” Her voice was high-pitched and unconvincing as she took the rice back to its pot on the stove. “Just — nobody’s an island, you know? If there were something going on, you wouldn’t have
Oh my God, he thought, suddenly sick. _Oh my God, she knows something’s up, she just doesn’t know what it is she knows…_

But aloud, all he said was, “It’s all okay.”

Over the next few days, when he could spare the time between school, Tony, and homework, he did some research on his own. Justin Hammer: born in Surrey, England; moved to New York in the very late ’90s; creator of world-renowned weapons manufacturer Hammer Industries; father of Justine and grandfather to Sasha (mother and son-in-law unknown); billionaire and philanthropist. The last headline he’d been in was from a week before, when he’d laid off enough employees to attract attention. He’d cited unforeseen financial troubles. Before that was an article discussing his influence in opening a new opera house in Chicago several months before.

Google wasn’t going to get him anyplace, it seemed.

The day before his birthday, as he and Tony worked on his suit in the garage — they were up to the first prototype, Peter working on the webbing canisters in the cuffs and Tony fusing the metal into the breast plate, and it looked fucking _amazing_ — he decided to take the bull by the horns.

“About the other night,” he said. Tony looked up. “When Hammer came over? What… do you know about him?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Peter shrugged, trying to look idly curious. “Just wondered. I mean… you don’t seem to like him that much…?”

Tony sat down on one of the stools and laid the strip of metal in his hand on the workbench.

“Yeah, well,” he said. “Business rivals, and anyway — well, look, you met him, you can understand. He’s not especially likable.”

“Yeah,” Peter muttered, eyes on the canister in his hand. “I know his type.”

“What’s got you on this?”

The canister made a hollow _clunk_ as he put it down on the table. “What happened that night after I left?” he asked. “You’ve been really evasive, and I just… I don’t know. It feels like there’s something you’re hiding.”

Tony seemed to age several years under his gaze. He pushed his hands through his hair with a groan, his head hung low.

“To make a long story short,” he said, “he’s blackmailing me.”

“He — wait, what?”

“I’m paying him to make sure news of this depravity —” he gestured between himself and Peter — “doesn’t hit the nightly news. To say nothing of your side-hustle.”

Peter stared at him. “My — but — there are people out there who actually want me dead… If they knew who I am…” He trailed off, afraid of continuing.
“… which is why I’m paying up.”

“How much is it?”

“Oh, a million.”

“What?!” His chair screeched backward. “That’s way too much —!”

“Peter? Peter.” Tony had stood up, too, had caught his hands in his. “Hi. Multi-billionaire. I can handle it.”

“But — but that’s — that’s so much money…” To his alarm, he was beginning to tear up. “That’s so… there’s gotta be something else we can…”

“No.” Tony’s voice was firm. “There is absolutely nothing you can do about this, okay?”

“But I don’t want you to carry this alone!” Peter cried. “I got us into this, so shouldn’t I at least help you —?”

“Peter, you are not the one at fault here —“

“But nobody’s at fault!” He stopped as Tony laid a finger over his lips and shushed him.

“Just let me handle this,” he said softly. “You know, I appreciate that you want to help, but you don’t need to. There’s nothing you need to do here. Now,” he continued in a different tone, “since I’m giving you the day off tomorrow for your birthday, do you want your present now?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Don’t try and change the subject.” He hesitated and glanced at the digital clock. They only had an hour and a half left before Peter was supposed to go home. Better do it now, so they wouldn’t have to call May again; they’d been doing too much of that lately. “But, since you asked, sure.”

Now, seated on Tony’s bed and waiting for him to come out of the walk-in closet, Peter was beginning to wonder if he had miscalculated.

When he’d initiated this, it had been purely for himself. He and Tony had been the only players in the game. When it was just them, it worked.

Nobody else was supposed to figure it out.

He wondered, as he had a lot in the last week or so, whether he should tell Tony about Michelle. But he didn’t want to worry him, and anyway, she had said she wasn’t going to say anything, hadn’t she? It would be okay, wouldn’t it? But would she feel like keeping her promise after what how he’d behaved to her earlier?

After a moment, he started untying his shoes.

And now that Justin Hammer knew about it as well, where did that leave them? A million dollars. It sounded cartoonishly large. Wasn’t that the amount that bank robbers always stole in kid’s shows? A million bucks. What was that? Per month? Eventually, Tony was going to bleed dry.

He’d felt quietly guilty ever since the night in his bedroom, with spikes of it whenever he spoke to May, but this was a new, stabbing type of guilt.
But he was distracted from his thoughts by Tony reappearing (looking rather white-faced, Peter thought) with one of his belts looped around his wrist.

“Told you that long to get a belt?” Peter said skeptically, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“There’s a lot of stuff in there, you try it some time.” It sounded like an evasion, but Peter let it be.

“So, what is that?” he asked as Tony went to where he sat at the immediate center of the bed. “Is that for me?” He couldn’t quite keep the apprehension out of his voice.

“Unless I was greatly mistaken, you mentioned something about being tied up the other day,” Tony said, and Peter went bright red, looked away even as he internally breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sorry,” he said, grinning, “that just slipped out.”

“Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“No! Definitely not.”

“So.” Tony’s throat bobbed as he sat down next to him — his hands were shaking again, Peter noticed. “Is there anything in particular that…?”

But Peter shook his head. His face was hot enough, he thought his skin might melt. “You decide,” he said.

“We need a safeword,” Tony said immediately. “Frankly, we should have been using one before, but you know what they say. Hindsight’s 20/20.”

“Safeword,” Peter repeated uncertainly.

“Something that one of us says if we need to call time. We can take a breather, or we can stop completely. Your choice.”

Peter nodded. “Time. I like that.”

“Time?”

“For the word. Yeah.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Peter nodded and didn’t say that his anxiety had just accelerated by several miles per hour from the idea that Tony thought he might need to tap out.

Tony leaned forward to kiss him and started on the buttons of his flannel. “Hey, FRIDAY?” he said out loud.

— Sir? (Peter jumped; he’d never gotten used to the idea of the AI being essentially omnipresent).

“No disruptions, okay?”

— Yes, sir.

“No disruptions, huh?” Peter murmured as he shrugged out of his shirt.

“Of course, all my attention’s going to be on you.” Peter grinned. “On your back, right?”
He nodded, relieved that Tony had remembered, and let him push him down into the pillows. “Arms up.”

He obeyed, breathing out slowly as Tony carefully wrapped the belt around his wrists. The buckle jangled metallically.

“Too tight?” Peter tried it and shook his head. “I’d tie you to the headboard,” Tony said, “but I’m worried you could rip it off the bed, and I don’t want to have to explain that.” He bent his head down and kissed him, and Peter hummed. It was strange, being this open, and a little frightening as well. He supposed he should have expected the helplessness, but somehow, it hadn’t really hit him that it would be an integral component until now.

Tony was heavy above him, kissing down the side of his neck, one hand on his stomach. His beard scratched him, and he realized with a sudden burst of clarity the utter insanity of where he was and what he was allowing to happen. On what planet was it completely safe to let an older man tie you up and put you at his mercy?

His jeans were a heap on the bedroom floor, his boxers around one ankle. Tony was stroking him, little feather-light touches that made him start. He closed his eyes, and the sensations got louder.

He heard the now-familiar squeak of the nightstand drawer, the now-familiar click of the lube bottle’s cap, the cold, wet pressure…

He whimpered and pushed his hips upward, felt Tony’s mouth against his forehead. “Good boy — good boy —”

A little of his initial fear melted away. This was Tony, he trusted Tony, Tony wasn’t going to hurt him because he loved — right?

The thought was too troublesome to concentrate on, so he pushed it away and gave himself over to the friction, the kisses, and then the undulation of the bed as Tony’s mouth disappeared, and then the sudden warmth against his opening —

His eyes flew open, but it was too difficult to crane his neck with his arms up and his hands bound — the leather was beginning to bite into his wrists — so he stared at the smooth ceiling above him, feeling as though he were about to drop into empty space as Tony lapped at him, his hands forcing his shaking thighs apart. He opened his mouth but no sound came out. His eyes were damp; he closed them and whimpered.

Tony reached a hand up and pinched one of his nipples; with a yelp, Peter jolted hard, driving his hips upward into nothing.

Barely losing the rhythm of his tongue, Tony ran a finger down the underside of his cock.

Peter’s entire body went limp, wet heat spreading across his stomach. He didn’t open his eyes; he didn’t have enough energy for it.

When Tony spoke, his voice came from above, reassuringly close as a hand was laid on his shoulder. “Okay?”

Several breaths to ground himself, and then he opened his eyes. Tony was kneeling above him, concern etched across his face. “Hey,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“That was amazing…” Peter mumbled.
“How’re your arms?”

“What? Oh —“ he flexed them — “they’re okay. Getting a little tingly, but it’s okay.” Then he added, “Are you not going to get anything out of this?”

“Would you like me to?”

“Would you like to?” Peter countered.

Tony grinned, traced a finger down his chest. “Course I’d like to. When you’re looking so pretty for me…” His finger drifted downward, pressed inside, and Peter bit his lip.

He nodded.

When Tony fucked him, it was with the hard, steady thrusts that he liked, one of Tony’s hands holding his bound wrists down against the bed, the other holding his hip steady, nails digging in as he thrust into him relentlessly. He didn’t touch him, but he didn’t need to; Peter came again within two long, blissful minutes, several sobs catching in his chest.

“Tony — oh — you — oh — oh —“

A particularly hard pound of his hips made him sob into his chest, his shoulders heaving, and, with a growl, Tony came mid-thrust, half in him and half on him.

Peter burst into fresh tears.

Tony reached immediately for tissues, but Peter shook his head frantically, still crying. The sobs came constant, near hysterical, gasping from deep in his chest. He wasn’t coherent enough for words, only enough to be aware of Tony quickly untying his wrists and pausing only to throw out the condom and tossing away the belt before pulling him close against his chest.

Huge, ugly sobs that made his stomach ache and his forehead hurt from how he clenched his muscles.

“Shh… baby… baby, it’s okay, I’m right here. I’m right here. I’m right here.”

He felt great, he felt terrible, he felt irrevocably sullied, and he couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Semen slipped slowly, wetly, down one of his thighs.

Gradually, his crying subsided, until he was limp against Tony’s shoulder, Tony stroking his hair.

“Was it okay?” Tony asked after a minute or two of silence, broken only by the occasional sniff. Peter nodded.

“Really good,” he said honestly, pulling back to look at him. “Like — I just —“ He laughed shakily. “It was good.”

“I made you cry,” Tony murmured, and it seemed to Peter that he was looking a bit green. “Didn’t mean to do that.”

“S’okay.” Peter was rubbing his arms, wincing at the pinpricks as his nerves came back online. “Really, it’s all good.”

His eyes roved over him. Then he pressed a kiss into his hair, his hands at his jaw. “Sweet thing,” he
murmured, barely on the edge of hearing.

They looked at each other. Peter startled by the endearment and Tony looking as though he’d never intended to say it in the first place.

“You ought to eat something,” he added after a beat, dropping his gaze. “And drink some water.”

“Actually,” Peter said with a grimace, “I think I want to shower.”

“Go for it. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“I’ll be down in the kitchen. Take as long as you need.” Tony kissed his forehead as he stood. “Need some help getting up?”

Peter shook his head but accepted the hand Tony held out and let him pull him to his feet anyway. “Thanks.”

“Sweet thing,” Tony said again as he stroked the hair out of Peter’s eyes. And Peter smiled.

In the bathroom, he came face to face with his reflection and stopped dead at the sight of his reddened wrists — almost red-purple — the love bites down his neck, the drying stains on his stomach and his thighs.

Dimly, he knew he had come in to shower off, but all he could do was stand there in front of the vast, unforgiving mirror and stare and stare until fresh tears mercifully blurred out the sight of himself, and he could slide onto the cold tile and cry properly.

Ten minutes later, he had washed off the incriminating evidence, and his tears had subsided enough that he could join Tony downstairs, where he was greeted with a tall glass of water.

“Drink that,” he said. Peter threw it back — he hadn’t realized how badly he’d needed it until then — then handed it back, and was startled as Tony handed him a spoon and a dish of chocolate ice cream in return. “And now eat that.”

He sat down at the island and obeyed, grateful for the way coldness and the sugar woke him up from his lethargy.

“How are you?” Tony asked. He was cleaning the dishes in the sink. Suds drifted through the air.

“Not too bad, considering.”

“How’re your arms?”

“Not too bad.”

Silence for a while. Peter finished his ice cream and put his head in his hands. Until now, he hadn’t really understood the meaning of the phrase *fucked-out*.

The nastier thoughts — some of the ones that had come to him while he was showering, and then some new ones — arrived in his head, and he groaned involuntarily.
“Peter?” He heard dishes clunk into the sink, felt his hand on his shoulder.

He didn’t say anything, just stretched upward and tugged him down by the front of his shirt to kiss him.

“Fuck,” Tony whispered and licked into his mouth.

Wet hands carded through Peter’s hair, tugging his head further back, almost as far as it could go. Peter groaned and let his mouth fall open. He needed adrenaline, badly, but this was the only way he could get it when his body felt like Jell-O. Besides, he had a sudden, terrible need to be touched.

“I don’t wanna leave,” he murmured, startled by his own honesty. He didn’t want to go back home if it meant he would have to look May in the eye, all the while knowing what he’d done… who he was… who he had chosen to be…

Tony didn’t reply, just kept kissing him, and Peter allowed him to do it.

Tony’s tongue was dancing against his soft palate, and he was pressing him back against the chair, and it was because of that that Peter failed to note the vibrations of footsteps in the corridor outside the kitchen before the door opened to reveal two vaguely familiar figures, who stood frozen on the threshold, just visible past Tony.

Peter went rigid, and Tony stilled against him.

“We came for a check-in,” said Secretary Ross. “I didn’t think it would be this eventful.”
The stain that doesn't wash out

Chapter Summary

He deserved all the consequences he got. A hell of a lot more than a punch. He knew
that. So why was the world so determined to see that he not get them?

Chapter Notes

Check back here Saturdays as I’m going posting then, too. I want to get this done before
schoolwork swallows me whole.

The argument down the corridor carried all the way to where Tony sat at the kitchen table, studying
his reflection in its polished surface and wishing that he were someone — anyone — else. Leaned
against the kitchen island was Ross, who stared up at the ceiling as though tallying up all the places
he’d rather be than here.

Outside, there was a quick crescendo of voices.

Peter, sounding on verge of panic: “May, you’re not listening to me —“

May, barely containing her fury: “God, look at your wrists —!”

And Pepper Potts, trying to keep her own temper in check: “Ma’am, if we can discuss this
someplace else…”

With a sigh, Tony buried his head in his hands, dragging his fingers through his hair. Of all the
people to catch them in the end… Ross and her. And then the inevitable call they made to his aunt.

Outside, Peter’s voice rose, shrill and panicky, and it was impossible to ignore how young he
sounded.

“May — can you please listen to me for three seconds —“

“How could he do this —“

“I asked for it, okay?! No, not like that, I didn’t mean it like — May — May —!”

“Ms. Parker, just —“

Footsteps echoed outside, and then May Parker burst through the doorway, red-eyed and furious.
She was still wearing her coat, the worn men’s one that he remembered from when they’d run into
each other in the ER before. Her face was blotchy.

Tony sat frozen as she stormed toward him — Pepper and Peter appearing behind her, Pepper
imploring her to step away — and only stood before she reached him.
She punched him in the jaw.

His head snapped to the side, pain a throbbing, crystalline bolt in the left side of his face, and he caught the edge of the table for support. When he looked up, Ross had stepped neatly between May and Tony, and Peter was gripping May’s arm, shaking, his eyes glimmering.

“May,” he said unsteadily, through gritted teeth, “please. Please.”

She opened her mouth, but words seemed to fail her; she stared at Tony, shaking her head, her entire frame trembling.

“He’s been through so much already and you just decide —” she broke off just moments after she began. “And they call you a hero.”

Pepper coughed from where she stood on the threshold of the kitchen. “Ms. Parker,” she began, “if you and your nephew could come with me? We can discuss this at the office —“

“There is nothing to discuss here,” May snapped. “Peter and I are going to the police.”

“May,” Peter began. He looked on verge of tears again, his eyes huge and almost afraid. “May, please…”

She looked back at him, and her voice became gentler, somehow without losing the rage behind it.

“You don’t need to protect him, Peter.”

“You’re not listening —!”

“The police is what we need to discuss,” Pepper cut in. She had her poker face on, the one Tony recognized from when she was saying words she didn’t believe. May looked back at Tony, her hand flexing. “Ms. Parker, this isn’t going to solve anything.”

But May didn’t seem to have heard her. Her gaze was fixed on Tony, who leaned against the table, a hand pressed against his aching jaw. He wanted to say something, but what could be said that wouldn’t dig him further into the mess. “If you lay a hand on my nephew again,” she snarled, “I’ll cut your balls off.”

And then she turned, put her arm firmly around Peter’s shoulders, and escorted them both from the kitchen. Peter threw one last look at Tony over his shoulder, his eyes huge. He thought he saw him mouth his name.

They disappeared around the corner, and it was just Pepper there in the doorway, staring at him as though she couldn’t quite believe she was seeing him. She opened her mouth as though she wanted to speak.

Her eyes were flinty and terribly hurt, and Tony couldn’t meet them for longer than a moment.

She turned away and quickly followed the others down the hall.

After some silence, Tony coughed, then winced at the throb of pain in his jaw. “How’d you get in?”

His voice was hoarse.

“The AI,” Ross said, stirring for the first time in several minutes.
“And she didn’t tell me you were there because…” *Because I told her not to interrupt us and never retracted the order ’cause I got distracted. Right.* He gulped. “Never mind.” He stood and scooped ice from the fridge into a paper towel. Balled it up and pressed it against his aching jaw.

“We came to see if there was a reason that no reports had been made per the activities of the Spider-man for the last month,” Ross said. “We did say we’d be checking in, after all. Am I correct in assuming that Mr. Parker is —“

Tony sat down in the chair that Peter had been occupying just ten minutes before. “Yes, fine. Yes.”

“Then what precisely was the nature of your relationship?” When Tony didn’t respond, Ross sighed and sat down across from him. “You’re in an empty room, Stark. Fire away. Was it consensual?”

He sighed. “You know that’s impossible to answer from a legal standpoint.”

“No, it’s not, you’d just prefer not to. Well?” Ross huffed a humorless laugh. “You’re a statutory rapist, Stark. You haven’t got much of a leg to stand on anyway, so hadn’t you better just get it out there?” When Tony didn’t reply, he continued. “As I noted earlier, there weren’t many reports from you. Was he trading favors for independence in the field?”

“No.”

“What was this, then?”

Tony pressed his lips together. “Would you believe me if I said this was based on mutual attraction? Yeah. Didn’t think so.” He stared down at his hands. “Just — believe whatever you want.” He cleared his throat. “What do you plan to do?”

“Nothing.”

Tony’s head snapped up as he stared at Ross, who looked back at him, almost bored.

“Nothing?” he repeated.

“Nothing.” Ross lifted his chin. “As we speak, Ms. Potts is escorting both of them down to my office to magic this away.”

“Magic this away?” Tony felt like Echo.

“They’ll both be signing a nondisclosure agreement.”

“You certainly don’t waste time,” Tony said, voice dripping with sarcasm. ”Did you have those filled out already just in case I fucked up?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Ross said, missing Tony’s very caustic humor. “Nobody’s perfect, Stark, and we have to be ready for that, even if the public isn’t.”

Tony stared at him. “You said it yourself,” he said slowly. “I’m a statutory rapist. I deserve everything I get for doing what I did to that kid. Fucking hell, you saw what his wrists look like. I am unquestionably the bad guy here.”

“No, you’re not.” Ross stood up and went to the window, looking out on the city. “You’re Iron Man. Welcome to rape culture, Stark.”

“That is bullshit, and you and I both know it.”
“This is bigger than whatever you did,” Ross said flatly. “Think about the people out there.” He jabbed a bony finger at the city outside. “They saw their favorite line of defense schism just a few months ago. Captain Rogers is now a war criminal, to say nothing of the rest of them. They’re frightened. They’re uncertain. Ask yourself: is it in their best interests to know that Iron Man is a sexual predator?” He coughed and opened one of the cabinets to retrieve a clean glass and filled it with water from the tap, sipped it. “You are at the mercy of the state,” he said. “And the state sees fit to give you a reprieve. Mr. Parker goes home, you stay here, and you both stay silent. No communication between you, and no stories to the press.”


He deserved all the consequences he got. A hell of a lot more than a punch. He knew that. So why was the world so determined to see that he not get them?

But beyond that, a sick, rotting part of himself was relieved.

“Consider it like this — just what do you think would happen,” Ross continued, “if he were to go to the police?” He turned to face him, water glass in hand. “The same thing. You’re rich as Croesus, and, for the most part, you’re the darling of the American public. No one’s going to touch you, no matter how many witnesses and proof Parker might be able to produce.”

“But —“

“If this goes public, the vast majority of the public isn’t going to see a predator. They’re going to see an attention-seeking teenager who manipulated his way into five seconds of fame. You say you care about the kid. Would you really like to see him become this decade’s Monica Lewinsky?”

Tony pressed the makeshift ice pack harder into his jaw. It felt as though it were beginning to swell.

“What do we do?” he asked at last. He felt as though he had become a child again; he needed someone to tell him how his day would go, pick out his clothes for him. Someone else clearly needed to take the reins on his life again, if this is what he did when he had a modicum of independence…

“Get your jaw looked at and burn the bed sheets. The last thing we need is someone finding stains that shouldn’t be there. Beyond that, what you’ve been doing.” Ross reached for his coat. “I’m off to the office. I imagine the mother is going to need some handling.”

“Aunt,” he said absently. “She’s his aunt.”

Ross did up the buttons of his coat. “I hope you realize,” he said, “that there’s a strong chance this could go public. Parker could spill this anytime he wants — minors and contracts, like we discussed before — and as for Ms. Parker, if she was angry enough to punch you, I doubt she’ll sweat the idea of violating an NDA.”

“I know that.”

*Add that to Hammer*, he thought, *and I’m f**ked*. And then he silently added: *I’ve got to keep him quiet.*

“I say this now because I need you to get used to the idea,” Ross said, “that should this thing go public, you’ll have to defend your reputation. Meaning that you and I will need to grind him into the mud.”

“And what if I confess?”
“You won’t do that,” Ross said.

“And why’s that?” Tony snapped.

“Because I’ll see to it that the media turns Parker into the boy who cried wolf. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to see that. And besides, the Department of Defense feels strongly about maintaining a positive image of the Avengers Initiative.”

“Meaning?”

“Better an inactive hero than a disgraced one.”

Stark frowned. “Meaning?”

“You’ll both be — how can I put this — strongly advised to retire.”

Tony stared at him. “Are you — oh my God, you’re serious. But — here’s the thing: you need me —”

“We don’t need you. We just need your suits.” He saw the look on Tony’s face. “Rape’s a touchy subject, Stark. You’re privileged enough that you may go free, but that’s a stain that doesn’t wash out. We can’t risk that. Nothing personal, just the nature of the business.” Ross nodded to him. “I’d tell you to have a good day,” he said, “but I think the irony might kill me.”

After Ross left, Tony abandoned his attempts to pretend and went to the refrigerator to feverishly scan the contents. There was a beer there, at the back. Sam Adams. He bared his teeth and tried to remind himself of Rhodey’s concern from a week ago — over a week ago now.

*Just when you think it can’t get any worse,* he thought, *you remember you’re not supposed to drink.*

All at once, the same rage that had earned him the boxer’s fracture what felt like years ago swept through him. He closed his eyes, willed the cold air blowing out of the refrigerator to cool him down. He let the rage pass through him.

What were you supposed to do in this situation? Cry? Throw shit against the walls? Accept it and move on?

He closed his eyes, said a silent prayer of thanks that at least Happy hadn’t been in the building at the time, and then went upstairs.

The bedroom looked like he’d fucked somebody there. Plain, simple, unavoidable. The looped-up belt lay discarded on the floor. The bed was in disarray, stained and rumpled. And to think that less than fifteen minutes ago, he’d been stretched out for him, panting and desperate and, God help him, beautiful.

He sucked in a breath and began pulling off the bedclothes, in need of something to do with his hands.

They smelled like him. Tony resisted the urge to bury his head in the linen and inhale.

Just how far gone was he that, instead of being relieved that it was all over, all he could think about
was how he wouldn’t get to see that again.

Somewhere out there, Peter and May were being treated to mountains of legal paperwork.

His jaw hurt.

_No less than you deserve. They should have let her keep going._

The sheets sat in a heap on the carpet. Intellectually, he understood that they needed to be cleaned, or destroyed, or something, but he couldn’t summon up the energy to go through with it.

He could, however, summon up the energy to head back downstairs, grab the beer from the refrigerator, and wander back up to his bedroom. The first swallows went down cold and slightly bitter. It tasted like relief.

Sitting down on the bed, he reached for his phone and scanned the contents. A couple texts from Rhodey — no, no, not right now. Nothing from Peter. He shouldn’t have been surprised. He was forbidden from contacting him now, but still, he scrolled through the seemingly endless rolls of conversation. There was no chance of getting the real thing, not now, but he could read back, he could remember…

The last thing Peter had sent him:

_I have beard burn where nobody should ever have beard burn_

And Tony had replied:

__And you drew blood yesterday so we’re even__

Once he had finished the bottle (and was craving, dying for more), he switched on the news for the sake of distraction. A courtroom, people standing, a judge. The standard Blonde-Female-American-News-Anchor voice narrating.

“... weapons-selling and manufacturing throughout the city of New York. Mr. Toomes has pleaded guilty but refuses to divulge further information regarding funding or his consumers. An associate of Toomes, Herman Schultz —“ Tony muted the TV. Hearing about Toomes had only put him back in mind of Peter, now at the dinner with Hammer. “I know his daughter.” Quietly defiant.

He really was hero material, so much more than Tony was. If it had been Peter in his place, he would never have let Hammer insinuate him into paying money to cover their asses.

He had to find a way to keep him quiet.

But at present, it was too much work to think, and he had no desire to waste what energy he did have on Justin Hammer. He picked up his phone again and, on impulse, began scrolling through his camera roll. One photo, just one, of Peter. Clothed, thank God, but seated on Tony’s bed in a way that spoke of familiarity, sprawling against the pillows. His hair was curly, the way it always got when it was wet. It looked like he’d just dressed after showering. Tony only dimly remembered taking it; the last two weeks had blurred after a while.

Biting his lip, he scrolled back: photos from some press events; Rhodey, back when he was still in hospital, pointing at his cast with a look of cartoonish exasperation, mid-eye-roll; several before and after shots of projects; Dum-E with a sign hung on his proboscis that read SHAME; Steve, stretched out on the sofa in the compound’s den, asleep — he remembered that one perfectly, he’d sent it to Natasha with the caption _grandpa’s napping._
Seeing Steve again so suddenly had shaken him. He didn’t want to continue, but the masochistic impulse in himself had taken over. He continued to scroll.

A video of Clint’s birthday, with Natasha and Sam signing the lyrics to *Happy Birthday* to him as Wanda brought out the cake.

Steve in profile as he bent over a drawing.

All of them squeezed into the frame — that had been New Year’s Eve, he could tell from the oversized sunglasses he and Rhodey were wearing and the now-infamous bottle of vodka that Natasha was holding (infamous because Clint had insisted on confiscating it later that night, and, true to form, Natasha had put up a fight). Another photo, also from New Year, of Steve and Sam opening the first champagne bottles of the evening.

Christmas now, the tree leaning dangerously to the left. Clint lying in a pile of wrapping paper. Sam had given them all terrible holiday sweaters; Steve was wearing his, royal blue with snowmen grinning unsettlingly across the chest, and drinking hot chocolate.

Wanda and Steve lighting their menorah together earlier in the month, his arm around her thin shoulders.

A video of Natasha teaching a giggling Wanda how to tango in the kitchen while Clint sat on the counter and played a poor-quality version of *La Habanera* on his phone.

Steve signing several little girls’ backpacks.

A video of Steve doing the dishes and humming Glenn Miller.

Steve seated on one of their beds, naked and with one eyebrow raised as if to say, *are you ever going to put that thing down?*

Pepper at the bathroom vanity that was just a room away from where Tony now sat, doing her makeup.

His stomach clenched; his heart began to beat faster as he remembered the look on her face earlier. The hurt, the disgust.

Before he even realized what he was doing, he’d deleted the photo. Back to naked Steve. Deleted that too. Steve doing the dishes. Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

It was a quick massacre of the last nine months, feverish and desperate, until Tony found himself once more looking at Peter, who grinned at him with a sweetness that was too sincere to be a sham, who sprawled so relaxedly for him, who several hours ago had panted his name where he was pinned beneath him, who’d readily curled up next to him a week before, who’d let Tony do whatever he liked to him and never once had seen him in any way other than as a hero.

Tony wanted to be a hero.

He so desperately wanted to be good.

On the television, a man whom Tony assumed was Adrian Toomes was escorted by police from the courtroom.

Tony glanced back down at Peter’s face. At Peter’s eyes, adoring and embarrassed and lustful all at once.
He deleted the photo, tossed the phone onto his bed, and went in search of something more to drink.
Happy birthday

Chapter Summary

He knew that she was being far more understanding than he deserved, but then, that was almost assuredly because no matter what he said, she still saw him as a victim. He couldn’t quite blame her.

Chapter Notes

For the record, I don’t know when Peter’s birthday is canonically, and I don’t particularly care.

Chapter-specific warning here for some implications of past CSA.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They’d been back at the apartment just fifteen minutes, and May was still crying. Peter sat on the arm of the sofa in the den and listened to her try and cover it up, but it was obvious; she’d been doing it since they’d left Ross’s office. Probably since the moment Pepper Potts asked for her signature on the nondisclosure agreement, all while looking like she’d swallowed something bitter.

The worst had happened, but Peter was only now realizing that there was a lot more to it than just a few moments of humiliation. There was paperwork, and terrible silences, and May looking at him as though he’d been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

A shadow appeared in the doorway. He didn’t look at her.

“Is there anything you need?” she asked. “Anything I do for you, or get you…”

He shook his head, eyes trained on the carpet. “It’s fine.”

“You’re sure? At least let me get you something for your wrists…” Her voice faded as she disappeared back down the hall. A minute later, she returned with Neosporin and a box of Band-Aids from the medicine cabinet. “Come here.”

She sat him down properly on the sofa, had him hold out his hands and hissed in sympathy when she saw the marks up close. Numb, he watched her rub ointment on each abrasion — the edge of the belt had cut into his skin, but he hadn’t noticed until now — and then carefully wrap a Band-Aid over them.

“You don’t need to do that,” he began, but she just pressed her lips together.

“This is the one thing I can do,” she said, her eyes on her work. “Just let me do this, okay?”

He nodded, and she finished applying the last bandage, unable to resist thinking that if nothing had gone wrong, it would be Tony doing this. They’d be in his bathroom, Peter leaning against the counter and Tony taking care of him.
May saw the first tears that slipped down his cheeks. “Oh, no,” she said. “Come here. Come here…” She pulled him close, arms tight around him, and Peter thought that if she knew the details of everything he’d been doing for the last few hours, she’d probably treat him like a water moccasin. Something treacherous and full of poison.

But she just pulled back and took his hands.

“Talk to me?” she said.

“I have talked to you,” he said, feeling sullen as he avoided her eye.

“Peter, you don’t need to protect him. Not here, not with me…” She touched his face. “Can you be honest with me?”

Peter sighed in defeat.

“It’s a really long story. And it’s really complicated.”

She waved a hand. “Do we have anywhere to be?”

He swallowed. “All right. Okay.” He sighed again, his shoulders sagging. “Do you remember when that spider bit me?”

And he told her everything: from his first ventures as a vigilante, through the day that Tony had appeared in the apartment, and up to the internship, omitting only the parts that made his stomach churn in shame (the details of that first kiss, sucking his fingers in the car, how he’d thrown himself at him in the dining room, and, of course, how he’d let him fuck him in his bedroom while May was out; she didn’t need to know those parts). By the time he had finished, they were both seated on the sofa, and she was holding him against herself, his head against her breastbone, stroking his shoulder.

“I didn’t ever think it would get so far,” he finished. “I just — I was okay with it,” he said at last. “We both wanted to, and it was okay. Wasn’t it?”

May was silent for a long time. “Peter,” she said at last, “he’s an adult. He should never have let this happen.”

“But he didn’t — he didn’t hurt me — I was the one who started this…” He trailed off. May had a look in her eyes that he’d only seen a few times before: fury that was only offset by her grief. It reminded him of after Ben had died; he’d been babbling about how it was all somehow his fault, and she’d taken his face in both her hands and told him sternly that nothing that had happened was because of him.

“Peter, let me ask you something,” she was saying now. “What kind of adult just goes along with something like this?”

“May —“ He made a frustrated sound in his throat and waved his hands vaguely. “May, it’s not — it’s different —“

“Do you realize how easily you could have been hurt?” She shook her head. “You ought to go to the police.”

“May, no!”

“Your signature wasn’t binding, I can’t do it, but you can —“
“May —!”

“What else are we supposed to do?” she snapped. “He didn’t say no! He just let it happen! There’s a word for men like that, Peter, and that word is predator.”

“I’m not going to the police —“

“Peter —“

“I’m not, he didn’t do anything wrong —“

“Peter, for God’s sake!” Her voice had thickened up, and Peter realized that behind her glasses, she was beginning to cry again. “You’re so trusting… Do you realize how much I worry about you? You just go through life like nobody could ever hurt you. I don’t know how,“ she continued, and Peter’s stomach clenched, “but you do. But I can’t think that way, I can’t live that way, and if you’re not going to worry about your safety, then I have to do it for you.”

“It wasn’t —“ he groaned in frustration, trying to find the right words — “it didn’t feel wrong!”

“Do you know how frightened I was when I got that call this afternoon?” she asked. “No explanation, no context, just you crying and babbling about something Mr. Stark had done. I was terrified.”

“It wasn’t like that!”

“And I get there, and I see you bruised up and crying, and your wrists… Peter, whether you realize it or not, you got hurt.”

“May,” he began, a flush of shame rising in his cheeks as he looked away from her, “I don’t know how to explain this to you, but I asked for that.”

Silence. May stood up and went to the opposite end of the room. Not looking at him. He could hear her stifling another sob. It couldn’t be easy, he figured, realizing that your kid had grown up. He stood and went to her, but then she spoke at last, her voice low and shaky.

“Ever since I got that call this afternoon, I keep on seeing you when you were eleven, sitting in the kitchen and crying your eyes out because you didn’t want to shower —“

Peter’s mouth had been open to retort, but he snapped it shut again. “Okay, know what?” he snapped. “I’m done. I’m out.”

“Can you just try and see this from my point of view —“

“That was like five years ago!” he cried. “Can you give it a rest? I don’t even remember —“

She whirled around to face him. “You’re the only child I can ever have, Peter!” she exclaimed. “I’ve seen you get hurt too many times, and I can’t stand how you never let me do anything about it anymore!”

Peter was shaking, his hands curled into fists. “I didn’t get hurt this time!” he shouted. “I only got hurt when you started throwing around words like police again!”

And he ran to his room, closed the door with a slam.
She came in several hours later, a little after eight in the evening. Lying face down on the bed with his shoes still on, he pretended he was asleep as she sat beside him, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You know,” she said at last, softly, “when I get strict, or I get mean, I’m not trying to ruin your life. It’s because I worry about you. I’m not trying to punish you for what happened. Any of what happened.”

Peter shifted his head against the pillow and didn’t reply.

“You can stay home tomorrow, if you want,” she continued. “All-day birthday party. How does that sound?”

He shrugged. He’d forgotten all about his birthday in the commotion. Now that he remembered, it didn’t seem to matter so much.

“Also,” she added, and she sounded more uncomfortable this time, “I’d like you to get tested.”

Now he lifted his head to look at her. “Come on.”

She sounded tired. “We need to be responsible about this.” With a groan, he slumped back into the pillow, feeling sick. “We’re going to be okay,” she said, rubbing his back. “Like I told you, I’m not mad. I’m just worried.”

They stayed that way for a while, Peter lying there and May rubbing circles into his back.

“Want dinner?” she asked finally.

His stomach growled involuntarily, and he nodded.

At five-thirty the next morning, his alarm went off. The only attention he paid to it was the amount required to switch the damned thing off before curling up under the covers again, shivering. His sheets and blankets weren’t thin enough to block out the early December cold, and he wasn’t self-delusional enough to block out his memories of what had happened.

The memory of waking up next to Tony after the disastrous dinner with Hammer appeared unbidden his mind, a new lump grew into his throat, and he buried his head in the pillow so that May wouldn’t hear him crying from across the hall and worry that he had lied to her again.

He rose late the morning, near eleven, to find May cleaning the kitchen.

“Hey, you,” she said over her shoulder as he came in, blinking at the brightness. “Happy birthday.” He offered a weak smile and went to the fridge, not sure how to reply.

“I was wondering if you wanted to see a movie or something tonight?” she added. “Do something special.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I kind of want to stay in.”

May nodded easily as she scrubbed down the stove. Wrinkling his nose at the lemony scent of cleaning detergent and giving up food as a hopeless cause, Peter retreated to the other side of the kitchen.
“Then you pick something to watch tonight.”

They sat in silence for a while. Then Peter sighed. “Are we just going to pretend it didn’t happen?” May slowed in her cleaning and then stopped altogether. She took off her glasses and turned around to face him.

“I want to go at your pace,” she said. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable or….” She sighed. “The truth is, Peter, I’m sort of at a loss as to what to do. I mean… they don’t prepare you for this.”

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean for this happen.” He couldn’t tell if he meant the thing as a whole, or just getting caught.

“It’s all out now,” she said. “It happened. Let’s do what we need to do and move on, yeah?” She gave him a small smile. “Anytime you need to talk, you just say so, okay?”

Peter nodded, not quite able to look at her. “Thank you,” he said. He knew that she was being far more understanding than he deserved, but then, that was almost assuredly because no matter what he said, she still saw him as a victim. He couldn’t quite blame her.

“Got a film in mind for tonight?” she asked, signaling that the conversation was over.

“Pacific Rim?” he suggested.

“Sounds like a plan.”

He spent most of the day in his room, working on homework he hadn’t caught up on and texting friends. Ned mainly, but also a surprise text from Liz, who wanted to know who he thought the next captain for the decathlon team should be since she would be leaving at the end of the school year.

Michelle, he texted back. Definitely Michelle

That’s what i thought too

Do you know what’s been going on w her btw?

She’s been kind of closed off

No idea

He’d attempted to text Michelle as well, but she was still ignoring him.

That evening, he and May sat on the couch with Chinese takeout and watched the movie.

“Idris Elba,” May mused. “Would he not be a great Bond?”

“The best Bond,” Peter agreed. “He looks the way Old Spice smells.” Then he faltered, worrying that she would give him some sort of lecture about older men and the dangers therein, but all she did was put her arm around him and tug him closer.

“Where were you yesterday?”

They were in English, and while they were supposed to be writing short responses on the symbolism
of the conch shell in *The Lord of the Flies*, Peter and Ned felt they had better things to do. Coming back to school had been more difficult than expected — he couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow everyone in the hallways knew exactly what had happened to him — and worst of all was Ned, who kept asking questions, innocent and unassuming.

“Spider stuff?” he murmured, and Peter nodded. “That must be so cool,” he continued. “Getting to swing around buildings on your birthday.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t talk about that out loud.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Peter scribbled something down to the effect that the conch shell represented the last vestiges of humanity in a savage world run by petulant boys who didn’t know better and then marched his paper up to the teacher’s desk.

“You okay?” Ned asked once Peter had returned to his seat.

“Yeah. Why?”

“You’re just acting weird. Not like you have been. Like something happened.”

“Something did happen.”

“What?”

Peter grinned crookedly, not really feeling it. “I turned sixteen.”

“What,” Ned said, “you become an emo little shit the minute of?”

“I am *not* being emo.”

“Pardon me, *moody.*”

A fresh wave of — of whatever that feeling was, sadness or guilt or anxiety or all of the above — swept through him. He put his head down on the desk.

“Hey, seriously.” He felt Ned’s hand on his shoulder. “Is something wrong?”

But Peter just brushed off his hand and his question.

Michelle was very pointedly sitting at the opposite end of the lunch table again. While Ned was in the lunch line, Peter tried to talk to her, but she just put her book up in front of her face, and he found himself addressing Malcolm X instead.

“Fine,” he snapped. “I’ve got some stuff to talk to you about, but you know what? Fine. Fine.”

Two eyes appeared above the covers.

“For the record,” he added, “you were right. Okay? Happy now?”

She just looked at him.

“I’m sorry I upset you. It was a shitty thing to do, and I shouldn’t have done it. Can you please talk
She put down the book, breathed a sigh, not making eye contact as she smoothed down the pages. “Text me,” she said. “I’ve got stuff to do.” And she swept her things off the table and headed out of the commons toward the library.

“Hey.” He turned to find Ned standing there with his tray, his eyebrows raised.

“Hi,” he said awkwardly, clearing his throat.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Ned pressed his lips together. “Can you — okay, look.” He put down his tray, squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. “Can you please level with me?”

“Ned, listen —”

“No, you listen!” Ned snapped. “Something is clearly going on with you two, and you’re not telling me what it is,” he continued. “It’s — it’s not cool. Honestly, it fucking sucks being around you two because you’re constantly talking over my head or fighting with each other. Aren’t I your friend? Aren’t I your best friend?”

“There is so much going on right now —”

“Nobody’s fucking talking to me anymore. Michelle’s doing that thing where she walls herself off from everybody, everyone else is busy, and, oh, sure, yeah, we talk, but we don’t talk.” Ned was shaking. “I’ve known you since third grade. I know when something’s not right with you. Can you please respect me enough to tell me what’s going on.”

Peter stared at him. Around them, the noise of lunchtime in the commons roared, loud and impersonal. Nobody was so much as looking in their direction.

He slumped into one of the seats at their table and put his head in his hands. Ned settled into the one beside him.

“Peter?”

“Um — I lost the internship. The one with Mr. Stark. I lost it.”

Ned was frowning at him in confusion. “That — that’s what this is about?”

“No, there’s more to it. I just — I can’t say more than that right now. I just can’t.” To his horror, his nose was beginning to burn, heralding more tears. He could not, he could not cry in the middle of the commons… “There’s been so much going on recently that honestly, I’m having trouble cataloguing it all, up here.” He tapped his temple. “It’s been… it’s been fucking miserable.” His lower lip was starting to tremble. Oh no, please, no…

“Hey. Come on. Put it here.”

Peter sank gratefully into the hug.

“Thanks,” he mumbled into Ned’s shoulder.

“Tell me the rest when you’re ready, okay?”
He nodded.

On his way from school, he took a detour and stopped outside the mansion. It towered above him, creating the illusion that he was even smaller and more insignificant than he already felt.

Part of him was tempted call in anyway and sneak inside. Just to see him again. But he remembered everything May had said, and the look in her eyes when they’d argued, and he turned away. He couldn’t do that to her right now.

He breathed out a regretful sigh, breath clouding in the cold December air, and headed back down the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets and his head low.

May was out when he returned to the apartment. It was strange to be there so early, with daylight still streaming through the windows and nobody home. Usually, at this time, he’d be out patrolling the city or already at the mansion. In the lab or up in his bedroom.

He wanted to go back. It was like an ache in his body.

Instead, he went to his room, switched on his iPod, and started his homework.

Once he’d finished the online listening quiz for Spanish, he texted Michelle.

You were right

It’s done

He didn’t anticipate getting a response any time soon. Typically, she only replied to her messages at odd hours in the evening.

If she replied at all.

The next day, after school, May picked him up at the apartment and drove him to the family planning clinic several blocks away.

“They take walk-ins,” she explained on the way. When he groaned, she added, “I just want to make sure. It’s good that we’re doing this.”

He was the youngest person in the waiting room — certainly the youngest guy — and it was impossible to shake the sense that every other person there was looking at him and wondering what the hell he might be doing there.

A plump, middle-aged nurse in pale purple scrubs opened the door, called his name, and escorted him down a narrow hall into an examination room (to his relief, they left May in the waiting room).

“You can take a seat in the chair or on the table,” she said. He took the chair by the shelf of health magazines. His stomach was in knots, and he clenched his fists to hide how badly his hands were shaking.
“I’m Tameka,” the nurse said, filling something in on a clipboard. She looked at him, gave him a reassuring smile. “I’ll be handling your tests today.”

He nodded, said nothing.

“Date of birth?”

“December fifth, 2002.”

“Happy belated birthday, then. Do anything fun?”

He shrugged, looked away. “Just stayed in,” he muttered.

“Okay, Peter.” Tameka leaned back in her swivel chair with her clipboard. “Before we do the actual tests, I just want to ask you a few questions. Everything you say is strictly confidential unless there’s an issue of safety. Suicide, extensive abuse. That kind of thing.” She looked at him, assessing whether or not he’d understood. He nodded. “Okay. How many sexual partners have you had in the last month?”

*Here we go.* “One,” he said. His voice was rough; he coughed and didn’t look at her.

“Where they male or female?”

“It was — it was a guy, yeah.”

“And there was no history of HIV in either of you?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

She nodded and marked something down on her clipboard. “And did you use any sort of contraceptive?”

“Yeah —” he felt lightheaded — “yeah. Condoms.”

“Latex?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you describe what sort of sexual contact you and your partner had?” He glanced up at her, but she was completely poker-faced.

“You mean, like, what we did?” he asked uncertainly. She nodded.

He put his head in his hands.

A barrage of questions, a blood test, a urine sample, and one grotesquely personal swab later, he was out the door and back in the car with May. They didn’t immediately leave the parking lot, May leaning across the transmission and putting her arm around him. He leaned into it, feeling hollow.

“You know,” she said after a while. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it,” she said. “I’ve been drawing my own conclusions about everything for the last few
months, and… Between your grades dropping and the panic attacks — and that day you came home beat-up, and I took you to the ER, and he was there with his hand in a splint — I was frightened. Whatever was really going on, it looked bad.

“And when you came to me about the internship, I nearly said no, but you clearly wanted to do it so much, I let you. And then…” She stroked his hair and sighed. “You do this thing where you crawl into your shell and don’t talk to anyone. You did it after Ben died, and before that —“ She cut herself off. “You’ve done it for the last few weeks, too. And it scared me. But I’m — I’m glad you’re okay. I’m glad that it wasn’t worse than it was. And yeah, sure, I want to throw Tony Stark to wolves. He had a responsibility, and he —“ She stopped as though she were chewing on her tongue. “As long as you’re safe now…”

Peter wiped his nose with the back of his hand and didn’t look at her.

“I’m sorry I worried you,” he murmured.

“It’s okay. It’s all okay. You don’t need to apologize.” She pressed her lips to his forehead. “Come on. You want ice cream? I could murder a sundae right now.”

He nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter goes up this Monday!
Men like us

Chapter Summary

So here he was. Handling the situation, except it felt less like handling and more like feverishly trying to stop a leak in an already sinking boat.

Chapter Notes

Not 100% pleased with this chapter, but the upcoming chapters will more than make up for it :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What happened to the kid?”

Tony jumped and looked up from his computer at Happy, who had appeared in the doorway of his office.

“Sorry?” He’d been immersed in his work, and to him, Happy’s words had sounded like a nonsensical collection of syllables.

“The kid. I thought he was interning here.”

He looked away, suddenly unable to meet his friend’s eyes. “Scheduling conflict,” he said distractedly. “Couldn’t keep it up.”

Happy didn’t leave the doorway. “Shame,” he said. “He was starting to grow on me.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow. “Someone? Growing on you?”

“Like mold on Canadian beef, sure.”

With a huff of laughter, Tony bent back over his screen.

“Are you all right?” Happy pressed. Typically, he had the subtlety of a sledgehammer, but Tony could see that he was trying to be delicate. “You’ve been doing that thing where you throw yourself into your work because you’re trying to pretend that something isn’t going on with you.”

Tony sighed, rubbed at his eyes wearily. “This isn’t like the suits,” he said. “This actually does have a purpose. So if you could, you know, let me work?”

It was unusually snappish of him, and Happy cast him an uncertain glance, but he passed on from the room, and Tony returned his attention to the screen.

His friend wasn’t wrong; Tony was absolutely throwing himself into his work to ignore the dueling voices in his head telling him that he should be relieved or in mourning, ashamed or furious. But there was another purpose to it as well.
The day after Ross and Pepper had discovered them, Tony had called Ross again. It was after six, and he could hear the clatter of cutlery in the distance, kid’s voices.

“Wish you wouldn’t call at dinnertime,” Ross said. “My niece wonders enough why her uncle’s always on the phone.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “sorry, listen. There’s something I forgot to mention.”

Ross sighed. “What’s their name.”

“No, not like that. Somebody else knows. Justin Hammer.”

“Do I want to know how this came about?”

“He’s been blackmailing me.”

A heavy sigh. “Of course. You people never can make this simple.”

Tony chewed the inside of his cheek, swallowed his pride. “Is there anything you can do?”

“You need to handle that situation for yourself,” Ross said. “I’ll take care of the media, but I’m not holding your hand through this. A crime’s a crime, Stark.”

Suppressing a growl of frustration, Tony had said that he understood and ended the call with a stab of his finger.

So here he was. Handling the situation, except it felt less like handling and more like feverishly trying to stop a leak in an already sinking boat.

He hit several keys on his keyboard, and the printer behind him whirred to life.

“You’re leaving?” Happy asked, confused, as Tony marched down the stairs toward the main doors.

“Yeah. Got a meeting.”

“Drive you?”

“I’d rather you sat this one out, if I’m honest,” he said distractedly and strode on.

The main building of Hammer Industries was a great deal like its proprietor: tall, dignified, and for all that, carrying with it a distinct atmosphere of corruption.

He ignored the various clerks and secretaries who tried to stall him, pushed past several security guards, and eventually arrived outside the lacquered black door of Hammer’s private office.

He knocked once and then strode inside, not waiting for Hammer’s come in. He was seated behind his desk — also lacquered black, apparently when Hammer found a motif he liked, he used it everywhere — and raised his eyebrows at the sight of Tony breathing hard in front of him.

A thick packet of paper slapped onto Hammer’s desk.

“We need to talk,” Tony said.
Hammer leaned back in his chair. The bruises from where Tony had punched him had faded to a pale green color, giving him a slightly gangrenous complexion. Fitting.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Think of it as an alternative offer.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hammer—“ Hammer’s private secretary had appeared in the doorway, looking anxious — “he walked in before I could stop him—“

Hammer waved a long hand. “Just close the door, will you, dear?”

The door shut with a discreet click. “Why don’t you sit down, Anthony?” Hammer continued.

“Not interested,” Tony said shortly. “We need to talk.”

“Am I to assume this is about our agreement from earlier?”

“That was no agreement,” Tony snapped. “That was you backing me to the wall. Guess what, I’m doing the same thing to you.” He jabbed a finger at the packet. “You’ve got secrets of your own.”

Hammer half-smiled. “How is he?”

“Don't change the subject.”

“You don’t look as though you’ve slept much. Can we attribute that to him, or something else?”

“You try to sleep when there’s a gun to your head,” Tony snapped.

Hammer cocked an eyebrow and reached for the paper, leisurely scanned the first page. His pace was killing Tony; he’d been running at eighty per hour for the last three days, and now, to stand here and wait…

“I told you about my involvement with Toomes in good faith,” he said. He licked a fingertip and turned the first page. “With the implicit understanding that you wouldn’t use that against me.”

Tony snorted. “What, you expected honor among men like us?”

Hammer put the packet down. “Just what precisely is this?”

“That? That’s the summary of all the evidence readily available that implicates you with Adrian Toomes.” Tony waved a hand. “Coinciding spikes in income, the undeniable Chitauri-ness of some of your products in the last few years, interviews with people willing to talk — you’d be amazed at what you can get ahold of when you’ve got the influence…” Hammer’s face darkened. “You won’t find their names in there, I’m not stupid. But everything else is.”

When Hammer spoke, his tone was cool and collected. “And just what do you plan to do with this?”

“Take it to the authorities, be a hero. Unless you agree to drop our previous deal.”

Hammer’s thin lips twitched. With a little sigh, he turned to his computer, typed a few lines, and then clicked something.

“… don’t we stop wasting each other’s time and get to it?”

“Oh, yes, let’s.”
“I’m going to assume by the cringing manner with which you handled the subject of he who hath just departed that affairs haven’t changed since the last time we met.”

“Come again? Maybe not in iambic pentameter this time?”

“I assume you’re still fucking him?”

Tony went cold. “What the hell is this?” he asked quietly.

“I took the liberty of recording our conversation at dinner some days ago,” Hammer said. “Insurance, if you will. Nobody’s going to want to believe that you, the holy of holies, is capable of something like this, but it’s amazing what concrete evidence will help down.”

His mouth was dry. “And so?”

“And so if any of this report —” he tapped the paper in front of him — “sees the light of day, so does this recording.”

“Have you forgotten about your own little offer that evening. You’ll implicate yourself, too.”

“But you’ll already have done that for me, so what’s a man to lose?” He lowered his voice to a growl. “If you take me down, I will see to it that you are dragged into the mud with me.”

“And Peter?”

“Him, too.”

“What’s your problem?” Tony snapped. “Why go this far to ruin me?”

“Because when we were in the same business, you outstripped me by miles,” Hammer said coldly. “And when you left weapons manufacturing, instead of letting me take the lead there, you stayed in the spotlight. And I didn’t move at all.”

“And what about Peter? Where does he fit into that? He was a child when I left the industry.”

Hammer shrugged with one shoulder, a fluid, elegant movement, and settled back into his leather office chair. “Collateral damage,” he said simply.

Tony’s hands twitched, but he did nothing; there was nothing that could be gained by attacking him in his own building.

“What can I do to make you destroy that tape?” he asked.

“I’m sure you can have a guess,” Hammer said.

Tony stared at him for a moment.

“No,” he said flatly. “Absolutely not.”

“I don’t think that possessiveness is in your best interest at the time, do you?” Hammer asked.

“If you think,” Tony began, trying to keep calm, “that I would whore him out to save myself, you are very much mistaken. It didn’t work last time, and it won’t work this time, either.”

“It’s your choice,” Hammer said. “Feel free to leak all this —” he gestured at the stack of paper — “if you like. But know that you’ll be sacrificing both him and yourself do it. Is it really worth it,
Anthony, to destroy all that in the name of some higher cause? Captain Rogers might think so, but you… I doubt it. You’re a man of the world. You know the dangers of losing a sterling reputation.”

Tony’s jaw tightened.

And he turned on his heel and strode out of the office. Hammer called after him, but he missed whatever it was that was said. It didn’t matter.

Outside, he slumped into the driver’s seat of his car and closed his eyes. *Deep breaths. Deep breaths. It’s just anxiety, it’s just anxiety, it won’t kill you…*

He was fucked.

With a shaking hand, he found his phone, scrolled through his contacts. Rhodey picked up on the second ring.

“*Hey. What’s going on?*”

“I — I’m not doing that well, suddenly.” He was seized by the sudden desire to admit everything he had done. Just so somebody else could bear the weight with him. But he couldn’t do that; he could never do that because Rhodey would never speak to him if he did.

“Anxiety?”

“Yeah, listen —” he was breathing hard enough that his head felt like a balloon in danger of detaching from his neck — “am I a good person?”

“What are you — Tony, what’s going on?”

“Just tell me. Do you think I’m a good person? Because — because I feel like I haven’t been — like I haven’t *needed* to be since Steve was there, and Pepper was there, and you — and — and like you’ve all been shouldering the weight so I don’t have to —”

“Tony,” Rhodey said slowly, “*where is this coming from?*”

“Just tell me. If it was down to me, would you trust me to do the right thing?”

There was silence. *Oh my God,* he thought, *he doesn’t know how to say it… that he wouldn’t trust me at all…*

But what Rhodey said was, “*How many times have we flown together?*”

“I — what?”

“How many times we have flown together, and something’s gone wrong?”

“Too many to count?”

“Exactly. And every time, I’ve trusted you to get us out of there. And I know you’ve trusted me to do the same thing.”

“But I couldn’t get to you in time in Berlin —”

“But you tried. You don’t always get it right, but when do any of us?” Tony closed his eyes, bit into
his fist. “You tried, and that’s what matters. You’re a good person, Tony. You wouldn’t be doing what you do if you weren’t.”

Silence. Tony breathed out shakily and tasted blood. He’d bitten through his knuckle.

“Okay,” he rasped at last. “Thanks.”

“Get back here to the compound,” Rhody said. “It sounds like you need to take a break.”

“I can’t, yet.” Tony breathed out again and closed his eyes, opened them again. Several parking spaces away, two men in suits emerged from a Corvette and headed inside. “There’s something I need to do. In fact — “ he gulped — “it might be a while before I go there again.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just…” He bit his lip and felt his eyes sting. If he wanted to be good — he didn’t dare say hero yet, contrary to what people believed, he didn’t love himself enough for that — he had to start now. “Be ready,” he said in the end. “Something’s about to happen.”

He ended the call before Rhody could ask for further clarification and stared down at the list of contacts. Scrolled until he found Peter.

He wasn’t supposed to contact him again. At present, he didn’t especially want to — the aching terror of what he might say were Tony to tell him his plan was a powerful deterrent. And yet…

The passenger seat was empty, and he thought of an evening long ago, after yet another heated discussion with Hammer, when Peter had sucked his fingers into his mouth and cried when Tony had rejected him. Why hadn’t he let himself lose control that night? Why hadn’t he pulled him into his lap and allowed himself to have him, to know him. That was the Biblical way of putting it, wasn’t it? Strange, the intimacy of that one word.

Why hadn’t he let them have more time?

Peter had seen his uncle get shot, and Tony had nearly died, had lived through his parents’ murder. Surely they knew better than anyone the benefits of living fast when it was so clear that everything could be over in a moment. And yet Tony had held off and held off, and now they’d had just a scant few weeks of each other. A few weeks of kisses, of furtive fucks, and of time that slipped through their fingers too easily, like water, like sand.

Why hadn’t he had him then?

The news about Hammer was nothing, really, nothing in compared to the hurricane that would engulf the media the minute any of his own business came out. No matter what he did, it seemed, he’d get fucked. Best to go out in a way he could perhaps live with. God help him, he had to try. He had to try and do right again.

He would not pay money to cover up his sins.

Steve came to mind, suddenly — Steve, who’d been willing to defy the United Nations if it meant that he’d keep Barnes safe. Before, that had seemed incomprehensible, but now… now he thought he might understand a little of that feeling. That wild-eyed desperation. But he, Tony, had to be better than that. How else could he disassociate himself from Hammer in his mind — Hammer, who only destroyed things, who hid his own rottenness behind wordy sentences and class.
With shaking fingers, he tapped out a quick message to Peter.

*Get ready*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter comes on Thursday!
#IStandWithSpidey

Chapter Summary

“Exactly!” came May’s voice sharply from the kitchen. “They will jump through whatever hoops necessary to make sure he’s not to blame because God forbid Iron Man not be above reproach!”

Chapter Notes

Enjoy all the tea I spill in this chapter, which was posted early again at the behest of RedFlags.

Chapter-specific warning here for some references to past CSA.

14 December

6:57 PM EST

WHAT’S GOING ON

HAVE YOU SEEN WHAT’S ON TV

IS WHAT THEY'RE SAYING TRUE

7:28 PM EST

PETER PLEASE TEXT ME BACK

JUST TELL ME IF YOU'RE OK

[8 missed calls]

9:07 PM EST

Just saw the news

I know we haven't been talking (my fault) but text me when u can

10:10 PM EST

Or dont text me if your still mad

At least text ned cause hes freaking out
For real though are you ok

Im sorry it happened like this

Peter stood outside Midtown, the hood of his sweatshirt up, and tried not to panic. He’d done enough of that the night before.

He and May had been eating out when the story had broke. And from there, it had been an endless hurricane of texts, tweets with his name in them — all of which he had missed because they had gone home early, only to pull over because his anxiety had blossomed into a full panic attack, and May couldn’t hold his hand and drive at the same time.

“You know,” she’d said earlier that morning, “you can stay home if you want. No one’s making you go.”

“I have a test third block,” was all he’d said. He’d had enough of pity.

Now he was regretting that decision.

It was one thing to go to school when everybody knew that you were one of an entire subgroup of gay nerds who didn’t take much interest in anything that didn’t have a Death Star on it. It was something else entirely when everybody knew that you were, A of all, a vigilante, and B of all, an alleged rape victim. It would have been fine if it had just been about his secret identity (God, what was he, a character in *The Incredibles*?) but now the other bombshell would overshadow anything else.

In desperation later that night, he’d violated one of the points of the agreement he’d signed and frantically texted Tony (with little guilt, seeing how they’d already shattered the *do not communicate* order earlier).

*WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON*

*IS THIS WHAT YOU MEANT WHEN U SAID GET READY??????*

No reply. Just like there was currently no comment from Stark Industries, according to the hook-nosed reporter on CNN. The media must have been working its ass off: Spider-Man’s identity uncovered, Justin Hammer arrested for funding illegal weapons manufacturing, and Iron Man outing as a perv. Somewhere out there, whoever calculated ratings for all these news broadcasts must have been busting out the champagne.

Students passed him, taking no notice, talking amongst themselves. Peter thought he heard a stray ‘Avengers’ from some of them. *It could be anything, he told himself, it could be anything, it isn’t necessarily about you…*

“Peter!”

He whirled around, wincing at the volume of Ned’s voice. Ned came to a stop in front of him.

“Peter, what’s going on —“
“Shh — can you please keep your voice down?”

“— you weren’t responding to my texts or anything, and I was freaking out —“

“Ned —“

“Are you okay, though — is this why you were crying the other day —?!”

“Ned, I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“Hey, I had to deal with him all night, so maybe you could explain things.” Michelle had materialized behind Ned, her arms crossed.

“Did you tell him?” Peter asked her. She gave a one-shouldered shrug.

“Not my secret to tell, is it?”

“Tell me what?” Now Ned sounded suspicious and upset. He turned to Michelle. “Did you know about this and just not say anything?”

People around the entrance were beginning to stare at them. Peter groaned. “Listen — can we talk about this inside?”

Some kid he’d never met before in a black sweatshirt sauntered over to them. “Hey,” he said, “you’re Peter, right?”

Peter was too taken aback to say anything.

“So…” The kid looked as though he were formulating his words in his head. “Was it, like, he’d pay you, or would you do it for free?”

Ned understood quicker than the other two did. Peter seized him by his shoulder and pulled him back before he could tackle the kid.

The kid just laughed. “Should have made him pay you,” he said. “No way I’m a sucking a dick gratis.” He swept his baseball cap off his head and headed up the steps of the school.

“… that kid needs a lesson on rape culture,” Michelle said at last.

Peter sighed. “We need to talk about this. Now.”

“Um, damn right we do,” Ned said. “You should have let me punch him.”

“Come on. Inside.”

The conversation was rushed and not well-executed where it took place beneath the staircase at the back of the school, but by the end, he’d caught Ned up.

“And you knew about this?” Ned asked Michelle, sounding hurt.

She nodded, eyes on the floor. “Yeah.”

“So… you’re Spider-Man,” he said, “and then on top of that, Tony Stark is your… boyfriend…?”

Peter groaned and shook his head. “We’re done. It was over. And now this happens…”
“What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea.” He glanced down at his phone and found that #IStandWithSpidey was trending on Twitter, just above #WhosPeterParker and just beneath #StarkTape. And then there was #TeamIronMan, #NotSoSuper, #JailJustin, #TheHammerFalls, and on, and on. One tweet showed someone burning their Iron Man sweat-shirt. Others were, well…

Savanna Davy @8-cups-of-joe-l8r

Iron Man & Sp-man? HAWT #StarkTape #AmiriteLadies

Kelly Horta @70sgrrlatheart

Gold digger #NeedISayMore #TeamIronMan #StarkTape

George Pike @sp1dersgeorg

Fuck this shit im heartbroken #IStandWithSpidey #NotSoSuper

Ned covered up his phone screen before he could read any others. “Don’t look at those,” he said. “Just try and get through today.”

As if on cue, the school bell rang, and with Pavlovian timing, the students around them stirred and struck out for their first block.

“Oh, fuck,” Peter said. He looked back at Ned and Michelle. “I can’t do this.”

“You’re going to have to,” Michelle said. “It’s go to class or hide in the bathroom and watch Netflix, which I can’t recommend. It’s not very comfortable.”

“How bad that Netflix in the bathroom feels like the more viable option right now?”

“Come on,” Ned said. “We need to get to class, or we’ll be late.”

Peter caught the eye of several passing freshman girls in softball uniforms — he’d forgotten there was a match today — and all three of them immediately looked away, began speaking more furtively.

“Just go,” said Michelle.

“They’re talking about me —“ he said, feeling absurdly paranoid. Why? Weren’t all his secrets finally out in the open?

“Yeah, ‘cause you’ve gotten more dick in a month than they’re gonna get in their entire lives.”

“Michelle?”

“Yeah?”

“Not helpful.”

“Come on,” Ned said. “We need to go.”

They saw Ned off to AP Human Geography and then went to Physics. To Peter’s relief, he was
neither last nor first person in the room, but it was impossible to ignore the eyes on him. How many of them had seen the news or seen the tweets about it and had said, *oh my God, Peter Parker, I know him, he’s in my first block...*

Dr. West made a habit of taking attendance every morning, out loud. This morning, he just murmured Peter’s name, mostly to himself, and gave him a nod accompanied by a look that he chose to read as sympathy. The stares of everyone else in the classroom burned hot against his skin.

He lowered his head, hunched his shoulders, and eventually decided he would follow Michelle’s example, forego the notes, and just sleep.

Michelle shook him awake an hour and fifteen minutes later, and while she walked with him to the end of the hallway, as usual, they didn’t speak. All he got was a nod, and then she was walking to her history class, and he was on his own. Until last night, despite what she’d said in the commons before, she had never texted him. He wanted to feel upset about it, but part of him whispered that he wouldn’t have listened to any of what she said anyway.

The minute he walked into Spanish, he knew that he wasn’t going to get the free pass that he’d gotten in Physics. A laptop cart was parked by the teacher’s desk, and the projector was set up showing Audacity, meaning that they would be pairing up and recording conversations.

Sure enough, once the class had congregated, Señor Delgado clapped his hands together and instructed them, in Spanish, to get in pairs. Through the usual scramble as everyone fought to get to their friends, Peter stayed seated, head low, hoping that perhaps he wouldn’t be noticed.

And then everything quieted, and he realized with a sinking feeling that he was the only person in the class with no partner. And Señor Delgado didn’t have the discretion of Dr. West.

“Can anyone make a group of three?” he asked. “Flash, you and Harry maybe?” Peter immediately looked away, and as Flash started to reply — whatever he was going to say, Peter really, really didn’t want to be there to hear it — the classroom door opened again.

“Oh, perfect!” Señor Delgado said as Liz slipped inside and handed him a pass.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “NHS stuff.”

“Not a problem. We’re doing conversational today.” He lowered his voice slightly. “Could you partner up with Peter?”

She glanced momentarily in his direction, and Peter looked away, a flush that had nothing to do with the awkward week they’d dated in middle school rising under his collar.

“Yeah, sure,” she said.

Señor Delgado squeezed her shoulder. “Thank you,” he told her quietly, meaningfully.

She sat down at the desk beside his. Peter didn’t make eye contact, just nodding hello. After an unnecessary review of the directions and a retrieval of the laptops for each pair of desks, he didn’t feel much more comfortable with her there.

“I can do this,” he said, angling the laptop toward himself to log in. He refused to do nothing.
They were an oasis of awkward silence amid the sea of their classmates speaking, in Spanish and in English. He was dimly aware of Liz looking at him every so often in her periphery as she filled out the first questions of the assignment sheet. Her sweater was lemon yellow, bright enough to almost hurt his eyes.

Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore.

“You have anything you want to ask?” he muttered, eyes on the computer screen.

“Hm?”

“You know. If it’s true, if I got money out of it, etcetera.” He struck the Audacity icon on the desktop with more force than was necessary. “Surprisingly, nobody’s asked me how big it is yet, so feel free to fire away if you’re curious.”

“Peter.”

He glanced at her and found her looking at him as though she were about to cry. “What?” he asked, suddenly feeling far older than sixteen.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “You shouldn’t have to talk about it, I mean…” She shook her head. “You don’t need to do that.”

He sagged. “Sorry. They’ve been coming after me all morning, and I’m kind of — over it.”

Slow and tentative, she laid a light hand on his shoulder. “I know how that feels,” she said gently. “Is your mom okay?”

She nodded. “We’re getting through it. How’s your aunt?”

For a moment, he contemplated telling her the truth, that May had known for a week at least, that everything had been consensual and desired and, for a brief couple days, perfect. At least where he was concerned. And then there had been Michelle, and Hammer, and Ross, and a thousand other things that ripped it all up.

“We’ll get there,” was all he said.

Liz gave him a tiny smile. “All we can do, right?” She offered him her fist, and he knocked his against hers.

They were just settling into actually doing the assignment when Señor Delgado’s phone rang.

“Peter? Dr. Morita wants to see you.”

And his marginally improved mood plummeted.

It was a small army that greeted Peter in the principal’s office: Dr. Morita himself, his counselor Dr. Nicks, and three of the school’s five security officers. Nicks stood up as he entered.

“Hi, Peter,” she said gently, and something about her tone reminded him of Liz upstairs. Careful, not wanting to spook him as if he were a horse or something. She pulled out the chair next to her, and he sat.
“Hi, Peter,” said Dr. Morita where he sat at the head of the table. “We called you down here because we wanted to address some —” he fished for the right word — “some rumors,” he said at last. “We wanted to make sure we had your side of the story.”

Peter glanced at the security officers in their navy polos. The largest one was easily over six feet tall and looked too big for the chair in which he sat. He had out a notepad and pen.

“We just want to ask you some questions,” he said reassuringly.

*Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck, they want me to incriminate him, oh fuck…*

When Peter made no reply, he added, “Are we okay with that?”

Peter nodded shortly and said nothing. That was all he could risk.

“You did the Stark internship recently, right?”

No way to deny that; Midtown required its students to list any internships or jobs they took on. He nodded again. His voice seemed to have to have stuck in his throat like peanut butter.

“How was it?” the security officer asked. He had an impressively gentle demeanor for such a big man. “You had fun?”

He jerked his head again. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “Yeah, it was fun.”

“And Mr. Stark himself. You worked well with him?”

He nodded and said nothing, not trusting himself with words.

“There weren’t any problems?”

“No, sir.” His eyes were fixed on the gray metal table. “No problems.”

The chair beside him creaked, and Nicks put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Nothing you say is going to leave this room, Peter. I promise.”

He nodded, stayed silent.

“How often were the two of you in contact?”

He shrugged. “Fairly often? I mean —” he cracked an uneasy grin — “we were working in the same building, so…”

The officer leaned forward and lowered his voice to a more conspiratorial tone, the effect of which was somewhat defeated by the presence of the others around the table. “Listen, son,” he said. “I know this may be uncomfortable to talk about, but I promise that you’re in a very safe place here. We’re just trying to make sure that you stay safe.”

Peter didn’t respond.

“In the file for the internship,” the officer continued, “it said that you left it after about a week and a
half. Any particular reason for that?”

“Um — family emergency —“ he mumbled distractedly.

“No other reason?”

He didn’t respond.

“Now, I took a peek at your record,” the officer said. “It mentioned an incident with a Steven Westcott a couple years ago —“

“We’re not talking about him right now,” Peter said flatly.

“I only bring it up because he was recently released from prison,” Gordon said. Peter looked up, alarmed. “Got out on good behavior.” He spotted the look on Peter’s face and grimly added, “I know. If it’d been up to me…” He shook his head. “But you haven’t had any contact?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“So we can rule that out.”

“Peter,” Nicks said softly, “if someone hurt you, it’s very important that you tell us.” He looked away from her, a lump forming painfully in his throat. Pain left deep impressions; Peter found himself thinking about an evening from years ago spent with the police, and about a lady who looked like a mom holding his hand, distracting him with questions about his hobbies, his favorite TV show…

He swam back to earth. Nicks was still talking. “Officer Gordon here can pass on your statement to the police, and we can do something about it,” she said.

Nausea boiled within him; he forced it back down and let out all his breath at once.

“Peter,” the officer said, “we’re trying to help you. But we can’t do that if you don’t talk to us.”

It came all at once, unstoppable: Peter’s body trembling as the tears finally spilled over. It wasn’t crying or sobbing. More like blubbering, his eyes squeezed shut, a fist pressed against his mouth.

Nicks laid her hands on his shoulders; he shook her off and stood, his chair screeching backward.

“Next time,” he stammered, “just bring a doll.”

He fled the office before anyone could stop him or call his name.

Outside the office, he fled down the nearest corridor, half-convinced that the security guards were following him to try and drag him back in.

But the person he ran into was neither security guard nor teacher, but Michelle coming out of the girl’s bathroom, a giant pass dangling from her wrist.

“Hey, where’re you headed?” she asked.

“I — don’t know?” he admitted. “I just, like, ran away from Dr. Morita, so, I don’t know what I’m doing.”
She studied his face momentarily. “Want to come join me?” She jerked her head in the direction of a classroom further down the hallway. “It’s Sculpture, and the teacher literally does not care if people walk in, so.” She shrugged. “You can come hide if you want.”

He hesitated. Then —

“Thanks. Yeah, yeah, I think I will.”

“Come on.” He fell into step beside her as she kept talking. “I’m doing this sculpture of Trump Tower out of bananas with flavored condoms on them. I call it Penis Envy.”

“You’re a genius.”

“Agreed.”

“Hey —” he stopped her outside the art room. “Are we cool?”

She almost grinned. “Have we ever been?”

“I meant us, personally.”

One corner of her mouth twitched. “I’m sorry it all came out in the open,” she said, looking away from him. “And I’m sorry we fought.”

“I’m sorry I said what I said.” Peter stuck his hands in his pockets. “I should have listened to you.”

“Yeah, and I shouldn’t have gone for a cheap dig. Come on.” She jerked her head in the direction of the door. “Let’s put condoms on fruit.”

There were twenty minutes left in the block, most of which Peter spent watching Michelle carefully hot glue banana after banana into a formation that, to Peter’s eyes, looked less like a building and more like a colorful and suggestive dessert. The bananas she’d glued together earlier were already beginning to shrivel up in their latex (“It’s, like, a metaphor,” Michelle explained). Sure enough, nobody in the class paid much attention to him, and he was free to take the earbud that Michelle offered him and close his eyes as Daveed Diggs rapped in his ear about Alexander Hamilton’s shady behavior.

He woke up six minutes before the bell rang to find the sculpture cleared away and Michelle drawing a cartoon of he and Ned dabbing in her sketchbook. On the opposite page was a considerably higher quality sketch of Liz seated on a sofa in jeans and a sweatshirt, popping a gum ball in her mouth.

Michelle saw him looking. “Not as straight as you thought,” she said.

“Congratulations?”

She rolled her eyes, but her lips were pressed together in a way that suggested she was trying not to grin. It made Peter feel somehow bereft. You could have had a normal adolescence, he thought, where you date people, and hook up with people, and people tease you about it, and it’s not a big deal.

And when he walked upstairs to third block English, it was with the reinforced feeling that he’d sacrificed his youth and everything that came with it for a chance at... what? He missed Tony — desperately, in the way you missed the bottom of the sandbar when you went swimming and the
current pulled you out too far — but his losses didn’t feel proportionate to what he’d gained. Even Tony himself felt like a loss, a prize too fleeting to count.

There was nothing of interest in English — nothing except a lot of furtive stares and whispering behind his back, until Ned’s repeated glares and, eventually, hissed threats shut them up.

Lunch was worse by sheer dint of the increased number of people. After someone finally asked the inevitable size question, he, Ned, and Michelle picked up and moved into the library, where they were able to hide amongst the book shelves and take turns reading from Stephen King novels. Peter’s energy for it fizzled out within a few minutes, but Ned just put an arm around him, and Michelle took out her phone and pulled up *The Gilmore Girls* on Netflix, and then Peter almost felt as though he’d aged back to what he was supposed to be.

When he returned to the apartment building, he was greeted by a cacophony of lights and people shouting; he screwed his eyes shut and made it to the building’s door with his other senses. How had people found out where he lived?! The spooky power of the digital age, he figured.

Another cacophony greeted him when he opened the door to his apartment: the TV running in the living room, and May talking on the phone in the kitchen. She had her back to the door and didn’t seem to realize that he had come in.

“Yes, we’re all fine here,” she was saying. Then there was a beat, and when she spoke again, it was with a harder note in her voice. “Have you turned on the TV? You can imagine what they’re saying.” Peter set his book bag down on the dinner table. She didn’t hear it. “Oh, something to the tune of how I’m somehow criminally negligent and everything that happened is my fault. Hm? Oh, no, that was ABC.”

Now morbidly curious, Peter stepped into the den. The TV was switched to Fox, which was hosting a panel of what were no doubt so-called “experts.” The banner beneath read: STARK TAPE - SCANDAL OR SMEAR?

“… and really, do we know how much money this woman makes per year?” one of them was saying. “How do we know this isn’t some elaborate scheme —“

“And where is she?” The token woman, blonde and busty, asked, interrupting the first one. “Why hasn’t she made a statement or come forward or gone to the police or something? If it was my nephew, I would be throwing all I could at Stark, but everything is radio silent from the Parkers.”

“And, Rhonda, it may be off-color for me to say so this early on, but that does not look like the behavior of an innocent woman —“

“No, it does not,” said the third one. “And what about the tape itself? The audio’s not clear, and most of what Stark says is… ambiguous at best —“

“Exactly!” came May’s voice sharply from the kitchen. “They will jump through whatever hoops necessary to make sure he’s not to blame because God forbid Iron Man not be above reproach! Peter’s a good kid,” she continued in a lower voice, “but he’s sixteen, and, you know, everybody makes rash decisions when they’re that age. But the adults aren’t supposed to encourage that kind of behavior!” Her voice had risen again. “I could kill Tony Stark right now,” she said more quietly, “I really could. I don’t care how many times he’s saved New York, he *fucked* us over, and now we
can’t even set the record straight!”

Peter shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t usually hear his aunt curse.

 “… for those of you just joining us, we’re discussing the recent leak of the Stark tape and the merits of the accusations being leveled against Tony Stark and Justin Hammer — “


A moment later, she walked into the den and immediately took the remote from the sofa and switched to another station.

“— late this morning, Stark Industries released a statement acknowledging the severity of the accusations and asking that the Parker family be given privacy — “

She growled in frustration and switched the TV off.

“I don’t want you watching that,” she said, squeezing his shoulder briefly. Peter looked down at the carpet.

“Was that Nathan?” he asked. She nodded. “Did you tell him the truth?”

“Had to,” she said. “I didn’t want him laboring under any delusions of what the situation is.”

Peter went to the window and pushed the vertical blinds aside to look out onto the street. If Stark Industries had asked the media to leave them alone, the media clearly hadn’t listened.

“How was school?” May asked from behind him. She said it tentatively, as though frightened of what he would tell her.

He sucked in a breath. “It sucked.”

She didn’t reply, just sighed and came over to pulse his shoulders. “Is this where you tell me that every decision has consequences?” he added.

“You’re not the one who needs to hear that,” she said grimly. “Stark is. Hopefully, hearing his name get dragged through the mud will open his eyes to that.”

He looked back at her. “Yeah, but they’re not dragging him through the mud. They’re dragging us.”

Again, she didn’t reply. Just put her arms around him and rocked him back and forth the way she would when he was younger.

“We’ll get through it,” she said at last. “We always have, haven’t we?”

“The principal called me down. Wanted me to talk to security about what happened. What allegedly happened.” He leaned against her unhappily. “He asked me about Skip. Well — mentioned him.”

May’s arms wrapped around him a little more tightly. “I kind of… ran out of the meeting? So, you might get a call about that. Just so you know.”

“Are you sure,” May said gently, “that that had nothing to do with this?”

“You mean, like… psychologically?” Peter swallowed and extricated himself from May’s arms, clearing his throat. “That’s more psychoanalysis than I’m comfortable with.”

“That was invasive, sorry.” May was watching him from where she stood at the window. “I worry
about you,” she added. “You know that, right?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry I make you worry.” They looked at each other for a few seconds, and then Peter looked away. “I got homework,” he muttered.

But he didn’t do his homework. Instead, he took out his phone and stared at the text that he’d gotten this time yesterday evening (there had been no replies to his earlier texts). He glared at the screen, even, until the pixels swam in his eyes.

Get ready

He pressed his lips together, then tossed his phone onto his bed and got up to fish his suit out of the ceiling.

“Where are you going?” asked May when Peter emerged from his room, suit now safely stowed in the backpack that hung from one shoulder.

“Out,” he said vaguely, heading for the door.

“Oh no.” May caught him by the shoulder, and he was surprised to find that her face was deadly serious. “You tell me exactly where you’re headed.”

He swallowed, not meeting her eyes. “I think you know.”

“Peter —”

“I have to fix this,” he said. “Don’t tell me not to. This is my mess, and I need to clean it up.”

And he walked out the door before she could say another word.
Chapter Summary

And now Peter, and now Rhodey.
Can you hold onto nobody?

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the most nihilistic chapter of anything I’ve ever written in my entire life.

Warning for some discussions of rape and past CSA, in addition to some slight dubcon in this chapter. Some weird stuff happens with consent here.

Shout-out to RedFlagsAndDiamonds for some of Rhodey’s dialogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is a little like hell; almost romantic.”

Ingmar Bergman

So this was how destruction happened.

Tony had gone to bed with debilitating anxiety and had woken up with the same amount of anxiety, only now he had a scandal of his very own sprayed like piss across the national media.

He had given out the dirt on Hammer, so Hammer had anonymously leaked the recording. One good turn deserved another, he supposed. But that didn’t warrant the anonymous suggestion of Peter’s alternate identity to BuzzFeed (of all places, BuzzFeed. Against his judgment, Tony felt a grudging admiration for Hammer’s ingenuity. He must have known there was no concrete evidence for the scoop, so he’d given it to the one place that might take it).

There was a mob camped out in front of the mansion, bearing cameras instead of torches and pitchforks, but Tony figured it was only a matter of time.

He was woken by a call from Ross, who explained the situation and told him to lay low and not do anything rash. Stark Industries would be given a statement per Ross to release to the media.

“And the kid?” Tony had asked, not wanting to know the answer.

“Have you seen the internet?”

He’d told Ross not to destroy him, and then he’d hung up and looked over Twitter, the news. The arguments ran far and wide: was Tony guilty or not; was Peter an innocent angel, a lying teenager, or
a gold digger with his talons sunk deep into Tony’s flesh; was this a national disgrace or a hoax? As he’d feared, the news regarding Justin Hammer had been sidelined in favor of Tony’s dirty laundry. The only interest he’d garnered was his own part to play in the tape.

Peter had texted him, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at the messages. Later, he told himself. When he was feeling less out of control.

When he’d come downstairs that morning, Happy had been waiting for him, dressed for work as usual, but seated in the kitchen, looking as though he’d been wrestling with himself all the way there.

“Is it true?” he asked, his usual brusque manner gone. Tony missed it. He looked away.

“It sounds like you don’t need me to answer that,” he said.

Silence ringing loud in the kitchen.

“I didn’t know because I didn’t want to know,” Happy said at last. “I’m not stupid. Something was clearly up, but I didn’t want to know about it.” He wouldn’t look at him. “We’ve been working together a lot of years,” he continued, and something in Tony swooped, “and mostly, I’ve let you do your thing. But…” He shook his head. “If I stick my head in the sand on this…” He spread his hands wide. “That makes me even more complicit in it than I already have been.”

Tony drew in a shaky breath. “I never did anything that he didn’t want,” he said. It was a feeble defense, but it was the only one he could offer himself.

Happy nodded. “I know. I never thought that you were capable of — of that. But I’m taking some vacation time,” he said at last, heavily, and now it was Tony’s turn to nod.

“Won’t hold it against you,” he managed.

Happy stood up. “Call me if you need to,” he said and walked past him. He heard his footfalls move toward the elevator.

That had been the first loss of the day. The next one came just a few hours later, with the phone call that Tony had been dreading since the day before.

“I saw the news,” Rhodey said the minute he picked up.

“Oh my God,” came the eventual reply. “Is it — it’s not…”
“Yeah. Yeah, it is.” Tony glanced out the window. The crowd outside the doors had only grown.

“And I’m going to assume that the Peter Parker they’re talking about is also the Peter Parker you brought to Berlin and that you’ve been bringing every other place for the last few months?”

“Yeah.”

A long, long, long silence. Tony felt like he was choking on it.

“Was it consensual?”

“Yes!” Tony exclaimed. “Do you really have to ask?”

“According to CNN, you’re a molester. You haven’t really spoken to me in ages. And since everything in Berlin, you’ve been a different person anyway. I don’t feel like I know you anymore! So, yeah, I feel like I do have to ask.”

“I never hurt that kid,” Tony said through gritted teeth, once the sting of guilt had subsided.

“You need to explain this,” Rhodey said. “Right here. Right now.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“That’s not good enough, Tony.”

“I know, I know. I just…” He groaned, dragged a hand through his hair. How did you go about justifying this sort of thing, especially to your best friend? “I’ve been in a very private hell recently,” he said at last. “I felt like shit, and — no, hang on. No. Let me start over.” He sighed. “He looked at me like I was a hero, and I liked it. And I know that that’s not enough. I know that that’s a shitty excuse for… for everything.”

Yet another pause. “Has your life really been so empty,” Rhodey said at last, “that you thought the only way you could get validation was by fucking a fifteen-year-old kid?”

He sagged into the nearest chair. “Rhodey —“

“Man, if Steve were here right now —“

“Yeah, well, he’s not. Is he.”

“Tell me that’s not what this is about.”

“No.” Although, in some ways, that wasn’t strictly true because it always seemed to come down to Steve in the end, Steve and his habit of abandonment…

“Is it still going on?”

“No.”

“How long?” He sounded hurt more than anything else. “How long has this been going on?”

“I don’t know exactly. Since I punched the wall.” Rhodey cursed. “I know,” he added. “I know how bad this is. I know.”

“I don’t know if I can... You know,” he continued. “I’ve stuck with you for a long time now, but this… I just don’t know.”
“Okay, no, no, no…” Tony stood up again, his stomach beginning to churn. “No, don’t talk like that —“

“How do you want me to talk?” Rhodey snapped. “This isn’t something you can just brush off.”

“I’m losing everything already,” Tony said desperately. “You said it yourself, you’ve stuck with me for years and years, Christ, you’re the best friend I’ve got. I… I can’t lose you too.” His eyes were welling up.

“I don’t know, Tony. I just don’t know.” He sighed. “You never said anything. You just let the news handle it. I’m your best friend, and you just…”

“Do you honestly think I felt like I could tell my best friend about this?” Tony asked.

There was a long silence. “Give me some space,” Rhodey said at last. “I need to process this.”

And he hung up.

“Fuck,” Tony swore out loud. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck —“ He hurled the phone at the chair across the room. It struck the cushion and slipped with a thud onto the floor. He covered his eyes and turned away.


Can you hold onto nobody?

He retrieved his phone and deleted another eighty photos from his camera roll, not even looking at what they were. He didn’t want to know, and he didn’t care. It was his way of undoing the past, as though somehow things could rewind to the way they were if he just butchered his log of events enough.

Several hours after the time during which he should have eaten lunch, there was a clamor rose outside: a snapping of camera shutters, questions being hurled at the red-headed figure that hurried for the door.

— Sir, FRIDAY announced (and Tony thought that today she sounded slightly more disapproving than usual), Miss Potts has arrived.

She arrived in the TV room just a few minutes after FRIDAY’s warning, dressed in one of her suits, wild-eyed and slightly unsteady on her feet.

“Pepper,” Tony began, “what’s going on?”

“Did you know,” Pepper asked distractedly, as though she’d not heard him, “that there’s this thing called schadenfreude? Apparently, it’s German for that feeling you get when you look at someone who’s suffering and you think, oh, thank God that at least it’s not me. I bring this up,” she continued, dropping her purse on the coffee table with a clunk, “because I keep thinking about your poor PR person and what kind of hell they must be living in right now, and all I’ve really got to say is, at least it’s not me.”

“Have you been drinking?” asked Tony. She wasn’t normally this loquacious, and some of her words were slurring together.
“Yes,” she said bluntly, “and I should have done it long ago, honestly, so I could have come here and just gotten it all off my chest sooner without feeling guilty, like somehow I brought you to this point — and you know,” she interrupted herself as she began pacing back and forth, “it’s a really ugly position to be in, when you’re making a sixteen-year-old sign an NDA, and you know you shouldn’t blame him, but some irrational part of you wants to scratch out his eyes because you feel like, deep down, he’s the bit on the side? In fact, the only position I can think of that would be uglier than that would be, you know, fucking him.” She laughed bitterly. “I didn’t want to talk to you about it, but then I got drunk, and there was your fucking face on the television —“

“Pepper, listen to me —“

“No, you listen,” she snapped. “The suits were one thing, the —“ she waved her hands vaguely — “the you-ness where you forget to eat, and that thing where you don’t remember people’s names and the anxiety and insomnia, that was one thing. But I just — I couldn’t hack it anymore. So I go, and then what do you do? You — you —“ But she stopped, staring at him with huge, hurt eyes. Then she seized her purse, rummaged through it, and dropped something metallic onto the coffee table between them.

The silver necklace. The heart facing Tony upside-down, like she’d planned for it to fall that way.

“Take it,” she said.

“Pepper, I told you when you left, you didn’t need to give anything back —“ he protested, but she cut him off.

“This isn’t about that.” She pointed at it with a shaking finger. “When I left, I took that with me, I figured, oh, hey, I have a souvenir, right? I’ve got something I can look when I want to relive the good times, or when it’s two in the morning, and I can’t keep the poker face on anymore…” She paused for breath. “But I can’t keep it. Not now.”

“Pepp —“

“Because every time I look at it, I have to be reminded that you went after a child. And you know,” she continued, her voice beginning to thicken for the first time since she’d arrived, “I don’t want to think that that was the man I knew — that Steve knew — much less that I actually slept in the same bed with you for several years — so just take it. Throw it in the river, flush it down the toilet, or save it for when you want to feel sorry for yourself, but just take it so I don’t have to get nauseous every time I open my goddamned jewelry box.”

She stopped for breath, and Tony had to look away from her, and also from the necklace that winked and mocked him where it lay on the glass of the coffee table.

“I don’t know what you think this has been like for me,” he began, “but I assure you I didn’t make this decision lightly, okay? You think I don’t go to sleep at night wondering just who or what I’ve turned into?”

“But you do it anyway,” she said.

Silence. She coughed and sank into the nearest armchair. It was the one she’d frequented back in the old days, and it hurt to think that she was only sitting there in the capacity of a guest, that she wouldn’t be getting up and roaming about the place, telling him not to call the bots names, managing everything that was too much for him to wrap his brain around.

“You know,” she said at last, softly, “I cried for a week after I left. I’d just made the stupidest
decision of my life, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to get another one like you again.” She dragged a
hand through her messy hair. “And now that we’ve been separated for a couple months, I know that,
if such a thing as ‘the one’ — “ she made air quotes around the words with one scornful hand —
“exists, then you were it. But literally nobody has told me what I’m supposed to do when thinking
about the ‘the one’ for any length of time makes me physically ill.”

She stood and reached for her purse. “I can almost understand it,” she added. “Why you did it.”

Tony couldn’t look at her.

“You’ve both got the same kind of insanity. You don’t just go out there and risk your necks, you
fucking love it.” She sighed. “Many happy returns to you both.” Her tone was acidic, and Tony
knew he deserved every burn it left in him.

“It should never have happened,” he croaked as she headed for the door. “Not just the thing with
Peter, I mean you and I separating. You and I to begin with. This whole — thing.” He gestured
around at the walls, and she looked back at him. “If I had stayed the brainless rich boy I was, do you
think I would be happier today?”

She just looked at him, her mouth contorting as though she were trying to suppress a sob.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice breaking. “I don’t know, Tony. And the fact that I can’t
immediately say no scares me.”

Her heels clicked away, but he wasn’t given time to go after her or even attack his camera roll again
because FRIDAY spoke once more.

— Sir, there’s been a security breach on the third floor. Something’s come through the window.

He knew before he got there. Sure enough, there was Peter in his suit straightening up in the middle
of his bedroom. The balcony doors were open, he was panting, and for a moment, Tony was
overcome by how much he had missed the sight of him.

Then Peter caught Tony’s eye, and Tony saw the anger there.

“Get ready?” He crossed his arms, his face thunderous. “Was that all you could fucking come up
with?”

“Fuck,” Tony muttered. “Peter, what are you doing here? Do you realize how risky this is — “

“Fuck risk, were you thinking about risk when you showed up at my apartment to fuck me — “

“Um, the entire time, actually.” Tony crossed the bedroom to close the balcony doors.

“Or how about when you decided to let Hammer leak everything, were you thinking about risk
then?”

He groaned, leaned his head briefly against the doors. “He was a criminal, Peter, what was I
supposed to do, let him get away with funding Toomes’s projects?!” Couldn’t he just understand that
he’d needed to feel right again, like he had some semblance of a moral compass…?

“You could have asked me!” Peter shouted, and Tony realized that he was on verge of tears. He
looked back at him. “You could have asked me, ‘Hey, Peter, do you want to be the face of rape
victims everywhere for the next decade?’ and the answer would be fuck no.” His voice broke hard.
“What were you thinking, and why didn’t you ask me?”

“I —“

“And now I can’t go anywhere without getting recognized and pointed at, and the people at school look at me like I’ve sprouted another head, and the teachers treat me like I’m made of fucking glass because you apparently raped me for months on end!”

His voice had risen to a shriek. Tony darted forward and put his hands on his shoulders, shushing him.

“What if they arrest you?” Peter added. “I don’t want —“

“That can’t happen unless you expressly tell them that I touched you.”

“But they’re saying…” He pressed his hands to his temples. “They’re saying you hurt me, but —“

“Peter, can you listen —“

“But that’s not what happened —“

“Um, not from a legal standpoint —“

“Maybe I’m being an emotional teenager right now, but I don’t care — I’m not gonna let you take the fall for something I made you do!”

“You didn’t make me do anything! I chose this, and I sure as hell deserve whatever I get!”

“But it’s my fault!” Peter cried.

“If you want to fix this,” Tony said, “you need to stop saying that because it makes you sound a hell of a lot like a victim.”

Peter glared at him. “You don’t get to say that.”

“Do you realize how guilty I feel right now?” Tony asked. “How guilty I’ve been feeling since we started this?!?”

“But —“

“No, this is where you listen!” Tony snapped. “The adult is talking!”

“The adult is talking?!” Peter’s eyes lit up in fury. “Oh no. Don’t you dare. You lost the right to play that card the minute you put it in me —!”

“Whatever you thought you felt,” Tony continued over him, “according to law, every time I laid a hand on you, that was an assault. Every time we fucked on that bed —“ he pointed — “that was rape —“

“Okay, no. No.” Peter was shaking, voice cracking. “That? That was not rape. That was not assault — I’m not stupid, I know the fucking difference, okay?”

“Peter —“

“You wanna know what assault is? Assault is some rich asshole that you invited over feeling me up
against a kitchen island —“

“Wait —”

“You wanna know about rape? Rape’s some kid pulling your pants off when you’re too fucking little to know what’s going on and too freaked out to run away!”

“Hold on, what?”

“So I know what I’m fucking talking about, okay? I know when I want something. And I know when I don’t. And don’t you dare tell me otherwise because I am the only person who gets to decide that!”

Silence fell like a stone. Tony stared at him. Peter was breathing hard, not quite meeting his eyes. He turned away, covered his face. “I shouldn’t have said that,” he said, speaking far more quietly.

“Peter… what…?”

“Some kid when I was eleven,” he muttered shortly. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“The — the other thing you said —“

“Forget it.”

“But —“

“I said forget it.”

Then, with a choked sob, Peter started to cry.

“Kid,” Tony said wearily, “don’t do that, please —“

“You could have told me!” he sobbed. “You could have said a little more than get ready.”

“I know. I know, I’m sorry. I was afraid you would talk me out of it. And I know that’s a bullshit excuse.”

“I didn’t know what you meant,” he said softly. “I was so confused, and then my name was literally all over the TV, and…”

Tony stared at him, trying to reconcile everything he’d just heard, about Hammer, about Peter’s past. Suddenly, the odd things that Tony had been unable to understand began to make sense: Peter’s insistence on face-to-face sex, his behavior after Hammer had left that night. Perhaps even his low mood right before Ross had caught them had been more than just sub-drop. And, oh God, right before that, when Peter had burst into tears… had the roughness and the restraints reminded him of something else? Every encounter they’d had now took on another light. On some sick level, he’d been able to rationalize it as mutual attraction, but if Peter had been a victim from the start, long since before Tony had ever met him… it was all so different now…

“Oh God,” he muttered, “all this time…”

“All this time, what?” Peter snapped. “What? I haven’t been the little angel you thought I was?”

“No, of course not, I just… I didn’t know that you — that you’d been — oh God.”
Peter looked back at him. Something dangerous and fiery had appeared in his eyes, subdued only slightly by the tears that were still falling.

He seized the front of Tony’s henley and kissed him, hard and reckless. Tony pulled back, and Peter frowned.

“What?” he snapped. “You were okay with it, and then you find out that I’ve been hurt before, and now you get cold feet?”

“Peter —” he said helplessly.

“Just shut up,” Peter whispered and kissed him again, wet and sloppy, his hands pulling on his hair. “Just — shut — up.”

Tony landed hard against the wall, the back of his head throbbing in pain.

“Hang on —” he said, but Peter was kissing him again, growling as he wrestled him out of his shirt. Pausing only to hit the button on his suit, he fumbled with the zipper of Tony’s trousers. Tony seized him by a handful of hair and kissed him again, teeth scraping lip and tongue as he kicked off his jeans and his boxers at once. Peter, his own boxers around his knees, bit down on Tony’s earlobe. Tony hissed.

“Christ, I’ve missed you —”

Peter didn’t reply, just shoved his boxers the rest of the way down and reached a hand to the nightstand beside them, tugging furiously on the knob of the drawer until, frustrated, he pulled it free of the stand to land with a clatter on the carpet. He snatched up the familiar bottle of lube, flicked it open with a thumb, and reached under himself with no interest in finesse as he kissed Tony again: and yet not a kiss, there was too much teeth and tears and anger to call it that. Tony dragged his teeth down the side of his neck, leaving raw pink lines over his skin, his cock hard against Peter’s thigh, and Peter was pushing him to the bed, throwing him onto his back — Tony felt something in the bed give way, like something had snapped — before climbing over him, legs on either side of his waist and hands on either side of his head.

He sank down on him with bared teeth and an ow that couldn’t be disguised. Tony groaned and flexed upward as Peter moved one hand to his shoulder, nails digging in hard enough to break the skin.

A few thrusts left them both breathing raggedly, the pace hard, fast, and merciless on them both. Tony seized him by his hips with a growl and tried to roll them over, but Peter grabbed the headboard and stopped him, gritting his teeth together, his eyes screwed shut.

He whimpered, and something about the angry, broken sound made Tony come to his senses.

“Peter —” he said, trying to think through the waves of heat and friction as Peter fucked himself on him — “Baby —” he reached up for him, but Peter twisted away — “Slow down, you’re hurting yourself — baby —”

He tried to sit up, and Peter shoved him back down with unnatural force.

“Baby—“

“Don’t fucking call me that!”

He lashed out at him as though he might strike him, and Tony seized his arms, nails digging into the
skin, Peter fighting it through every thrust, as they rocked back and forth, back and forth, tense and joyless.

Abruptly, Peter went limp, trembling, his head turned away.

He was crying again.

All at once, the residual anger left him. Tony let go of his arms, sat up as he pulled free, and wrapped his arms around him. He was quivering with each sob.

He cupped his face. “Hey, hey…” Peter wouldn’t meet his eyes, even when he tilted his chin up. “Come on,” he said gently, not wanting to trigger another argument. He laid his other hand on his neck. “Let’s do this right, okay?”

Very slowly, tears dripping off his jaw, his eyes closed, Peter nodded.

It took a good fifteen minutes to calm Peter down, and when they lay hands on each other again, it was cautious and careful again, each afraid of hurting the other. Kisses that were as gentle as they were deep, slow movements of hips, Peter’s fingers wrapped around Tony’s. Tony ran his free hand through Peter’s hair, licked his lower lip.

“I’ve got you… I’ve got you…”

Peter didn’t make a sound either time that he came, but he did when Tony did, a little gasp accompanied by a cringe. With a tissue, Tony mopped up the mess first from Peter’s stomach, then from the sheets, where semen was already sliding out of him. They hadn’t used a condom, and the dim realization of all the implications that came with that made Tony nauseous.

He threw out the tissues and sat back down beside Peter. He hadn’t moved at all, still lying there with his legs apart, bent, looking shell-shocked. Tony caught himself wondering about the past incidents that Peter had let slip and shut the thoughts down immediately.

Neither of them spoke, but after a moment, Peter curled in toward him, and Tony stroked his hair. He looked tragically small where he was curled up at the center of the massive bed. Far too small to have to deal with all this.

The bedroom was well and truly trashed: the nightstand a mess, the contents of the drawer spilled across the carpet. The bed didn’t feel right either; Peter had definitely broken something when he’d thrown Tony onto it. It was at times like these that Tony remembered Peter was actually stronger than he was. There were bruises all over his arms and his hands, even on his hips from where Peter’s thighs had rested.

Peter had fallen asleep, but it was with a frown, his hair in his eyes.

He stroked the curls out of his face, let his fingers linger there for a few moments.

*This can’t go on,* he thought. *But I won’t stop it, and you won’t stop it. And so we spiral down, down, down…*

He wanted a drink. Carefully, so he wouldn’t wake him, he stood and laid the duvet over him to give him some modesty, bent down and kissed his temple, then crept quietly downstairs.
He was in the kitchen and pouring himself a scotch when he heard the noise up above. He was quick, but Peter was quicker, and by the time he reached the bedroom again, the bed was deserted, the backpack and suit picked up from the floor, and the doors to the balcony were open again, looking out on a gray city with no sign of the boy who had been in his arms just a few minutes before.

Chapter End Notes

Next update on Monday!
Catharsis

Chapter Summary

How was it possible to feel better and worse simultaneously?

Chapter Notes

Warning for ATTEMPTED sexual assault and some physical violence in the first section. There’s a brief and non-explicit flashback to past CSA.

I won’t lie: this chapter starts in a very dark place, but we end in a better spot than we started.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hello? Hey, May.” Peter ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, yeah, I’m okay.” He sighed. “I promise I’m okay. Listen, I’m going to be out for a few more hours, but I should be back soon. Yeah. I will. Love you, May.”

He ended the call. May was clearly upset, and no doubt he would hear from her when he got home — whenever that would be — but he would worry about that later. For now…

He had never broken into a building before, but he was now officially up to his second in one day. Certainly, somebody must have spotted him from the ground when he’d climbed into Tony’s mansion, but he hadn’t cared about that then.

Now, hindsight was catching up to him, and all he could do was wonder what the hell he had been thinking. First, when he’d spilled the last couple of secrets he’d had — about Hammer, about Skip, the latter of whom he honestly hadn’t thought about in years, up until quite recently — and then when he’d hurled himself at him. His body ached, bad; he was certainly paying for his impulsiveness, but he’d felt so out of control… He’d needed to feel as though he had the reins on something, especially since so much in his life had already been decided without his say. He wouldn’t even be Spider-Man if it weren’t for sheer luck.

He’d wanted to hurt, too, but he’d worry about that particular impulse later.

But for now, he was paying the price. Who knew if Tony would ever want to see him again, especially since he’d ditched him while he’d been out of the room. But another impulse had seized him, and now…

And now it was evening, and he’d been staking out Hammer’s penthouse for the past three hours.

It had been a climb to get up to Hammer’s balcony. He suspected it led into his bedroom, which looked deserted for the moment. But he knew Hammer was home; he’d felt the vibrations of his
footsteps, heard him coughing very distantly. As he’d expected, Hammer had bailed himself out of jail. Peter wasn’t sure that, considering his charges, he was allowed to do that, but with enough money and influence, you could probably do whatever you liked.

Now or never.

Carefully, he eased the balcony’s French doors open and crept inside. It was dark, the bedroom sparsely decorated, to his relief — less things to trip over. Gritting his teeth together, he moved around the dresser and the bed, and opened the door a crack. It led onto a dimly lit hall. To his left was shadows, but to his right, there was a light and Peter could hear sounds that suggested someone was moving around. Praying he wasn’t about to scare a maid or something, he silently crawled up the nearest wall onto the ceiling and made his way like that down the corridor, which he found led to an unexpectedly cozy parlor. He detached his limbs from ceiling until he hung several inches from the light fixture by just a few fingertips. Then he dropped down and rounded the corner.

Hammer had his back to him, was filling a glass from a mini bar in the corner.

He raised his head, cocked it to the side, and Peter felt his heart spasm in his chest. Hammer glanced over his shoulder.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “I wondered if I’d have the pleasure again. To what do I owe this occasion?”

Peter thought about taking off his cowl and then thought, **Better not.**

Hammer turned around to face him entirely. He was drinking bourbon neat. Now he raised it to his lips, sipped it delicately without taking his eyes off him.

“I’m sure you’ve seen the news,” he continued. “So you know that I have nowhere to be. Take your time.”

The parlor was dimly lit, lending an especially dramatic cast to his face, hollowing out his already hollow cheeks and eyes.

Peter stayed silent.

“Well, if you’re not going to talk,” Hammer said at last, “I will.” He sat down in the nearby leather armchair, gestured to the chair nearest to Peter. “Do sit down.” Peter didn’t move. “I hope there aren’t any hard feelings about our last meeting.”

Sarcasm found Peter’s tongue for him. “You mean like when you pinned me against the kitchen island and felt me up? Nah. No hard feelings.”

Hammer frowned as though mildly scandalized.

“I think you’re overstating things a little,” he said. “Tell me. Why are you here, Mr. Parker?” Then his lips twitched. “If it’s vengeance you want, you need to look closer to home. Your name wouldn’t even be on the television if Anthony didn’t have a hero complex.”

“I know, I just saw him.”

“Better informed than I thought. So.” Hammer took another sip of his bourbon and crossed his legs. “Why are we here? If it’s any consolation, I might add, my real issue is with Anthony. You were merely caught in the crossfire. Unless you’re here on Anthony’s behalf.”
“This isn’t about him,” Peter said, trying to sound braver than he felt. “This is about me.”

If Hammer was at all intimidated, he didn’t show it. “Good for you,” he said. “You should never tie yourself too tightly to anyone. So,” he continued. “You leap straight into the lion’s den for revenge?”

“I’m not here for revenge.” His voice shook.

“Really? What are you here for, Mr. Parker? Don’t tell me there’s something Anthony can’t give you.” His voice was acidic with sarcasm. Peter clenched his hand into fists, dug his nails into his palms to bring himself back to the ground.

“I want you to take it back,” he said.

His thin lips twitched. “Take back what? I’d have thought you understood how the internet works. That tape is out there. It’s circulating, and it won’t go away.”

“Then leak something else,” he said. “Prove it didn’t happen.”

“Discredit it, you mean?” He cocked an eyebrow. “That would be difficult, were I able or willing to do it at all.”

“You could start a rumor that it’s a hoax,” Peter said desperately. “You could convince people it’s not real. You could do something.” His voice broke hard on the last word.

“Why should I?” His tone was blasé, disinterested. He took another sip of his drink.

Peter curled his hands into fists. “I’ll make you do it?” he said and hated how uncertain of himself he sounded.

But Hammer just shook his head. “Did Anthony tell you about my offer?” he asked.

Peter blinked behind his mask, taken aback. “What offer?” he asked in confusion.

Hammer’s bourbon clunked onto the mahogany coffee table. “Don’t play brainless with me,” he said, leaning forward. “It doesn’t suit you.”

He shook his head slightly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

With a small groan, Hammer rose from the armchair and stepped toward him.

“What’s going… on…” Peter’s voice shrunk into a whisper on the final word as he stepped back and his shoulders brushed the wall. No place left to back up.

Fuck.

Hammer was two feet away from him, watching him with a curious sort of look in his eye, head tilted to one side.

“I might consider your request,” he said. “I just need incentive.”

Silence, and then Peter understood.

“If you come near me,” he said shakily, “you’ll regret it. ‘Cause I’ll break every bone in your hand.”

It felt good to say that, as though the words had been lining themselves up in his mouth for years, and he’d finally set them free. But even so, he’d sounded braver than he’d felt, and he already knew
that he hadn’t sounded very brave. He shrank back and swallowed as his heart began to pound, his eyes stinging.

Hammer stepped squarely in front of him. A soft, frightened sound escaped Peter involuntarily as he pressed himself as far back against the wall as possible. *Stay small,* he thought. *Just stay small, don’t make a sound, he’ll leave you when he’s done, just stay small…*

Hammer brushed two delicate fingers down his throat, and the first tears slipped down Peter’s cheek, the fabric of the mask absorbing them. He shivered, looked away from Hammer. *Just stay small…*

Fingers hooked around the edge of the cowl, and suddenly, he was looking at Hammer without the barrier of the mask to preserve him. Hammer dropped the mask on the carpet, looked back at him, and Peter immediately turned his face away, cheek against the wall, not wanting the eye contact.

“Oh, dear boy,” Hammer murmured in a tone that might have been interpreted as pity in another man. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you?” A fingertip brushed along one wet tear mark on his cheek. Peter cringed and sniffed wetly, his vision blurring. “You’re going to do exactly as I say,” Hammer continued in the same tone — and it was almost gentle, almost understanding — “and then I’ll see about doing a little damage control. After that, we can go about our lives, can’t we?” When Peter didn’t reply — he was suddenly back in a shitty apartment several blocks from his own, frozen and terrified with his pants around his ankles — Hammer tilted his chin up with a finger.

“I’ve just made you a very handsome offer,” he murmured. “Now, what do you say?”

The first sob broke through, loud and childish, and what little had remained of his earlier confidence vanished.

“What do you say?” Hammer repeated in a more severe tone. He was now gripping Peter’s chin in his hand, forcing him to meet his eyes.

He squeezed his eyes shut, hot tears leaking over his cheeks. “Thank you.” His voice was soft, just on the edge of hearing. Hammer’s lips twitched in what might have been the hint of a smile.

Perhaps he could find a way to power through, and then all of this would go away, and Tony would be safe, and people wouldn’t look at him the way they had been… Eyes on the goal. He needed to focus on the goal. This was just a few minutes of bad for a greater good.

“You’re welcome,” Hammer said. “This is what you’re going to do,” he continued. “You’ll come with me to the bedroom. You’ll take off that ridiculous costume. You’ll lie down. And that’s all. You’ll let me take care of the rest.”

Peter’s vision blurred as his gorge rose, the fabric of the suit suddenly boiling hot as his head pounded.

“Do it, and I’ll make all this disappear. That’s my offer.” Hammer was close enough that if Peter moved forward at all, he would brush against him. His breath, smoky-sweet with bourbon, was warm against his face. “I won’t extend it again.”

*Just stay small and power through. Thisisfinethisisfinethisisfine…*

He thought about the twenty good minutes he’d spent with Tony several hours before. What had come before was bad enough; he didn’t want to punctuate the good memories with this, no matter what he might get in return… and beyond that, he already knew what it was like to be touched by Hammer; he didn’t want a repeat of the experience.
Perhaps he was damning them both, but, God help him, some things just weren’t worth the trauma.

“No,” he said at last. Tears slipped off his jaw. “I can’t. I won’t.”

Hammer didn’t move, still holding his jaw in his hand, and Peter’s body suddenly broke out in gooseflesh.

“I want to go now.” he whispered. “I want to go home?”

“Patience is a virtue,” said Hammer. “I suggest that you learn it.”

“I don’t give a fuck about patience or your offer,” Peter snarled, voice breaking. “I’m not doing it!”

Still, Hammer didn’t let go of his jaw. “Does anyone know you’re here?” he asked.

His body went cold.

Oh God, no, he thought. Nononono, not again, not again…

His voice was barely above a whisper. “No.”

“The more fool you,” Hammer said, and he hooked his fingers under the neck of his suit.

With a shriek of panic, Peter seized his arm in both hands and shoved with all his might to the right. Hammer stumbled and righted himself, twisted around to grab him, but Peter ducked under his arm and slammed his fist into his stomach. Gasping, Hammer doubled over, and Peter kicked his shins. Hammer seized the arm of the nearest chair and hauled himself up, lashed out at him, but Peter lunged backward, and his fingers closed around the handle of an expensive-looking vase. He flung it at Hammer. It smashed against his shoulder, and he went down with a yell.

“What was that?” Peter snapped at the groaning figure on the carpet. “Ming? Ouch.”

Then Hammer’s hand wrapped around his ankle. The floor slipped from beneath him as Peter toppled, hard. Shrieking, vision blurring with panic, he seized the far edge of the coffee table and shook his leg furiously, trying to dislodge him.

“Let go — let go of me — let —!”

He grabbed the glass of bourbon from the table with his free hand and threw it in Hammer’s face. Hammer flinched, his grip going slack, and Peter kicked at him for good measure, then let go of the coffee table to deal him a blow across the jaw that knocked his head to the side.

“I told you,” he panted. “You’d regret it.”

Hammer was curled up in a heap, clutching his bleeding face in one hand. The scent of blood and bourbon hung in the air, spicy and sweet.

“Do you honestly think,” he began thickly, indistinctly, “that this will solve anything?”

“Shut up,” Peter whispered. He was leaning against the coffee table, for the moment unable to stand. He was shaking so badly, he felt as though he had chills.

“Anthony is still defamed, and everyone still knows your secret. What can you accomplish?”

“I said, shut up.” He spoke louder this time.
“And ultimately,” Hammer continued as though he’d not heard him, “what will you ever amount to? People will see that suit, and they’ll think, Oh, there he is. There’s that little boy who spread his legs for Iron Man.”

Peter leaped on him with a growl and struck him again. His head snapped to the side, but he didn’t stop. He was hitting blindly, rage blurring his vision. It was only when he realized that Hammer was going limp beneath him and that his face was now a mass of bloodied flesh that he stopped, fist already raised for the next one.

Hammer drew in a wet breath, and Peter scrambled backward, nearly knocking over the coffee table. He was crumpled up, wheezing. Peter glanced down at his hands and realized that his gloves were covered in blood.

He cursed out loud and pushed himself to his feet, snatching up his cowl and immediately dancing out of Hammer’s reach — shards of porcelain crunched under his feet — but Hammer wasn’t even looking at him. Only the faint rising and falling of his chest signaled that he was still alive.

Peter fled.

A block from the penthouse, he stopped in an alleyway, ripped off his cowl, and vomited into the gutter, his arms wrapped around himself to rid himself of the feeling of hands wandering all over his body.

_I’m on my own_, he thought once the worst of the heaves had subsided. _I’ll have to find a way._

Within ten minutes, he was back in his room and stripping off his suit as quickly as he could. It was nearly ten.

He balled up the suit and threw it into his closet, tossing the cowl after it, and then slammed the door closed. With a little whimper, he landed hard on his knees on the carpet and covered his eyes with his hands to block out the image of Hammer’s battered face, the feeling of Hammer’s fingers on his cheek. There was a large, nasty-looking bruise stretching along his ribs and his side from where he’d landed on the coffee table. That’d be good within a day or two, at least.

His stomach growled, and he remembered with a jolt that he hadn’t eaten since lunch. That had been hours and hours ago. But the thought of picking himself up off the floor, let alone getting out to the kitchen, was too overwhelming to be entertained. A thousand memories flashed through his mind — he and Tony making breakfast after the night he’d stayed over; Homecoming, and Michelle telling him to be careful; Hammer’s finger laid against his lips, his other hand drifting down his stomach as he murmured something about Anthony’s little whore; Tony holding him earlier that evening, stroking his hair; May crying as she signed the NDA; and a voice from years ago that called him Einstein and told him some sob story about his parents’ divorce, like that would make up for everything that Peter was about to do, everything that Peter would ultimately block out.

Behind him, his bedroom door creaked open.

“Peter?”

May. He couldn’t reply — his throat was too tight to speak — but he felt her sit down behind him and pull him close, rocking him back and forth as if he were so much younger than sixteen.
“What happened?” she asked eventually. He could feel her looking at the bruise.

“A lot,” he managed. “I…” He pressed his lips together. “Please don’t make me talk about it.”

Hammer’s fingertip trailing down his cheek. His bloodied face. His bloodied hands. At some point, self-defense had turned into revenge. Maybe Hammer had been right, and that was what he’d really been seeking.

How was it possible to feel better and worse simultaneously?

“How was it possible to feel better and worse simultaneously?”

“Look at me,” May said. He looked. Behind her glasses, her eyes were grave, concerned. She held his chin in her palm. “Have you been hurt?” she asked.

He shook his head, but May frowned. “I want a verbal answer,” she said.

“No,” he said. “No one hurt me.”

“Did you go to him?” May asked it casually, the way a doctor might casually ask a patient about drug use.

He nodded, not wanting to lie to her anymore. May pressed her lips together.

“I want you to have your privacy,” she said slowly. “And I don’t want to get up in your business, but…”

“I know,” Peter said softly. He sighed, looked away. “It happened again.”

May seemed to age several years, and he wondered if it was because she could somehow sense that it had been less out of desire (although, sure, he’d been horny as hell) and more out of a need for pain. Pain could make him focus. Pain was what had made him go to Hammer.

“For what it’s worth,” he continued unsteadily, “I don’t think it’s going to happen again.”

His lower lip quivered — Tony holding him, calling him baby, sweet thing — and suddenly he buried his head in her shoulder. She put her arms around him.

“Oh God. Okay. It’s okay…” She was patting his back, shushing him softly. “It’s going to be okay.” Her voice sounded hollow, like her heart wasn’t in it. He couldn’t blame her.

“What’s gonna happen now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she told him. “But we’re going to be fine regardless, okay? We’re going to get through it.”

“I’ve been wondering lately,” he said into her shoulder. “About what Ben would think if he were still around. If he saw all this.”

“Oh, honey. Me too.” She stroked his hair, sniffed.

Peter laughed, somewhere between helpless and hysterical. “I mean,” he said, “if he literally wanted to castrate Skip…” He trailed off.

May was looking at him, her pity clear, and Peter remembered that trauma was processed differently in different people, that not everyone could make jokes about it. He didn’t understand how he could do it, himself.
He was still laughing, through his helplessness and fear. Perhaps it was the only thing he could do.

She pulled him close again.

Neither of them slept that night. Still running on a cocktail of panic, adrenaline, and heartbreak, Peter did the homework he’d neglected, and May made them a late dinner, which he ultimately couldn’t keep down.

_I should have gone through with it_, he thought as May helped him up from the bathroom floor. _I should have done it and then gone straight to the police. I could have landed him in all the hot water possible… But no. I lose my nerve and freak out like a fucking kid…_

Then he thought about everything Hammer had said, the instructions he’d given him, and he thought that perhaps he shouldn’t be so hard on himself.

When five-thirty the next morning rolled around, Peter rose from the sofa, where he’d been watching _Moana_ (action movies were a no-go for now) and made for his bedroom.

May stirred where she’d been dozing in the recliner. “You’re going to try going to school?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think there’s something I need to do.”

On his way to school, he read on his phone that Justin Hammer had been discovered unconscious on the floor of his penthouse early that morning, beaten to within an inch of his life. He'd been hospitalized, reports said. There was no word as to his current condition.

Peter gulped and quickly closed the article.

As he’d expected, the situation at school had not improved. Students still pointed, still whispered, and Ned and Michelle flanked him like body guards, glaring at anyone who so much as looked in his direction. He appreciated it, but sometimes it seemed that that only drew further attention to them.

“Hey, I gotta split,” he said as they escorted him inside.

“What’s going on?” asked Ned. He narrowed his eyes — he had been watching Peter with even more concern than usual that morning after he’d unthinkingly put his hand on his shoulder, and Peter had flinched away from him.

“Nothing,” Peter said. “There’s just something I need to do.”

He felt their eyes on him all the way across the commons to the security office, where Officer Gordon was at the front desk.

“Peter,” he said when he recognized him. “What can I do for you?”

He gulped. “I need to talk to someone.”
“I’m very glad that you decided to get in touch with us again,” said Gordon. They were seated across from each other in the back room, Gordon again wielding his notepad and pen. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Peter cleared his throat and wondered if he should hem and haw a little, milk it. Then he figured it would be better to be direct and get it over with.

“The stuff they’re saying on TV?” he began uncertainly. “It’s not true.”

Gordon looked up from his notepad, lifting an eyebrow. “What do you mean by that, son?” he asked.

“It wasn’t Mr. Stark,” he said. This time, Gordon did a better job of maintaining his poker face. “It — I mean,” he clarified, “it happened during my internship, but it wasn’t — it wasn’t him.” He cleared his throat, braced his hand against the table to hide how badly he was shaking. “It was Mr. Hammer.”

Gordon put down his pad. “Justin Hammer was the one who assaulted you?”

He nodded, gulped. “That’s right.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?” he asked.

He shifted uncomfortably. “He told me he’d hurt my family if I said anything…”

There was a horrified silence, and Peter felt himself blushing hard. “Okay,” Gordon said at last. “Now, I know this is going to be difficult, but I’m going to need you to describe exactly what happened.”

He nodded again, shakily, and drew in a breath through his nose. Let it out.

“He came over for dinner one evening,” he began. “It might have been around the first? But he came over, and — “ he remembered something he’d read somewhere once, that the best lies had grains of truth to them — “and I was already sort of uncomfortable because he kept watching me? Like, I’d look up, and he’d be — he’d be looking at me.

“So, after dinner, he gets me alone —“

Gordon held up his pen. “Sorry, where was this, son? What room?”

Grains of truth, Peter. grains of truth. “The kitchen. I was putting away the dishes, and he kind of, you know, started coming onto me? Like, he felt me up a little? Mr. Stark wasn’t there.” He looked down at the table. “So I knocked over some glasses, and he came in to see what the noise was…”

“Did you tell him what happened?”

Peter shook his head. “Didn’t get a chance. And after it really happened, I was too scared… Anyway, he and Mr. Stark went somewhere else to talk, and I went to bed. I was staying the night anyway ‘cause it was running so late.” He gulped. “He came in like fifteen minutes later? Mr. Hammer. Like, he didn’t knock or anything, he just opened the door and… and he told me to be quiet.”

“Afterward, what did you do?”
Peter shook his head. “I didn’t really do anything?” he said uncertainly. “I think I took a shower, and then I went back to bed.” Feeling that last statement sounded odd, he added, “I just wanted to forget the whole thing.” Several tears slipped down his cheeks with no effort on his part.

The officer nodded reassuringly. “And you didn’t talk to Mr. Stark at all?”

Peter shook his head again.

Gordon frowned. “I don’t know if you’ve heard the tape, Peter,” he began, “but the conversation makes some serious implications regarding your relationship with Tony Stark.”

“I know.” He nodded. “I heard it. I….” This was the shakiest part of the story, the part he would have to work hardest to sell. “I don’t know what that’s about. All I know is that Hammer was the only one who ever went near me like — like that.” It was true, wasn’t it?

Gordon nodded, frowning down at his notepad. “And you’re certain that nothing ever happened between you and Mr. Stark that made you at all uncomfortable?”

“No,” he said simply. “Never.”

And that was true, too.

“Okay,” Gordon said. “Now, Peter, I know this is difficult, but I’m going to have to ask you to get into some specifics. Can you do that?”

Peter looked down at his hands.

“Yeah, that’s okay,” he heard himself say. “I can do that.”

Chapter End Notes

The last two chapters will be posted together this Thursday :’)}
He had narrowly escaped ruination, he wanted Peter back with him again, and somehow everything was fine.

"you take a lover
for granted, you take
a lover who looks at you
like maybe you are magic."

Marty McConnell, *Frida Kahlo to Marty McConnell*

It was a lazy late afternoon, the setting sun glaring red and gold through the window of Peter’s bedroom, and Peter himself was heavy and pliant in Tony’s arms.

“Baby —“

“Tony...”

One arm wrapped around a slender waist, one hand pulling one of his legs wider. Peter’s hands were heavy on Tony’s shoulders, his knees on either side of his thighs, arching his back and tilting his head back to expose the long line of his throat, the veins there, and when Tony set his lips against them, he heard Peter whimper.

He pushed Tony back onto the pillows — the mattress groaned in complaint — and sank down on him again, bending his face close to Tony’s as he brushed the hair back from his own forehead and kissed him.

Tony thrust upward, and Peter began his usual sex-stupid babble, Tony’s name mixing alongside obscenities and appeals to divinity. He seized a handful of Peter’s hair and pulled him down for another kiss, pressed the side of his face against Peter’s, listened to his little moans that almost sounded like *ow, ow, ow...*

With a little hitch in his breath as Peter quickened their pace, he wrapped his arms around him and grinned when Peter kissed him again through the pants, the little noises of need —

Tony woke with a start to the ice blue stare of his alarm clock — 3:51 AM — and the throbbing indignity of a hard-on that showed no signs of flagging.

With one exhausted fist, he weakly punched his pillow in frustration at waking up. When he dreamed of him (as he did more often than he’d care to admit), it was always that first evening he
returned to, to the sordid intimacy they’d found there on his bed. Their point of no return. God help him, he wanted to go back to that, to when the only people who knew had been the two of them. It had just been them and the squeaking springs of Peter’s twin bed, a constant, rhythmic undertone to the little sobs in Tony’s ear.

When he closed his eyes, he could get that back.

Dream Tony had been happy with Dream Peter, and now the real Tony was trying to hold onto some of that blurry feeling, but it was like trying to hold water in his hands; it kept slipping through his fingers. It was hard to tell if he even deserved that kind of happiness. Certainly with the way he’d left things several evenings ago, he didn’t. It was a wonder he wasn’t having nightmares about everything that had happened — nightmares would have been more fitting, when Peter had lashed out at him, and Tony had heard the secrets that had risen out of him before they could be stopped, had heard about Hammer and what had happened when Peter was eleven… and in spite of that, he’d weakened the minute Peter laid his hands on him and let himself become yet another man to use him.

He should be having nightmares. Not… not this.

He rolled onto his stomach and tried to will the thoughts away, but Peter kept dancing in his mind’s eye like he wanted John the Baptist’s head, and what could he do but grit his teeth, slip his hand into his boxer briefs, and pretend that everything was fine.

Everything was fine. Or it should have been.

Because however shaky the story, however undeserving he was, he was in the clear.

Ross had called him two days before.

“It’s not on the news yet,” he’d said. “But it will be by tomorrow.”

“What?”

“According to a few friends of mine, Mr. Parker has accused Justin Hammer of rape in the first degree. Claims no knowledge of anything you said on that tape. You’re safe, for now.” There was a shocked pause. “He’s a smart kid. Went after the one person who couldn’t offer much of a defense anyway, particularly what with everything he says on the tape. And that’s assuming he even makes it to the trial.”

Tony had read about that, too — no way to avoid that bit of news. The media had been afire with the revelation that Justin Hammer had been discovered beaten to a pulp in his own penthouse, barely breathing. Whatever the story was, Hammer wasn’t in a position to say. Tony had his own, private theory and had spent a long couple of hours debating whether or not he should text Peter to make sure he was all right. In the end, he’d figured it would only make a bad situation worse.

Sliding into him again, the little squeak of surprise when he got too deep at first, only for him to beg Tony to do it again just a few moments later…

He came with a little exhale into his pillow.

He had narrowly escaped ruination, he wanted Peter back with him again, and somehow everything was fine. Everything was fine. They were a little lonelier, a little more scarred, but nobody would be going to prison.

When he’d cleaned up and thrown out the tissues, he reached for his phone. Nothing. Not even something from Peter himself.
The dream had left him shaken and unable to sleep. In the end, he dressed and went downstairs to make himself a coffee — he wasn’t supposed to be drinking it, exacerbating the already exacerbated anxiety and all that — but what the hell, he needed a lift somehow.

“Hey, FRIDAY? Show me the news, will you?”

A screen projection appeared in the air. CNN.

“… reports that Justin Hammer, the businessman currently under investigation for funding the Toomes scheme, is still in critical condition, and experts say that he may not last the next twenty-four hours. There is no word yet from the authorities regarding the identity of his assailant. Others in the building that night reported sounds of a disturbance during the time of the —“ Tony cut the feed off and drank half his coffee in one go. Then he took out his phone.

Are you okay? he texted Peter. Tell me what you need

It felt a little too sexual, but he sent it anyway. It was four-fifteen in the morning; he’d get it when he woke up for school.

But he barely had to wait for a reply before —

Ping.

I did what i needed to do

And i’ll let you know

About what happened last time, he immediately texted back.

There’s a lot you don’t know

I don’t want to talk about it

But Tony kept typing.

Ross had me handling Hammer on my own. I did what I could but it blew up in my face

You could have told me, Peter replied.

I know. I’m sorry

There’s still more to it

I dont want to talk about it

Tony sighed and looked up at the ceiling, closed his eyes. He wanted to explain the situation with Hammer in full, including what Hammer had asked of him, but the last thing he wanted to do was force Peter to listen to it.

Another ping told him that Peter had texted him again.

I’m so sorry about what I did

I was just so angry at you

I think I wanted to hurt both of us
And after another beat —

I miss you

The sky outside was beginning to lighten. It looked like it would be a rainy day, one to stay inside and not see anyone. Over the last two days, most of the press that had been flocked around the mansion had disbanded until now the entire space around the building was deserted.

Can you come by? he typed. We need to talk this through

Definitely, came the reply.

There was no photo to accompany his contact, and the messages felt weird, anonymous as though they were just flying out of the ether.

He didn’t respond to Peter’s message, and Peter didn’t text him again.

Later that morning, he discovered that Stark Industries had released another statement, this one expressing their sympathy for the Parker family and their disapproval of Justin Hammer’s behavior — or something equally vague and milquetoast. Tony hadn’t even seen a draft of it, and he assumed that Ross had again pulled some strings. In his call two days before, Ross had mentioned the possibility of doing a press conference. “They need to see you,” he’d said. “You can’t afford to be a recluse right now.” No doubt Ross would again be scripting him.

Tony wondered if, several months ago, he would have chosen to sign the Accords if he’d known that it would ultimately render him Ross’s bitch. He felt like a puppet.

No less than you deserve, he murmured to himself. You need handling.

Thanks to reminders courtesy of FRIDAY — whose code he was in the process of rewriting so she’d be more capable of independent action and less likely to be obedient to a fault — he remembered to eat lunch, even if lunch turned out to be, A of all, a few bites of a cheese sandwich that he had no appetite for, and B of all, several hours late.

It was after he’d thrown out the rest of it that his phone rang. He snatched it up without looking at the ID.

“Hello?” It was Ross, or it was Peter. They were the only people who talked to him anymore.

But it wasn’t either of them.

“Tony,” he began, and Tony felt his insides clench. “I saw what the headlines were saying.”

He knew he was supposed to say something, but his voice had stuck in his throat. He mouthed his name.

“I…” he trailed off briefly and then rallied. “I’m not going to ask if it’s true or not. I don’t want to believe it. I want to believe there’s some explanation.”

Tony finally made his voice work. “Did you listen to the tape?” he croaked.

“Yes —“
“Then you know that there’s a slim chance of there being an explanation.”

“The news says it was Justin Hammer,” Steve Rogers said. There was a pause, and that seemed to say everything. “I know that we didn’t part on the best terms.”

Tony snorted bitterly. “That’s the best you’ve got?”

“I don’t blame you for being angry,” Steve said. “But, Tony, whatever you think of me now — I do care about you. And I know that the man I knew back in New York isn’t the man they’re showing in the news.”

Tony’s chest felt hollow; he sank down onto the floor.

He wasn’t a fool. He knew Steve was a better man than he could hope to be — which didn’t stop him from resenting him at all, not when he’d had that little fact impressed on him since he was nine, maybe even younger — but Christ, why did he have to be the one to give Tony the benefit of the doubt? As if there were ever a chance that what was in that tape could be misinterpreted, as if anyone would be fooled by Peter saying he didn’t know what the tape was about…

“What’s it like over there?” he asked after the silence had stretched into several minutes, and the sound of him breathing over the line had grown unbearable. He sounded so close, like Tony could reach out to his left and touch him, pull him against himself…

“Over where?”

“Nowhere. Wherever. Where you disappeared to.”

Steve groaned the way he usually did when adjusting his position wherever he sat. “It’s fine.”

“How is he?”

“Who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Steve.”

There was another pause that lasted a few seconds too long. “It’s fine,” he said at last. “He’s fine.” His voice had the taut, high-pitched quality that Tony remembered from nights when Steve would pretend his sleepless nights were just that, not a symptom of an underlying problem.

“What happened.”

“Nothing. It doesn’t concern you.”

There we go. The inevitable door that closed on whatever he had with Barnes, shutting Tony outside of it. Forever outside.

And now forever alone, it seemed.

He’d texted Rhodey earlier that morning but hadn’t received a reply. It was taking all his energy not to let the agony of it consume him.

You can soldier on, you can resurrect, it’ll be fine, he told himself. Save the world again, and no one will ever remember any of this. You’ll be a hero again.

That thought sounded like Ross, though, so he pushed it away.
Steve was speaking again. “There’s been some talk,” he said. “About coming back.”

Tony coughed hard. “Coming back?”

“Nothing’s definite, yet. There would be a lot of eventualities to prepare for, and God knows it wouldn’t be clean, but... if we were to form our own team independent of the Initiative...”

“I see.” So, separate from him.

“Tony —“

“I’ve been so alone.” The words tumbled out of him before he could stop them. “If you knew everything I’ve done to not be alone...” He pressed his lips together.

A sigh. “Tony —“

“Why did you have to fucking go?” he snapped into the phone.

“Tony, don’t act like this was —“

“You leave, and then you call months later and give me the benefit of the doubt, which I sure as hell don’t deserve —“

“Tony, listen —“

“No, you listen.” He was shaking. “You don’t get to call me out of the blue and just forgive me for what I did like it’s even your place! Come on, Steve. If one of us should be forgiving the other, it should be me. And I’m sure as hell not doing that.”

“This isn’t forgiveness,” Steve said flatly.

“Then what is it?” His tone was icy.

Silence.

“I wanted to believe that you weren’t capable of it,” he said at last. “The news —“

“— says it was Justin Hammer. I know.”

“What happened to that kid, Tony?” He asked it quietly, in a tone so delicate and sad it made Tony want to throw his phone across the room.

He drew in a shuddering breath. “I was so alone,” he said at last. “And you weren’t there. No one was fucking there.”

He ended the call and tossed the phone away, almost wishing that it could shatter, but it was one of his own make; the damn thing wouldn’t break whatever he did to it.

The thought occurred to him out of nowhere as he stared at his phone.

*If I let him go, I’m not going to have anyone.*

Right on cue, his phone screen flashed up. Like a madman — like an addict, he thought — he snatched it up. Peter.

*I’m on the roof*
He breathed out a sigh that may have been more of a sob, pocketed his phone, and headed for the stairs.
The clear

Chapter Summary

They had dodged a bullet. Now the trick would be staying low to the ground so they wouldn’t get fired at again.

Chapter Notes

This is where we leave them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“He is witty, graceful, lovely to look at, lovable to be with. He has also ruined my life, so I can’t help loving him — it is the only thing to do.”

Oscar Wilde

The sky was deep, deep gray, like factory smoke, and Peter could taste rain on the air, feel it heavy against his skin through the thin fabric of his suit. He sat on the edge of the roof, looked out across the city.

Footsteps behind him. He twisted around.

Tony stood there, hands in the pockets of his trousers. A breeze ruffled his hair as he walked over to him, his shoes making little scuffing sounds on the cement. With a sigh, he sat down beside him on the edge of the roof. Up close, Peter could see that his beard wasn’t as neat as usual, that there were bruises under his red eyes.

Tony cleared his throat. “That was smart,” he said at last, after the silence had stretched into minutes. “What you did.”

Peter half-smiled, no humor in it. “Made sense. It got you in the clear.”

“Kind of cold, don’t you think?”

“Like he didn’t deserve it?”

Tony seemed to consider it, his head cocked to the side, eyebrows lifted. “Fair enough,” he said.

They lapsed into silence. There was a distant hissing sound; Peter looked out over the rooftops and saw that the rain he’d sensed a few minutes before had arrived at last, a silver-gray curtain moving slowly across the city a few miles off.

May had found out what he’d done, of course, and he could see how it was killing her, but she’d just hugged him especially close when she returned from work that evening and, later, had made him a
dish of cherry pie to eat while he finished his homework. He supposed she’d always feel a need to protect him, baby him, even. Perhaps that wasn’t such a bad thing.

“When’s the trial?” Tony asked at last.

“Couple weeks from now.” He swallowed. “The news says they don’t know if he’ll make it that long? If he doesn’t make it… then I did that. That’s my responsibility. They’ll want you as a witness,” he added quickly, unable to stomach the previous thought. “We’ll have to get our stories right so they don’t think we’re lying.”

“What happened to Hammer?” asked Tony.

“I lost my temper.” Then Peter caught Tony’s eye. “Nothing bad happened. Not to me.” He didn’t need to know how close things had gotten.

Tony nodded, more to himself than to Peter, and looked away again. “He told me that the only way he’d destroy the tape was if I… if I passed you around, so to speak.”

Peter gulped, said nothing. So that was what Hammer had meant by his offer. He breathed in and out, making a conscious effort to stay steady.

“He had my back to the wall,” Tony explained. “I did what I could. And you’re right,” he added. “I should have warned you properly.” He caught Peter’s eye. “I’m so sorry.” Peter nodded and looked away. He was feeling a sudden desire to cry, but he’d done enough of that already, and he didn’t want to do it front of Tony. It’d worry him…

Silence, except for the growing hiss of the rain. Idly, he wondered if Tony could hear it.

“I’ve been thinking about retiring,” Tony said suddenly. “Hanging up the cape, so to speak.” Peter raised his eyebrows but said nothing. “I’d still be active,” he added, “just merely in a consulting capacity.”

“So I’m not going to get to fly out with you again?” Peter asked, unable to resist the small smile that pulled at his lips.

Tony didn’t quite smile back, just brushed his little finger over Peter’s where their hands rested on the concrete. His eyes were looking wetter by the moment.

The rain hissed closer. Neither moved. They had dodged a bullet. Now the trick would be staying low to the ground so they wouldn’t get fired at again.

Assuming they kept this up at all.

“You’ve really…” Tony bit his lip. “Well. Grown up isn’t the phrase I want to use. But… you’re not the kid I met back in Queens a couple months ago. That kid wouldn’t have thought up something like this.”

He frowned. “Are you angry?”

Tony studied his face. “No.” The word sounded caught between a sob and a laugh. “No, I’m not angry.” He looked away again, staring at his knees. “You know, we can’t keep this up.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

“It’s not healthy.”
“Yeah.” He chewed on his lower lip and glanced back Tony, feeling suddenly helpless. “What are we going to do about this?” he asked.

Tony shook his head. “I have no idea,” he said wearily. He cleared his throat. “By the way, there’s, um, a chance that some of the others might be coming back.”

“The other Avengers?”

“Yeah. Listen, I don’t know when it’ll happen, but if and when they do get here, and for some reason, they do become official Avengers again… They’re good people,” he said. “They’re not going to —” he floundered a little — “you know. They’ll work with you, is what I’m trying to say,” he added, rallying.

Peter frowned. “So… are you saying I’m an Avenger now?”

“Yes,” Tony said hoarsely, not meeting his eyes. “As far as I’m concerned. For what it’s worth. I mean, since Ross is dissolving the arrangement we had.”

Peter watched him avoid his gaze for several long moments.

“This is why you’re stepping back, isn’t it?” he said. “So they don’t see us working together and remember the tape and wonder if maybe the headlines were right after all…”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s why.”

“But you shouldn’t have to —“

“Kid,” Tony said, “I need this break. Really. And you… I think you and I both know that if either of us should be out there, it should be you. You’re better at this than I ever was. Smarter.”

They stared at each other for a long stretch of time, seconds trickling on and on.

“So,” Peter said quietly, after he’d shored up enough courage. “Is this it, then?”

Tony blew out a sigh. “I don’t know,” he said unsteadily. “I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I’d miss you.”

“Yeah,” Tony whispered. “Yeah, I’d miss you too. See —“ he groaned — “this kind of thing… it alters you. You don’t come out of this the same person.” Peter stayed silent, let him wrestle the words out of himself. Finally, they emerged, rough and broken. “I’ve lost so much over you. I shouldn’t say that,” he immediately added. “It’s not your fault. I chose this. But now… now that I know what I know about you… I’m not sure that I can let this continue.”

Peter looked away. Skip Westcott, still fucking things up for him years down the line.

“But now it seems like you’re all I’ve got,” Tony muttered, looking out at the city, not at him.

“Maybe we can be okay,” Peter said weakly.

Tony gently turned his face to look up at him, brushing his thumb down his lips, and Peter couldn’t resist opening his mouth, giving him a brief flicker of tongue.

Abruptly, he pulled Peter closer, arm around his shoulders. Peter tucked himself into him, pressing his knees against his thighs. His grip around him was reassuringly tight.
The rain was about ten buildings off. Kids screamed as it hit them far below on the pavement. Tony was kissing the top of his head, nose against his scalp. Peter turned his head to nuzzle into his neck, to breathe in the scent of his aftershave and the little edge of something uniquely him that he usually only caught after sex, lingering in the sheets and on his body.

Perhaps they’d be okay, he thought. Not perfect, certainly not good. A little sullied, perhaps. But okay. Certainly better than they had been when they’d had nothing.

Right?

He tasted the rain before he felt it gush over both of them — an early December downpour that soaked the fabric of his suit straight to the skin, plastered Tony’s hair to his head, and left them shivering against each other. It was hard to tell if it was rain or tears gliding down Tony’s face. Peter figured he’d give him the benefit of the doubt.

“You know,” he said through the roar of the rain over the roof, through his chattering teeth, “I’m legal in a year.”

Tony pulled off his wet blazer and draped it over Peter’s shoulders, his hands lingering on his chest.

“We should get inside,” he said. Peter leaned against him, threaded his fingers with his. The rain was already beginning to move off again. Tony brought Peter’s hand to his mouth and bit his knuckles gently. Another gust of wind made them both shiver: a storm was brewing up. It looked to be a dark, rainy afternoon, the kind where night seemed to fall hours before the sun set and time seemed to slow to a crawl.

“I’m just saying,” Peter said. “In a year, they can’t say shit.”

“Uh, yeah, they can,” Tony began. Rain was dripping from his hair. “We’d have to wait ’til you’re at least thirty before the press stops talking —”

Peter laid a finger on his mouth. The rain had moved off, leaving them both drenched and cold. His teeth were chattering even harder.

“Your lips are blue,” Tony softly. He jerked his head in the direction of the door that led to the staircase that led down into the mansion, stood, and held out a hand. “Come on,” he said. “Get warm?”

Peter could feel the shape of the next few hours perfectly. No matter their original intentions, they’d end up taking advantage of the electronically heated sheets in Tony’s bed, their hair leaving wet marks on the pillows and each other while their clothes dried. Hold each other for a few scant hours, perhaps even sleep. And then Peter would go home, and Tony would slip away to the lab or to the TV room, each with their secret to bear like an anvil on their shoulders, weighty and oppressive and terrible, and yet uniquely theirs.

And they would push the decision off to another day, and then another day after that, and another, and another, until they found themselves clinging to each other because there was nothing else they could do, or until something ripped them apart by force, muscle tearing from bone.

If he followed him, would it be to continue, or to make an end? What did he want? A better question: what did he need?

He looked away, down at the puddle he stood in.

“We can’t keep this up,” he said at last.
And Tony nodded. “I know.”

He imagined life after the others returned. Discussions, combat, coming back to lick their wounds. Slipping out of the room a few minutes after Tony, meeting someplace — under the staircase, perhaps, or a supply closet — letting Tony press him against the wall, kiss up his neck, make him breathless. More tiptoeing, more fear. The inevitable moment of discovery, mortification.

And yet, some part of him, the part that made all the bad decisions, whispered that perhaps it would all come clean in the end.

And yet, and yet, and yet…

Peter let him pull him to his feet — water dripping off their hair, their noses, their chins.

“Just the once,” he whispered, lips twitching inadvertently. And Tony nodded with a helpless little laugh like he took his meaning, his eyes low. Wrapping their arms around each other’s waists, they slipped inside.

The door clicked shut. The rain continued.

Chapter End Notes

Because I’m extra AF and a compulsive playlister, there’s yet another mix for this fic. It’s 26 songs, one for each chapter. Check it out if you’re interested: https://open.spotify.com/user/joannscribbles/playlist/7Hbdzyjwmmgj09Dw1wzBK

Finally, thanks to all of you who reviewed, left kudos, or even just read this not-so-little piece of damnation. I’m truly blown away by the response this has gotten. I’ve never had a writing experience like this one before, and I couldn’t have done it without you all.

Works inspired by this one My Language Does Not Exist by Terminal_End

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!