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**Dear Captain America**

by [teaberryblue](http://archiveofourown.org/users/teaberryblue)

**Summary**

Young Tony Stark writes fan mail to his personal hero.

A maze of personal correspondence from the desk of Tony Stark, ages 8-13.

(This story is currently abandoned. My apologies!)
Notes

There are a lot of small character cameos, and characters who are not explicitly named. If you are the first reader to guess who one of them is, you can choose any character you like (within the bounds of some rules) to also appear as a cameo. It's like a fun game!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Winter, 1979: Dear Captain America

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dear Captain America,

My name is Tony. I am eight. I know you're not really Captain America. You're a writer at Timely Comics who pretends to be Captain America on the letters page of the comic book, but that's all right, because you are the one who thinks like the character in the comics, so it's almost the same thing. Who knows what the real Steve Rogers thought? For all we know, he could have been an asshole: a real jerk.

So I wanted to write to you because I saw a mistake in the last comic book. The schematics for the hovercraft that the Grand Director was piloting just would not work. There wouldn't be enough lift. It might work now, if you used a lightweight aluminum alloy, but in the 1940s, the engine would just have had to be too large and would weigh the whole thing down.

I've drawn you blueprints for a better hovercraft that could have been built using 1940s technology. I hope you like it.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

Chapter End Notes

Timely Comics is the company that published the original run of Captain America, and eventually evolved into Marvel Comics. For the sake of this fan canon, I've decided that since Captain America continued to be published into the 1970s, Timely Comics continued to exist in this world.
Winter, 1979: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

Thank you for replying to my letter and publishing my drawing in your Letters section. Not everyone likes when I do that. Stan Lee called me a stuck up little prick.

I really liked this most recent storyline. I was really worried about Sharon! I hope nothing happens to her. But I thought the idea of having someone who has Cap's exact form of idealism but who is fighting on the other side was just great. It was too bad that the other Steve Rogers was brainwashed into being a Nazi, but I liked that you had two guys who are both just so certain they are right fighting against each other like that. Also, a blitz in New York is a really scary idea!

I know you probably won't publish this letter because you have to give another kid a chance, but if you ever have questions about mechanics or aerodynamics or things like that, you can write to me at this address. I asked if I could give you my phone number, but my mom and dad said no. I would be happy to help you with the math or science parts of the comic. I know those are hard for some people, just like I can't draw unless it's technical drawings. My skills are math, science, and being a nuisance, my dad says. I know I am pretty smart at a lot of things, though. So it's okay you're not smart at math or science, because you can do a lot of things I couldn't do.

Sincerely, Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

I haven't heard from you in a while. How much did the real Steve Rogers from history look like Steve Rogers the way you draw him?

Sincerely, Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

Thank you for printing that photo of the real Steve Rogers in your Letters section. It was really grainy but I like that you have done your research. I think it is okay that you don't draw him exactly like he really looked. I was wondering about that because his muscles in the comic seem really unrealistic, but I guess most comic book characters have muscles that would be too big in real life.

Did he really punch Hitler in the face? My dad says that that was an artistic liberty.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
June, 1979: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

No, I am not eight years old. I am nine now. But I am really nine, which I think answers your question. I turned nine last Tuesday. A lot of people say I sound older than I am. Some people say I sound like a smart aleck. But it's really because I read a lot. I sound smarter when I am writing than I do when I'm talking to people because I learned a lot of words from reading, but I don't know how to pronounce them. So I say them wrong in public sometimes, especially the ones with Greek roots. Greek words are weird.

I am also related to Howard Stark, yes. He is my dad. He knows I really like the Captain America comics, but he doesn't like to talk to me about the real Captain America, so that's why I keep asking you questions. You answer a lot more of my questions than most people.

Thank you for including that photo print of the real Steve Rogers. It's a lot less grainy than the picture you printed in the comic. I am surprised no one has ever asked you for one before. Are there any pictures from before he took the serum?

Thank you for writing back to me. I write a lot of letters to a lot of people, but most of them don't write me back, or sometimes I just get signed photographs. Sometimes the signatures aren't even real. I've tried removing them with different solvents just to test them.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

Thank you for asking about my dad. I don't think it would be a good idea to ask him if he would do an interview. He isn't always very good at interviews. You have to get him at the right time and he only likes to answer questions that he made up himself. Also, he says that you're a hack.

I don't think you're a hack. Some kids believe everything their dads say, but I think sometimes my dad has very strong opinions. He says comics haven't been the same since the Comics Code happened. He says that's why you're not allowed to draw the serum the way it really happened, with needles. He also said that they whited out all of the blood from the original Dick Tracy. Did you know that? I sort of wish I could have seen Dick Tracy when it still had all the blood in it.

Anyway, my dad says there haven't been any good comics since the Comics Code happened, and that all the comics out now are trash. He has a lot of really old comics, but he keeps them in plastic sleeves and won't let me touch them. He said I might be allowed to read them when I turn eighteen.

Sometimes I sneak read them anyway. He has a security system protecting them, but I know how to trick the circuits so that I can get past it.

Maybe you shouldn't publish that part if you publish this letter.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

Of course I can tell you how dirigibles work. No, there are not people inside the balloon part. That is just full of gas and very lightweight, but there's nothing to breathe inside there, so people would die if they were riding in that part. Some of them have frames inside the balloon part, and those are called rigid dirigibles. I think for the kind of fight you want to show, the rigid kind makes the most sense because you can have Captain America coast to the ground on the rigid frame even if the balloon blows up in midair. It is not completely realistic, but I think it would be possible. And it would look really neat. The frame would be made out of metal so it would get very hot but it wouldn't burn up.

I am not sure how you can have Captain America rescue the passengers if the dirigible blows up in midair, but I'm sure you can think of something. Your stories are always really clever. Captain America is my favorite comic.

I don't think I would really get in trouble for breaking into my dad's comic collection, but I appreciate your concern. My parents try to punish me sometimes but as long as I act upset about it when they do it, they don't expect me to get around the punishment, and I always do. But they really don't punish me that often. Usually they don't really notice what I do and I get to do what I want. They're both very busy and it is better if I stay out of my dad's way.

I drew you a picture of what a dirigible framework might look like. I hope it makes sense.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

My family is pretty good, thank you for asking. I'm back at school now, though, so I won't have as much time to write to you. They skipped me to the sixth grade this year. Every year they skip me more, and I never have time to make friends. Usually by the end of the year, I have a friend or two, but then I end up in classes ahead of them and they end up jealous. It's not my fault I'm smarter than everyone else, though. It's just how I turned out. The classes are always really boring and I have a hard time sitting still, and the teachers don't like it when I correct them in class. The textbooks usually have a lot of mistakes, though. They are putting me in sixth grade for English and History, but I am taking Math and Biology at the Upper School. I like taking classes at the Upper School more than at the Lower School, because the boys at the Upper School are much, much bigger than me and don't pick on me as much because I am just a little kid compared to them.

Classes start tomorrow, so I wanted you to know that I probably won't get to write to you until Thanksgiving. I might have time, but I am not allowed to leave campus, and there isn't anywhere to buy comics here. Comics are really supposed to be contraband, anyway. I really hope nothing too exciting happens between now and November, because I'm not sure if I'll be able to get any new comics before I'm home at Thanksgiving time.

Have a good fall. I will miss writing to you.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Thanksgiving, 1979: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

Thank you so much for the comics! I got home from school for Thanksgiving break and Jarvis (Jarvis is our butler) gave me the mail you had sent me while I was gone. I really didn't expect you to do that. I'm going to read all of them before I go back to school, but I wanted to write to you first and say thank you. Nobody has ever done anything like that for me before.

My family is really rich so I feel bad taking free comics from you, since you're just a comic book writer and I hear people like you don't make a lot of money. I've put $1.60 cents (40 cents for each issue) in the envelope to pay you back for it.

Also, thank you for the kind words about school. I know smart kids are picked on a lot, but it's nice to know that that doesn't keep happening when you're a grown up. It's one of the things I like about Captain America, that he was picked on but he didn't let that stop him from doing what he wanted to do with his life.

School is still boring. Sixth grade is not any harder than fourth. I have been reading a lot to make up for it. I started reading the encyclopedia. I am up to the Ds.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Thanksgiving, 1979: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Captain America,

I know I wrote you a letter earlier today, but I can't believe Sharon Carter died! She was my favorite character (besides Cap himself of course). I like her because she's so sarcastic and she doesn't let anybody push her around. I like her a lot more than Peggy, and I was rooting for Cap to fall in love with her instead. I don't usually like girl characters, but if I had to be a girl, she is the kind of girl I would want to be. I hope you bring her back.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

PS I hope Steve doesn't quit fighting for good. I assume he probably will not because people probably wouldn't buy a comic about Steve Rogers' art career. I think it would be interesting, though, to read a comic about somebody with superpowers just trying to live an ordinary life and not fighting things all the time. Did this really happen or is this one of the fictional parts?

Chapter End Notes

I've been reading up on what was actually happening in Captain America in 1979-- this coincides with Sharon Carter's "death" in Marvel canon. But, obviously, in comic canon, Steve hasn't come out of the ice yet, so I'm taking some liberties and making up my own fictional storylines that are loosely based on real Marvel canon, but happen in a world where Cap is still fighting in the 1940s.
Dear Captain America,

I don't know if I'm going to send this letter or not. I don't think it's okay to tell you these things, especially since you're not the real Captain America. Sometimes I wish you were. I guess I don't wish you were. I wish the real Captain America were still around, because he's really good at fixing things. But you always figure out how he's going to fix things, and that's almost as good, even if you're not super strong and you just write comics.

I'm only good at fixing machines. I can fix almost anything mechanical, but I can't fix problems. I just get so angry and want to throw things.

My dad ripped up the November issue before I got to read it. I'm so mad. I got so mad that I broke my dad's recording system, the one he uses to keep records of everything that happens in his office. But then I felt bad about that and I'm working on putting it back together now before he finds out. I think I found a couple ways to improve it, too. It's like the one President Nixon had in the White House that got him into all that trouble. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I took all the tapes from when my dad is really angry and played them for someone, but he's really not that bad. He's just stressed out a lot because of work, and I know a lot of other kids have it harder.

Also I deserved it. One of my teachers phoned to tell my parents to talk to me over the break because I've been goofing off in class. I don't know if I agree with their definition of goofing off, because it isn't my fault I keep finishing the work early. So I was building these little walker-things that used the tension from rubber bands to power them so they would walk across my desk. They were made out of pencils and paper clips. One of them fell off my desk in while everyone else was still finishing our test, and I guess it made too much noise, but what am I supposed to do, sit there silently with my head on the desk? I tried to take a nap once and I got in trouble for that, too.

The teacher didn't tell him all that; he just said that I was being disruptive. So that's why I got in trouble.

I hate school. I don't want to go back, but I don't want to stay here. I wish I could come visit you.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

How much do comic book writers make? I know it isn't a lot, but I don't need a lot of money. I just want to start saving money so when I am old enough to leave home, I will be ready. I'm not very good at stories, but I could do all the science for all the comic books. Do you think you could get me a job?

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

I am back at school. I didn't know that about child labor laws. That's too bad. Maybe by the time I'm old enough, I'll be good at writing stories, too, so I can do the whole thing. Do you think they would let me write Captain America?

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
December, 1979: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

Sorry for taking so long to reply. School said it's okay for me to write to you as long as I am not actually reading comics on campus, but I had to wait till the weekend to write. I bet you were a really good writer when you were a kid, but it's very nice of you to say that you think I could do it.

Do you know why people hate Communists so much? I don't really get it. I know there's something about missiles in Cuba and they put up a wall in Germany or something? And they make everyone where the same clothing in Russia and China? Weren't they our allies against Hitler? What happened after that to make everybody hate them so much?

I'm asking because my dad really hates Communists, so I was thinking about becoming one.

Also, red is my favorite color.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

Merry Christmas! Or are you Jewish? My dad says all comic book writers are Jewish, so I guess I should wish you a happy Hanukkah too, just in case. Thank you for the December issue. Here is 40 cents to cover it. I also drew you a blueprint of George Maxon's secret underground lair as a present. We don't really celebrate any holidays because my dad says religion is cultural pablum, but I get a lot of presents.

So what you're saying is that Communism itself isn't the problem so much as the people in power using it to control people? I wish they taught us more recent history in history class. Right now we're learning about the American Revolution. Do you want to know how many times I've learned about the American Revolution in school? No, you don't.

You are probably right. I don't really want my dad to hate me. I just sometimes want to make him think harder about things besides his work. He's been really nice since I got home this time, so I think the holidays are going to be okay.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

Chapter End Notes

George Maxon was Red Skull's name in the original Timely Comics storyline, before he was revised into Johann Schmidt and given an origin story. Again, in this universe, where Captain America remained a Timely title, I figured it was best to go with the original backstory for Red Skull.
New Year's, 1980: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

Happy New Year! I'm pretty excited that it's a whole new decade, are you? I did like that 1979 was a prime number. But 1980 has thirty-six different divisors, which I think is really funny for a number coming after a prime, because it's like it's making up for the prime number.

Thank you for the recommendation. I asked my mom and dad if they would buy me that book but my dad said absolutely not, he would not allow Marx in his house even if it was just so I could understand better.

Then my dad sat me down and told me that half of Karl Marx's kids starved to death and he was a terrible father. He also said that Karl Marx didn't think anyone should be allowed to make money off their own inventions and everything should belong to everyone. I don't know what I think about that. I mean, I like the idea of helping poor kids, but if I invented something really amazing I think I should get to make the money and decide what to do with it. Just like if you came up with a really great comic character, you should be allowed to make the money and decide what to do with it.

Then we had some egg nog. My dad sometimes gives me scotch as a treat, but I don't like it at all. It's stingy and tastes like dirt, but he says real men drink scotch. I feel like real men must have malformed taste buds. The worst is Laphroaig. That tastes like drinking burning garbage.

Egg nog is better because it has brandy in it but it still mostly tastes like a nutmeg milkshake. The trick is to drink it slow, though, because otherwise my dad will just keep pouring me more and more and I end up getting a headache.

My dad asked me where I heard about Marx, so I lied and said it was in history class. There was an angry phone call to school after that. I'm not supposed to know that, but he shut himself up in his office and shouted at someone on the phone, and then he came out and said that when I get back in January, I'm going to be in the seventh grade instead. I am pretty sure they have that Karl Marx book in the Upper School library, so I can read it when I get there. I bet I can do it for extra credit.

I asked my parents for a small internal combustion engine for my Christmas present. They got me an Erector set instead, and some Legos. It's nice that they understand that I like to build things, but I really wish that they understood that I can't really learn anything from Legos and there's nothing to take apart.

They did get me this game called Mouse Trap. It has all these pieces that you assemble to build a very complicated mouse trap. It's fun, but very inefficient, and it only works successfully about 60% of the time. I tinkered with it for a while and improved on the design pretty well, I think, so I am going to write to the game company as soon as I finish writing to you.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

PS there were Communists during World War II, right? I think it would make a good story if you had some Communist characters, but ones that were sometimes good and sometimes bad, like they would help Cap fight the Nazis but they hated Americans, too.
Dear Captain America,

What do you think of other comics? I think I like Batman a lot. It's not as good as Captain America and I know it's your competition, but I like Bruce Wayne a lot. I feel like he's a lot like me. Alfred reminds me of Jarvis. I feel bad for him, sometimes, because his parents died when he was just a kid. Even if I fight with my dad a lot, at least I have a dad.

I don't really like Superman. Superman is a lot like Captain America in some ways, but I don't like that he comes from outer space. One of the things I like about Captain America is that Steve Rogers was just a normal kid growing up. I also like that he's based on a real person, because it means it's something that could really happen. Superman being from outer space is like telling us that we need somebody else to be better than us and that normal people can't ever do it on their own. I also really don't like Lex Luthor. It seems like we're supposed to hate him because he's rich, and he's just plain evil because he's rich, and that's not fair. A lot of rich people do a lot of good things.

I didn't know that about work for hire. I guess it makes sense that since Steve Rogers was a real person, you wouldn't make royalties from your job, but you made up a lot of the stories yourself, didn't you? So it seems unfair. I feel like people should get paid for what they invent themselves.

I'm back at school now so I can't really write another long letter right now, but I hope you're having a good winter. Seventh grade is okay, I guess, but I don't like the teachers very much, and the other boys are a lot bigger than me. They're not beating me up or anything, but one of them made me steal cigarettes from our English teacher. And then he made me smoke one. I guess he didn't make me, but he made fun of me and told me I was a pussy if I didn't. Cigarettes are awful. I don't know why anyone would put one of those in their mouth on purpose.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

I think it's okay. I don't really think it would go over well if a comic book writer called the school and told them about the cigarettes. I feel like right now, I mostly don't get beaten up because I help everybody with their homework, and they know I'm really rich, but if they thought I was a tattletale, the whole house of cards would fall over on me.

They'd also probably call my dad and I don't know how he would feel about that. I think he would be mad that I tell you things I don't tell him, but he would be more mad that I let kids bully me. And he might not let me write to you anymore.

We're learning about metaphors in English class, so that's where the house of cards bit came from. I feel like it's making me a better writer. I still think it would be neat to write comic books one day.

I was thinking about what you said about Steve and how even after he took the serum, it was probably hard to think of himself as anything else but a little scrawny guy, and how he was probably surprised when people didn't pick on him. I liked that. One thing I would really like to be someday is tough. I am pretty good at being tough when it comes to not crying and things like that, but I'm not so good at sticking up for myself or for other people, and I wish I were better at that. Mostly I just feel like I'm too small to do any good. Which sort of reminds me of Steve, too. I think a lot of the time it's hard to feel like one person can change anything, and one of the things I like about him is that he is still just one guy but he is able to change things on his own without help.

But he still didn't get there on his own. He needed the government to do that. So part of him getting chosen was luck. What if some other guy had gotten chosen? Dr. Erskine still would have gotten killed and Steve would just be a normal guy. But I guess if that happened, he wouldn't have disappeared and he might have been able to have a normal life.

It's something to think about, I guess.

I was also thinking about Bruce Wayne some more. Because I was saying, Bruce Wayne is like me in a lot of ways, because he has a lot of money and it doesn't seem like he has a lot of friends besides Alfred, and he decides to be Batman because he wants revenge because his parents get killed by criminals. But then I was wondering, would he have been Batman even if his parents didn't die? I feel like maybe not. And I don't know what kind of person he would have been if his parents had lived. Would he have used his money and power to do good things? I feel like I know someday I will have a lot of money. My dad has a lot of money, but I think I could do better than him or make a lot of money even if he wasn't rich, because he is really smart, but he doesn't always see anything but his work. So I feel like I should start thinking about what I will do with it now. I know I'm only nine, but I'm going to be ten in May and that's not so far off now. I want to do good things with my money, not just spend it or make more money. Of course I will want to make more money, because then I can do more good things. But I don't know what those good things should be.

There is going to be a Valentine's Dance at school. It's for the seventh grade, and I guess I get to go even though I don't really like dancing or kissy stuff. By "get to" go, I mean that I have to go. Our school is all boys, but they are letting girls from the local schools come so the boys have someone to dance with.
I guess I'll sit in the corner and watch. I can bring a sketchbook and practice drawing. It'll be okay.

Sincerely,

Tony
Dear Captain America,

Wow! Thank you for the tee shirt. I don’t know how much tee shirts cost, and we're not allowed to have pocket money at school, so I can’t pay you back for it right now. It came just in time to wear it to the dance. We are supposed to wear jackets and ties but I think that as long as I have on a jacket and tie no one will complain if I wear a Captain America tee shirt. Nobody is really going to care what I do there, anyway.

Sincerely,

Tony
February, 1980: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

It was really nice meeting you at the dance. Thank you for rescuing my sketchbook. I didn't know there were any girls who actually liked comics. I'm sorry you got punch on your dress, but those guys deserved it. I hope you can write back soon.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
February, 1980: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

The dance was both better and worse than I expected. It's funny how that happens sometimes, isn't it?

So I went to the dance and I wore my tee shirt and everything. It was pretty boring, really. I did what I said I was going to do and sat in the corner and sketched some things while all the bigger kids were dancing.

Then one of the boys came over and started asking me what I was drawing. I showed him my pictures. I thought he was trying to be nice, but really he just wanted to steal my sketchbook. He grabbed it from me and held it over his head. He was much taller than me, so I couldn't reach it.

I knew he was trying to play Keep Away and expected me to try to jump up to get it, so I didn't try to do that. Instead, I head-butted him in the stomach. He fell down, but he grabbed me and I fell down, too, and he started punching me in the face. One of the other boys took my sketchbook before I could get it back, and he started ripping pages out and he put one of my drawings in the punch.

I tried to figure out what Steve would have done before he took the serum, and I felt like he wouldn't have hit back, and I felt like if I didn't hit back, I wouldn't get into as much trouble at school, but I also knew they would call my dad and he'd want to know if I hit back. So I hit back, because that's what my dad would want me to do, even though it was stupid, because that kid was so much bigger.

Anyway, he split open my lip and I got blood on my tee shirt. I'm really sorry about that.

But then he screamed, and for a second I thought I must have kicked him in the nuts or something, or hit him harder than I thought, but I didn't. There was this girl. She was probably the tallest girl I've ever seen who wasn't a grownup, and she had her shoe on his face.

I don't really want to sound like I enjoy violence, but it was maybe the best thing I've ever seen. She had red hair and a red face and a red dress. She was just red all over, and then she whipped him with her purse. She said something about did he think he was a big man, picking on a little kid.

I was a little irritated that she called me a little kid, but I guess I probably am a little kid compared to her.

Then she helped me up and picked up my sketchbook, and marched right by that boy while he was still lying flat on the floor, with her nose in the air. She went up to his friend and told him he should be ashamed of himself. He laughed at her and tried to grab her butt, so she smacked him in the face. So he threw his cup of punch at her.

So then she dumped the entire punch bowl on his head.

At this point, it was a pretty big scene and all the teachers had noticed. One of them came over and took one look at all of us and said that we were getting detention and she was calling our parents. And then they asked the girl what her name was and where she went to school.
And she just talked to those teachers like they were nothing. I don't mean she shouted at them or anything. You know how there's that face and that tone of voice grown ups use when they're very disappointed in you and want to make you feel bad? I have never in my life seen a kid do that to a grown up before, but she did. She just shook her head and pursed her lips and looked so very sorry at them, and then told them that as chaperones they really should have been paying more attention and what were they thinking, letting older boys bully a little boy like that?

Then she told them that her name was Virginia and she went to school on the Air Force base, and then she just started marching out of there. At the door, she turned around and smiled at me and said "Nice shirt, kid." And then she disappeared. It was like magic.

I tried to send a thank you note to Virginia at the Air Force base, but I don't know if that's enough information to get it to her.

I still got in trouble, but I didn't have to go to detention for as many days as Harold and Charlie got. They called my dad. They made me sit in the room while they did that, which I guess I am glad I was there, because my dad told the Headmaster to go fuck himself and not to bother him unless he had something important to say. Then he threatened to sue the school if they let me get injured again, so I guess it's nice to hear that my dad cares, even if he doesn't always say it in so many words.

That's all. I realized I haven't written you a letter that you could publish in a while. Sorry about that. But thank you for replying anyway.

Sincerely,

Tony

PS Should I call you something besides Captain America? I realized I don't know anything about you except that you work on the comic books. Are you married? Do you have any kids?
Winter, 1980: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I can't believe your name is really Steve! Is that ever weird for you? Because obviously you're not the same Steve, but do people ever get mixed up in conversations about whether someone is talking about you or Steve Rogers?

I have been thinking a lot about your advice about what Steve (Steve the character, not you) would do in my position. I think I'm going to try it.

I didn't hear back from Virginia. And no, I don't think I liked-her-liked-her. I feel weird about that, because people keep saying sometime I'll change my mind about girls, and I don't think that's going to happen, but it would be nice to have a friend.

It's okay with me if you read my letters to your wife. Tell her I say hello.

Thank you,

Tony

Chapter End Notes

In 1980, Steven Grant, most famous later for The Punisher, was on the writing team for Captain America, and he penned the February, 1980 issue. While my world is a fictional one, and my writer is not the same Steve, it was too good a coincidence to pass up.
Dear Steve,

I tried to talk to Harold, like you said. It didn't turn out so well. I think some people are just bullies.

Sincerely,

Tony
Winter, 1980: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I realized my last letter didn't explain anything and it probably wasn't fair of me to send that. So I thought I should probably tell you more.

When I tried to talk to Harold before, we were in the bathroom. He shoved my head in the toilet. I kicked him, and he threw me into the urinal. I was covered in pee; it was the grossest thing ever. I walked out of the bathroom and everyone was either staring or laughing at me, so it was pretty obvious something had happened, but I didn't want to be a tattletale.

I went back to my room and took a shower and changed my clothes and put the dirty ones in a plastic bag so they wouldn't smell as bad, but by then I had missed Math and I never miss Math. So my Math teacher called me to his office and asked me what was wrong. I told him I just wasn't feeling well, but I guess my wrist was swollen worse than I thought, because he could tell. So he gave me a pass and said he would make sure my other teachers knew I would be missing class, and sent me to the infirmary. I didn't tell on Harold, though. I was pretty proud of that.

In the infirmary, the nurse asked what happened, and I told her, even though I didn't tell her who did it or what I said or anything.

She asked me if I knew why I was being picked on. I told her the truth, that I think it's because I'm smaller and younger and an easy target, but I'm also so much smarter than everyone else that they're jealous and wish they were as smart as me, but they're not, so they get mad and try to make me feel bad about myself.

I don't really feel bad about myself, though, because I know I'm better than them. I just feel bad for them that the only way they know to express their anger is to beat up smaller kids.

I mean, that's what I said to her. I know it's true, really, but it's hard to always remember that. Sometimes I wish I were more like them, even if it meant my memory was for shit and I needed a calculator to do math.

She told me that that's not true, and people don't hate people for being smart, and maybe the problem was that I made them feel bad about me being smart because I show off so much. I don't mean to show off, but it's fun to draw sin curves without doing the calculations and recite chunks of our reading assignments from memory. She said maybe it would be better if I didn't act like such a jerk about how smart I am.

I am not sure what to think about this. I don't think I'm a jerk about it. I know I'm bad at things, too. But I'm going to try really hard not to be a jerk.

So I found Harold again and asked him very nicely if he would help me learn to pass a basketball. We're playing basketball in gym and I'm really bad at it, and I'm much smaller than all the other kids, which makes it really hard. I told him that, and I told him I was really bad at it, and I knew he was good at it.

He sort of gave me a weird look, but he agreed. I think he realized I hadn't told on him, and playing basketball with a little kid was better than detention.
I guess we're playing basketball tomorrow, so we'll see how that goes.

Sincerely,

Tony
Dear Steve,

Things have been better at school. Harold said I was shit at basketball because I'm a tiny wimp but he said he thinks I'll be okay at tennis and he's been teaching me that instead. Charlie just kind of goes along with whatever Harold says, except that he's shit at tennis. Harold says you have to have a light touch for tennis and Charlie is like a brick.

Now that all the other guys see that Harold and Charlie think I'm okay, things are a little better. They don't really talk to me except when they want homework help, but Harold and Charlie are on the wrestling team so no one messes with them and that means they don't mess with me. If this were Math class, that would be the transitive property, which is a property of logic.

Thanks for your advice. I'm a little worried because the school year is ending and if they skip me again next year I'll have to make friends all over again. I hope they won't do that, because I'm running out of grades. I'm going into the eighth grade and that's the last year in the Lower School. The kids I started with are just in fourth grade now. I was in fourth grade for two weeks when I was eight.

Oh, I almost forgot to say congratulations to you and your wife. I don't have any brothers or sisters. I think that's okay, though, because my parents say I am a handful and I think I take up enough time for two kids. Maybe you can name the baby after me if it's a boy. You could do that if it's a girl, too, but Antonia is a stupid name.

Sincerely,

Tony
May, 1980: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Thank you for the birthday present! I really didn't expect it. My mom remembered by birthday, but my dad forgot and stayed at work until it was too late, so we had to have cake the next day.

I'm double digits! But also, ten is a triangular number and our entire numerical system uses base ten so that's pretty exciting.

The action figures are really great. I like how you can switch Red Skull's face back and forth. I don't have any action figures because my dad says they rot your brain, so I'm just not telling him about these ones. Steve's shield is the best!

My parents still didn't get me what I asked for, but they did get me a three speed mountain bike, so I took that apart and I'm putting it back together. I made some improvements to the brakes to make them work faster and I fixed the steering to make it smoother. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with it once it's done, though, because I'm not supposed to leave the estate by myself, and there isn't a lot of pavement to ride on here. I guess I'll figure something out. At least I can take it back apart and maybe build something else out of it.

Thanks again. Have a good summer.

Sincerely,

Tony
Dear Steve,

Sorry I didn't write for a while. I decided it would be a fun project to try to make my bicycle fly.

The problem was that I got the amount of thrust right but not the amount of lift. I calculated them correctly, because I'm not stupid, but I don't think my materials were really capable of the effect I wanted to produce. So what this means is that I was able to get the bike up into the air but once it was there it wouldn't stay.

What this also means is that I broke my wrist. So I haven't even been able to write anything for six weeks. It's been the worst summer. The summer is going to be over right when I'm able to get up and do things again.

Oh. I also broke my collarbone. Which was worse than the wrist, but that's not why I couldn't write.

Harold came and visited me! Can you believe that? He said he was mad that the bike beat me up worse than he ever did, but I don't think he meant he really wanted to beat me up anymore. He asked me if I had finished my summer reading. I felt a little bad because he had to read the easy book, Johnny Tremain, and my English teacher told me I could pick anything I wanted from the library. So I just read Johnny Tremain, also. It was an easy book, but a neat story. Have you read it?

Sincerely, Tony
Dear Steve,

I'm really sorry to hear about the baby. That must be very hard for you and your wife. I hope you can have another one someday.

My mom said that I was a really difficult pregnancy, and then I was supposed to have a brother or sister once but that didn't work out. I guess I was too young to remember. She said I should tell you that if you need to take a break from writing for a while, I will understand. I guess I will. I will be pretty busy with school anyway, even if it is still boring.

I bet you would be a really good dad. If you want to pretend I'm your kid sometimes, I would be okay with that.

My mom told me I should say "with sympathies" but I feel like saying that I understand well enough to sympathize would be lying. But I am very, very sorry.

I drew you a few pictures. I hope that will cheer you up. I think my drawing is getting better.

Sincerely,

Tony

PS I will stay off flying bikes, I promise.
August, 1980: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

I was really surprised to get your letter when I got back to school. I saw the date and it looks like I just missed it by a couple weeks, so I wasn't ignoring you.

Wow, so you're in Italy now? What's that like? I've been to Italy, but only on vacation. Italy is so interesting because it is the birthplace of so much of modern engineering. And architectural anomalies like the whole city of Venice! You should try to go to the Galileo museum in Florence if you can, and also the Duomo. The Duomo is really exciting because the structure of the building is based on the structure of an eggshell. Before that, people thought building a domed structure of those proportions with so few supports was impossible.

My real favorite thing in Italy is to go see the Murano glassblowers in Venice. You get to take a boat to Murano and watching people make such delicate but functional objects with nothing but a hot oven, a pipe, and their own breath makes me jealous. I wish I could do that. Someday I'd really like to make things.

How old are you? I just turned ten in May. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Do you have any pets? I'm not allowed to have pets because they mess up the furniture.

Things are all right at school. They're a lot better than when you were here, actually. Remember those boys who were picking on me? They're my friends now. We're in eighth grade, so we are the top of the totem pole, as my mom put it. I got the guys to start a club where we go around making sure the littler kids aren't getting bullied. That still includes me, but not for long, because Harold decided that he's going to teach me to lift weights. And he said he could show me how to do some karate. I like the idea of doing karate because it's about self defense more than offense. Harold knows a lot of different styles of fighting. He boxes and wrestles and knows a few different kinds of martial arts. He says I'm too puny for anything but karate, but now that I know him better I know he's saying that all in good fun.

Do you want to be pen pals? I think that might be fun. I don't know any other girls.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Virginia,

Thank you for your letter, but I don't think you're being fair. It's not that I didn't appreciate what you did for me, but I don't think it's fair of you to say I shouldn't have given the other boys a chance. I didn't think it would make you mad. Harold and Charlie are my classmates and my friends, and even if they weren't, it would be stupid to make enemies with kids who are that much bigger and stronger than me. It's much better in the long run to have them on my side. I'm sorry if you can't agree with that, but you are in Italy and I don't even really know you. I can't count on there always being someone who will step in. I need to protect myself, and sometimes the best way to do that is by making friends.

Maybe we shouldn't be pen pals after all.

Tony
Dear Steve,

It's okay. Like I said, I have been pretty busy with school anyway. Thanks for sending me a note, though.

I would be really sad if you stopped writing Captain America. They'd get someone else to write it and there's no way he would be as good as you.

I could still write to you, right? I don't think I want to write to a different guy. Would it be okay to get your home address?

Tony

PS Girls are really weird.
Dear Steve,

Okay. I got your address. Can I still talk to you about Captain America sometimes? What if the new guy isn't as smart as you?

School is tough right now because I feel like I finally figured out how to make friends and keep them for more than a couple of months, but all the other guys are sort of getting interested in other things. The rest of the eighth grade is all thirteen and fourteen years old, and they're smoking cigarettes and reading Playboy in the dorms and talking about girls. Charlie said he got a blow job over the summer. It took me a while to figure out that they weren't talking about a hair dryer. That seems kind of gross but all the other guys were impressed, so I don't know.

They aren't picking on me, really, but it seems like nobody wants to hang out with me anymore. Harold and Charlie made up these tough guy nicknames. They said I could have one, too, but I can't think of one. I was thinking something with Star because my last name is Stark, but everything sounds stupid. Harold is still showing me some self-defense stuff, but I can tell he's only doing it because he feels bad. Everybody is way taller than me and some of them get to shave. Harold has an electric razor; those are pretty cool. I recalibrated his for him and fixed the gears; the ones inside it were pretty flimsy plastic and didn't always engage.

I guess that girls comment was pretty vague. Do you remember that girl who dumped the punch on Charlie at that party? She sent me a really nice letter over the summer, but then she sent me a really angry one when she found out I'd made friends with Harold and Charlie after she left. I don't get it. I don't really know any other girls, but if they're all like that, I don't think I want to. I told her I didn't want to be pen pals anymore, but then I felt bad about that. I was going to write her another letter, but I had thrown out the envelope with the return address because I was angry, I guess. I'm not going to do that again.

I hope moving to Colorado is nice. I guess it would be nice to get a change of scenery. I hope you and your wife are doing better.

Sincerely,

Tony
Dear Captain America,

Hi. My name is Tony. I'm ten years old. I am friends with Steve, the guy who wrote Captain America before you. You have some really big shoes to fill. Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I am giving you a chance to write Captain America as well as Steve did, but if you mess him up, I will tell you exactly what you got wrong.

Steve sometimes asked me for help with science stuff, and you are welcome to do that, too. You can also check to make sure you're writing Captain America right, because I would rather give you advice than let you write bad stories.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Captain America,

I haven't heard back from you yet. I know it's probably tough starting a new job with all that pressure, but I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Steve,

Happy Thanksgiving! The new guy doesn't reply to my letters at all. I'm really concerned because he's been writing whole new issues while I was at school and can't read them, and I have no way of knowing if he's doing a good job or not. And he didn't even send me the new issues so I missed three whole months of comics. I guess that's my fault, though. I should have reminded my mom to buy them while I was gone. I'm really upset because I think I missed your last one.

Thank you for the postcards from Colorado. I went to the military base there with my dad once, but I haven't really seen the state. I wanted to go hunting for jackalopes but my dad says they aren't real. Personally, I think the best way to keep people from hunting you is to convince them that you're mythological.

What did you think of the Presidential elections? We were allowed to watch some of the news at school. Usually we're not allowed to watch TV at all. My dad is very pleased; he says that Reagan is going to be a much better President than Carter, and he also says he's worked with Mr. Bush, the new Vice President, and he likes him very much. I'm just hoping that Mr. Reagan is able to get those poor hostages released. I bet if Captain America were around, he would have taken care of that. He wouldn't have let innocent Americans be trapped for over a year.

You're probably right about girls. I bet your wife is really nice, and my mom is a good mom. I shouldn't be assuming that all girls are like Virginia just because she's the only one I know. The guys are talking about girls all the time now. Charlie and Harold both have girlie magazines under their mattresses. I looked at them and the girls are really pretty but they're just sort of weird to me. I think I'd much rather talk to a girl for real than just stare at pictures of one.

Talk to you soon,

Tony
Dear Steve,

Merry Christmas. You really didn't need to send me more comics! And yes, I do have to pay you back for them. Thank you. The other present you mentioned in your letter hasn't arrived yet, but I'll keep an eye out for it.

This new guy is just not doing Cap justice. No wonder he doesn't reply to my letters. I'm going to have to explain some things about nuclear submarines to him. The Nautilus wasn't even built until 1954 so there's no way Cap would be fighting one. I suppose you could say that Maxon built one first, but that doesn't make sense. I highly doubt Maxon's technology was superior to any project my dad was working on.

Speaking of which, my dad finally got me a really good present this year! I got my own home computer. It's really cool. You can make it do all kinds of calculations or tell it to draw things for you and the lines are always perfectly calculated. I have been teaching myself some programming languages so I can write programs for it because all my dad got me for it were games. So far I'm starting to get the hang of BASIC and Pascal but I want to learn LISP and C and Fortran, too. I really like it because you just make lists of instructions and the computer just does what you tell it to do. I think my dad likes it because it's kept me busy the entire holiday break. I've been using it way too late at night because I don't want to go to bed. I just want to keep programming things, and I won't be able to take my computer to school with me in a couple of weeks. I already set up a rudimentary security system on the computer to keep my mom and dad from spying on my files when I'm gone. I don't really think I have anything that private, but you never can be too safe.

I made you a Christmas present, too, but you're going to have to find someone with a computer to look at it. The black thing in this envelope is called a floppy disk. You can put it into a computer and it will read all the information. In case you can't find a computer, it's a Captain America video game. It's not very good because it's the first game I've programmed, but it was fun to do.

Tony
December, 1980: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Captain America,

Even though you haven't replied to any of my letters, I feel like it's important to tell you that there couldn't possibly be a nuclear submarine in your comic. The Nautilus, which was the first nuclear submarine in the world, wasn't commissioned until 1951, and since my dad helped build it, I can guarantee you that there's no way someone else built a secret one first. It was completed in 1954 and Cap had disappeared by then.

Plus, I don't think you understand how nuclear meltdowns OR nuclear torpedoes work.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

PS: In the spirit of even-handed criticism, I really liked the insert with the map of Steve's apartment.

Chapter End Notes

The December, 1980 issue of Captain America involves Captain America being tied onto an oil tanker, which is then intended to be used as a nuclear torpedo. There is also a submarine involved.

Hilariously, I didn't know this when I wrote this letter. I was just making random stuff up.
Dear Steve,

HOLY SHIT. I know I shouldn't swear but I have never, ever, in my whole life ever gotten such an amazing present from anybody. How did you manage to get this? Oh. Well. I know how you managed to get this because you used to work with the artists.

I am going to have this framed and hung on the wall in my bedroom right over my bed where I can look at it all the time.

THIS IS THE BEST PRESENT EVER.

THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU.

I drew you a picture of Captain America saying thank you but OH MY GOD I HAVE MY OWN CAPTAIN AMERICA COVER AND IT'S FROM THE ISSUE I HELPED YOU WITH.

YOU ARE THE BEST BEST BEST EVER.

Tony
Dear Virginia,

Thank you for your Christmas card.

No, I'm not mad anymore. I actually wanted to write you back but I lost your address. So I haven't been mad for a while. I hope you're not mad. You have to understand that Harold and Charlie are my friends now, though, and if you don't like them, it's best if you kept that to yourself.

Oh, and apology accepted. But if it wasn't, I probably wouldn't be writing back.

It's okay with me that you're older than me. Usually I only talk to grown ups, and all the boys in my classes are older than me.

I'm glad you got to go to Murano! Did you get any glass there?

I hope you had a nice Christmas and a nice New Year.

Sincerely,

Tony
Dear Captain America,

I don't think your response is in the spirit of the series. Steve Rogers would never say something like that. Steve Rogers would appreciate being told he's wrong.

You should really read a book about nuclear fission or avoid the subject entirely.

Tony Stark
Dear Steve,

I'm glad you think there are times when it's okay to swear.

Yes, I've been keeping up on the computer programming even though I don't have a computer here at school. I have a notebook and I've been writing down a lot of computer programs by hand. It's fun because I can look over my writing and improve it, and it makes me think about how the programs will run without actually running them.

I was really glad to see those hostages released!

There's a thing I wanted to talk to you about. I don't really have anyone else to talk to about it. The guys would probably just all laugh at me. My dad would tell me I was wasting his time. My mom would try to be sympathetic but I don't think she really gets it.

I think I have a crush on somebody. Except it's not who I'm supposed to have a crush on at all. I guess since you're married, you probably had a crush on your wife at one point, right? And maybe on other people, too? It's so infuriating because I feel so stupid around this person. I'm the smartest person I know until they're around and then it's suddenly as if everything that comes out of my mouth is the dumbest thing ever.

I keep having dreams about kissing them, and I wake up and half of me is all hot and flustered and sad it's over, and the other half is kind of grossed out.

I know you're going to ask me to say more about them. They're older and blond and actually remind me a lot of Steve Rogers. Not just because they're tall and blond but because they're very... righteous I think is the word I would use. They always believe in doing the right thing and don't compromise.

I don't know what to do. I feel sick to my stomach about it, but I know they'd just laugh if I said anything. Or worse. Have you ever felt that way? What did you do?

Thanks in advance,

Tony
January, 1981: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

Sorry for the short letter, but I have a question. Have you ever had a crush on a boy? What's that like?

Tony
February, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Thanks for the advice, but I don't think I can do that. The worst that can happen is that I would probably get beaten up and lose all my friends.

It's awful. I feel like my guts are getting twisted all the time. I don't know if I can explain this to you because I feel like...you know how smart I am, right? This is the only time in my whole life I've met anybody who even comes close to my level of intelligence. I guess, mathematical and scientific and linguistic intelligence, since my spatial intelligence and social intelligence and musical intelligence leave something to be desired. I probably won't ever meet anybody who's this close to being as smart as me again in my life, and I know they won't like me back.

I sent them a Valentine.

Tony
February, 1981: H-

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

H-

I've never talked to you, but you're really smart, and I like how curious and confident you always seem. I hope you have a good Valentine's Day.

I would say "from your secret admirer" but that sounds kind of stupid. I know you're really clever, so I wore gloves and wrote this card out with the wrong hand, so you're probably not going to be able to figure out who it's from.

Chapter End Notes

   Yes, this Valentine is written to another Marvel character. See if you can figure out who it is!

   Maybe there will be a prize for the first person who guesses it. We'll see.
Dear Virginia,

No! I didn't mean that I have a crush on you! Not that you are not entirely worthy of boys falling in love with you all the time. I bet there are tons of Italian boys who are in love with you, aren't there? It's just that I've only met you the one time.

It's just that I think I have a crush on somebody and it's not really the kind of thing I can talk to the guys about.

Some of the guys talk about having a type. It usually has something to do with hair color. I'm not sure I understand why hair color would be a deciding factor in why somebody likes somebody, because wouldn't you want them to be the kind of person who's interesting to be around? Do you have a type?

If this is too weird to write about, that's okay. I can write about something else.

Tony
Dear Steve,

I guess that deadbeat who took over writing from you isn't going to reply to my letters. And his plots aren't as well-thought-out as yours. I hope he gets fired.

Still have the crush. It's still awful. I keep sneaking in their initials into the programs I've been writing, like a secret code no one else can see. I didn't go to the Valentine's Day dance this year. I just didn't want to. Harold and Charlie both egged me on to go, but I pretended I wasn't feeling well. I just...I knew my crush would be there and I didn't want to see them dancing with somebody. And none of the girls pay any attention to me, because I'm so small. Well, they pay attention to me, but it's in a cute-head-patting way and I don't know what to think about that. Harold came back from the party with a hickey on his neck and lipstick on his shirt. Charlie seemed a little pissed that he didn't get a hickey, but I think he's so big a lot of the girls are scared of him.

I've been writing to Virginia again. Her dad is the Air Force. She's in Italy right now, and after that they're going to be in Bitburg in Germany. She thought I had a crush on her and wrote me a very long, nice letter about how she thought I was very nice but didn't feel that way about me, which I guess was very kind of her but wasn't what I was expecting.

My dad is getting angry that they haven't skipped me another year. I think he still thinks they skipped me because of my superior intelligence and not because of my inferior social skills. I think it was a little of both, really. I'd like to think it was just my brains, but I'm not going to lie to myself.

Oh, so my crush got the Valentine but I don't think they even told anybody about it. I didn't hear about it from anyone, at least. This is why I like them so much. They could have made a big fuss, but they didn't.

Anyway, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about Captain America, because I haven't done that in a while. I've been thinking more about why I like Cap so much. Yes, he's brave and stands up for smaller people and all the things we've discussed before. But he's also very human and he makes mistakes, and he's very graceful about it when he makes mistakes. He doesn't get mad or blame other people or take it out on them. That's something I wish I could do. I'm not very good at that. I get really angry at other people or yell at them when I make mistakes. I'm not very patient with people, I guess, and Steve Rogers is. I wonder if that's because he had to prove himself to so many people, so he's more willing to give people a chance.

Tony

PS This made me think of something else I should do.
Dear Captain America,

I'm sorry I was snippy with you. Sometimes I get really angry when people don't take my advice, because I feel like people underestimate me because I'm a kid, but I guess it must be hard having kids telling you you're doing your job wrong, even if you are doing it wrong. Writing stories is a really hard job that you don't get paid a lot for. I write a lot, but I write computer programs, mostly. When you're writing computer programs, it's easy to tell where you made a mistake. With a story, sometimes it's not so easy because you can't see where it's broken all the time. Especially if the broken thing is in another field, like particle physics. I guess to be a really good writer, you would have to be an expert on every single thing there is, or you have to accept you're just going to make a lot of mistakes sometimes.

I really love Captain America and I want Steve to be just so. I hope you understand that. I'm not correcting you because I think you're stupid or because I hate you. I just want you to be the best at your job, and I miss when Steve was writing it. I was hoping we'd be friends just like I'm friends with him. I forgot that you weren't the same people.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Steve,

No, I'm pretty sure my crush still doesn't know I exist.

I think it's all right, though. The more I like them and they don't notice me, the more irritated I get. Being irritated actually feels better than being in love.

Stupid hormones. I keep telling myself that this is a normal part of early adolescence and that I'm at the mercy of a lot of chemicals. Logically my brain understands it but that doesn't actually make it feel any better. I'm just going to take your word for it that everybody goes through this and we all have crushes who don't like us back. And then I'm going to go punch something and write a computer program. Maybe I'll write a computer program that punches things.

Tony
Dear Captain America,

Really? I don't know whether to be insulted or flattered. Do people really do that? I don't understand how it would benefit anybody to pretend to be a kid. Nobody ever listens to kids. You mostly just get told that's nice, now leave me alone.

I really am a kid, and I really am ten, and no, my parents didn't help me with this. My parents don't even know I wrote to you. My mom knows about Steve, but my dad doesn't. He probably wouldn't like it.

I just really like science a lot. And Captain America. My dad actually worked on the Captain America project so I am really interested in it. Haven't you done your research? If you're writing Captain America, you should know who Howard Stark is. Steve recognized me by name.

The thing is that my dad doesn't tell me anything about his projects, so I started reading Captain America so I could understand better.

Sincerely, Tony Stark
May, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I just got home from school for the summer. It was great. We had a party for finishing the eighth grade and it didn't matter so much all the differences between me and the older guys this year, in the end we just celebrated together as friends. Harold and Charlie and I all snuck into the woods and lit a bonfire (after I showed them how to do it properly), and it was really great.

But then I got home and my dad says I'm not going back there for high school. I guess he finally listened all the times I said it was boring. He got me placed in some school in New Hampshire. So it's even further from home and really far from all my friends. He keeps telling me it's the best and shouting at me that I should be happy to be with the best, but all I can think is that I'm going to have to figure out making friends all over again. I don't even know anything about New Hampshire! I got a book out from the library. Their state bird is the purple finch. Their state motto is "Live Free or Die." At first, I thought I liked that, but the more I think about it, the more illogical it seems. Sure, I am a big fan of freedom, but if you're alive and not free, at least you always have the possibility of escape in your future. That's not so much true if you're dead. I feel like Cap would tell people to keep on living even when things are bad, right? And he's a symbol of America, which is supposed to be all about freedom. You don't just kill yourself because you're trapped. You try to escape.

So I'm not sure what I think about New Hampshire, especially since I'm a little scared I'm going to be trapped there. I guess I'm trying to give myself a little bit of a pep talk.

At least this solves the crush problem. I'll never see them again.

Tony
May, 1981: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

Thanks for the birthday card! Or should I say, danke! I hope you're settling in okay in Germany.

Whoever told you they're calling you that because of your freckles is lying. They're obviously calling you that because of your temper.

I don't mean that as an insult. You do get pretty heated. Sometimes that is an asset, believe me.

Anyway, thanks for listening. I guess the thing is, you're a girl so you don't have to worry as much about being beaten up, do you? What would you do if telling someone you like them might get you beaten up? Is that worth the risk? What if you were afraid your friends might hate you if they knew?

It would be so much easier if I liked somebody my friends would like, too.

Hey, I had a thought. I'm going to a new school next year. Is it okay if I pretend you're my girlfriend? I don't mean to be too forward. I don't expect anything from you, and I don't actually want you to be my girlfriend. I would even do you a favor in exchange if you wanted. I think it will just be easier to make friends if I could tell people I had a girlfriend.

Tony
May, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Thanks for the birthday present! This is the best. I would never have thought to ask for one myself, but I am having so much fun soldering things together.

My dad told me that eleven is too old to care about birthdays and I should grow up and be a man about it. I think what really happened is he forgot about it and then needed to make it look like he didn't. Then he poured me a shot of whiskey. I still don't like it, but I guess I'm getting used to it. It doesn't hurt so much when I swallow a whole shot at once, and my dad doesn't tell me I'm being a wimp.

I did wash my mouth out with coffee right after, though. I'm starting to like coffee. It definitely gets the taste of whiskey out of my mouth.

I also soldered the locks on my dad's liquor cabinet shut. He'll never guess how that happened, especially since he doesn't know I have a soldering iron. I can't decide whether I want to be there to watch when he finds out, or if I should be far away in case he gets really mad. It isn't going to stop him or anything, because he'll probably just take the cabinet doors off their hinges, but it will be pretty funny.

I was thinking of other things I could solder. I'm going to try to open up the processor for my computer and see if I can get it to work faster. I don't entirely understand how the hardware works yet but it doesn't look too complicated.

You really do send me the best presents. This is much better than a shot of whiskey.

Tony
Dear Virginia,

Oh. I should have known you'd have a boyfriend, I guess. And I really didn't mean to insult you. I guess I can see why my letter would be a little insulting but I don't think it's worth being that upset about. Sorry about that.

Tony
Dear Harold,

I'm so angry that I'm going to miss freshman year with you guys! My dad can be such a prick sometimes. I figured I'd write you a letter. I know you're not much for writing, so it's fine if you don't write me back, but I wanted you to know that I'm going to miss you.

Tell Charlie hi. I am not even bothering to write to him because I know he'll feel obligated to write back even if I tell him he shouldn't be, and I know how much he hates writing.

I hope school's good this year. It's hard going from the top to the bottom, but I think you'll do a good job. The older guys would have to be stupid to pick on you.

Hope you're having a good summer. I'll write to you soon.

Tony
Dear Steve,

The soldering iron has come in really handy. You know those rocket kits you can buy that are all made of balsa wood? They're okay but they burn up a lot or break on impact with the ground. So I built my own metal rocket and soldered it all together, and that worked really well. It went super high. I was lucky that there weren't any people around, though, because it plummeted down pretty quick.

I also took my computer apart and put it back together again. Computers are tougher than they look. So I took it apart AGAIN and put it together again AGAIN and now it's working fine. I decided I should probably learn more about computers before just taking apart an almost-brand-new one again, because I don't think my parents will replace this one if I break it too badly.

All of those programs I wrote over the school year worked, mostly! So that was cool. The thing that is frustrating me the most now is that there's no way to input information from other sources. For example, I can type in the temperature of something, but it would be much better if I could just hook the computer directly to a thermometer and create a heat sensor. I'm going to see if I can figure that out.

Virginia is really a handful, as my mom would say. I asked her if I could pretend she was my girlfriend at my new school and she wrote me back a really angry letter. She said something about objectification and the male gaze or something and I really didn't understand where she was going with it but I doubt I will be hearing from her for a while, which is too bad.

Do you remember last summer when I said I wasn't going to try to make my bicycle fly again? I decided that gliding and flying are not technically the same thing. I didn't break any bones this time, either, although I considered it. I would want to wait till the end of the summer to do that, before I have to go to this new school.

How is your wife doing? I'm sorry I haven't asked in a while but I just realized you haven't mentioned her lately.

Tony

PS Don't worry. I won't really injure myself on purpose. But I have thought about it. Not seriously.
Dear Virginia,

That's fine. I'm not mad at you, but writing to you isn't fun when all your letters are like this. You can write to me again anytime, but I'm not going to write to you unless you feel like it.

Tony
Hey Harold Happy,

That’s cool that all the older guys are calling you by your nickname, but I still can’t get used to that. I guess I will eventually.

Why was Henry talking about me? That’s so weird. What did he say? I mean, I guess it’s nice that he noticed that I wasn’t at school anymore, but I didn’t even realize he knew who I was.

Thanks for the letter. It's okay that it's short. I know you're busy and you're much more of a talker than a writer.

Tony
Dear Steve,

I haven't gotten your letter yet, but I'm starting to think that by the time I get it, I'm going to have way too much to say, so I'm going to start writing now.

I think school is going to be okay. This school is-- I don't know how to put it. Much more accommodating to kids like me. But my dad isn't going to get his wish in regard to skipping me. They said I can start in ninth grade, but I have to stay the full four years and they have classes that are way more advanced than the classes at most schools.

They also have A WHOLE COMPUTER LAB. A whole lab! And I can sign up to use it anytime I want as long as there isn't a class in there.

THERE ARE COMPUTER CLASSES.

I won't get to take those till sophomore year, but I'm really excited.

They also have lots of art classes and music classes and science classes, which is great because I was already taking honors Physics at my old school and that was the highest level science we had. They are making me take Physics again, which I don't mind, because it's my favorite, and I had a bunch of questions about Planck's constant that my last teacher couldn't answer.

My roommate is actually a guy I met before, which was a big surprise. His name is Ty. Our dads work in the same industry and they don't really get along but we talked about that and Ty assured me it's all right and he doesn't think I'm my dad. He actually said he asked to be my roommate when he heard I was going to be here. That surprised me, because I didn't think he liked me, but I guess people grow up, which is nice. I'm really flattered. We have bunk beds in our room and he even let me take the top one. I've always wanted to have a top bunk. I already built us a collapsible ladder so it doesn't take up as much space.

I'm actually IN my bunk bed. At my last school, I had my own room, but this school says they don't give any kids special privileges. I kind of like it. It's almost like having siblings.

I hope I hear from you soon! I bet I'm going to have a lot to tell you!

Oh, also, I got the weirdest letter from Harold. I mean Happy. I don't get the whole weird name thing. I mean, nicknames are one thing, but I feel like I'd rather everybody know exactly who I was. Anyway, he actually said my crush was asking about me. Which makes me feel a little weird. Weird-good, but also weird-bad, because I was starting to get over it over the summer and that sort of made me feel things again.

Tony
Dear Steve,

Oh. Leave it to me to put my foot in my mouth. I'm sorry to hear that. Are you getting divorced, or did she just need some time away?

School really is pretty great. There aren't just computer classes, there are computer CLUBS. Well, a computer club. There's also a video club with video cameras and a robotics club and it's making my head spin, there's so much to do here. I barely have time to write letters. I guess it's just as well that Virginia hasn't been writing. Or the new Captain America guy. I sort of gave up on him. I just can't get into his stories. They're not nearly as good as yours. I hope they find someone to take over for him soon. I've been checking the bylines to see.

I'll get back to school in a minute. I guess I get what you're saying about Virginia. I didn't mean to make it sound like I thought I could buy her friendship. Or fake-girlfriendship, I guess. I just was thinking that the boys at my new school would think I was cooler if I had a girlfriend, and she's the only girl I know. Plus, she's really pretty, so they'd probably all be pretty jealous.

She has a boyfriend. Happy has a girlfriend. I know I'm younger than both of them but I've been feeling a little bit left behind. I think that's the biggest problem with being skipped so many grades. It seems like it's going to be easier here, though, to meet kids closer to my own age.

First, there's Ty. Like I said. We joined the computer club together and he offered to help me with my programs, so I've been showing him all the stuff I've been working on. He's really curious about the new project my dad is working on with the government. I was surprised he'd even heard about it! But it seems like he knows more about it than I do, and he was a little disappointed when I told him my dad hasn't really said anything about it to me. I explained my dad is kind of a jerk.

So everything is pretty good here, I guess. I'm gonna run to robotics club and check that out! I'll talk to you soon!

Tony

PS I hope things work out with your wife.
Dear Happy,

Of course I'm not a fag. You know me. I never did anything even remotely faggy, did I? I don't know why Henry would say that. Thanks for punching him, but I hope you didn't get in trouble.

School is pretty fun. I'm making new friends. I hope school is going well for you, too. Just remember that there's no shame in asking questions. It lets the teachers know you're paying attention, even if you don't do well on the tests.

Good luck with wrestling! I know you'll do great this year.

Tony
Dear Henry,

Hey. I know I've never talked to you, but Happy told me you two got into a fight and it had something to do with me. I just wanted to say, first off, that I didn't even know you knew who I was, and I don't know what happened, since I wasn't there, but Happy can kind of have a temper sometimes, but you should make up with him. Neither of us have a lot of friends, so we can be really protective of each other and I know he only meant well. Second, if you have something to say to me, I would hope you would mention it to me and not to other people. You seem like a good guy and I always looked up to you when I was at school.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Steve,

Ty keeps asking me who I send all these letters to. I explained, so he says hi. He's sitting on his bunk now reading while I'm writing to you. Ty says Captain America is all right, but he likes characters who are not so clearly good or evil. I guess I can see that. Real people aren't one or the other. Although I suppose the real Cap wasn't so much one or the other. I mean to say that he was certainly a good guy, but I bet he had faults. It's just that the comics don't so much tell us about those because they are about his adventures and heroics.

Ty watches a lot of TV. Some of the shows Ty watches sound pretty good. He was telling me about this one with a stuntman who is also a bounty hunter, and then this other one with these two rival oil tycoon families in Texas. He said I should really watch that one., but we don't have a TV, because my dad says TV is full of propaganda intended to turn us into mindless robots. I guess that if I watched TV, I wouldn't have as much time to do things like build stuff or program computers, so maybe I'm better off like this.

I'm excited to hear that you're moving back to New York, even if the circumstances aren't the best. Do you think you'll start writing comics again?

Tony
Dear Dad,

Thanks for the card. Everything is fine here. Is everything okay at home?

Your son,

Tony
Dear Mom,

Did somebody die? Dad sent me a card. Do you know about this? I didn't even think he knew what the name of my school was. Can you call me? I am allowed to use the phone on weekends and Friday evenings.

Love you,

Tony
Dear Steve,

My dad is apparently trying to quit drinking. I don't know how to feel about this. He sent me a card. Mom says one of the things he's supposed to do as part of quitting is try to make amends with people he's hurt. I guess that he thought that sending a card was a good way to do that. It made me feel a little weird, though, because my dad isn't the kind of person who's ever sent a card before.

I also sent my crush a letter.

Shit.

I don't know how to talk about this. What happens if I suddenly have the kind of dad who cares about how I'm doing and then he finds out that I
Dear Steve,

My dad is trying to quit drinking. Mom says one of the things he's supposed to do as part of quitting is try to make amends with people he's hurt. He sent me a card. I guess that he thought that sending a card was a good way to do that. My dad hasn't ever sent me a card before, so it seemed a little weird and I was worried something was wrong. But I am going to try to help.

The funny part is that I took two bottles from his liquor cabinet and hid them in my bag when I came to school. I haven't done anything with them but I thought that if I had problems with the other boys, I would have something to maybe help me make friends.

I have a question. What do you do when there is something you feel like you should tell somebody, but you're worried that they'll be mad at you, or that it will change their opinion of you? Suppose it's a big, personal secret, like the fact that your dad drinks too much. You want to tell someone things that are happening in your life, but you can't, without telling them that part of it, and you're not sure you're ready to tell that part. I know you know about my dad at this point because you've actually asked me questions about it, so I feel like I can ask you this.

Thanks,

Tony
Dear Henry,

Oh. No. That is not at all what Happy said.

I appreciate your concern, but no, I switched schools because my dad decided he wanted to send me somewhere else. I think this school is a better match, anyway, because there's a computer lab and a lot more resources. You'd probably like this school better, too, if your parents would send you here.

I'm sorry Happy took what you said the wrong way. Either way, the answer is no, but I guess being curious is not the same as being insulting, even if it is a pretty weird thing to ask about a person.

Good luck in the science fair. You're going to need it. My roommate and I are both entering. I don't doubt you'll get to regionals, but when you do, be prepared to get squashed like a bug.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Happy,

I talked to Henry and he says that he was asking out of curiosity, not because he meant to insult me. And he asked you because he thought that if anyone knew, it would be you.

It's still not a cool question to ask, but maybe you should apologize. You have a habit of reading people wrong, like when you thought I was insulting your intelligence. This is why I ask questions before I hit people.

Well, really that's also because I'm terrible at hitting people. But we can keep that between ourselves.

Hope school's good. Tell Charlie hey.

Tony
Thanksgiving, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Thanksgiving is weird this year. My dad is really talkative, but it's this sort of fake talkative, like he
doesn't know how normal people carry on conversations. I don't know what to do with a dad who
is acting interested in my life. I feel bad, because I just want to go work on my computer, but I feel
like I have to talk to him and do family stuff with him.

He keeps buying me stuff. He got me new sneakers and these really expensive jeans that he said he
read were cool somewhere. He actually bought me a computer game. It's pretty cool, you have to
explore this house and find treasures and put them in a treasure case. It has some bugs, though. The
best one is that there's a troll who can kill you, but if you go to another screen and attack it, you can
still do damage and kill it. The funniest one though is that you can hit your head on a river. The
only annoying part is there's this thing called a grue that eats you if you go anywhere dark. I hate
the damn grue.

Mom says he's doing really well, and I guess he is, but he keeps asking me the same questions over
and over, about school and my friends, almost like he's forgotten he'd asked before, but I know my
dad's memory is really good. And he wants to do all this stuff I liked to do when I was a little kid
that he was too busy for, like go for grilled cheese and ice cream at Friendly's. The kids' menu goes
up to twelve but I didn't have the heart to tell him that I'm a little old to get a sundae with a face on
it.

It's nice to have him not shout and to be more interested in what I'm doing, but I don't really know
what to say to him. I think I'll be relieved when I go back to school.

Thanks for the advice. I guess I'm still not sure. It's hard to believe that people won't change their
opinion of me if they know some things about me. But I'll think about it.

Tony
Thanksgiving, 1981: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Captain America,

I don't know if you're the same guy I was writing to a few months ago, but I have to say that I actually really enjoy the plot that just wrapped up. I had been getting bored with the comics and hadn't picked one up in a few months, but my dad just bought me a whole bunch of them. I don't mean the action stuff, even though Ameridroid is pretty cool. I wish he hadn't been destroyed so quick, though. It seems like there's a lot you could do with a character who is a robot powered with a human intellect. Anyway, the thing I really liked was the whole plot about a Captain America movie.

It's interesting to think about what it must be like to have a movie made about you, especially while you're still alive. Obviously the Captain America comics are about Steve Rogers, but he's long dead and will never read them or have his reputation affected by them. And I think TV and movies and even the newspaper can affect someone's reputation even without there being hypnotic suggestions in them. Isn't that the thing with Spider-Man? J. Jonah Jameson hates Spider-Man so much that he makes the Bugle portray him as a villain or at best a nuisance.

It's also interesting to think about the difference between a fictional movie about a real person and a documentary, and what that really means. A documentary can be really biased, and doesn't that make it almost fictional?

Anyway, I just wanted to say good work.

Sincerely, Tony Stark

Chapter End Notes

(Tony is talking about the "Celluloid Heroes" storyline from Captain America issues #261-#263, which ran September through November, 1981)
December, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I'm back at school. I hope you're settling back in in New York. That's too bad about the writing but I think you'll be a really good teacher. And you can still write in your spare time.

Oh, just so you know, whoever the guy is who is writing Captain America right now is doing a much better job.

My dad didn't drink at all the whole time I was home, but he did ask me a lot of questions about Ty. At first, he seemed angry that we were rooming together and he said he was going to call the school about that and something about conflict of interest, but then he seemed to warm up to the idea.

And then he asked me if I could find things out about his dad's government contracts.

I don't think I'm comfortable with that, but I didn't know what to say, so I said I would try. I guess I can just try a little and then give up, right?

I talked to Jarvis about it a little bit. I'm not really supposed to bother him in his rooms but I wasn't sure what else to do. I know my mom would take my dad's side. She's still so happy that he hasn't been drinking for almost a month.

Talking to Jarvis is weird because he never says things directly, he makes observations and then leaves it for me to make up my mind. I like that he thinks I can do that, but it would be easier if he'd just say one way or the other. Jarvis said that sometimes my dad puts his work before people. I already knew that. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, though.

Anyway, I ended up leaving a day early and coming back to school on Saturday instead of Sunday. I made an excuse that I had to work on my project for the science fair.

Tony
December, 1981: Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Henry,

Oh. I doubt we're even going to be in the same category. I guess that's a cool project, but I've never really worked with anything organic before, so I don't know anything about paper wasps. I'm much better with machinery than I am with living things, I guess.

The first project I wanted to do was an improved design for the integrated circuits in a home computer, but I guess I can't really do that, because I have no way to actually build the circuit with the equipment we have available in the school lab, and I don't know that the judges will believe me unless I can prove it. Instead, I'm trying to improve on the design for alcohol breathalyzers. I think they'll be more efficient running off a fuel cell than they will off crystals, and you know the judges at these things like projects that sound like you care about serious problems like drunk driving.

Sure, it's cool if we trade ideas. I trade ideas with my roommate all the time, and we're studying the same fields. He actually helped me come up with my second idea when it looked like the first one wasn't going to work. I don't think you'd steal them or anything.

Tony
December, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

This science fair project is really driving me crazy. I've been going to bed really late, and then getting up in the morning is so hard. My first class is French and I keep accidentally speaking Spanish. I fell asleep with my face right in the baobab planet in *Le Petit Prince* on Tuesday. Ty felt so bad he actually snuck off campus and bought me four cups of coffee. I drank two of them and the other two are carefully hidden in my underwear drawer for when I need them. I let him have a shot of my whiskey in exchange. He seemed really excited to try it until he tasted it.

I feel like I should tell Ty about my dad. Not about what my dad asked me, but about the drinking. I guess we already talked about this, sort of. Christmas break is coming up and I don't really know what my dad's going to be like. And I know Ty is going to wonder if I end up spending part of break here at school. Maybe I can come up with a good excuse.

Oh! I've actually been exchanging letters with my crush. My old crush, I guess I should say. The more I get to know them, the less weird I feel about them. It all started over a misunderstanding, but now that that's sorted out, we've been talking about science and stuff and it's cool. I still like them, I guess, but it seems a lot more normal now to just talk to them like they're a regular person.

Tony
December, 1981: Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Henry,

Good to hear from you!

I didn't mean I was only doing the project because the judges would like it. I know what you're saying about how we should want to do good things because they're good and not because we want approval. But if we get approval, it helps us do more good, right? My dad couldn't do all the new research he does now if he'd started with some of the less popular ideas he's had, but now he can do them, too.

For me, sure, this wouldn't be my first choice, but I know I can do it, and I know people will understand what I'm doing and why it's important. You're doing all this interesting stuff with wasps, but like you said yourself, most people hear wasps and they think of really aggressive bugs. Most people even think that about bees. I didn't know that paper wasps were major pollinators. I just thought they were nuisances that build pretty cool hives. So you are also going to have to convince people that what you're doing is worth the time and effort. And this is a contest. It's about winning. If I win, I get a scholarship, and it will be the first time I ever have any money that didn't come from my parents. And I can use that money to do whatever I want.

Sorry, I am sort of lecturing. I've been trying to work on not doing that.

Oh, so, yeah, I do know the guy who used to write Captain America. Do people really know about that? I used to write in to the comic letters page all the time when I was a little kid, and he just started writing back to me, which was really nice. He's a cool guy. I didn't know you read comics. I guess I'm not surprised.

Tony
Steve,

I talked to Ty a little bit. I didn't tell him everything but I guess I explained that I wasn't on really good terms with my dad right now. You were right. He was really understanding. He talked to his parents and they said that I could come stay there if I was unhappy at home over the winter break. It was just really nice.

Ty's been great about the science fair project, too. We're in the same division, and I guess that would make a lot of people get competitive, but he's been really helpful. I'm still stressed out about it, though. When I ran out of coffee, I switched to Coke, but drinking too much Coke makes my mouth feel really sticky all the time. It does keep me awake, though.

I also found out that if I'm really tired in class in the morning, if I lick my fingers and touch them to my eyeballs, my eyes hurt too much to close them, so that works, too.

I don't know why my dad doesn't like Ty's family. They seem like really decent people.

I'll write you a longer letter over break, I promise! I'm just so busy right now!

Tony
Henry,

I don't think you understood my point. I do think blood-alcohol-level analysis is important. I'm not just doing it for attention. But if I have a list of, say, ten things, and fuel cells for breathalyzers is number three on the list, but number one and two are things no one will understand, I'm going to do number three, get the money people will pay me for it, and then use that money to do number one and number two. It means all three will get done instead of number one, which I might think is a lot cooler or a lot more important, but that I know other people won't get.

I do get what you're saying about doing what you think is right. I'm not doing something just because it's also popular. I'm doing it because it's good AND popular. I'm not sure I get why you think that's wrong.

I'll tell Steve you say hey, then. Yes, his name is Steve. I still think that's pretty funny. And I definitely agree with you, that's one of the reasons I like Captain America, also. Most superheroes are born with their powers, and it would kind of make them jerks if they used them for selfish things. Steve Rogers actually went out of his way to gain abilities so that he could help people more. And that's really neat.

Tony
December, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I'm going to have to change my science fair project. This is not going well at all.

The project itself is going well. It's not the project. But it's causing complications.

I left school this morning. My dad still isn't drinking, so that's good, and he was more normal than he was at Thanksgiving. He actually drove all the way up to New Hampshire to pick me up at school. It's almost a six hour drive! My dad almost never drives, but I think he wanted to do a normal father-son thing like other families do. And of course he wanted to stop and get ice cream on the way. He spent a lot of time telling me about his life, and about the projects he's working on. Some of them are really great. He's doing a lot of work with energy technology that I think is going to be really important someday. It seems unwise for people to keep depending on oil for power when things are so uncertain in the Middle East right now. Did you hear about the car bomb in Beirut? (And that massacre in El Salvador was terrifying. Also, Poland. The stuff going on in Poland is really confusing me.)

I felt pretty good about it. He still had his moments, and he didn't seem to remember anything about me between the time I was seven and now, but mostly, we were having a nice time.

But then he asked me about the project. And I was really excited, because I thought he'd be really proud when I told him that I was working on something that would help identify drunk drivers.

He actually stopped the car. In the middle of traffic. He put his feet on the breaks and just squealed to a halt, and I was terrified. I thought we were going to die.

I think I might have yelled. But I don't remember. I just remember being scared.

He finally got the car onto the shoulder, and he shouted at me and accused me of airing our dirty laundry in public. I told him that I hadn't said anything to anybody and there was no reason to think people would guess it had anything to do with our family. He said I was trying to tell people without saying it outright.

I got really mad. Partly, I was mad because he was accusing me of something I didn't do, but partly, I was mad because I had hoped that maybe he was only angry when he drank. In movies and comics and books and things, that's usually how it is. You see perfectly nice people shout or hit people after they get drunk. Then they stop drinking, and their families are okay. I thought that was how things were going to be with him.

I told him I wouldn't tell anybody that, because I was too embarrassed. And then he shouted at me for being ashamed of him, and he asked me if he hadn't done enough for me.

I didn't cry, though. I was pretty proud of that.

The rest of the ride home was quiet. Neither of us said anything. I got out of the car and came in my room and started writing to you.

I know I could ask Ty if I could stay with his family, but I don't think my dad would let me. I just don't know what to do. I could apologize and smooth everything over, but I don't think I did
anything wrong. What if he's mad the whole time I'm home?

I feel like I should change the project, though, if this is making him so mad.

What do you think?

Tony

PS Oh! I found out my former crush really likes Captain America, too. (It really is former. They said some things and I think I mistook confidence for stubbornness. It's okay, because I think we're starting to be pretty good friends.) But they told me to say hey, so I will.
Dear Captain America,

Thanks for your nice letter. I think it would be really fun to write comics someday.

I liked the December issue all right, but I was disappointed that it ended with Hardy dying. I think you could have kept him alive and done more interesting things with that dream machine. I really liked the idea of an alternate universe where the Nazis won-- it would sort of be Cap's greatest failure, wouldn't it? And really hard for him to adjust to.

Now that I think about it, what would have happened to Cap if, one, he hadn't died, and two, the Nazis had taken over? I feel like he would have been killed right away, or he would have had to go into hiding or fight in a resistance movement or something. It's something to think about, anyway.

One thing I like about what you're doing with things like the dream machine is that you're using things that are so totally impossible, scientifically, that it's a lot easier to believe than when things are real enough that I can pick out the mistakes. It's funny, isn't it, that a machine that makes people's dreams turn into reality seems more plausible than a submarine that doesn't work right.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Dear Henry,

I feel like people saying 'we can agree to disagree' is a nice way of saying 'you're wrong, and I want the last word.'

But it's obvious you don't want to talk about that anymore. No hard feelings. I hope your project is going well.

Break is all right. I've been reading a lot. Ty finished his project a bit ago, and he's actually found test subjects willing to try it out, somewhere in Oregon, or something. I guess some people will play video games no matter what. I'm still not sure what I think of the premise. I know I'm not going to play it. It seems sort of dangerous. Obviously, you know my dad builds a lot of weapons for the military, but I don't see how this could be used against anyone but civilians, and only one at a time, so it doesn't seem that efficient, unless you had a whole arcade full of them. But I think Ty isn't trying for something with a real world application. I think he's just doing the most zany thing he can think of.

I'm sure, I mean, I guess I could do that. My dad can be sort of hard to predict from time to time, but I bet if I get him in a good mood, he'd show you the labs. I'm not sure this is the best time to ask, though. I'm kind of in the shithouse with him at the moment. Let me figure out how to get back on his good side and I'll see if he'd be willing.

To be fair, Steve Rogers wasn't a scientist. I think that's okay. Not everybody is an intellectual. But he was a really good guy who wanted to help however he could. So, yes, you're right that he had to rely on other people to enhance his physical abilities, but I think having the skill to find the people you need is just as important as having the skill to do something on your own. I'm way better at building things than Ty is, but he is way better at organizing and planning. He's always three steps ahead. I'd never be able to keep to a schedule without him. And if I couldn't do that, I might not finish all the irritating schoolwork that has nothing to do with my interests. So he's just as valuable as I am, even if it's in a different way. Erskine may have completed the serum, but he couldn't have been the person to take it. And Steve is the one who decided how to use his powers once he had them, so I think that's pretty important.

Good talking to you! Have a merry Christmas!

Tony
Hey Steve,

It's really nice of you to offer but I don't think my parents would let me. I wish I could, though.

My mom said I could stay at Ty's for a couple days between Christmas and New Year's, but I'm not sure. Part of me would like to go, but part of me feels like being around people who get along with their family would just make me feel homesick.

My dad still isn't talking to me. More not talking than usual, because usually he doesn't talk to me because he's too involved with some project. This time he's doing it on purpose. I've tried everything I can think of. I told him I'd change the project. I told him I'd drop out of the science fair. He hasn't shouted at me again, but he either ignores me or glares at me, or says "that's nice," in a tone of voice that makes it obvious he really doesn't think it's nice.

I don't get it. I thought I was doing something good, that he'd be proud of. I still think I'm doing something good, and I really wish he would look at it because he's the reason I know anything about fuel cells in the first place. I don't know what else he wants from me.

I keep thinking, maybe I should just tell him what I know about what Ty's dad is working on. It's not much, but I feel like that's his idea of what a good son would do. It doesn't seem fair that I have to be a good son when he's always been a shitty father.

Sorry to be such a downer lately. I need to do something about that. I just think between my dad and this whole science fair thing, I don't have much time for anything else. At least I'm catching up on sleep!

Tony
Dear Virginia,

I know I told you I would wait to hear from you but since I haven't and it's Christmas, I hope it's okay for me to send you a card. Merry Christmas and best wishes.

Tony
December, 1981: Hey, Happy,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hey, Happy,

Merry Christmas!

Haven't heard from you in a while. School is good, but really hard. Did you ever expect me to say school was hard? Haha! Family is family, I guess. Hope you're doing well. Let me know, okay?

Tony
December, 1981: Hey, Ty,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Hey, Ty,

Merry Christmas! I hope you're having fun out in Oregon. You're so lucky you finished your program; I'm sitting here antsy that I can't work on my fuel cells at home. I know, I know...you're going to say I need to slow down, but the idea of taking weeks off when I have work to do is driving me a little nuts.

My dad's in rare form, so that's been a fun time. He's barely said two words to me since I got back. My mom said it would be okay if I came there for a couple days when you get back, but to be honest, I know she'll be disappointed if I do. I hate that I get to see my folks so rarely, and then this is how things are when I do.

So, here's your present; I hope you like it...I kind of nicked it from my dad's lab. He won't miss it, though.

Henry sent me this letter that's just, just all this ranting about how science should be pure and motivated only by love of research and curiosity and striving to make the world a better place. Which is really nice, but it got hard to argue with. What did you end up calling it? Is it really making people hallucinate? (And no, I still don't want to try it and see for myself). I don't really know how it's going to go over at a school science fair, but at least your dad can sell it, right?

Talk to you soon! I miss you!

Tony

Chapter End Notes

Has anybody guessed what Ty's science fair project is?
Christmas, 1981: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Steve,

This is way too much. I mean it. I think there is only going to be so many ways to hide an acetylene torch from my parents.

THE HELMET IS INCREDIBLE. It's my favorite color!

Sorry for such a short note. I kind of have to hide this right away and go have Christmas dinner. I know my mom is going to ask what you sent, so I probably have to make something up. I guess I can always say more comics.

I don't even know why we're having Christmas dinner. My dad announced that he bought me enough stuff at Thanksgiving and it made me ungrateful, so I'm not getting any more presents. I found a stack of stuff stashed in his office closet that was probably supposed to be my presents, but I don't even want to look at any of it. I really want to get out of here. I decided I'm just going to do my project. I don't have time to do something else. If that makes me a bad son, fine.

Seriously, though, this present is the best. I already have some ideas.

Tony

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I realize Steve just bought an acetylene torch for an eleven year old. He's 27 and has never had kids. I suspect he would be That Uncle.
Dear Steve,

I gave up. I sort of feel like a quitter. Part of me really wanted to try to get my dad to talk to me. But he wouldn't. He also wouldn't let me go to Ty's, even when my mom said I could.

I thought about running away from home, but I'm eleven, my dad is famous, and just happened to have invented some of the best tracking technology in the world. If I had a couple of weeks, I could figure out how to jam it, but I didn't want to stay at home for a couple of weeks.

I did do something cool, though! I figured I should do something really simple to practice with the torch before I accidentally burned my face off, or something, so I make myself a replica of Captain America's shield! My mom eventually gave me one of my presents, which was a Polaroid camera, because she said it was a waste for it to just be sitting in the closet. So here are a couple of photos of me in my welding mask with my shield.

I realized you probably saw photos of me when I was a little kid and people thought it was cute to take pictures of me with my dad, but I guess you wouldn't really know what I look like now, huh? Here's another Polaroid. That's not the Cap shirt you bought me. That one is infinitesimally too small for me now, but I keep getting new ones.

So, if you didn't guess, I came back to school early. A whole week and a half early.

The campus is open, and I guess sometimes there are a few kids who stay through the holidays, but it seems like I'm the only kid with nothing better to do than be at school this year. It's nice. I like the quiet, and I get to use the labs all by myself. I stayed up till midnight on New Year's and pretended to have champagne. I mixed some of the whiskey with a can of gingerale. I thought it would be closer than it was, but I guess with all the things I'm good at, cooking isn't something I really get. It didn't taste abysmal, though. It was sweet and fizzy and the whiskey actually was not bad that way. I got a ton of work done on my science fair project, and it's pretty much almost complete. I actually tested it on myself when I drank that whiskey. Not bad results, actually!

I hope you had a good New Year. I was going to make you a present with the welder, but I didn't have time before I left.

Tony
Hey, Henry,

Yep. I got everything finished over break. It's not perfect, but I still have a couple of weeks, right? Anyway, it's close enough that I feel like I can breathe again, so I put the fuel cells aside and I've been working on a robot. If the robot goes well, I'm thinking about seeing if I can combine the two before the fair.

It'll be cool to see you, too! I was thinking, it's really funny, because the last time I saw you, I hadn't said two words to you before, ever, and now I feel like we're friends. I'm looking forward to talking to you in person!

See you soon,

Tony
January, 1982: Hey, Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hey, Virginia

It's cool. Like I said, I wasn't really mad at you. It just seemed like we couldn't write without fighting, so it seemed best to take a break.

I'm really sorry about your boyfriend. I wish I could give you some advice, but I don't know anything about boys, either. Or girls, for that matter, but while I could tell you what I would want from a girl, I think I'm a little weird in that regard. Let me just take a moment to say that I think you're pretty darn near perfect and I don't know why any boy would break your heart.

There's not much I can do from this far away. I can't call on the phone or buy you ice cream, but if there is ever anything I can do for you, let me know.

Look, I made you a necklace. It's built off a fuel cell from the science fair project I've been working on. If you blow on it, it'll change colors. It was supposed to be a breathalyzer test but this one was faulty, so it'll change colors no matter what you do.

I hope you feel better soon.

Tony
Dear Dad,

I'm sorry I went back to school early. I miss you and Mom a lot, but I feel like you don't want me there.

I know you are trying hard and making a lot of sacrifices for my sake. I appreciate that. But it doesn't mean you can shout at me when you know I mean well and am trying to help.

I hope you had a nice New Year. I am entering my project in the science fair, whether or not you want me to, because it is going to help a lot of people.

Tony
January, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I know I just wrote to you, but this is a momentous enough occasion that I think it's worth another letter. I think I made another friend.

I was back here for a while by myself. Then another boy came back early. I didn't realize it until I went to get food. I am not sure how long it took me to remember food, but I guess when I did, it was the same time as this other boy.

It was weird, eating in an almost empty dining hall. I had been bringing my food back to my room when I remembered to get it, but when I saw somebody else there, I figured I might as well stay. He's this kid I've seen around but never talked to him before, but I don't really talk to anybody but Ty, so I guess that makes sense. I'm not sure how old he is. He's really popular and always has a lot of the other guys around talking to him. You know what I mean, one of those guys who's always smiling and chatting and looks so relaxed and easy. He's tall and skinny and has really long eyelashes like a girl, and those kind of blue eyes where you keep checking to see if they're really that blue, and curly blond hair that he wears long even though it goes against dress code. We're in some of the same advanced classes but not any of the same clubs, really. He came right over and sat down next to me and was really, really friendly. I kept waiting for him to prank me or something. But he didn't; he was just really nice and asked me all kind of questions about myself, like he was really interested.

He said he'd come back to school because he'd gotten into a fight with his dad, too. I think we have a lot in common, actually. His name is Warren and his family is even richer than my family. His dad owns a really huge company that makes lab equipment and refines oil and makes frozen yogurt and lightbulbs and all kinds of things. He actually said he could get me some spare computer parts to tinker with, which I'm really excited about. It seems like he's really popular. He knows everybody's names and talks about everybody like they're his friends. I don't know how anybody could dislike him. I don't know what the deal with his dad is. He said they didn't see eye to eye on politics, but I don't know what that means.

He told me tomorrow he'd come get me at breakfast. He seemed genuinely interested in being my friend.

Nobody like that has ever liked me before, but he's also really smart, so maybe it's that. I thought that if you were really smart, people just automatically didn't like you. I didn't realize that it was possible to be both smart and popular, but somehow he does it.

I am wondering if I could do it, too, if I pay attention to what he does.

Tony
January, 1982: Dear Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Ty,

Yeah, I just came back to school. I'm sorry I couldn't come there. I thought about just doing it anyway, but I didn't want to make my dad any more angry than he already was. Sorry he's an ass.

On a better note, I did get the breathalyzer cells completely done. I've been drinking whiskey and blowing on them for fun.

You know who else is back here? Warren Worthington. You know, the guy with the ponytail? I've never talked to him before this, but he's really cool. I told him we should all hang out when you get back.

Glad you're having fun with the oscilloscope. I thought it would be up your alley.

See you in a week!

Tony
Hey, Happy,

Remember how I kept sticking my nose up whenever you guys were talking about how you had types?

I take it back. I obviously have a type. Tall blonds. Maybe redheads, too.

Let me know if you see any who want to go out with a runty, swarthy genius. What I lack in looks, I make up for in neural transmissions.

Tony
February, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

That's great! I'm glad school is going well. Do you tell the kids that you used to write comics? If you ever have any really, really smart kids and have questions about what to do with them, you should ask me. It's really boring being smarter than all the other kids, and it makes it hard to behave in class. I bet it's even harder in a public school.

How are you?

Warren keeps introducing me to people, and they actually like me. I think it's because he likes me, because none of them really paid attention to me before I started hanging out with him.

I'm starting to see how he does it. He makes other people feel really important. He makes sure you know that he considers his time precious and his friendship valuable and doesn't waste it on people unless he likes them. He asks questions. He makes eye contact and doesn't look away, which is a little bit intimidating, actually. I think it would be hard to change the way I talk to people that much but I'm going to try.

I've decided that from now on I'm going to try to always ask people a question about themselves before I talk about myself. And then act like I'm interested even if I'm not. I am interested in what you have to say, though.

Ty doesn't seem really keen on Warren. He says Warren coasts off his dad's reputation, is too sincere and has no sense of irony. I think Warren gets irony, but doesn't have a lot of patience for it. Warren keeps telling me that Ty is jealous because Warren is popular and Ty is insecure. I don't really know what to say to either of them. I think they're both right, if I had to be completely honest, but I want them both to be my friends.

Anyway, I'm going to put the last touches on my science fair project. Two days! I'm really nervous. Warren says I shouldn't be, because my project is the best and will win. Ty's is really good though. Apparently his arcade game test in Oregon was really successful.

Next time you hear from me, I'll have a gold medal! I'm going keep telling myself that.

Tony
February, 1982: Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Steve,

I don't know if I'm going to write for a while. I just wanted to send you a note so you know to write to me at home instead of at school. I don't know if they're going to let me come back. I'll tell you what happened later. I just don't want to talk about it now.

Tony
February, 1982: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Ty,

Stop blaming yourself. It wasn't your fault. I'll call you next weekend.

Tony

PS Congrats on your win. You deserved it.
February, 1982: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warren,

It's my fault, not Ty's. Thanks for talking to your dad about it. I'm sure he'll try his best.

Tony

Chapter End Notes

(I'll...just leave that like that for a little while.)
March, 1982: Hey, Virginia

Chapter by geniusesbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hey, Virginia

Really, the necklace was nothing. It was kind of a piece of junk. But it was pretty. I'm glad you like it.

So it took me a while to get your letter because my mail had to be forwarded from school. I got in trouble and was sent home. I have to write an apology and explain my behavior or something, and then they'll decide whether I'm allowed to come back.

Right now I'm at home. And grounded. I'm not allowed to leave the house without one of my parents. And my dad won't talk to me at all. Pretty grim, huh? I guess it'll be okay. I'm just sad because I really liked this school, and I was starting to make friends there.

Anyway, if you have time when you are in New York, and my dad will let me out of my room, yes, I would love to see you! I can't believe it's been two years. You probably won't recognize me. I'm a lot taller and I've suddenly become devilishly handsome. Well, I can dream, I guess. My mom gave me a Polaroid camera, so here's a picture of me. Making a stupid face, as usual. I tried to build a little auto-controller to take my own picture from across the room, but it didn't work right, and it just took pictures of my computer screen instead. So I had to just hold the camera up. I took six, and this is the best one, believe it or not. And yes, I promise promise promise that I won't pretend it's a date or anything.

Let me know when you're in town. You can just call Stark Industries and they'll patch you through.

Tony

Chapter End Notes
(In addition to myriad technological advancements in pretty much every scientific field, Tony Stark was also the inventor of the selfie.)
Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you in regard to my recent dismissal from school on a charge of contraband possession and underage alcohol consumption.

I fully admit guilt in both cases, and would like to apologize with utmost sincerity. I humbly throw myself at your mercy and would like to request leniency in your decision-making process.

My possession and consumption of alcohol was certainly misguided but caused no harm to myself or any other students. I was working on a science fair project to detect the blood alcohol levels of drivers, and I decided to experiment with myself as a subject. This was certainly poor judgment, but was fully intended to further my education.

I hope I have been a model student since I began at your school in the fall. I have straight As in everything but Music and Phys Ed, and I am a member in good standing of four clubs. I have loved every minute of my time there and I pray you will allow me to return soon.

Thank you for your consideration,

Anthony Edward Stark
March, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Steve,

I guess I should tell you what happened. I'm not as upset anymore. I'm really sorry I didn't write more. No, no one is sick or dead. If somebody in our family was sick or dead, it would probably be in the paper, anyway. As it is, I got a lecture about how everything I do might end up in the paper.

So, I guess you probably remember how I had those bottles of whiskey in my room, right? Well, I mentioned drinking some of it in a letter to Ty, where I was talking about fighting with my dad. He took the letter to the principal, because he was worried about me. He meant well, I guess, but he forgot that I talked about drinking whiskey in the letter when he brought it there. Needless to say, schools sort of frown on eleven yea olds drinking whiskey. The school has a zero tolerance policy, so they searched my room and then sent me home immediately. I didn't get to participate in the science fair, which was fine, since Ty won, although I'd been looking forward to seeing some of the kids from my old school.

Ty felt so bad about it that I'm glad he at least won our division. I'd really hoped to win. The prize was college scholarship money and I sort of had my sights set on proving to my dad that I could save money for my own education. I guess there will be a lot more chances.

I bet you can guess my parents are furious. I'm pretty much under a prison sentence until further notice. The worst part is, Virginia is coming back to New York in a few months to visit and I'm pretty sure I won't get to see her now. It's my own fault, I guess.

If I thought my dad was mad before, he's furious now. He called me a thief and a hypocrite and an embarrassment to the family. My parents keep fighting about me. At least, I think it's about me. My mom looks so tired and I know it's my fault. And I didn't do anything malicious or unkind. I just wanted people to like me.

I don't know yet if I'm going to be allowed back to school. Warren's dad is on the board of trustees, and he's going to look into it, which is really nice of him, since I only knew his son for a few months.

I have an idea of something to do to occupy myself, though. I built this pretty cool robot at school, and I think I want to do more of that.

What is going on with you? How's school? How are your students? Any child prodigies?

Tony
March, 1982: Dear Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Henry,

Does everybody know what happened? I'm really embarrassed. It was so stupid of me.

Yeah, I'm sorry I didn't get to see you, too. Congrats on your win, though. That's great.

What's this about some kid from Ohio sweeping the entire applied physics category? Ty said this one kid entered three different projects and they all placed. What's his deal? I thought I was going to go insane doing one project; this kid sounds like he must be pretty crazy already.

I'm on a really short leash right now. I'm afraid, but I'm thinking about starting a robotics project to keep myself busy. I'll let you know how it goes.

Tony
April, 1982: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

I know you're concerned, but I know Ty. He wouldn't do something like that on purpose. He used to sneak off campus to buy me coffee. He helped a ton with my project. Why would he sabotage me?

I really don't want to fight about this. I really like you and I want to be friends with you, but I'm also friends with Ty. You don't have to be friends with each other. I don't expect you to like each other. I know Ty can be a prick if he decides he doesn't like somebody. But I want to be friends with both of you separately. Okay?

Thank your dad for me. For both the spare parts and the help with the Board. He really didn't have to do that, and believe me, I know we don't know each other well enough to expect you to be this kind. Thanks for the invitation, too, but I feel like I'm going to be under house arrest all summer. Maybe you can visit me in the Stark Penitentiary for Juvenile Miscreants, yeah?

It'll be okay. My folks are pretty mad, but they can't stay mad forever. And I'll be back in August, now, so everything's going to work out.

Good luck with the rest of the year. I'm sorry I won't be around. I was looking forward to hanging out with you. Write back when you can. I'll be happy to keep writing. God knows I don't have anything else to do.

Tony
April, 1982: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Captain America,

Hey! Sorry I haven't written in a while. I've had a lot going on. I was really excited to see the American Dreamers people back again. I loved that story. Also, my friend Henry just told me that they're named for a science fiction writer? He was explaining about her books to me, and now I really want to read them.

How often do you do stuff like that, with the references to things that I should know? Apparently, Cap also reviewed a movie that is out in theaters right now, also? I feel like I miss a lot of pop culture references. Now I want to go back and find them all, but I bet there are tons.

I do have to say though that it's still a little weird to see Cap trying to live a double life. I guess I understand why he might want that, but it seems to be more trouble than it's worth. It seems like villains always figure out how to get to him anyway, and it just causes confusion in his personal life.

Oh, I liked last month's comic, too. I like when we see ordinary people reacting to Cap and the different responses he gets. It's interesting to see how some people question his motives and ideals, even to the point of thinking he's dangerous. I guess no matter how much good you try to do or no matter how hard you try, you're going to have some people who disagree with how you do it and maybe even hate you for it.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
April, 1982: Dear Virginia (Unsent)

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

That would be great. Thanks for sending the picture. I was a little scared I wouldn't recognize you. You don't look anything like a horse, and those braces are cool. I really like your haircut. I guess I didn't imagine you with bangs because you didn't have them last time.

I think my parents will be okay with that. I hope so, at least.

There are some things I feel like I should tell you. One, my dad isn't a very nice guy. He's really smart, and he's a great dad in a lot of ways, but I don't think he likes me very much, and I don't know why. He used to be a drunk, but he hasn't had a drink in six months now, and I'm really proud of him, but I don't feel like anything's any better.

Two, I know we talk sometimes about boys and girls and you always tell me I'm going to find a girlfriend someday, but apart from the fact that I'm not quite twelve and don't really feel old enough to like anybody that way, I think I might like
April, 1982: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

That would be great. Thanks for sending the picture. I was a little scared I wouldn't recognize you. You don't look anything like a horse, and those braces are cool. I really like your haircut. I guess I didn't imagine you with bangs because you didn't have them last time.

I think my parents will be okay with that. I hope so, at least.

Look, there is something I want to ask you. If you're not okay with it, that's fine, but I wanted to ask before I see you in person.

I have a lot of things going on in my life right now, and some of them are the kinds of things I don't want to talk to other people about. I feel like all the people I know are either too close, or not close enough. Would it be okay if I told you some things, even if they're embarrassing? I feel like I can trust you, and I know you'll tell me if I'm being an ass, but I'm never going to see you every day or anything like that, so I feel like I won't be too embarrassed by it. Would that be all right? I know I'm bring exceptionally vague, and it's probably hard to answer, but I thought it would be worth asking.

See you this summer!

Tony
Dear Ty,

Yeah, things are a bit better. Warren got me some stuff from his dad's company and I've been working on my robot. I guess I could ask my dad for parts, but I'm already so far in his bad books, I don't want to rock the boat. He actually asked me if I was trying to destroy his life. Mostly, he's not around, though. He's been working really late at the lab. Which is just as well, because I cracked the security on his home workshop, and I've been using it for the robot after my mom goes to bed.

I just wish there were something I could do to get back on his good side. If I was ever on his good side. Maybe when I was, I don't know, six. I do know I'm never, ever going to drink again.

I think we can hang out this summer. I'd love to see some movies with you. There are a ton I haven't seen.

Glad school is going well. That's so cool that somebody from the government wants to talk to you about your code. if they have questions about the parts I helped with, let me know. I've also been improving on the core on that copy that you sent me, so if you want that, I can mail it to you on floppies. I figure at least I have a head start on next year's science fair project. We should make sure we're not in the same category, but you know I still think it's stupid that computer programming doesn't have it's own. Maybe we can lobby for that.

All right, Dad's actually home tonight. I'm going to go sit at a silent dinner table and pretend to be part of a normal family.

Tony
April 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Well, I think I just did it.

I'm not sure what I did, but that was most definitely it.

We were supposed to be having family dinner. My dad came in with his gloves still on, picked up his plate off the table, put some mashed potatoes and some pot roast on it, took his glass of juice, and turned around and started walking right back toward his shop.

I decided I was sick of this. I got up, stood between him and the door and told him to sit down and have dinner with the rest of us like a grown up. I told him that it was stupid that I was having to tell him to act like a grown up when I'm not even twelve and he's sixty. I think I told him I was disappointed in him and he should know better. I said a lot of things, very angrily, with a lot more swearing than I am willing to repeat on paper, and when I was done, I realized I still had my fork in my hand.

I put the fork down, and Dad looked at me for a really long time, and then sat back down at the table.

We ate dinner. Nobody said anything, and the silverware sounded really, really loud. Dad finished first, and got up without excusing himself. He never took his gloves off.

I'm pretty sure I'm going to be in trouble again tomorrow, once the shock wears off. If he still remembers he has a son then.

I feel really weird right now. I think I'm experiencing what happens after a big adrenaline rush, because at first I felt really good, like I was invincible, and then I started getting shaky and feeling a little weak. I looked it up in a medical textbook and it seems to fit. Right now, I feel like I want to cry, but I thought I'd write to you instead of doing that.

That kid sounds pretty cool. You can tell him about me, if you want to. I understand why you're not supposed to tell me his name, so that's all right. If I wasn't sure I was about to be disowned, I would tell you to tell him I'd invite him over to the house. I'd write him a letter, but I don't have a way to write in Braille. Let me think about that.

I've got to calm down a little. My head's pretty fuzzy right now. Write soon!

Tony
May, 1982: Dear Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Ty,

Well, that was strange. My dad just shifted a hundred and eighty degrees on everything he's said over the past few months.

So we are actually back on good terms again, somehow. I'll tell you more when you're out of school and we can talk on the phone.

My birthday is right after school lets out and I know this is short notice, but he said I could have a few friends to the house. It coincides with the time Virginia's going to be here, so I'd like you and Warren to get to meet her. (You and Warren have to promise to be nice for my birthday, though.) I'm also inviting Happy and Charlie and Henry from my old school. And my cousin Morgan, who is kind of annoying, but he's the only cousin I have and my dad makes me invite him to things.

I hope you can come! The only birthday parties I've had before were full of kids my parents knew. Having one with my actual friends will be really great.

Would you be okay with it if I showed my dad your code? I saw that newspaper article from Oregon and it worried me, so I'm trying to add safeguards so the game doesn't trigger episodes in players unless it's instructed to do so. I know it's mostly your code, so if you say no, that's all right.

Tony
Steve,

Thanks for asking. Things are actually better. How are things with you? I hope the date went well!

He avoided me for an entire week. Then, this morning, he knocked at my door at seven in the morning and told me it was time to get to work. And he took me over to Stark Industries and set me up with my own workstation.

He put one of my fuel cells down in front of me, and told me I had until lunchtime to tell him what was wrong with it. Then he set down a cup of coffee. He even made it black with four sugars. I was really surprised at first, but then I realized that he just made it the same way he drinks it. I didn't know other people polluted their coffee like that.

I realized after a little while that he was just trying to push me to do better. I found a flaw with the basic efficiency of the cell, and fixed that.

He came over at noon, told me to report my findings, and then took me out to lunch. We ended up getting pancakes and ice cream. He opened up a notebook and spent lunch drawing schematics for different power generators, and describing how they worked and the pros and cons associated with each one. It wasn't a conversation, because he did all the talking, but it was nice. Then we went back to the lab and he told me to start over.

I did. I found three more problems, and corrected two of them before it was time to go home.

We had dinner with my mom. He spent dinner telling my mom exactly what I had done, and where my method was sloppy, and what I'd missed, but also what I'd done correctly. It wasn't praise, exactly, and I didn't really talk again, but I got the feeling he was pleased.

Just now he knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to come back tomorrow. He told me he couldn't actually hire me, but I could shadow anybody on his team that I wanted to until I go back to school in August.

I don't want to ask him what made him change his mind, because I'm kind of scared it won't last. But it's really nice right now.

I'm having a birthday party, too! I haven't had a birthday party in years, but Dad said that twelve is an important year. I didn't remind him that he said eleven was too old for birthdays.

Tony
May, 1982: Dear Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Henry,

So I'm back to the fuel cells.

I realized that if I tweaked it a little, the cell could actually be used as a small power source and not just a meter. So I worked on that, and got it to power a little propellor. Then I decided I liked the idea of people pulled over for drunk driving being forced to wear propellor beanies while they blow into a straw. If you want to talk about a way to get people to stop drinking and driving, right?

But I'm a lot more excited about the possibilities for these cells as something that can actually be used to generate power. I think I can turn this into something in time for next year's science fair, for sure. Are you still working with wasps or did you move on to something else?

My parents said it would be fine if you stayed over. A couple of the other guys will be there, too.

Tony
May, 1982: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ty,

It was not fair of you to just hang the phone up on me. This is really serious. I know you're upset, but I'm upset, too. I didn't do anything wrong, and you know it. And things with my dad are really weird right now, and I don't want to mess them up.

I didn't know there was proprietary technology in that oscilloscope when I gave it to you, and I'm sure you didn't, either, but your dad had no right to use it.

You have to stop being so careless. You keep doing things that have really big consequences. My dad is really, really angry right now. It was a fight not to let him cancel my party, but he told me I have to uninvite you. And I have a bad feeling that we're not going to be allowed to room together next year.

I know you said you don't want my dad to see the Polybius code, but I'm giving it to him anyway. I trust him not to steal other people's technology, and I think you're being too reckless. A weaponized arcade game is scary enough as it is. It needs to be safe if it's going to be more than a proof of concept.

I'm really, really sorry. But I guess sometimes there have to be consequences to your actions.

This is a really big mess, though, and I don't know what to do about it. But I need to make sure things stay okay here with my family. I will talk to you soon, and hopefully the companies will be able to settle this out of court.

Tony

Chapter End Notes

In case you're unfamiliar with the Polybius urban legend, here's a link to the Wikipedia page.
May, 1982: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

I guess now that you've seen the news, you know why the party's cancelled. It's not true. I mean, it is true, but it's more complicated than that. I asked my dad to take a look at Ty's program and it executed the file instead of opening it in edit mode. It should have let him edit it. Nobody ran it. I don't know what happened.

I feel sick.

I'm really sorry about that. Look, I'll write again soon. Phone privileges have been revoked. Right now I'm just too worried about my dad to write.

I don't know if you were right about Ty or he really is this fucking stupid. Sorry for swearing, but it's true.

Tony
Dear Virginia,

Hey, my mom said you called. Thanks for doing that. I'm not allowed to use the phone right now. The party's off, but Mr. Stane, who is running things while my dad is in the hospital, says that I can still come see you. We still have the reservation at Serendipity for next Wednesday.

Tony
May, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I assume you've seen the news. Everyone's seen the news. Remember that time I joked about what happens if somebody in our family is sick or dead?

I don't even know what to call what I'm feeling. I keep going back and forth between feeling completely frozen, like I have no feelings, and wanting to kick everything in the world. And it's my fault.

I keep asking myself what Steve Rogers would do, like I did when I was a little kid. I don't even know what he'd do. Take his lumps like a man, I guess, go out there and not let anyone know he felt humiliated, and tell the truth, right? But I'm not even allowed out of the house right now, so how am I supposed to do that?

I wanted to write so much more to you but I'm just not in the mood. My brain is working faster than my hand can write anything and it keeps jumping around. I think I actually am going to kick some things. And think about what I can do.

Tony
May, 1982: Dear Editor(s)

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Editor(s),

Unorthodox as it may be for the Daily Bugle to publish a letter written by a twelve-year-old, I hope you will consider the source.

The media, and particularly your paper, has made a farce out of my father, the esteemed Howard Stark, over the past several days, citing intoxication, drunk driving, erratic behavior, and even what appeared to be an attempted suicide.

What I can tell you is this: my father was the victim of an insidious computer program, known as Polybius, developed by my friend and schoolmate, with my assistance.

Polybius was never intended to be used outside of a closed environment. It was an experimental project meant for competition in a science fair. It was tested only once, late last year in Portland, Oregon, and the results were presented at this year's National Science Congress, where it won first prize in its category.

It is a weaponized arcade game that sends hypnotic signals to the player, which then can be used to trigger instructions built into the game based on the controller's wishes. Even the most polished versions of the code still resulted in unpredictable responses. I asked my father to look at the code in order to shore up this deficiency just before the unfortunate incidents of the past week. My father was not responsible for any of his actions while under its suggestion.

You've also mentioned that Howard Stark's child was suspended from school this year for substance abuse. Unless my father has another child I don't know about, that child is me, and what you've failed to mention is that said substance abuse was committed as part of testing a fuel cell intended to improve breathalyzer tests for intoxicated drivers.

From this and other articles in your paper, I can only conclude that your main priority is not journalism but to gleefully tear into the reputations of anyone you might envy. I'd like to remind you of how many times Howard Stark has been the subject of positive news items, and request that you respect our family's privacy.

And please stop trying to sneak your photographers into the hospital.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
Age 12
Dear Mr. Stane,

I know you said I can call you Obie, but it still feels weird for me to call grownups by their first names. I want to thank you for all you've done for us this past week. It's been really upsetting in a lot of ways.

I promise you I did not make up a word of the letter I sent to the Bugle, in spite of what people are saying. I have a copy of the video game and I'll be happy to show it to anyone who wants to see it. I don't know why you can't find any records of it. I know Ty won the competition. There was also a mention of it in the Portland paper, because it didn't behave the way it intended and I guess some people got really sick. That's what I was trying to work on with Dad.

I swear I didn't make any of it up. I'll do whatever I can to prove it.

Also, thank you for getting permission for me to see my friends. They keep telling me they're worried about me.

Tony
June, 1982: Dear Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Henry,

You remember Ty's game, right? You were at the Science Fair. It's like every mention of it has been wiped from existence. Please say you remember it.

Tony
June, 1982: Dear Ty,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Ty,

Why the hell did you reprogram Polybius to delete itself after running?

I don't know what's going on. You're not answering my phone calls. Nobody remembers seeing it. I can't find a reference in print. The school paper can't find any back issues from that month. Even Henry doesn't remember it, and we talked about it at length. I feel like I'm going crazy. People are saying I'm going crazy.

What did you do?

Tony
June, 1982: Dear Warren,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Warren,

I know we talked on the phone, but I'm putting this in writing. I'm putting everything in writing, because it seems like everything is vanishing. Even letters are vanishing. Henry can't find any of the letters where I mentioned Polybius.

Thanks for believing me in spite of everything. What I really want to know is why I remember it and nobody else does.

And I don't know why you were so shy about asking me to room with you. That wasn't like you at all. Did you think I'd say no? You're pretty much the only friend I know I've got at school.

I'm really looking forward to the movie. See you next week.

Thanks again.

Tony
Dear Virginia,

It was really good to see you. Really. There's a very short list of people who don't think I'm crazy right now, and the only reason I'm not being hounded by reporters like Mr. Stane is is because my parents have done a pretty good job of keeping my picture out of the papers, so I don't think anybody recognizes me. I know it's not always going to be like that, but I don't really relish the thought of being Janet Van Dyne and having my picture splashed all over the society section when I'm ten years old.

That is one drawback of being my friend, I guess. There's a lot that isn't private. I'm surprised your parents still let you come, with everything that's been in the papers, but it means a lot to me.

I'm sorry I wasn't the best company. I can't really sleep and I've been living on coffee, pretty much.

I guess I didn't have to screw up the courage to tell you that my dad's a drunk. Well, he was a drunk. He's not anymore, no matter how the papers are making him out. That's most of what I wanted to tell you. There was another thing, too, but now I'm not so sure it's the right time. I'll figure it out.

Here's the best of the Polaroids I took of you. Well, second-best. I kept the best one for myself.

Have a safe trip back to Germany. I hope it doesn't take two years to see you again.

Tony
June, 1982: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Ty,

This isn't business. It's my *life*.

We're not friends anymore.

Tony
June, 1982: Dear Steve,

Chapter by [geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)]

Dear Steve,

The only thing I've heard from Ty is a four-sentence letter. All it said is "I'm really sorry. I promise that wasn't supposed to happen. My dad's lawyers said I'm not allowed to say anything in writing right now. It's business."

Dad's doing better. They've been monitoring his sleep. He's having really bad nightmares and the doctors say he just talks incoherently while he's sleeping. He hasn't done anything really violent since he crashed the car into that divider, but they're still worried about him and it sounds like they need to do psych evaluations once he's better.

What makes me angry is that the newspapers all seem to have saved up all this evidence of my dad's drinking for years and years and years, and not published any of it until something went terribly wrong. Do they do that? Just hold on to things so they can wait and laugh at people when something really bad happens?

Okay, that's not the only thing making me angry right now. There are a lot of things making me angry. Mr. Stane asked me if I'd be willing to testify in court about the oscilloscope, and I guess I should, but the papers are making me out to be a nutcase. I feel like nobody's going to believe anything I say.

I saw Virginia. She's really, really pretty. Much prettier than I remember her being the last time I saw her. Then again, the last time I saw her, I was on the floor with a bloody nose. I think she's also about a foot taller than me. I took a bunch of photos of her. I meant to get one of us together, but I forgot. She's also. I don't know how to put this. Really grown up. More grown up than anybody else I know. It seems really weird that I'm a whole grade ahead of her in school. I know she's almost two years older than me, but she seems much older than that. We went to this ice cream place and I was worried she was too old for ice cream. She seemed to have fun, though, even though we don't have a lot in common.

I had been planning on telling her about my dad. I guess now I don't have to tell anybody. People who recognize me keep looking at me like they feel sorry for me, and that's making me angry, too.

Oh! Also, I've been thinking about that kid in your class you told me about. I'm so stupid, I kept thinking about Braille. But the obvious answer is audio. My mom gave me a Walkman for my birthday. I can record tapes for him, and he can record tapes back, if you want. I just have one request. Since you can't tell me who he is, is it okay if you don't tell him who I am? I don't think being me is really a recommendation right now.

Tony
June, 1982: Dear Dad

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Dad,

I am so, so sorry about all of this. I was careless and had poor judgment and I take full responsibility for my part in it.

I tried to do what I thought was right and told the truth about what happened. Nobody believes me.

I guess I'll talk to you about this more when you're feeling better. I just want you to know I love you and I'm sorry.

Tony
June, 1982: Dear Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Henry,

The coordinates you want are 3.23, 1.6, 2.14, 1.789, 1.5

I think that will get you the results you're looking for.

Say hey to Warren for me.

Tony

Chapter End Notes

This is a CODED MESSAGE.

If you need help solving it, read Clues and Solution here.
June, 1982: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Warren,

Thanks for taking me to the movie! I thought it was an interesting premise. The government agents were really scary. Their anonymity and facelessness of their suits made them intensely creepy. Definitely more alien than the real aliens.

I thought the part where ET visited Elliot's school was fun. I loved that the frogs all escaped.

But there were some really poignant parts, too. When ET got sick and I thought he was going to die, I wanted to cry.

It would be hard to get me to stop thinking about that movie. I've had so many ideas about outer space travel.

If you're interested in talking more about it, let me know. I'd love to discuss it more. I'd really like to see another movie with you soon, if you can. Let me know when you're free!

I'm glad I had my camera with me. It was fun to take a lot of pictures.

Say hey to Henry for me.

Tony

Chapter End Notes

This is a CODED MESSAGE.

If you need help solving it, read Clues and Solution here.
June, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

I feel like I don't even need to write anymore, that I could just say, "Well, you saw the news."

You saw the news. The news about Viastone and the new government contract? Viastone is Ty's dad's company, and the government contract was supposed to be my dad's. They closed the deal right before my dad got out of the hospital.

Part of me really wants to talk to Ty, to find out what he was thinking or why he did this. Part of me is scared and worried. Ty kept telling me not to let my dad open that file. He didn't plan for that to happen. Maybe he gave his dad the oscilloscope on purpose, but I don't think he meant for my dad to look at the game. I haven't talked to Ty. He told me he's not allowed to. I don't know what he'd say if he was. But I told him we weren't friends anymore, so I don't know if he'd talk to me even if he was allowed.

I talked to Warren about it for a long time. We went to see this movie called "ET: The Extra-Terrestrial." It was surprising. It was a movie about an alien, but it wasn't an action or adventure sort of story. It was really about a boy whose parents had gotten divorced, and was looking for a friend. It was about adults not understanding kids. It was about the things that are supposed to protect us being more dangerous than the unknown. I've been thinking about it a lot.

Do you read Captain America anymore now that you haven't worked on it in a while? I'd really like you to read this month's issue. It was not what I really expected to read in a comic. Or, well, anywhere, really.

Yeah. I'll record a tape soon. I'm not sure when. I have a lot on my mind right now.

Tony
Dear Captain America,

I just read Captain America Issue #270. It was really eye-opening to me. I don't think I've ever seen a comic with a couple that is two men before. I feel like that's something that people don't talk about very much. The adults I know act like that doesn't even exist, and sometimes I have questions about things like that, and I don't know if it's something I'm supposed to ask people about.

It's funny, because I ask lots of questions about science and math and the worst thing that happens is people give me funny looks or tell me to stop being a smartass. But you start asking questions about people, and suddenly people make you feel like you're not supposed to think about those things.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say is thanks, because at least now, I show people the comic and then ask them about it. And that makes it easier to ask people questions.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

Tony just read Issue 270 of Captain America.
Dear Virginia,

Polaroid? The computer?

Holy shit, you're right. Why didn't I think of that?

My dad's home from the hospital. He seems like he's doing okay, but he's still having those nightmares. We're taking Ty's family to court over the proprietary technology they stole. That's pretty much it right now.

Thanks for writing. I'll write more soon.

Tony
July, 1982: Dear Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dear Ty,

I thought you would like to know my father is out of the hospital. I made a slight improvement to the Polybius game, strings of ten end up being more efficient than strings of five. It helps with the alternating patterns, and it will vary the squares up a little. See what you can do with this to fix the Polybius game. The first string will free up some space, the second string should be run twice. The usual engine works fine for a single run, but with a second run, you might want to consider running it in VIG instead.

Tony

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Chapter End Notes

This is a CODED MESSAGE. It's a DIFFICULT CODED MESSAGE.

You can find clues and a solution here.

OR you can try to solve this easier version for those of us who are not Tony Stark:

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9174947374261749472649562837174828372019283657404628103717582019281028
405737420205747274638365717181749472026562857472630281049182849205747284
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2817201917493957562627201720201928362837317183828102057174919284057375
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91749471749391748371026261837574948592728372017264917494720192818401720
Clues and solution to the less-difficult version
Dear Captain America,

Just writing to wish you a happy birthday!

I know you're a fictional character, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't get a birthday card.

Sincerely, Tony Stark
July, 1982: Dear Warren,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Warren,

The things arrived, right? I'll see you next week. I hope you're right about helping us get in. You think they'll let kids in just because they know your dad?

I'm looking forward to seeing Blade Runner with you.

Tony
July, 1982: Steve,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Steve,

I figured out how to get a message to Ty. Warren and I are arranging to talk to some people. Look, I know this is a big imposition, but if something happens to us, the last place we'll be is 675 Hudson Street, in Manhattan.

I'll explain everything later. In minute detail, I promise.

Tony
July, 1982: Henry,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Henry,

Enclosed are copies of the photos and everything I have in an encrypted file. Do not open it. Just keep it as it is until you hear otherwise.

Thanks, pal.

Tony
July, 1982: Dear Virginia,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

Hey. I'm sending you prints of those photos. Getting a print off a Polaroid was really hard, but I figured out how to cut up the original, insert the transparency into the camera, and expose new film. You might want to do it if you want to make more prints. Just in case.

You don't need to do anything with these. Just hold onto them unless something happens.

The black thing is a floppy disk for a computer. DO NOT try to use it. If he needs it, Henry will get it from you. I gave him your address.

Tony
July, 1982: Dear Mr. Stane,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Mr. Stane,

I think I have figured out what I want to do now. I will testify if I have to. Thank you for being so patient with me while I made up my mind.

On the other hand, I've decided that this is my mess, and I need to clean it up. Don't worry; I know what I'm doing. Mostly, I think.

Tony
July, 1982: Dear Mom and Dad,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Mom and Dad,

Just wanted to let you know that I love you both a lot. You know, even when I'm a snotty kid.

I'm going to stay at Warren's for a couple of days. I didn't ask permission because I know you'd say no and I wanted to avoid the whole messiness of defying your parental wishes. I'll see you soon. In the words of the great Howard Stark, don't do anything I wouldn't do.

Tony
Dear Mr. Stone,

I know we haven't met, although I am still very grateful for the number of times you and your wife have extended invitations for me to visit you. Ty has told me a great deal about you, and I know that you're an excellent father who cares very much for his son. I also admire your business acumen, in spite of your rivalry with my father.

There's one area of industry where Viastone is far more prominent than Stark Industries, and that's media. I'm aware that you own very large shares in a number of TV channels as well as newspapers and magazines. I'd like to make you a proposition that will, I hope, be beneficial to me, you, and your son, who has been a very good friend to me in spite of some recent hiccups.

I have some information that I think will be of interest to you in regard to Ty's science fair project. I have code. I have photos. I'm willing to give them exclusively to one media outlet. If Viastone would like the privilege of breaking this story, all I will ask in return is that you cease unlicensed use of any and all Stark Industries technology. Since I know that you are dependent on that technology for a recent government contract, I will speak to my father and Mr. Stane about the possibility of allowing to use it on a license, provided you subcontract the project to Stark.

If you are not interested in breaking this news story, I am sure I can sell it to The Bugle, since it seems like they'll print anything these days.

I will be out of reach for a few days, but I look forward to hearing from you upon my return.

Thank you for listening,

Tony Stark
July, 1982: Dear Henry,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Henry,

I think it worked. Sit tight on those files, though, if you can. Just in case.

Tony
July, 1982: Dear Mom and Dad,

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Mom and Dad,

I understand I'm grounded, and I guess that's fair. I didn't mean to worry you. You weren't supposed to find out that I wasn't actually at Warren's. To be honest, I figured you'd be too preoccupied with other things to try to find me.

I'm sorry I made you worry when you have been through so much lately, but I had something I really needed to do, and I think once you understand what it was, you'll feel differently about grounding me for the rest of the summer. You should expect a phone call in about a week, Dad.

Either way, I really, really want to go see Blade Runner with Warren. And I will actually, really and truly be with Warren. One of you can come with us if you want, just to make sure. Warren says it's supposed to be great; it's a movie about robots who look like humans. So it's scientific and educational.

Your loving (and only) son,

Tony
July, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Steve,

Right. Minute detail, as promised. I guess this is going to be a pretty long letter.

So, the day I went to the movies with Warren, I got back to my house, and this man was waiting in my bedroom. He told me he was from the government, and that I needed to stop talking about the Polybius game. It was pretty frightening. He just showed up in my room. I don't know how.

So at first, I thought this had something to do with Viastone's government contract, the one that they snatched away from my dad while he was in the hospital. Which relied totally on the new technology my dad had been testing out in that oscilloscope I gave to Ty.

I don't know if I ever told you about that time I tried to modify my camera so I could take photos with a remote control from a distance? Well, I never got it to work quite right. It would just keep taking photos until I actually picked the camera up and stopped it. I think I told Virginia about that. Anyway, I was pretty terrified of this guy, and I was worried he'd actually do something, so I managed to step on the remote (let's not talk about the part where my mother declared my room such a disaster area she wouldn't ask any housekeeper to set foot in there) and get him into a position where my camera would be able to get some shots of him. You know, by acting scared (which wasn't hard) and cowering in different directions (which was). I made noises like I was going to cry, to keep him from hearing the camera. I really kind of kicked up a fuss. I figure there are some times when crying is okay.

He told me he wanted every copy of Polybius I had. I told him I didn't have any more, which was true, because the ones I'd had all erased themselves after Dad ran that last one. It seemed like every copy had erased itself, and the people who'd seen it had somehow forgotten it. Henry didn't remember it, which was pretty upsetting. It was an early version, but it was mostly intact. (The funny thing about having a nearly-eidetic memory is that I remember things I see and hear, but not things I do.) He didn't seem to believe me, but I showed him all of my disks, and how they had all erased themselves. Then he told me again to stop talking. I asked him why. He said he was prepared to pay me if I did. I pointed out that my dad probably had more money than he could offer me. He said that something even worse would happen to my family if I didn't. I told him that made it sound like I should be talking about it. He didn't like that. He got really, really quiet, and the flipped a business card at me, put his fingers to his lips, and vanished.

I'm still trying to figure out how he vanished. It had to be some kind of trick. I was thinking it was a relation to John Pepper's Ghost Trick, but then he wouldn't have been able to toss me a card. So I figure there was some kind of optional illusion just at the end. I need to try to figure that one out.

The card just had one number and one word on it: 675 Hudson

I started thinking about it. He didn't show me any ID, didn't give me a name, or a department, and cornered me when I was alone, without an adult present. As much as I've been raised with a healthy distrust of the government, I don't think the government breaks into kids' bedrooms and questions them alone.
So I realized that this guy either wasn't from the government, or was from some agency so secret that they were allowed to operate, well, outside the rules.

I started thinking things through. Henry, my dad, those people in Oregon, the people at the Science Fair-- everybody else who'd had the game had their copies wiped and had forgotten it existed-- except for me, and, presumably, Ty. I wondered why, if these people had gone to the trouble of erasing so many people's memories of the game, they hadn't done it to me.

The only difference between me and everybody else was that I hadn't actually played the game. They'd thought I had. That was the only thing I could figure. The people at the science fair hadn't played it, but they'd actually viewed screens from the completed game.

In other words, Polybius worked even better than Ty and I had planned. But here I was, stuck being the only person who knew about something, trying to figure out what to do about it.

Well. Not the only person who knew something. Ty knew. And then I remembered that he'd sent me that disk with the newest code, and then gotten really skittish about it-- he kept telling me not to work on it, not to let my dad work on it. I was mad at him because of the oscilloscope thing. And, to be honest, I sort of wanted my dad to see the code-- since he'd let his dad see the tech in the oscilloscope. I was sort of trying to get back at him, a little. I acted really self-righteous about it, and told him I couldn't trust him, but that was just my excuse.

Ty had tried to get us not to look at it. That was after he said he'd been approached by someone from the government who wanted to buy the code. Something was already wrong.

I actually read some of Polybius. The historian, not the game. There was one thing that really struck me. He said that a historian should be pragmatic, and that historians should be men of action. I think most of the time we think of historians as people who sit to the side outside the story, and just tell it. And that's what I tried to do the first time. That was a mistake, just trying to tell people what happened. I decided I needed to really take action.

I sent a message to Henry and to Warren, two halves of a code that they could put together if they talked to each other. Then I got Mr. Stane to arrange for me and Warren to talk, since Warren's here in New York.. I showed him the card.

He said he knew what was there. That it's this club, and his dad's a member. That he'd been there before. But there wasn't really anything I could do with that information.

And then I sent a Polaroid to Virginia. Just one of her face. And she wrote to me and said, "hey, Tony, didn't you accidentally take a whole bunch of pictures of your computer screen back when you were testing that camera thing?" I think she meant the remote. But I had. Again, forgetting things I actually do. Thank goodness I had her there to remind me. It's too bad I don't have somebody to do that all the time.

And the Polaroids had pictures of the Polybius code on them. Not all of it-- there's well more than a screen of code-- but enough of it to recreate the rest from memory, and enough to prove that it's real, since the pictures are dated.

I rebuilt the code from scratch. Added some things to it. And got in touch with Ty. In cipher. That he says was so hard, he almost gave up cracking it. But he got it.

The thing about Ty is that he's not always the most creative on his own, but when you give him a project or idea, he can do it better than anyone. He just needs a little bit of a push, or something to copy. So once he had the cipher, he was able to write me back.
He told me that he'd given the oscilloscope to his dad because when I started getting along with my dad, he was worried that I wouldn't need him anymore. So he wanted my dad to get mad at me. Which is a pretty awful idea, and I told him it was stupid. But he didn't mean for my dad to get hit with that code. Whoever that guy was-- the same one who visited me-- made him send me a copy of that really, really poisonous version of the game, but then he tried to discourage me from looking at it.

I still really wasn't sure I could trust him, but I told him I still had a copy of the code, and that I wanted to go confront that guy, and would he help me?

He said yes about a million times.

I wrote a letter to his dad, telling him that I’d offer him an exclusive story including the photos and code to the game, and get my dad to drop the lawsuit over the oscilloscope tech, if he would subcontract the entire new contract back to Stark Industries. He agreed. I…well. I haven't asked my dad yet, but he's pretty committed to people keeping their word.

So I guess I have my friend back. I mean, he has some pretty poor judgment, but I know where he stands, mostly. And I think he was scared of what happened, too.

So we went to this club-- not before leaving copies of the code and photos of that man with as many people as we could-- I left one with Virginia, one with Henry, Warren had one in his room. Just so you know, copying Polaroids is tough. It's supposedly impossible, which means it took me about a dozen tries with bad photos of myself to get it right. The plan was to tell them that Warren was meeting his dad there for lunch. Not that we told Warren's dad this. We all got dressed up in nice collared shirts and slacks and jackets, like we were really meeting one of our dads for a fancy lunch.

When I got there, it was nothing like what I expected. The hostess at the front really didn't seem to know what to do with us, but once Warren showed her his dad's card, and said some password, she called someone to come get us.

The first floor of this place was…It was dark, and grimy, and the walls were bare concrete. There were a lot of people wearing a lot of black leather. Well. No. A lot of people wearing very little black leather, and doing a lot of things that I was vaguely aware people do, but was not aware people did in public. Or even semi-public. Let's just say the man escorting us took us past that room very quickly.

And then, past a curtain and a door with a keypad, there was exactly the kind of place I had expected. There was wood paneling, and velvet curtains, and plushy chairs. Another man stopped us and asked us what we wanted. I showed him my card. He frowned, and then whispered to someone else.

Then they took us into the vaults.

Under this mostly-unassuming triangular building was a maze of brick rooms, separated by archways and pillars. There were exposed pipes on the ceiling above. It was damp, and dim, and too quiet to believe that we were under a busy city street.

And there was that same guy. The same agent. Sitting at a table.

He gestured for us to sit, and asked me if I'd had a change of heart.

I told him I hadn't, but that I'd brought him the last copy of Polybius anyway.
I didn't sit down.

I handed him the floppy disk I brought with me. I explained that I'd improved it, added the controls that Ty and I had been talking about but had never implemented, that would make it less erratic and prevent the wrong target from getting triggered-- prevent things like what happened to my dad. And that if whoever he was going to use it, I'd rather innocent people not get exposed to that thing.

My heart was pounding like I-don't-know what at this point.

He thanked me and told me I'd made a very wise decision.

And then I told him that if he ever bothered any of us again, or we heard about Polybius being used on ordinary people, there were multiple people who had his photo and who had a photo of the code, and could prove its existence. I pulled out one of my Polaroids to show him-- one where his face was pretty clear. And then I pointed out that if he wanted to try to do anything to any of us, all of those people already had his photo and knew where we were going. And that we just happened to be the kids of three of the most powerful businessmen in the known world, so doing anything to us would be a really, really stupid idea on his part.

And then I told him that I was still acting in good faith, and he had the last of the code, and if he didn't mind, we'd make our way out.

He just sort of sat there, holding the floppy so tight I thought he was going to snap it. I hope he didn't.

Most of the reason I hope he didn't snap it is that I read about this kid in Pennsylvania who figured out a way to make a single floppy disk send a message to any computer it was inserted into, and then from that computer, it could travel to any other floppy disk inserted into it. His-- this kid's-- was just a funny message about elk and cloning. But I made one that would wipe any copy of Polybius it ran into, and replace it with a graphic of a little blocky guy who sort of looks like me flipping the bird (I know, I know. But they deserve it). And then it encrypts all of the other files on the disk using a basic Polybius square with the keyword "morons." I set it on a timer so it wouldn't do it immediately...it should go into effect next Tuesday, which coincidentally, is the same day Ty and I are going to be interviewed on television about the whole ordeal. If my parents will un-ground me. I'm sort of hoping they will once Ty's dad phones.

So here are photos of both the guy in question and the code. Just keep these somewhere safe, will you? I'm pretty sure I pissed that guy off.

Okay, I've written pretty much the longest letter I've ever written in my life. I wish I could get a grade on this. I'll talk to you more, soon. Maybe after the TV thing, once everything's settled down. I still need to see Blade Runner with Warren. Stupid being grounded.

My mom also limited my coffee. She said I was drinking too much of it. Which I was, when I was coding that thing. Now I'm only allowed one cup a day, if I'm good. I don't even know what qualifies as good when I'm barely allowed to leave my room. At least my dad is doing significantly better.

I hope you're doing well. I guess I'll get back to sending normal letters sometime soon. I still haven't forgotten about that kid.

Tony
The thing with the elk poem that Tony mentions is *Elk Cloner*, arguably the first widespread computer virus.
August, 1982: Hey, Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hey, Warren,

Yeah, I'm un-grounded now, so we can go see that movie.

I know, I know. I thought about it and I decided I'm really fine with Ty taking all that credit. It makes him feel better about the whole thing, and honestly, if I'm going to get that kind of attention again, I'd rather it be for something a lot more kickass. People can underestimate me until then.

The only phone calls I've gotten are from people asking me to tutor their kids in computer science. I've been turning them down. Partly because they're not offering enough money, and partly because their kids are all older than me by a lot. It's worth keeping in mind, though, if I ever need to make some money.

Also, fair warning: expect my dad to call your dad. You might want to do some damage control. Howard is pretty mad about this whole thing, partly because I said I was staying with you and they couldn't find us, but he also seems to think you shouldn't have known about the Hellfire Club. It turns out he's also a member, and I guess some people over there are trying to get his membership revoked now. He told them to go fuck themselves, in usual Howard Stark fashion, and that he got hypnotized by a video game and crashed his car into a divider, and the only reason he's alive is because of those airbag things he's been working on, so maybe they should be revoking their own memberships. But I was told under no uncertain circumstances am I ever to set foot in that place without him again.

I guess I'm a little pleased that that implies he might actually take me there at some point. Although I hope it's not to watch the leather folks. I really, really don't think that's something I'd want to do with my dad. I'm not even sure it's something I'd want to do on my own.

Anyway, yeah, dads can be assholes. Ty's dad let his own kid take the blame for industrial sabotage, my dad's a drunk who's got a temper even when he's not a drunk, Henry's dad also sounds like kind of a jerk... If the worst thing you can say about your dad is that he's kind of a bigot about people with weird powers that we see on the news, it sounds like you're doing pretty okay. I mean, what's the worst that happens? You have to keep your mouth shut and roll your eyes a lot over Thanksgiving dinner? It's not like any of us know any mutants (unless Henry's lack of a sense of humor counts as a mutation), so it really just doesn't affect us that much. I know that's an oversimplified way of looking at it, but sometimes you just have to shrug your shoulders, especially where parents are concerned. If I didn't, I'd probably never be allowed to leave my room, ever. Just sort of saying okay, so my dad's a dick, instead of wishing he wasn't one, has actually made things between us a lot better.

You can call me again, now that I'm no longer grounded! Actually, I'll call you before you get this letter. I seriously want to see Blade Runner so bad.

Tony
Virginia,

Yes, everything's fine. No, I did not get killed. Plan seemed to go off okay, but hold on to those pictures, will you?

Don't worry so much, all right? I had people who had my back, and sure, I understand how frustrating it must be to be in Germany and not able to do anything, but I wouldn't have wanted to put you in danger if you were here. It all turned out all right, and that's what matters, isn't it?

Good luck with school! Starting high school is a little unsettling, but it's not too different from any other year. I don't know how school goes on the Air Force base, but I assume it's petty much like everywhere. You'll do fine; I know it.

Talk soon,

Tony
August, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

So I made it back to school in one piece. I spent SIX MONTHS at home and didn't die. I got a ton of work done on my robots after we managed to sort out that Polybius thing. I'm still impressed that I didn't just die of boredom from being home.

Thanks for all the nice things you said about our TV interview. I wanted people to like me; that was really important to me. I actually thought a lot about how Warren acts, again. You know, sitting up straight and acting confident and making eye contact but complimenting other people a lot. Warren said the same thing about letting Ty take the credit, but I think that's better, you know, in some ways.

The contract is worked out with Viastone; dad is letting them keep 10% of the bid money and took over the bid, which was just as well, since it turns out that the Viastone tech people couldn't figure out how to replicate our circuitboards anyway. And my dad says he actually thinks he can use my ethanol-powered fuel cells, too, which is pretty exciting. He gave me business cards that say "Research Intern" as a going away present. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do with business cards, but it was really nice to get a present from my dad that wasn't really for a reason.

And I promise I'll be careful. My parents both know most of what happened, and so does Warren's dad. Ty's dad knows as much as I was comfortable telling him-- well, he probably knows everything at this point, because Ty is terrible about keeping his mouth shut. So there are lots of people who will protect us.

Things are good. Warren and I are rooming together this year. The school was sort of mixed on that, since Warren's a year older, but he's actually a grade behind me. It's really weird having older friends who are behind me in school. Virginia's the same way. I always forget they haven't studied the same things yet. I felt bad for Ty, since I sort of dumped him after I thought he'd actually hypnotized my dad on purpose, but his roommate is an eighth-grader, this kid named Christian, who seems pretty cool. If it's awful, Ty can just come sleep on our floor. It'll be like camping every night!

I've also already started my science project for this year. I'm altering the fuel cells, and building them into a robot. I think an ethanol-powered robot is a great idea. It's not a really complicated one, but I think it will be a good project. Ty says he's done with science fairs, and I can't really blame him. He's trying to find some other stuff to do instead. He says doing the science fair really killed both of our social lives last year, anyway, and he's probably right. But I know it's what I want to do.

I guess I'm joining the track team. I don't know how I feel about this. I've never been much for sports. But Ty really wants to do it, and he's been begging me since we started talking again. He's a way better runner than I am, so he keeps saying that if I can beat him by the end of the year, he'll take me to a movie or something. It sounds like a fun challenge, even though I don't know if I'll actually win.

Warren's a really great roommate. We're actually in Music Appreciation together, since it's a requirement here and it wasn't at my last school, so I'm taking it late. He keeps making fun of my complete tone-deafness. We can't be good at everything! And we also have to take Sex Ed this year, which is kind of weird. The other boys are all much bigger than me and Ty, obviously. Some
of them are pretty much hairy apes at this point. Some of them have actually had sex already. And probably a few more are just saying they have. I'm not sure what I think about that.

What do you think about this mutant crisis they're talking about in the news? I don't really understand why it's a crisis, I guess. I think it would be awesome to have superpowers, you know? We've been talking about it a lot in class, though. My dad says that as long as people use their powers to better the human race, he doesn't care what they do, but he also really wants an opportunity to study their physiology. Warren says his dad is a lot more skeptical and doesn't think we can trust people who are superhuman to do right by the rest of us. But there are lots of normal humans you can't trust either, right? And I keep thinking, what if somebody decided they couldn't trust me just because I'm smarter than they are? I think that would be valid, but it would also make me feel pretty bad. I feel like Cap would agree with my dad. But he'd feel it would be up to a person whether to surrender themselves for research. And really, you need to judge people by their actions.

Lunch is over! I'm off to class! I'll write soon!
September, 1982: Dear Dad

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Dad,

Hey. Look, I'm writing just like I promised I would! How are you and Mom doing?

We keep talking about the mutants in social studies class. Warren says his dad doesn't like them, which seems weird, because I've met Mr. Worthington, and he seems like a perfectly nice person. Ty's dad is a jerk, and Ty's dad seems okay with mutants. He's even talking about doing a miniseries on one of his cable channels where they profile different mutants, and famous historical figures who might have been mutants. I mean, sure, he's doing it because it's a popular topic at the moment, but he's not just giving into the hype and decrying them all.

I feel like it shouldn't matter how different people are, as long as they're good people, right? I was thinking about your work on the Captain America project (and I know you don't like to talk about how that all ended), and Captain America was sort of like a man-made mutant, wasn't he? Is there a difference, between somebody who grows up and then starts changing because of something that happened to them before they were born, and somebody who grows up and starts changing because they get a shot of some kind of serum in their veins?

I've been thinking a lot about some discussions I've had with Henry. Henry thinks people who make themselves superhuman so they can be heroes are more admirable than people who are born with special superhuman talents and use them for heroics. And I guess I can see that, because one means you've actually wanted something so much that you do something very brave and life-altering, while the other just means using what you've been given, the same way you've taught me that having the kind of money we have means feeling some responsibility for those who don't. Or, you know, that just because I'm really smart doesn't mean I shouldn't study.

And on that note, I'm going to get to studying! Write back!

Tony
Hey there!

Haha, Steve says I should say hi to you! I'm his friend from... when he was writing the Captain America comics. I started writing him fanmail, and Iiiii guess I just never really stopped. He's pretty cool, and he gives me a lot of good advice. Sooo Steve says we have a lot in common, which is really funny, because I still haven't met him! And I've been writing to him for, uh, three and a half years, almost.

So, I'm really good at math and science, mostly, and Steve says you're better at English and Social Studies. Which I guess I'm good at, but they're not my best subjects at all. I just like things that can be reduced to numbers, they make a lot more sense, haha.

Oh, man, I'm bad at this... I don't know what I should say! I should've written a script or something! I feel like anything I can ask you sounds really stupid, like 'what's it like to be blind,' or 'what's it like to live in Hell's Kitchen?' and here I am telling you how smart I am, but I'm going to sound really dumb on this tape.

Uhhh... I go to a private boarding school in New Hampshire. Which is pretty cool. I wish it was closer to New York, though. There really isn't anything to do except go into the town, which is kind of this quaint little place full of antique stores. I don't know if you've ever been to New England, but this place is pretty much exactly what New England is supposed to be like.

I'm working on building a robot right now, so that's pretty cool. What are you doing in school?

Ummmm...haha. I can't think of anything else to say! So I guess I'll say goodbye!
Hey, Steve,

Thanks for talking to me about the mutant stuff. I wrote my dad a letter about it, too.

Oh, yeah, I wrote a letter to my dad. A normal letter, like the letters I write you. It was kind of weird. But I promised him I would, and I hope he writes back. It would be nice if that's something I could do with him, because I could ask him questions about science. And he could answer when he has time. Phone calls don't really work for him, because he's always right in the middle of something when I call. But letters might.

You know, it's nice to have a dad I can write letters to. Sure, he's still a jerk sometimes, but he's a lot less of a jerk than he was before.

It's only September and Warren and Christian are both really gung ho about Halloween. Warren got passes to go into town, so we can dress up and...I don't know. I feel like we're a little old for trick-or-treating, but I've never even been trick-or-treating. I think it'll be fun to dress in costumes, though. I have to figure out what to be. Warren's being Conan the Barbarian, but I think mostly he just wants an excuse to walk around shirtless and wear his hair down. He does have pretty impressive hair. Christian is being the little girl from Poltergeist, which is really funny. They've been bugging us about what we're going to be. Ty keeps joking that he's going to make one of those crazy light-up suits from TRON. Did you see that movie? It was crazy. The idea that you could use a computer to animate something in a movie is just so, so cool. Ty and I have been talking about trying that. He might have decided he's going to do the science fair after all.

Oh yeah, so Ty's roommate, Christian, is really fun. He's from Boston, and he's got a whole bunch of littler sisters, and he writes to one of them the same way I write to you and Virginia and Henry (and Harold, when he actually writes back...that reminds me, I should send him a letter soon. It's been a while). So sometimes we hang out and write letters together. He and Warren really hit it off, too. I think he gets along better with me and Warren, but it's not like they hate each other, or anything.

In not so good news, my face is pretty much trying its best to resemble a pizza at the moment. And I think I just grew about a foot. Well. An inch and a half since the last time my mom took me clothes shopping. Nothing fits! Thanks, body, I appreciate the attempt to try to catch up with my peers all at once, but god, my face is gross. It's really, really hard not to pick at it. My mom said I can see a dermatologist over Thanksgiving, but I'm really not sure I want to wait that long. At this rate, I'm not going to need a Halloween costume.

Oh, and did you get that tape for that kid from your class? I really didn't know what to say. I hope I didn't sound too dumb.

I think that's everything going on right now! Talk to you soon!

Tony
October, 1982: Hey, Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hey, Ty--

Do you mind just telling our teachers I'm not going to be in class today? Warren's not feeling well, and he's already been to infirmary and they said there's nothing wrong with him, so I'm going to just hang out with him and make sure he's okay.

Henry says he will TOTALLY help us with the phosphorescents for a TRON costume, if you're serious about it. I guess I'll see you at dinner? If Warren's feeling better.

Tony
Hey, Henry,

This might be a longshot, but you're the only person I know who knows a lot about biology-type stuff. Do you know about anything that would cause really sensational back pain? Warren's been out of it for days. It's so bad he passed out in Phys Ed. The infirmary keeps telling him it's growing pains, and gave him calcium and painkillers, but he seems really sick. I'm getting kind of worried. He doesn't want to tell his dad because he knows he'll end up getting pulled out of school to see specialists, but I'm starting to think maybe he should be.

How's the thing with the bees going? I think that's so cool that you can get bees to actually build comb in different shapes. My fuel cells are doing okay. I've got them hooked up to a robot hand. By varying the amount of fuel delivered to each cell, I can get the hand to move in different directions. It's pretty neat.

Oh, and Ty says he's in for the TRON suit. Let's talk.

Anyway, anything you can think of for Warren would be great. You were talking about using bee venom for a painkiller or something, right? Could we try that?

Tony
Hey, Steve,

So, Warren's been really sick. Not like, flu-cold-chickenpox sick, but awful chronic pain sick. He's gotten a pass from PE till they figure out what's wrong with him. I'm kind of worried-- partly because I don't know what's happening to him, but partly because it keeps making me think about what if something like that happened to me?

His parents both want him to come home. At first he was trying to keep them from finding out, because he knew they would try to get him to come home. They want him to see all kinds of doctors, and he really doesn't want to miss school. I can't blame him. Missing school was awful.

I've been missing too much class, too, because I keep skipping to sit with him. I really hope he feels better by Halloween. As it is right now, some days he's just fine, and other days he's completely crippled by pain. I feel terrible for him, and I don't know what I can do. He just gets irritated if I act worried, though. So I kind of try to hold back a little.

I guess I'm just looking for advice, you know? I don't know what he should do. I think maybe he should be going to a doctor. I just don't want him to get sicker. But I also really don't want to be stuck at school without him. Stuff with Ty is better, and Christian's fun, but neither of them are Warren.

Tony
Dear Virginia,

That's nonsense. If I were anywhere remotely close, I would punch that boy for you. It wouldn't do much, because I'm sort of a weakling, but maybe it would at least get the message across. I don't know why these boys are so stupid. You're a catch. You should be breaking their hearts.

I'm glad the rest of school is going all right, though.

Ty took a picture of me and Warren in our costumes. I think we look pretty cool.

Look, there's a thing I want to talk to somebody about, and I don't know who else I can talk to. You're far enough away and I know you'll keep a secret. I'm not supposed to talk to anybody about it, because it's not really my secret to tell, but I need to talk to somebody. Would it be okay if I write to you about it? I know you've said yes to things like this before but I still wanted to check.

Tony
Henry,

Warren told me I could ask you this, and it's...well, really weird. Do you know anything that would make a person grow feathers? Not all over their body or anything, just a few.

I said it was weird.

Tony
Steve,

Something really weird is going on with Warren. I can't tell you, because it's not my place to tell, but it's not just that he's sick. I really think he needs to talk to an adult, but I don't know who. I don't think his parents will be happy about it.

I'm just really worried about him right now. I guess i just needed to say that.

Halloween was fun! We went into town. We didn't trick-or-treat, exactly-- we're kind of too old for that...but we hung out, in our costumes. We went to this pizzeria that just opened and got a couple of pies and sodas and it was a pretty good time.

There was this girl there who came over and said she loved our costumes. Ty was trying to show off how his suit lit up, but she told me she really loved Captain America. I guess her brother reads the comics or something, she said, and she used to sometimes sneak his copies.

She wasn't in a costume or anything, but she was really cute, I guess. We were having a really fun time, but I guess after a while I realized I wasn't paying attention to the rest of the guys. And then Ty came over and plunked himself in the seat next to her, and brought her a Coke. Warren and Christian were both being good about just leaving me alone to talk to this girl, and then Ty said-- that the only reason she was wasting her time with me was because of my mask, and I don't know-- that the only reason she was wasting her time with me was because of my mask, and I should wear one more often.

I know he just meant it as a joke, but it was really embarrassing. And the top half of my head was covered, but I'm pretty sure she could still see me blushing.

I've been thinking about the fact that here at school, I never really spend any time around girls. I know I've said this before, talking about Virginia, but I guess i got comfortable with her. She doesn't really seem like a girl anymore. But throw another girl at me, and I suddenly don't know what to talk about. I thought I was doing pretty well, but then Ty interrupted and I just couldn't get words to come out anymore.

I talked to Ty about it later, and he was surprised it upset me, I guess. He said it was all in good fun and he was trying to keep me on my toes. I guess...girls talk to him. They talk to Warren. They don't talk to me, unless they find out how stupidly rich I am. So I would have liked to just talk to that one.

Tony
Hi, Dad!

Don't worry about not writing back to my letter. I know you're busy. Just sending a card is fine! I'll be home in a couple of weeks anyway. Thanks for the money.

Would it be okay if Warren came home with us for Thanksgiving? I know it's not like he lives very far, but I think he's just been fighting with his parents a lot.

Thanks and love,

Tony
Thanksgiving, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Oh. No, it's nothing like that. I mean, I figure I would know that if it was true. I'm pretty sure Warren likes girls. Possibly too much. He and Ty can talk about girls for ages, and Christian and I end up just sitting there rolling our eyes at them. Sometimes it's a health thing, really. But it's really not something I can talk about.

Warren came home with us for Thanksgiving. I keep thinking about last Thanksgiving, when stuff between me and my dad was so tense, and how things are now. I mean, he's not the perfect parent or anything, but we get along, and we can laugh and joke about things, and he shows me the things in his lab.

It's been a little over a year since he gave up drinking. Don't get me wrong, he's still kind of a jerk sometimes, but it's been a whole year and I know how hard it was for him. We had sparkling apple cider with dinner tonight. My mom gave up drinking, too, even though I don't think I ever saw her have more than a glass of wine at a time, and I'm sure I never saw her drunk. I think she wanted to show Dad that she was supporting him.

And after everything that happened last summer, I was pretty sure my dad would just hate me again, but he doesn't. He doesn't talk about it. He treats me differently, though. He took me and Warren to work with him on Friday and actually had me take apart one of their new products and tell me what I thought. Like a consultant.

It's funny to think about how a year ago, I was the kid who hated going home so much that I wanted to stay with my friends, and now I'm the kid with the cool parents who let my friends stay over when their parents are being assholes. Well, maybe not cool parents. Weird parents. But okay weird parents. Things are getting to be okay.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Tony
Hey!

No worries about taking so long, I just took sooo long to get back to you, too. School's been really busy and my roommate was kinda sick, so that was a weird couple of months. I'm working on this robot for the science fair...yeah, I'm pretty excited about that. It uses ethanol-reactive fuel cells to induce motion. Which is basically just a fancy was of saying that if you connect a bunch of things together and then douse them with alcohol, they move.

I joined the track team this year, but I'm pretty bad at it, to tell you the truth. I can tell I'm getting better, but that means I'm only mildly worse than the rest of the team. Oh well, someone has to be moral support, right? Gymnastics sounds cool. I'd love to try that. The thing about going to a boarding school is there isn't anywhere else to do sports, and gymnastics isn't really a popular guys' sport, I guess. We don't have a team. I suppose I could do it next summer, if there are classes in the city?

I...don't really read a lot of fiction. Most of the books I read are, you know, books about circuits and things like that, because that's what I really want to learn about. Electrical manuals and things. When I was nine, I tried to read the whole encyclopedia, but I think I got up to the letter "P" before I got bored? Is it rude if I ask how you read books? Besides braille? I would guess braille books would end up being really huge, and I don't know where you'd get so many of them. Is there a braille library or something like that?

I wonder if there's a way to translate regular Roman letters into Braille using a computer. Let me think about that. Hmm. Oh, that would be the best science fair project, wouldn't it? If it wasn't already November, I'd switch! Ah, man.

What kind of books do you read, then? Anything I should try? I do read comics! But I feel like comics would be annoying as hell if you can't see the pictures. And I really haven't been reading as many comics lately. I'm so busy! Haha, so you're going to recommend books to me and I'll probably never read them, ever. I mean, I'd try, but let's face it, I'd probably get around to buying them and never actually get past the first chapter.

All right! I have to go eat pie! Happy Thanksgiving! Byeeee!
Thanksgiving, 1982: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

No, I'm not just saying that. Really. I mean, I know I don't really know what you're like in person apart from eating ice cream with you that one time, but there is absolutely nothing about you that would make you more offensive than most people. I should know, being that I'm more offensive than most people, so seriously, accept my expert opinion on the subject.

School's okay. I just really need to get this off my chest. Have you ever had to keep a secret for somebody? Like, a really big one? It ends up feeling pretty heavy. And I'm the worst person to know this, because, sure, I'm not going to blab it anywhere, but I can't help with it. There's literally nothing I can do except just tell Warren it's going to be okay, when there are experts and specialists and groups for things like this.

I had to wait for Warren to go to bed. He's staying with us for the weekend. I just don't know. He doesn't know I'm telling you. Don't ever, ever say a word of this to anybody, okay?

So Warren's been having all kinds of health problems since a little after school started. He's been coughing a lot, and his back always hurts, and he's been getting headaches and nausea. He kept going to the infirmary and they basically told him he's a wimp, and to suck it up. But it was getting worse.

Then in October, he started getting these weird boily-looking things on his back. Not a ton of them, not like a rash or anything, just two of them, and they were still pretty small, but he was so embarrassed and he didn't want to take his shirt off in front of anybody, which kind of ruined his Halloween costume, since he was going to be Conan. So we changed his costume-- he was still Conan, but he was Conan with a vest. And I guess that took care of it.

Halloween was fun, but I was a little pissed off with Ty all night, because he was hitting on this girl I liked. It's fine, she probably wouldn't have liked me anyway, but it was annoying. Warren was being super quiet, though, and I got the sense that he wasn't feeling well but didn't want to spoil things for the rest of us. But I sort of spoke up and said I wanted to go back to school, since I was annoyed with Ty anyway, and Warren and I headed back, and Christian and Ty stayed out with that girl and a couple of her friends, I guess.

By the time we got back to our dorm room, I could tell Warren was trying really hard not to cry. Which is really awkward, because Warren's not the kind of guy who cries, you know? He's always so cool. I asked if I should get a doctor, and he told me no, just get him a Coke and some painkillers, so I did that, and we sat around for a bit, still in our costumes, and then we eventually started getting ready for bed.

And then Warren took his vest off.

And there were feathers.

FEATHERS.

I know, crazy, right? He has FEATHERS coming out of his shoulder blades. I guess he could tell that something was wrong, and he gave me a look, and I just flailed my hands around a lot and had to take a Polaroid of his back and then position all the mirrors in the room in some kind of weird
arrangement to get to a point where he could see them, because I just couldn't SAY it.

And he frowned, and reached up and tugged at them, and then he told me to try pulling them out, and I didn't want to, but I did, and he kind of yelped, because THEY WERE ATTACHED TO HIM. And I tried to tell him not to worry and there was probably a reasonable explanation for it, but I couldn't say anything right and he just burst into tears.

I hate crying people. I don't hate them, I just hate the act of crying, I mean, because I don't know what to do and I usually make it worse, but I sat down and tried to tell him it would be all right, and I wanted to pat his back but I didn't want to, you know, disturb the feathers or hurt him again or anything and I just felt so useless.

Eventually we both fell asleep. I kind of fell asleep on the floor instead of in my bunk, but oh well.

So that was almost a month ago, and Warren seems to be feeling a little better now, physically, but the feathers are still there, and he's actually got these little feathery nubs on his shoulders? Which means he really can't take his shirt off anywhere now. I feel like he should see a doctor, but he won't, and he's pretending he's completely better just so he doesn't have anyone try to send him to one, and he didn't want to go home because his parents wanted to take him to one.

He's pretty freaked out and he won't even tell his mom or dad. This is the worst.

I don't really want to ask you for advice unless you have any, I guess. I just needed someone to tell all this to. Thanks, Pepperface.

Tony
December, 1982: Dear Mom and Dad

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Mom and Dad,

I just wanted to say that Warren was really, really appreciative that you let him stay with us last week. I was, too. He's a really good friend, and I'm glad to have a friend you both like enough to want at our house.

Dad, don't take this the wrong way, but a year ago, I wouldn't have wanted my friends at our house. I didn't even want to be at our house. But I had a great time this Thanksgiving and I'm really going to miss you both till I get home in a few weeks.

Thanks so much.

Tony
December, 1982: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

No, I don't have a crush on Warren. Why does everyone think that? We're just roommates, so we're really close. I mean, Warren's great and all, and if I were that kind of person, I guess he's good-looking? Is he good-looking? I wouldn't know what people think is good-looking for a boy. Girls seem to like him. But I'm not that kind of person. Not that I have anything against anybody like that. It's just not me.

But yeah, feathers. Seriously. Feathers. He's wearing shirts that are too big and then sweaters over the shirts to hide them, and that seems to be okay. We tried plucking the little ones out again, but it really hurt, so he's just doing that. We made the mistake of trying to put duct tape over them. That didn't work out so well. I'm hoping they don't get any bigger or show up anywhere else.

We're getting into high-gear science fair time. But I'm thinking about changing my project. Again. I did this last year, because I'm stupid. Except I found out last year another kid entered three different projects, so maybe I can enter two and not waste all this work. I met-- well, met is kind of the wrong word-- Steve introduced me to this kid I'm kind of pen-pals with now, who is blind, and I was thinking about trying to use computers to improve Braille technology. Wouldn't that be cool?

It would be great if you came back this summer. I'd love to see you, of course! Is there any chance your dad would get sent somewhere here in the Northeast?

Tony
Hey, Dad,

I know I didn't have to say that. I don't say things unless they're true. Thanks for the card, again.

I have a thought, and it's something I was wondering if I could try out in your lab over the break. You have somebody working on high-density fabrics for military use, right? Could I experiment with some of them?

See you soon!

Tony
December, 1982: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

What! I didn't even realize you had a girlfriend. Is this the same girl you were talking about a while ago? I've been talking about myself way too much, haven't I? I sort of forgot my rule to ask about you. Well, congratulations! I mean, good luck. And congratulations, because I know she won't say no.

So I think I'm about to completely drive myself crazy.

I had my robot that I was building for the science fair. Then I came up with this idea to build a computer that translates things into Braille. The tough part of that is a printer, but I think I can figure that out. Things that print Braille already exist, so getting a computer to talk to it can't be too hard, can it?

And I just thought of a third project to build some gear that I think would be really useful to the military. I don't know if I can do all three, but I'm going to try to finish the last one over break and then the second one when I'm back at school. The robot is pretty close to completion, I think.

Warren is feeling a lot better, thanks, and I think he figured out the problem he was having. I helped, a little. I think we're going to celebrate New Year's at his house, and get Ty and Christian and a couple other people to join us. Christian wants to bring one of his sisters, but she's really young...although I guess that would have been me when I was her age. He says she's a good kid and could use the trip.

Your present is in the mail, but I had to have it shipped separately! I ordered it from a catalog. Oh, and my dad knows about you now. I told him a little while ago, but I forgot to tell you. He asked me if I'd write to him, too. He's not as good at replying, but he sends me cards with money in them when he can't send a note, and it's nice to know he's thinking of me.

Have a good Christmas!

Tony
Dear Virginia,

Thanks for the present! This is hilarious! Hauptmann Amerika! I can't believe these actually exist. I can't read any of it, but it's got to be weird for Germans to read a comic about a guy who goes around fighting their ancestors.

Your present's enclosed. I ordered it from a catalog and it took longer to get here than I expected. I hope it fits. I don't really know anything about girls' sizes, and for all I know you grew another four inches and are going to be a foot taller than me the next time I see you, but I know you were complaining that your dad wouldn't let you buy anything this short.

Have a happy New Year. Fingers crossed your dad gets assigned back here!

Tony
Dear Steve,

Happy New Year!

I'm still at Warren's house even though it's the second. I still haven't changed out of my pajamas from yesterday. We've basically done nothing but eat chips and ice cream and drink soda and play games on his new Atari 5200. Have you seen this Q-Bert thing yet? It just came out ON New Year's Eve. It's crazy and 3-D and you have to jump around on these little bricks. It is SO HARD.

We had a really good time. Warren's parents actually had this HUGE party with loads of people. They invited my parents, but I don't think my dad wants to be around those kinds of parties right now. There were STRIPPERS. At a New Year's party. I guess there weren't a whole lot of kids. There were a lot of fancy hors d'oeuvres being passed around that were most definitely not kid foods, like escargot and those little shrimp balls wrapped in bacon, and they were just handing out shots to anybody. I only had one, because everyone else was trying them, but they were really sweet and disgusting, and that's saying a lot because I'm the one who always eats a whole bag of Chips Ahoy in one sitting. They were pink and had blue sugar rims. Ty and Warren both had two and I'm not even sure how many Christian had. His little sister got kind of annoyed and went and hid in the closet.

I felt sort of bad for her, because she was the only young kid there, and she seemed to be in a bad mood about the whole thing. I mean, Christian's parents came down from Boston, but their other sisters stayed with a relative or something, and Emmie seemed to just really want to tag along after her brother. You can tell they really adore each other, most of the time, even though they don't have anything in common. Christian is so outgoing and Em is this little mousy thing. Everything was great until the party started, but once he decided he just wanted to hang out with the guys, she got upset. And honestly, Christian was acting pretty dumb at that point. We were all sitting on a sofa, and he sat down square in Warren's lap. Warren pushed him off, but then the two of them were just sitting there giggling in the corner and not paying attention to anything else.

So I followed her to the closet, and chatted with her for a little bit. She seemed irritated at first that I followed her, but then she kind of opened up. I told her I'd give her some comics to read.

Anyway, I told her I'd help her find her parents and see if there was a TV she could watch, and after I did that, I went to find the guys, and Ty was sitting alone, looking bored. He said Warren and Christian had gone outside to smoke. I was going to ask why they went outside when I realized that he wasn't talking about cigarettes. I asked Ty why he wasn't out there with them, and he grinned and made a face at me and told me it was because he had me as a cautionary tale of what happens when you use illegal substances. And I whacked him on the head, and we went to find some more weird snacks. There was fried squid and sushi rolls and little puff pastry wrapped mushrooms.

Eventually, Warren came back, but he was alone. And he looked kind of upset. I guess he and Christian got into some kind of fight, but he wouldn't tell me what was going on, and he just sort of stalked out.

I went up to his room, and we talked a little, but he asked me if I'd leave him alone. I asked it this was about the other stuff that had been going on with him, and he told me no, but I don't know; I don't know what else would upset him that much.
Anyway, I went back downstairs, and found Ty, and the two of us toasted the New Year together. I actually did drink champagne. I kind of feel like drinking champagne doesn't count as drinking because it just makes you feel like champagne...all fizzy and bubbly. But Christian didn't come in until a lot later, and he was acting like he'd had more to drink since we saw him. I tried to ask him what was going on, but he just laughed and said Warren was a baby. It made me sort of mad, but my dad's said worse things when he was drunk, so I decided it wasn't the kind of thing he'd say if he was sober, and I let him be.

Ty and I had a pretty fun time, though. There were a lot of really fancy people there, and we tried to figure out which ones were actual models and actors and which ones were just trying to look like they were. And then we made up stories about them.

Warren seems better now. If he's still upset, he hasn't said anything. Christian went back home to Boston in the morning, and he was back to his usual self, but I could tell he wasn't making eye contact with Warren and I don't think he would have even said goodbye if his parents weren't right there.

How did your proposal go? Are you getting married? I want to hear all about it!

Tony
January, 1983: Hey, Emma

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hi, Emma! This is Tony, Christian's friend from the party. I just wanted to mail you these old comics. I don't really read them as much as I used to, so I thought you'd like them.

Good luck in school!

Tony Stark
Hey, Happy-

I haven't heard from you in a while. Everything good?

I'm working on another science fair project. This year, I intend to go...and win. What are you up to? Any good stories? How's Charlie?

Tony
January, 1983: Dear Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Henry,

Yeah, three. Crazy, right? But one of them is for this kid Steve knows and one of them is for Warren, and please don't pull that purity of science crap with me this time; these are totally selfish projects and I know it.

So here's what I have: I've built wings based on that old bike design I told you about, but I need to figure out a way to improve the design to make them stay in the air. As they are right now, they're a really pretty glider. I don't know if I want them to run off a power source or be analog--I could use the ethanol fuel cells, the more you drink, the higher you fly, haha. They're light, and flexible, and I used your descriptions to try to mimic the actual structure of bird wings as closely as possible, so thanks for the ornithology lesson. They can be collapsed down with the use of this harness to be virtually invisible underneath ordinary clothing. The harness uses state of the art breathable microfibers my dad's company is producing-- oh, and I finally, finally asked him if you could tour the labs. He said sure.

So, Warren's wings are much smaller than the ones I designed this for, but at the rate of growth he's experiencing, they're going to give him at least a three-foot wingspan, and I'm trying to make allowances for it to fit comfortably up to a twenty-foot wingspan. I might have to tweak it later. I know it's got to be awful for Warren, but it would be so cool if he could actually fly with them someday. Right now they're just a nuisance.

I've included my current schematic. Look it over and let me know what you think.

Tony
January, 1983: Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Steve,

Aw, man! I wish I could come to your wedding! That would be so amazing. I don't think my parents would let me, though. Maybe if I can meet you with one of them first. I'll think about it. It is almost a year from now. And I'll be a teenager! Isn't that crazy?

I got most of my second science project done. I really think I'm actually going to get three finished by February, and not lose as much sleep as last year. To be fair, most of the tech in my first project was stuff I built last year, repurposed, and then the second project is really basic. The Braille one I'm saving for last and that one might give me nightmares, but I'm confident I can do it.

Things have been weird since we got back to school. I still don't know what happened with Warren and Christian at New Year's Eve, and neither of them will say. But Christian was in our room half the time before break, and now I barely ever see him unless I go visit Ty. He doesn't sit with us at meals anymore. He's made friends with a bunch of boys in my grade, who are a lot older than all of us, obviously. Ty still does, but they weren't really close friends to begin with. Christian always got along better with Warren and me than he did with Ty. Warren completely avoids him. I wish I knew what happened. I feel like I can't be friends with Christian because Warren doesn't want to be around him. I know Warren wouldn't make me choose who to be friends with, but he's having such a hard time already, I don't want him to feel alone. And anyway, Christian was the one who was really drunk that night. I feel like if I had to place a bet on who was the bigger ass, it would usually be the drunk guy, since that's been my experience with my dad.

I sent some comics to Christian's little sister, anyway. You know what's funny? I was thinking about it when I mailed them, and I haven't picked up a comic in months. It makes me feel a little bit sad, but I also haven't really had time. I mean, of course I have time to read them, they aren't very long. I'm just so busy with things that it doesn't occur to me that I'm missing them.

Hmm, I think that's all right now. I'm gonna go work on some science fair stuff!

Tony
Hey! So I have some questions about Braille for you, if that's cool? I think I can write this program that will...sort of...punch Braille onto sheets of paper, sort of like a dot matrix printer but when it leaves an imprint, it would emboss the paper with raised bumps and you could have a whole sheet of Braille, just like that. What I really want to do is pair it up with some voice activation, but voice activation isn't anything I have worked with and I don't know if I'll have time to get that done. Maybe for next year. So what I wanted to know is, if this were going to work, is there a particular size you would like best? I don't know what size would work. I guess I mean both in the diameter of the dots, and the depth of the punch.

Mock trial sounds like fun. I don't really do any clubs that aren't science clubs. We have a robotics team and a chemistry club, and a math bowl team and then the science fair, of course. My roommate is on the lit mag staff. And yeah, track is done till spring, thank goodness. It was awful. Ugh. I am the smallest, slowest kid on the team. I have to decide whether I'm going to keep it up next term.

I've gotta go, it's getting to be the part of the year where the science fair takes over my life and I live on nothing but caffeine for a month. I'll talk to you probably once it's over, but if you don't mind answering those questions, that would be a big help. Talk to you later!
January, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Virginia,

So Warren's feathers are actually turning into full-fledged WINGS. WINGS. MY BEST FRIEND HAS WINGS.

My best friend has wings.

I am having a hard time processing this. There are certain things, you know, that make sense. Nowhere in any book I've ever read has it said that a boy might grow WINGS upon reaching puberty. I thought smelling like a sewer if I forgot my deodorant was bad enough. And Warren's a whole year older than me. What if I grow wings? How does that happen? What makes one boy in how many millions grow wings?

He's also fighting with Christian-- well, not fighting, because fighting implies they're speaking, and that means that's one less friend he can talk to.

I feel bad for him, because he has wings and that should be amazing. It's special and they're beautiful things, now that they're growing in...they're covered with fuzzy feathers that I think are down? They don't have the kind of structure that Henry says proper feathers should have. But he can't tell anybody. At least he doesn't think he can tell anybody. He's so embarrassed by them, and worried people will...I don't know what he's worried about. His dad makes rude comments about mutants all the time, and Warren is worried this makes him a mutant. I'm not sure. Is that a mutation? Or is it something else. There's no way to know if we don't tell someone who knows about these things so we can ask them. For all I know, there are thousands of kids with wings running around hiding them because they're afraid to tell anyone, because they think their parents will call them freaks. And since none of them say anything, they just all think they're alone.

I told Warren that, and it didn't cheer him up.

Oh, well. I just needed to say that to somebody. You're great.

Tony
February, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

All right. I was waiting till I got this just right to show it to you, but I know how unhappy you've been and I know you're scared someone's going to see.

I'm sorry I haven't been around as much. You know how the science fair gets. After its over, I'll have a lot more time to hang out.

So one of the projects I've been working on for the science fair is for you. And it's mostly finished. I pillaged some of my dad's experimental textiles and made you a sort of...I don't know if harness is the right word. It's flexible, and durable, and as long as you don't wear tight clothing, your wings should be totally invisible. I built a set of synthetic wings and tested it on myself, and I think it works pretty well. It has polyvinyl fittings with a quick release so that if you need access to your wings without warning, you just have to push the release clip and you're set. I hope it's comfortable-- it seemed okay on me, but my wings weren't part of my body.

I'm going to be in the computer lab pretty late working on the Braille project, but I wanted you to know why I've been a little cagey about that last project. Ty will be down with me if you want to join us. I don't think he invited Christian. Hope it works!

Tony
Dear Virginia,

Happy Valentine's Day!

I hope it's not too forward to send you a card or anything. I know we're just friends, but I thought you'd like to get one.

Tony
February, 1983: Hey, Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hey, Warren!

Thanks for the Valentine, haha. I guess as long as nobody's sending me real Valentines, getting them from friends is just as good. I'm glad the present seems to be working out. We can tweak it when I get back from the Science Fair. I'll see you in three days.

WITH A GOLD MEDAL.

Tony
February, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Ty and I are going to the science fair tomorrow-- yeah, he ended up entering after all. But we're in different categories this year, which is nice-- no competing against each other.

I managed to finish all three projects. They're not perfect, but they're done and I think they're acceptable for entering.

I'm really excited; I'm going to see Henry for the first time in almost two years, and there's this other kid he's been talking to for the past year who I want to meet. I asked Henry to send me his address, but Henry felt like that was a violation of privacy or something, because, you know Henry. He's got some weird ideas about ethics.

I have a question. Say there's a girl you like, and you know for certain she doesn't like you back, because you're not at all the kind of boy she usually likes. But then she sends you a Valentine, and you really didn't expect it. I don't know if I should say something about this Valentine I got or if it's fair to assume it's anything but a card from a friend. I don't really know what to do about it. I wrote a thank you, but I guess it still feels a little weird. Maybe bittersweet is the word? Knowing that they like me enough to think of me, but knowing it won't ever be the way I'd like it to be?

I also sent a Valentine to Virginia. I told her I know we're just friends, but I wanted to send her one anyway. She might be moving back here next year, and I guess I know she's too old for me, but she's still really pretty and really kind.

All right, I have to go pack up my stuff for the weekend. I'm so excited. I haven't been kicked out of school this year or anything!

Tony
February, 1983: Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Henry,

Ty and I are at the hotel in room #624. Come over as soon as you get this. There's a problem. A big one.

Tony
February, 1983: Bruce

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Bruce,

Hey. This is Henry's friend, Tony. We're all meeting in Room #624. Bring your projects with you--don't leave them alone. We'll explain when you get here.

Tony
February, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

I'm getting this letter out as quickly as possible. Sorry it's so rushed. The concierge said they'd post it right away.

Ty didn't notice this from last year, I guess, but we walked into the conference center to get our registrations, and we ran smack into one of the sponsors of the fair.

He's the guy from the Hellfire Club.

He greeted me by name and told me he couldn't wait to see what I was presenting.

We are so screwed.

Tony
February, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Virginia,

By the time you get this, if anything's happened to me, it'll be on the news. You still have those photos, right? Get ready to send them.

Tony
Ty,

Don't panic. No one kidnapped me; I just snuck out the window using the wings I built. I guess if you don't get woken up by a loud crash, they work okay.

I'm walking down the road to use a payphone, just in case the phones here in the hotel are bugged. I'm going to go tell my dad, and find out if he's ever heard of Mr. Brannex or his company (Seriously, what a stupid name). Henry and I worked on modifying his project so we can use it as a last resort if necessary. Bruce has been warned, and he's going to get the word out to some of the other kids with more advanced projects, to make sure they know not to give this guy any of their tech. I'm hoping that asshole doesn't even bother with us, but I want to be prepared in case he does. I wrote to Virginia and Warren, and they'll know to release the photos if anything happens here.

It's four AM now. If I'm not back by breakfast time, get the word out. You can use the Braille translator if you're worried about being intercepted. Henry and Bruce both have keys.

Tony
February, 1983:

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

If the text version of this chapter is blank, you can check out this image instead!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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HENRY:

I'm dressed like a girl and standing in the back of the conference hall with a projector blasted off some kid from 'Brony' Science. I'm pink sweater with a pocket on it, purple skinny jeans, pink leather boots, tall high socks. She's wearing blue eyeshadow ever. I got a box of aurora hair dye at the drugstore, dyed my hair in the back of the public bathroom. And when I'm not outside the hotel, and she kept telling me I look like an idiot trying to dress like Warren when I grow my hair out. Now I look like a reject from the year 2000. I even have clip-on earrings. I thought that was nice touch.

When I got back to the hotel in the morning, there were these guys in yellow suits in my room. I saw them coming in up from the outside balcony. They kind of looked like by keeping equipment and I thought may be it was part of your project's on, except they were painting some kind of weapon. I was turned around and walked back to the shopping mall, called my dad, and Warren and such and used my credit card to get a lot of things. I'm actually wearing a bra. Do you have any idea how hard it is to put these on? I'm not even sure how I'm supposed to get out of it.

I'm sure where they're now. Your parents should be sending backup but assume we're going to have to implement phase one. Let Mr. Rum know, make sure any of the other kids with more advanced prototypes know not to let these people near their tele. I've got a good view of the floor, and the smoker and spray you gave me are under the table. We're good to go.

ANTONIO / EDWINA / STARK

Chapter End Notes
For clues and solutions to this chapter, you can visit this link
February, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

S-

I am leaving this letter with the concierge but I needed to tell you this and I promise promise promise I will fill you in on all the details later but HOLY SHIT I AM SORT OF A SUPERHERO.

-T
Dear Mr. Brannex,

You may recall meeting us last year in the Hellfire Club under rather unfortunate circumstances. Let us make it perfectly clear that we are aware of your motivations and that we consider this a breach of any truce between your organization and ours.

Please return Tiberius Stone to his hotel room posthaste. If you do not, the consequences will be dire for you and your team.

You will not find us. You will not defeat us. You may not know it, but you've already lost.

Sincerely,

K.O.S.M.O.S.
February, 1983: H&B

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

H & B--

Thanks for taking over room surveillance while I try out this glider. I think I found out where they've got Ty. Trying to figure out if these are actual beekeepers or not. If they are, we're screwed.

--T
February, 1983: Dear Mr. Brannex

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Mr. Brannex,

K.O.S.M.O.S. does not negotiate with terrorists. Please return Mr. Stone as per our request.

Let us remind you that Mr. Stone's father owns one-fifth of the media outlets in the United States. And that we have you photograph. And now we have your name and the name of your organization.

The clock is ticking. If you do not cooperate, you will regret this.

K.O.S.M.O.S.
February, 1983: H&B

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

H & B--

Upon further inspection, I don't think those suits are actually bee-proof. Let's go.

--T
Dear Mr. Brannex,

You leave us no choice.

Have fun being featured on the evening news.

Oh, and by the way, the hotel is surrounded.

Don't fuck with scientists, asshole.

K.O.S.M.O.S.
February, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Steve,

Thanks for clipping that article for me. That photo is AMAZING. I'm a little disappointed that the science fair declined to award any prizes this year, but I suppose it's for the best, since all our projects got trashed.

First off, I met this kid named Bruce who is completely incredible. He's...I dunno, really quiet, but really smart. Henry met him last year and they've been pen-pals, but hearing Henry talk about him doesn't do it justice because there is a reason this guy placed all three places in his division last year. I wish he didn't live in fucking Ohio. Why is that a place? It's so far. I thought Christian being in Boston was far. Anyway, I invited Bruce to come to New York for my birthday this year. I hope he can, but he's in public school and they don't get out that early.

Bruce! It's so funny because I hear Bruce and I think of big guys, like Robert the Bruce, you know, that Scottish guy, but he's so unassuming. The name doesn't really go.

Anyway, he's doing crazy biology stuff that is so beyond me it's amazing. He doesn't get robotics or engineering like I do, but bio shit is like second nature to him.

So, conveniently, Bruce and Henry decided last year they wanted to do tandem projects with North American honeybees. Bruce was specifically working with the chemistry of what makes bees aggressive. It is really interesting because the thing with bees, according to both of them, is that bees are docile and calm and even friendly with people until there is a specific type of stimulus, and then they completely freak out. It's all pheromones and chemicals and stuff like that. At least, that's how Bruce explained it to me. Really interesting. What it comes down to is just the simple fact that if you aren't scared of bees, they will like you and even be affectionate toward you, but if you're scared, they'll sting the hell out of you.

Oh, shit, I'm totally digressing, aren't I? Sorry. I'm just so excited I met this kid. I'm just hoping I have a chance to work with him someday.

Okay. So Bruce isolated the pheromones that make bees aggressive, while Henry was working on strategies to communicate with bees, with the goal of helping beekeepers. You're not allowed to enter joint projects in the fair, but they agreed that if they placed first and second, they would split the prize money from both.

Then Ty got kidnapped.

I suspect they came for me, but I had seen Mr. Brannex when we got into the hotel. Oh! Mr. Brannex. I've told this story to so many people I keep forgetting who knows what. So when we got to the hotel, I ran smack into this guy. Who was the guy who threatened me and Ty last year. His name is Mr. Brannex and he's the CEO of this company called Advanced Idea Mechanics (what a dumb name, right?) who sponsors the science fair. He said some creepy stuff to me, so I got out of there, warned Henry and Bruce and we got together with Ty in our hotel room. I went out that night and walked to the shopping mall a couple miles away. Well, I flew there, mostly, with the wings I built for one of my science projects. It was really dark and there was nobody around, so I figured
that would be okay. I called my dad and Warren's dad. After last year when my dad got really pissed at me for not telling him about the Hellfire Club, I thought it would be better to make sure he knew. I thought about calling Ty's dad, but I trust Warren's dad more, I think, even if Warren's mad at him. My dad said not to worry, that he'd make sure it got taken care of.

I went back to the hotel, and was going to get into the room through the window again, but there were these people in the room in these yellow suits who looked like beekeepers. I wasn't sure what was going on, but they had something pointed at Ty, and I figured that if I went in, they'd try something with me, too. So I went back to the shopping mall. I had to walk, though, because the sun was up by this point, and I didn't want to attract too much attention. But I got a disguise, and went back to the science fair while everyone was setting up. I snagged another kid's project and pretended it was mine, so I could hang out in the room and watch what was going on without anybody recognizing me.

And how did you guess Julie from the Bronx was me? No one else has figured it out. My parents haven't even figured it out and my dad even commented on how I looked terrible with a buzz cut, but at least is was better than the pony tail. Julie just disappeared after the science fair and nobody's been able to find her for comment. It is kind of upsetting to have all the credit go to an imaginary person and not be able to take it for myself, but I don't think I could have done it without her.

I make a cute girl, don't I?

Henry and Bruce said they hadn't heard anything from Ty, so we sent Mr. Brannex a letter telling him we expected Ty back.

Mr. Brannex told us he'd give Ty back if we turned over all the tech we'd invented for that year to him. I used the wings again to look in all the hotel windows and found where they were keeping Ty, and then I told Mr. Brannex to fuck the hell off.

And then the fair started.

I pretended to be Julie with her stupid project about sea anemones. Seriously. I don't know why Julie hadn't already died from boredom. Mr. Brannex showed up and I saw him go up to Henry and Bruce. We didn't know if he'd figured out the connection, but he obviously had. They acted really dumb for a while while he asked them where I was, and I watched from my side of the room to see the rest of Mr. Brannex's staff get really close, like they were planning on attacking them, too.

And that's when Henry and Bruce let out the bees.

TOTAL CHAOS.

Everyone is afraid of bees. Even people who shouldn't be. All the kids stared screaming. But Henry gave me this smoker that pacifies bees and I'd managed to hijack the sprinkler system to dissipate the smoke around the room. Then we all had spray bottles full of pheremones that piss bees off, and all we had to do was squirt Mr. Brannex and his men, and the bees would just descend upon them. I have never heard so many grown men cry in one place.

Brannex tried to go after me, and I was able to get my robot hand to grab the back of his jacket just long enough to launch myself into the air. I don't know. I think I just wanted to show off my wings, to be honest, but it was really useful to spray people from way up high.

And that's when someone hijacked the hotel's PA system.

My dad had told me he would send help. He sent fucking SHIELD.
SHIELD. THE ACTUAL, REAL SHIELD. THERE WERE SHIELD AGENTS IN MY SCIENCE FAIR.

They told us kids we'd done a good job and could get out of there, and I guess they arrested the Advanced Idea Mechanics contingent-- though I found out later that Mr. Brannex had escaped. One of the agents told me I'd done a really good job.

I got out of the room, went up to the hotel bathroom, and Julie vanished forever. And I don't think she'll be coming back.

It kind of stinks that Bruce and Henry both got little medals from SHIELD and a certificate and all that, and I didn't get anything, but I guess it's better to be underestimated. It's worked well for me so far. Someday, I'm going to actually do something I get credit for.

I'm still really proud of myself.

Tony

PS Oh, and yes. It stands for Kids Of Scientific Minds Opposing Scoundrels. Clever, huh?

Chapter End Notes

Hey, lovelies! I'm going to be at New York Comic-Con and possibly associated events next weekend. I'll most likely be there on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. If anyone would like to try to meet up, please let me know!
March, 1983: Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Hey, so I feel like with all the press it got, K.O.S.M.O.S. should continue. Wouldn't it be cool if we had a big collective of all the most talented young scientists in the United States...or even the world? We've got me, you, Ty, Bruce, who else? I bet there are more of us. We should be working together and sharing ideas and fighting evil (okay, I don't know how often fighting evil will come up, but that was badass). What do you think?

I'm glad to hear most of your bees came out of that okay. I know that was the biggest sacrifice. I just list a pair of microfiber wings and crack a bunch of fuel cells. Oh well, next year, right? Warren's dad says Worthington can pick up the sponsorship slack. My dad would, but I'd have to be disqualified. I can't compete in a contest my dad is sponsoring, haha.

Either way, I want to talk to you about ways to apply your work to my work, or vice-versa. Specifically, flying. Those wings were fucking incredible and I want to fly all the time. Also, I was thinking, if it turns out Warren's wings are functional (they're still growing), then I can fly with him. I think he'd be happy about that. I'm still worried about him. When I started out at this school, he was one of the most popular kids I knew. I was shocked he wanted to spend time with me. Now he barely talks to anybody else. I know it's the wings, but I don't really think I can say anything to him about that.

Tony
March, 1983: Dear Bruce

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Bruce,

This is Tony, Henry's friend. Not that you'd forget after that fiasco. I hope you don't mind I took your home address off your registration for the science fair. I just really wanted to make sure to keep in touch with you, because I was just so impressed with your projects. I don't know how you do it! Multiple projects every year is incredible. I really, really hope you can come back next year.

Anyway, my birthday's in May, and I was thinking maybe if you wanted, you could come out to New York. I know you said you'd never been. I think you'd love it. You cold see my dad's lab, and we could drive out to Cold Spring Harbor to see the genetics lab at Cold Spring Harbor. My dad knows all kinds of people out there, so we could probably even see stuff that isn't normally open to the public. And the Museum of Natural History! And the Hall of Science (which is kind of for babies, but it's still fun)! My parents say that if your aunt can't afford the ticket, they'd be happy to pay for it as a birthday present for me.

Also, I've been talking to Henry about K.O.S.M.O.S. We want to keep it going. Henry's in, so's Ty. We should get some other members, though. I don't know how we do that. I mean, I guess we could open it up to the other kids at the science fair, but none of them are as smart as us. We'd have to figure out what the criteria for acceptance would be. If you have any ideas, let me know. I'm going to get us wristbands made up!

Write back!

Tony
Hey, look! This thing works! I'm working on a more streamlined version of it, but for now, I can type letters to you in the computer lab and print them out in raised Braille!

The science fair was kind of a wash. I don't know if you heard about that. It turns out one of the sponsors has been using the science fair to recruit kids for this crazy underground organization of scientist-saboteurs! It's like some kind of movie or something. I hope your mock trial went better. Or did kids get kidnapped by evil lawyers?

The funniest thing was, the Braille printer came in handy, because I was able to send messages to the other kids and not worry that the bad guys would be able to read them.

We're starting a club, sort of thing. I don't know if it would be up your alley since it's a science club, but I figure scientists need legal representation for trademarks and patents and industrial sabotage lawsuits. I don't think we are going to have to deal with too much of that just yet, but maybe eventually. Anyway, I made everyone else membership cards, so I made you one, too. I built a little robot that die-cuts the plastic and adds the raised letters. I don't know your name so I just put "Legal Counsel."
March, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

That's great news! I mean, it's not close, but it's better than Germany. Are people named Virginia even allowed to live in Virginia? Obviously you should come to New York instead.

Yeah, the science fair was nuts. You probably got the gist of it if you read all those articles. I guess you can be in K.O.S.M.O.S., too, if you want. I mean, it's mostly my club. It's supposed to be for science kids only, but I'm sure we can come up with a job for you. The one highlight is that I met this kid, Bruce, from Ohio, who might even be smarter than me. It's a close call.

Wow. I can actually take a train there from Penn Station. I wonder if my parents would let me do that this summer. Sure, it's an eight hour trip, but that sounds like it could be pretty exciting.

I'm glad you liked the Valentine. I wasn't sure if I should send that kind of thing, but I also was thinking that that's actually the day we met, right? Well, almost. I know the party was really on the 15th, but it's close enough. So it's also kind of a thank you for being my friend. For a really long time, actually. It's been three years, which I think is the longest I've been friends with anybody. I guess Happy, too, except I never hear from him that much anymore. He's too busy with sports and stuff.

Speaking of busy, remember how Ty hit on that girl at Halloween? He's apparently dating her now. He's been sneaking off campus to hang out with her. I'm sort of mad enough that I've thought about telling on him, but that's not really fair play, is it? He says she has a friend I could probably date, but I don't want to just date a girl for the sake of dating a girl.

Anyway, at the moment, I'm kind of trying to spend a lot of time with Warren. I built him harness thing that keeps his wings from being visible, but he's been down a lot. They're big and I guess they're kind of heavy, but they're not big enough yet for him to try to fly. Henry says his wingspan really needs to be about twice his height to do it safely, so there's a ways to go.

I'm really excited about you being back in the states. You might get to meet Warren. I mean, I know you will. I'd really like you to. You're my two favorite people.

I don't know what's going on with him and Christian. They're still not talking. Warren doesn't even like when I talk about Christian.

Tony
March, 1983: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Captain America,

I regret to inform you that I haven't read any comics in AGES. It's been really busy for me, and I feel a little guilty about it. There's a lot going on, I guess. Anyway, I got this month's issue and I was really excited to see that Arnie was still around, but why did you have to kill Michael? I didn't think that seemed very fair. There aren't really very many couples like them in comics (are there any others? I don't know. Captain America is really the only comic I still pick up) so I feel like they should get to be happy. I felt so bad for Arnie at the end of the book.

I also wasn't sure what I thought about that ending. Steve Rogers isn't the kind of guy who would steal the show when somebody else is grieving. Arnie was right to scold him like that.

How are you doing? I thought Primus was a pretty cool villain. Having to fight yourself would be weird.

I got to see some SHIELD agents last month, and I was wondering something. I suppose you make up fictional SHIELD agents for the comic, don't you, so people's real identities aren't compromised, right? Or do you use old SHIELD agents from when Steve Rogers was really alive?

Sincerely,

Tony Stark

Chapter End Notes

Tony is reading Captain America #279
Dear Steve,

I'm sort of at a loss as far as what to do with myself now that there's no science fair. Last year, I ended up at home, and we all know how that went, and I'm just realizing I was spending so much time on my projects, I didn't have time for anything else.

A few kids have asked me about the science fair, and some of them even asked if I met that girl who made the papers. I've just been saying no. It's easier than if people start asking me more questions and I have to make things up. Ty has been a saint about not saying anything. If public, at least. He keeps teasing me about it when we're alone, but that's fine, because I keep teasing him about getting kidnapped by beekeepers.

Things with Ty are a little weird right now. He has a girlfriend, and he's always rubbing it in everyone's face. It's not that I'm jealous or anything. I mean, I'm a little jealous, but really, where are we supposed to meet girls around here? Almost nobody has a girlfriend. He's just being obnoxious about it. And you probably heard the announcement about the new military arms stuff that the news keeps insisting on calling "Star Wars?" The missiles that are supposed to block other missiles? That's what the contract Ty's dad tried to steal was for, the one last year. It's going to be pretty huge and it's a little bit awkward every time that comes up, since it's big news lately.

Ty has also decided that he's going to master the Moonwalk, that new Michael Jackson thing. Have you seen that? The best I can do is fancy backwards walking, but Ty's much better at those kinds of things. I'm sort of glad I'm not rooming with him this year. I think Christian has got to be sick of "Billie Jean" by now. Ty's already talking about being Michael Jackson for Halloween next year. He told us that the rest of us can be the zombies from Thriller. I'm willing to bet money he'll be into something new by then. I'm pretty sure he only decided he likes Michael Jackson because his girlfriend does.

In better news, I'm actually starting to get better at track. I'm not the slowest kid on the team anymore, so I guess that's good. But I definitely don't think I'm winning any kind of bet.

I'm thinking I might ask Ty if he wants to build something together, now that the science fair is over.

I'm still worried about Warren. He still isn't really talking to his parents, and he's not talking to people here at school. He's barely talking to me these days. I mean, I guess that happens with a lot of kids. I didn't really used to talk to anyone, but that's because I thought they didn't like me. Actually, I'm pretty sure they didn't. Warren has so many friends and I can't imagine giving them up once you have them.

How's the wedding planning going?

Tony
April, 1983: Dear Dad

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Dad,

School is talking a lot about how next year is our Junior year and we should start thinking about where we want to go to college, and what we are doing to make sure we look like serious applicants to the schools we want to apply to.

I don't know anything about colleges, so I guess I'm going to have to do some research, but I was wondering if I could work for you this summer. I read up on child labor law and since, technically, Stark Industries is a private company owned by you, I could work for you and it wouldn't violate child labor laws. Minimum wage is three dollars and thirty-five cents an hour so I would like to suggest a wage of four dollars an hour since I would consider myself a skilled laborer. Ideally, I'd like to work three days a week, which, at seven hours a day, means it would cost you eighty-four dollars a week to hire me.

Please let me know if we can work something out.

Tony
April, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

Hey, look, Ty and I are down in the lab seeing if we can build a simple AI.

We got into a fight with that new asshole comp sci teacher again and he asked us if we thought we were smarter than him. We felt obliged to answer honestly, and he told us to prove it or we'd have lunchtime detention for the rest of the year. So I asked what we got if we could prove it, and he said we could miss class for the rest of the term. So now we're trying to build a simple AI that talks like him. And, you know, give it more basic computer science knowledge than he has. I think we can do it.

Anyway. I'm worried about you. I just needed to say that. I know this wing thing has to be awful, but it's not a reason to turn into a shut-in. You're the coolest guy I know. I like you just the same knowing about your wings as I did before. Why would anyone else feel different?

You have pretty much the coolest dad in the world. I know he's said some kind of awful things about mutants, but I can't believe he'd hate you. It would help so much if you talked to him. I say this as somebody whose dad is a royal dick, who still at least tries when I talk to him. You know, sometimes.

And I have no idea what's going on with Christian, but you two need to work it out. Or at least tell me what happened if you need me to punch him. I'd punch him for you. It would be the wussiest punch in the world, but I could built a simple robot that would punch him for you. It's not fair to me and Ty that we have to pick and choose when we spend time with each of you. You're both our friends.

I'm pretty sure you're my best friend, and I don't want you to be unhappy.

All right. Anyway, we're going to do something tomorrow night. No excuses. You and me, nobody else. It'll look suspicious if we leave together, so meet me on the south soccer field at eleven tomorrow night.

Bring your wings.

Tony
April, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Virginia,

Um. I feel like I owe you an apology. First off, you have to swear swear swear that you will not say a word about this to anybody. Second, I think I sort of lied to you.

I don't know what to do about this or what to say about this or anything. I almost feel like I imagined it and maybe it didn't happen and...

Warren kissed me. Kissed me. Like actually really kissed me. Not like, with tongue or anything weird like that, but kissed, on the mouth, eyes closed, the whole deal.

I took him out flying. You know, to test his wings? They were getting big enough I thought he might be able to do it. I built another pair of the wings that got trashed at the science fair, and we met really late at night, way far away from the rest of the school.

I could fly. He...couldn't, quite, yet. His feathers aren't all the way in; he still has these downy tufts, and I don't think his wings are really quite big enough. He got so frustrated, and I felt bad, like I was showing off too much. So I found a tree, that had pretty sturdy branches and wasn't too tall, and tried climbing up it. I figured even if he couldn't get enough thrust, he'd have the lift to glide, right? So we did that.

I could tell he was terrified. He kept crunching his eyes shut and opening them just the tiniest bit. So I finally took his hand and told him I'd jump with him. He squeezed my hand back, so, so, so tight.

Holding somebody else's hand while you're gliding through the air and there's nothing there to support you is maybe one of the most amazing feelings ever.

We didn't get really far, maybe forty or fifty feet. Warren was really nervous, and I think he's a little afraid of heights. Ironic, huh? He kept looking down and then wobbling and finally our wings got tangled and we just sort of tumbled down into a pile of wings and arms and legs. He yelled when we fell, and I laughed at him, and I felt a little bad, but then he laughed too, and we just sort of lay on the soccer field laughing for ages. And then he finally picked himself up.

His wings just fold back on their own, so elegantly. I need to get a better look at them to try to figure out the mechanics for mine. Mine have a hand-operated lever, which is cool, but if I could get them to maybe work off shoulder movement, that would be even better.

So. He got up, and I was just sitting on the ground, watching his wings, and he held a hand out for me, and I took it and dragged myself up, but he didn't let go of my hand. He pulled me up closer to him, and KISSED ME.

That happened, right? It happened. I know you don't know that it happened but it happened. And I know you've kissed a whole bunch of people, but no one's ever kissed me before, and I don't know what to think, because he's my best friend and he's a boy, and I'm not gay. I'm really not gay. I know I like girls. But I like him, too. He's tall and has dimples and amazing blue eyes and he's the kind of person who is so pretty I wouldn't ever expect him to notice me, and he's done so much for me, and he's just a really good person. And I'm sort of scared he just wanted to do that that one time and it won't happen again. What if that's the only time anybody ever wants to kiss me?
And the worst part is, I can't even tell people about it. I don't even know if I can talk to him about it. School's almost over for the year. I just kind of said hi to him this morning on my way out the door to class. Just "hi." Nothing else. Really smooth, right?

I want him to like me back. I hope he likes me back. I hope that wasn't just a one-time thing. I'm sitting in the library writing this to you because I'm scared to go back to the room and have him act like it didn't happen.

This is so bad, Pepperface. So so so bad. You'll meet him for my birthday. You'll see what I mean.

Tony.
April, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Virginia

I'm really sorry I'm just writing to you again but I don't know what else to do.

I like him so much. This is awful. I mean, I pretty much liked him as soon as I met him but I figured that wasn't a real thing, you know, I assumed there was no chance he'd like me back, ever. Which feels lousy but things were okay, knowing that was just not going to happen and he liked me a lot as a friend.

And that also sort of made it okay that he's a boy, because as long as it couldn't happen, I didn't really have to think about that part. I had crushes on boys before and they just always went away pretty fast. And I thought maybe it was just because I don't really know any girls besides you, you know?

And it's the kind of thing I would never have ever told him, because I didn't think he'd ever--

And now I just think, he just did that because he was sad or tired or scared, not because he meant it, because now he's barely talking to me and I don't know what to say to him. I've just been staying in the computer lab really late working on my AI.

I feel sick to my stomach all the time now. I hate this. I feel like I need to say something before the school year ends and we go home and I don't see him all summer, but I don't know what. What if he hates me?

Ugh. This letter is stupid. I'm sorry. I'm going to just go do something about this.

Tony
April, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

This is stupid. I didn't do anything. You're the one who kissed me. Why aren't you talking to me?

I'll be in the computer lab. Come find me if you want to talk.

T
April, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

This is shitty. Trying again: When I say "come find me if you want to talk," I mean I want to talk, but I don't want to force you to. What are you going to do, avoid me for the rest of the school year? We live together. You're my best friend. I thought you were my best friend.

In the lab. Again. Don't be stupid.

T
April, 1983: Dear Dad

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Dad,

Thanks for the card. Yeah, I'll be home next week. Really? I didn't think you'd actually assign me to a division. But I guess if I have to pick, something with computer programming or robotics. Is that okay? Thanks.

Oh, and yeah, I'm twelve, but I'll be thirteen in a month. So, no, I'm not technically old enough to drive yet. But thanks for the offer.

I'm asking a few friends if they can stay overnight for my birthday, and Warren's going to stay that whole week. One of them's a girl, but she can stay in a different room. That's still okay, right?

Tony
April, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Steve,

Sorry I haven't written in a whole. I've been really busy, you know, with finals and stuff.

My dad is offering me a job for the summer! I'm really excited.

Yeah, I think Warren is doing a little better. We had some problems but we mostly worked them out. And he finally told me what the problem with Christian was. I think it'll be okay, they just need to spend some time apart and maybe in the fall he'll be okay hanging out with him again.

My parents aren't too keen on the idea of me coming to the wedding, no, but thanks for inviting me, and please thank Maureen too. They did say I could send you a present, so I'll try to figure that out.

Things are pretty good. I'm sorry I'm not more specific, but I'm trying to figure them out for myself before I explain them to anybody. But they are good.

Tony
April, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Virginia,

Okay. So. He doesn't hate me.

I actually think I might have a boyfriend.

That feels so weird to say. Boyfriend boyfriend boyfriend.

Nobody else knows this. You can't tell anybody. Don't slip up. This is pretty much the biggest secret in the universe. I told Warren that you know, and he's okay with that. I actually told him that you guessed months ago, and he thought that was kind of funny. He says hi, by the way. And that he's excited to meet you for my birthday. And to keep your hands to yourself, but I told him we aren't that kind of friends.

I don't know. I feel like I should be ecstatically happy, but I hate secrets. This is stupid. Why can't I have a girlfriend, who I can brag about and hold hands with in front of people?

On the other hand, having a roommate I can kiss anytime I want is going to be pretty badass.

Tony
May, 1983: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Warren,

I kind of wanted to leave you with a letter, even though I'll call you tomorrow and I'll see you at the end of the month.

I know things have been really hard, but they're going to get better, I promise. I'm going to bet money that you can fly by the end of the summer. You should come out to the Long Island house with us; there's lots of room there and we could try it out. And we NEED to see Return of the Jedi before my birthday.

I don't really know what to put in this stupid letter. I think I liked you almost from the minute I met you, but I didn't think there was any chance you'd ever like me back. It seems so dumb now. You sent me a Valentine and I just thought it was a friendly thing! I guess I assumed you sent them to everybody. I don't know.

I just wanted to say I think you're pretty awesome. I think your wings are awesome. I know you're not ready to tell your parents, but I think they'll love you no matter what. Your hair is as awesome as your wings and I wish my hair didn't look stupid when I wear it long.

This is going to be the best summer. And next year is going to be the best year.

Okay. I really can't think of things to write in this other than that you're the best.

Tony
Hey, Ty

So I started work. It's pretty neat. I'm in the robotics division. I'm not actually working on any real products. My dad has me trying to replicate technologies from the past twenty years or so so I can familiarize myself with what's already been done. Right now, I'm building a direct drive arm, which is pretty cool. I'm thinking for the science fair next year, we should work together. I'd like to try to combine some of the hardware I'm studying with some of the software we were building together after we got out of comp sci. Haha, I still can't believe we did that.

So, about my birthday. Return of the Jedi comes out on the 25th and I'm going to go with Warren. You can totally meet up with us for that, but then he's going to stay with me for a few days and I think we're going out to the house on Long Island. I'd usually invite you but I kind of think Warren needs some time more alone-ish because, I don't know, he's still mad at his dad or something. But if you want to plan on coming out on the 29th, Virginia's coming and Henry's coming, andante Bruce. Jarvis can pick you up at the station and everybody is welcome to stay overnight.

I'm still not sure what to do about Christian. I wanted to invite him, but he and Warren still aren't talking. That's just going to be awkward. Do you have any ideas?

Okay! I'm going swimming. I'll talk to you later.

Tony
May, 1983: Dear Christian

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Christian,

I hope you're having a good summer so far. I'm sending a bunch more comics for Emma; tell her I say hi!

I wanted to write to you because I know you and Warren haven't made up yet, but I really do want to stay friends with you. I hope you understand that Warren is pretty much my closest friend, and I'm not taking sides, but I feel like it would be a bad idea to have you both here for my birthday. I hope that's okay. I wanted to ask you if you would like to come visit me in New York for a weekend, or if you'd rather, I asked my parents if it would be okay for me to come up there to Boston. I've only been to Boston to visit some of my dad's friends, and haven't really ever gotten to see the city. I hear you guys have a really cool science museum with a huge high-voltage electricity generator, and I'd really like to see that.

I hope you guys can make up someday. I want to be friends with both of you and I really think you're great.

Tony
May, 1983: Dear Bruce

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Bruce,

Oh. Well, that's too bad. I'm really sorry you can't make it. We'll miss you! I was really looking forward to you getting to meet Warren and Virginia. Would you maybe be able to come later this summer? My parents say that as long as I check the dates with them and it's less than a week, you can come anytime.

Tony
May, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Chapter Notes

GUYS, GUYS, before we go any further, I have to show you all this awesome pic by Roodles!!!!!!!!!!! YAY IT IS ADORABLE.

Dear Steve,

Warren's at our house right now, the one on Long Island, and we're taking turns playing Lode Runner, which is this game where you have to steal gold from a mine. It's really tricky, though; the AI for the guards in it is much smarter than in most games, but also, you can make your own
levels, which is really cool! So Warren's been building levels for me and I've been building levels for him and we have to play until we beat the other one's level. I'm afraid I've been making them too complicated.

So we went to see Return of the Jedi with Ty this afternoon. Warren had made me watch the other two before we went on video tape, because I didn't get to see them in the theaters. I was probably too young when the first one came out, anyway. I thought it was really good, but I still think I like the second one best. I mean, and I thought I had problems with my dad, haha. But I think Lando is a really interesting character, you know...because when you get right down to it, he's a good guy, but he makes some pretty bad mistakes and does some pretty awful things. I guess I feel like my favorite parts are sort of the later half of the second one and the earlier part of the third one. But the rest of them are good, too.

I also LOVED...oh, wait. You probably haven't seen the new one yet. I'll wait till you do.

It got me thinking a lot about the robots in the film versus the robotics stuff I've been doing with my dad. There are a lot of types of robotics functioning in the film series...the biggest and most obvious ones are R2-D2 and C-3PO, you know, besides the droids all over the movie and Luke's robot arm and Darth Vader's robot everything...But I really got interested in C-3PO in particular, because of what he implies as far as artificial intelligence. He's as smart as a human being, but he has a really quirky personality. It makes me wonder, there had to be a programmer behind that AI, and they decided to make a robot who is a big pussy about a lot of things, and who is just kind of anal retentive and nervous and stuff. Why would you do that, as a programmer? What kind of use does it serve? Is C3PO sentient? Because he certainly seems sentient. How does a robot get sentient? Or did someone actually program his so his voice rises when he is in danger of being damaged? That would be SO INTERESTING if someone did that.

Some of my friends are staying for my birthday, which will be really fun. Even Virginia is allowed to stay; she just has to stay in the guest room while everybody else gets to sleep on my floor. Bruce can't come. He said it had something to do with his dad. I guess his dad's been in a hospital for a while, and he lives with his aunt. I don't know what happened to his mom. It seems like a rude question to ask, and Bruce doesn't really bring it up.

I want to find more kids to join K.O.S.M.O.S., but I don't know how. Maybe I could put a want ad in the paper, you know, scientific minds sixteen and under invited?

It's going to be interesting to have people who haven't met all together. Virginia hasn't met anybody-- Happy isn't coming, which isn't really surprising. I think he thinks we're all a bunch of little kids. Henry hasn't met Virginia or Warren, but he's met Ty. I really hope everybody likes each other.

I know you're getting married soon, so I guess you might be too busy to write for a while. Good luck and best wishes and all those things I'm supposed to say. Good luck and stuff to Maureen, too! I hope you guys have great wedding and honeymoon and things. Have fun in California!

Tony
Ty,

That was not cool. Especially on my birthday, of all things. Of course I'm mad.

Look, beside the fact that you have a girlfriend and this is so not okay, I should not even have to tell you that Virginia is off-limits. No, we're not dating, we're just friends, but that shouldn't matter. You do not need to fucking kiss every girl I even talk to. I am not an uptight dickhead; Virginia is my friend and I want you to leave her alone.

I deserve and apology and she deserves an apology and you need to back the hell off.

And you don't get to call her Pepper. I get to call her Pepper. Nobody else does.

Tony
June, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

I'm sorry! I don't understand what you're mad at me for. Ty was the one being a jerk. You told me you didn't want him to kiss you. I get that you can handle yourself, or whatever you think the problem is, but I should be able to tell my friends not to be shitheads.

I was not being possessive! You of all people should know that. But Ty doesn't know everything, and he thinks I like you, and he thinks that means he has to prove he's better than me or something. Or that girls like him more. I don't get it. He's my friend, but it's just a thing he does.

Pepper, I really, really, really am sorry. I just don't understand. Can we talk about this?

Tony
June, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Warren,

I don't get why everyone is mad at me. Please call me? Please please please? I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. I promise I don't like Virginia that way; I was just mad at Tu for being an asshole to her.

Please call me. I'm so, so sorry and I feel like shit and I just want things to be okay.

Tony
Dear Steve,

Thanks for asking. My birthday was weird. I...it started okay, but I don't know what happened.

I know you're getting married in less than a month and you probably don't have time to write me back long letters right now, but this is really messed up right now. Everyone except Henry is mad at me and I don't even get what I did wrong.

Ty and Henry and Warren and Virginia all came for my birthday. And it was really fun, but Ty kept flirting with Virginia, and it was really annoying. And he has a girlfriend, right? She kept saying it was okay, but I could tell she didn't actually think it was okay, and didn't want to make a scene.

And then she went down the hall to get something from her room, and Ty said he was getting more soda from the kitchen, and they didn't come back and I had the worst feeling about it, and I went to check on them, and they were kissing.

Or he was kissing her. She says she didn't want to. But I feel like you, you know, can shove somebody off, or...I don't know. I kind of socked him in the jaw a little. Only I'm terrible at that kind of thing, and Virginia pulled me off him, and by that time, Warren had come down the hall, too, and then he got mad, and we all just ended up having a huge shouting match in the hall.

Ty's barely older than me, and Virginia's always made a big deal about how I'm so much younger and she thinks of me as a little brother and just because he's taller or something, I don't know. And I don't know why she's mad, if she really didn't want him there. I was trying to-- I don't know what I was trying to do. I was just so angry at him.

And Warren won't talk to me. And I don't get why he's mad, either. It doesn't seem like either of them are as mad at Ty as they are at me. And I don't know what to say or do to make it better. Virginia just starts talking about her feminist stuff and calls me a male chauvinist, and all I'm trying to do is stick up for her. Ty is treating me like I'm a baby. And Warren's not treating me like anything. He's just not talking to me at all.

I hate people. All of them. Except for Henry. Oh, and you. You count as a person, I guess.

Seriously, do you have any idea what to do?

Tony
June, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Virginia,

No. I really don't understand. I'm not saying that to fight with you. I just don't get it. Can you explain it better please? I don't get how a man looking at a woman is different from a man looking at a man or a woman looking at a woman or at a man.

I really really didn't mean to act possessive. I guess... Don't take this the wrong way, but I love you. A lot. Because you're my closest, oldest friend. And Ty doesn't care about that. It's a contest to him. I don't want him making you part of his contest. Is that feminism? I don't know what is and what isn't. I'm sorry I don't get it.

Tony
June, 1983: Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Steve,

I don't really-- how did you know about Warren? Was it that obvious?

Yes. I guess. I'm not gay. I usually like girls. I just...he's perfect. I don't know how... I guess how you feel about Maureen...when I'm around him I feel like I'm a better version of myself. I encourage myself to be better.

It's really confusing, because I thought I liked girls.

I don't care if everyone else hates me forever, I just need to make up with him.

Thanks for not hating me, I guess.

Tony
Hey, Susie,

This is Tony. I guess you remember me from Halloween. I just wanted to say something to you because Ty was kissing another girl at my birthday and it just seemed wrong.

Okay. I just. I don't want you to fight or anything but it didn't seem right not to tell you.

Tony.
June, 1983: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Warren,

No. I don't. I like you. Virginia's my friend and I don't like Ty taking advantage of her, but that's it. I like you and I wouldn't have agreed to date you if I didn't.

I like you a lot. I want to spend my summer with you. I like Virginia, too, but as a friend. Is that okay?

Tony
June, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Virginia,

Thanks for explaining. Did you make that up yourself or is it something you read somewhere? I'm not trying to belittle you and I don't think of you as an object. I really don't think the way I treated you had anything to do with the fact that you're a girl. I would have done the same thing if Ty kissed Warren. Or Henry. Under those circumstances. If I knew they didn't want him to.

Do you really feel like most boys treat you like that? Is that normal?

I'm not mad at you. I just wish everybody wasn't mad at me. I thought this was going to be such a good summer, since you're not so far away anymore, and because of Warren, and now it's just all gone to shit.

I'm going to try to think about what you said.

Tony
June, 1983: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue)

Dear Warren,

Yes, I promise. I promise I promise I promise I promise.

Do you want to go see War Games? It sounds pretty excellent; it's about computers and nuclear bombs and stuff.

Actually, never mind that. I'm just going to call you as soon as I finish writing this.

I know you're having a bad time and I know being home is hard for you. I know you have had a kind of messed up time and don't have a lot of friends right now. But you don't need to worry that I'm going to just suddenly not be your friend. I'm not Christian. Even if you dumped me, I'd still be your friend, I promise.

You're the best. I miss you.

Tony
June, 1983: Ty

Ty,

Seriously? You were an asshole to me on my birthday and you expected me not to do anything about it? It's not my fault you cheated on Susie. I didn't try to stick your tongue in anybody's mouth; I just relayed the message. If you're so great at meeting girls, can't you just find another one?

I do not have a crush on Virginia. And even if I did, you shouldn't have treated any of us that way. And you shouldn't be talking about her like that now.

I'm so glad I'm not your roommate anymore.

Tony
June, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Steve,

I don't know. I mean, a lot of people don't approve of boys liking boys and I know you've mentioned it to me before but I still wasn't sure if you really approved, I guess. I don't think my dad would approve, if he knew. And I was just really upset when I wrote to you. I think I wrote a lot of stupid letters to a lot of people. My parents don't keep alcohol in the house anymore, but Ty had brought over a bottle of Jack Daniels, and we had been mixing it with Coke, but then the other night I felt really bad so I drank a bunch of it with nothing else. It tasted pretty awful. I thought it might make me feel better.

I ended up telling Virginia that I love her and feeling sick instead. I puked a lot, so I poured the rest of the bottle down the toilet.

I told Susie that Ty was cheating on her. He's mad at me, but he deserved it.

I also promised Warren that I don't have a crush on Virginia.

The problem is that as soon as I wrote it, I realized I think I do.

Virginia said this thing to me about how I was treating her differently because she's a girl. So I said I wasn't, I would have gotten mad if Ty had kissed Warren, too. And then I said Henry, also, but as soon as I said it, I realized I wouldn't have given a shit if he'd kissed Henry. But I don't think I would have given a shit if Ty had kissed just any girl, either.

I guess Virginia's all the way down in Richmond, so it doesn't matter too much. And she's older than me, and she doesn't like me that way. We went to the movies and I slept over at his house, so he's obviously not mad at me anymore. I don't want to tell him something that's going to make him mad again, especially if there's no reason.

Hey! I guess this letter is probably going to get to you right around your wedding! Break a leg or whatever people wish people for weddings!

Tony
July, 1983: Hey, Susie

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Hey, Susie.

Everything between me and you is fine, I promise. I mean, I only met you the couple of times. It's okay that you liked him better. He's just being a jerk, really. I'm sorry you got stuck in the middle of it. Ty does some dumb stuff sometimes, but he's not totally bad.

Of course I'll hang out with you when we're back in New Hampshire! Are you still reading comics? I sort of stopped for a while but I'm trying to get back into them. Really just Captain America. This whole brainwashing storyline was pretty freaky, wasn't it? I mean, if you're still reading them.

Thanks for the letter! I'll talk to you soon!

Tony
July, 1983: Hey, Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Hey, Warren,

Happy Fourth of July from Merry Old Boston! It's pretty cool to be here for the Fourth, even though I'll miss the New York fireworks. This whole city is full of people dressed up as revolutionaries and stuff.

I got you a present! Actually, I got you a lot of presents. Well, not a lot. Some. And we did the Freedom Trail, which was pretty cool. We went to the USS Constitution, which is one of the first six frigates authorized by the US Navy! And we got tricorns. Ty got a fife and it's pretty much the most annoying thing ever.

Things are still weird with Ty, but it's fine. It wouldn't have been fair to Christian to cancel the trip. Christian's good. I told him about, you know, me and you, like we talked about and he said he wasn't really surprised, but I don't know if that meant he was okay with it. He's still...he has a bottle of vodka in his room, and cigarettes. I didn't want to have anything to drink after my birthday, but Ty kept teasing me about it. So I only had a little. Anyway, he says he'd be okay with being friends, he thinks, if you are. He's got a couple of your books; I'm supposed to bring them back for you.

One night when Christian and Ty had a lot to drink, I went and hung out with Emmie. She's having trouble with other kids in school, I guess. But she's not as good a student as I was, so I'm not sure why. But we ate some Chef Boyardee and she showed me her Cabbage Patch Dolls. They all have names and birth certificates, or something? I guess that's cool if you're a little girl.

I'll be home on Wednesday, provided we don't get beaten up for being New Yorkers after that no-hitter. Bostonians are really serious about their baseball, wow.

Tony
Hey, Virginia,

I'm in Boston with Ty and Christian right now. It's pretty fun, I guess. Tomorrow I'm going to visit one of my dad's friends who works at MIT. That's going to be interesting; he arranged for me to see a bunch of stuff that I wouldn't normally get to see if school was in session.

It was pretty funny because we were just sitting around after dinner and the phone rang, and Christian picked it up, and he gave me this confused look, and was like, "do you know a Doctor Richards?" And I was about to say no, but then I remembered my dad talking about him. For a second I was worried maybe something happened to Dad. But no, Doctor Richards said that my dad mentioned that I was in Boston, and he didn't know why Howard hasn't told me to look him up. Ha, I don't know how well he knows my dad, then, right? I guess he also has a kid a few years older than me? But he's off backpacking in Europe for the summer.

He asked me if I'd thought about MIT for college. I said I didn't know. He said I should start thinking about that while I'm visiting, whether it's the kind of place I could think of as home.

It's kind of scary, isn't it? I know you have another year, but I feel like there is so much talk about colleges and what we want to do and two years seems so far away.

Then I started thinking about it, and I'm thirteen, so two years is really about fifteen percent of my life, and I guess if you compare that to someone who's sixty, and it's only three percent of their life, two years doesn't really seem like very much time, so that's why grown ups are starting to get concerned about it.

I'm going to this place and I am going to have to think about whether I like the people there and whether I could work there and not just enjoy myself visiting.

I hope you're having a nice time settling in in Richmond. I feel better about everything, and I hope you do, too. Ty's still being a little bit of a jerk, but I guess if we can just all agree he's a jerk, it's easier to deal with him. He was actually hitting on Adrienne, who is like sixteen or something. And she's not even nice; she's been kind of a stuck-up bitch all week. But anyway, even if I don't get it, yes, I can agree not to try to protect you unless you ask me to. I'll try, at least.

Tony
To whoever finds this letter: Please deliver to Dr. Nathaniel Richards of MIT on July 5, 1983

Dear Dr. Richards,

Whoops. Sorry. I know you said not to touch anything, but I'm apparently in the 1700s now.

I've left about a dozen copies of this letter in various places, so I hope one of them gets to you. Any idea how to get me home?

Sorry again!

Tony Stark
Dear Dr. Richards,

I realized after I sent that that you might not actually have a way to reply. Anyway, MIT didn't exist yet in 1780, I guess, so I went over to Harvard, impressed some people by rattling off some stuff about the basics of Lavoisier's Law of Conservation of Mass, since I figure that happens sometime soon and it won't change history too badly, so they're putting me up here and I'm studying really, really old fashioned physics until you can come get me. You can come get me, right? I really hope that thing I was messing around with has a retrieval mechanism.

Can you just make sure the Frosts know I'm not coming back there and just maybe tell my mom and dad that I'm fine?

Tony
July, 1780 (Unsent): Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

So, this is super screwed up. I'm not entirely sure how to get letters to anybody, and I hope people aren't worried about me over there. I'm a little scared maybe time is going faster or slower than it is here and I'll end up being ACTUALLY like Captain America or something.

I miss you. I miss you I miss you I miss you. I hope you're doing okay.

I'm not sure who to tell any of this stuff to, because I am guessing it's probably all confidential, so I haven't written to anybody but Dr. Richards, but I need to write to somebody I know, right?

Oh, shit. I didn't even tell you about Dr. Richards, did I? I wrote to you before he called.

So I went to MIT to visit a friend of my dad's. I guess they used to go traveling together? I sort of...fooled around with one of his machines while he wasn't looking, and now IT'S JULY, 1780.

1780. Like, during the American Revolution 1780. Massachusetts JUST adopted their constitution.

Nobody bathes. Ever. And people use horses for transportation and everything smells kind of awful. And it's really, really really hard to keep my mouth shut and not change history but scientists in the 1780s are so stupid. I mean, there are some brilliant mathematicians and no one has calculators. But I'm having to spend all my time reading to figure out what people know and don't know so I don't accidentally give something away. Did you know they didn't know about Uranus? I'm just hoping they forget I said anything.

And tungsten. They don't have tungsten. Hydrogen doesn't have a name! They don't even have thermochemistry as an ENTIRE SCIENCE. I don't know what I'm going to do with these people.

Anyway, I'm mostly okay. I'm assuming Dr. Richards or my dad can come get me, if I somehow managed to get here. I'm not sure what else to do. There is no way I can stay here. If I stay here, I'm going to have to build the first integrated out of, I don't know, horse manure so I don't bore myself to death. That's the ONLY thing there's a lot of. Either way, I will completely screw up history; I'm pretty sure of that.

I'm not even in the right city to meet Ben Franklin. This is terrible.

I'm thinking about maybe going to the Freemasons if this takes any longer. I'm pretty sure my dad is a member.

I can't even send this to you. I could do what I did with Dr. Richards' letters and just leave them in buildings that I know will still exist, but I realized I can't really let this one get opened, with all the details. And I know you hate when I do ciphers.

Tony
July, 1780 (Unsent): Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Warren,

Still no idea how I'm sending these. Apparently, the U.S. Continental Navy DID actually impress people if you piss the wrong people off. History class makes it sound like only the British did that.

So I'm on a boat, now. I pretty much feel like I'm going to puke all the time.

Hint about the 1780s: Don't get in trouble with the law.

Hint #2 about the 1780s: Apparently, it's a lot easier to get in trouble with the law here.

Tony
Dear Dr. Richards,

I'm currently aboard the privateer sloop *Tracy* off the coast of Massachusetts. I'm hoping someone can get this letter to somewhere you can find it.

This is starting to worry me. I need to invent running water.

Tony
July, 1780: Dear Commander Hopkins

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Commander Hopkins,

I hope I'm not being too forward, but for a ship that was only recently commissioned, I am thoroughly distraught with the lack of technological advancement aboard your vessel. If you wouldn't mind supplying me with the tools and supplies on the list provided, I believe I can make some basic but substantial improvements. I also think it will be a much more valuable use of my time than splicing rope all day, which I am very bad at.

Thank you for your time.

Tony Stark
Ship's Boy

Chapter End Notes

Commander John Burroughs Hopkins was the real, historical captain of the Tracy, a privateer sloop sailing out of Massachusetts for the Americans during the American War for Independence.
Dear Dr. Richards,

Actually, if you could give me a few weeks, or maybe a month, that would be ideal. There's a thing I want to figure out.

Thanks,

Tony
July, 1780: Dear Commander Hopkins

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Commander Hopkins,

While I understand and appreciate that five lashes is actually quite a lenient punishment for insubordination, and my backside appreciates it even more, I assure you that I am in no way trying to be insubordinate: you are leaving yourself at a disadvantage as the Royal Navy has begun adopting carronades, which are much more effective in terms of destruction but also take up less deck space and weigh much less per gun in comparison to the long guns you're carrying now. I've made a chart to show you how transitioning to carronades will allow you to carry more guns and more men.

Really, though, if you can get me the supplies on that list, I can build you a much more versatile gun with a longer range than anything you have now. You would be stupid not to. I eagerly await your reply.

Tony Stark

Ship's Boy
Dear Warren,

Things got pretty scary here for a bit. We were actually engaged in a sea battle with a British warship called the Jane.

Anyway, the Jane was a bigger, way more powerful ship, and I don't think we would have made it out alive if I hadn't started fixing the guns. The Captain (Mr. Hopkins) actually whipped me for telling him I could improve them. Stupid. Anyway, now I think he's going to let me do some more work.

I really don't know anything about ships, but it's pretty lucky we went to visit the USS Constitution the other day, because the guides were really knowledgeable and I was able to get a good look at the construction and things. So I've sort of been working with that, because those ships were built about fifteen years from now, and I don't think the technological advancements required to build ships like those are too far in the future that I'll mess anything up. And then I've been throwing in a few tweaks. Nothing special. Just more aerodynamic design. And I'm upgrading the steering mechanism.

Oh, also, everybody talks weird. Like it's the South or something.

Tony
Dear Commander Hopkins,

You're welcome. I will gladly surrender my share of the purse from the capture of the Jane if you would be so kind as to have the owners of the Tracy advance me a payment and give me one month to improve the ship's guns and interior structure. I will also need a team of men who can do the heavy lifting. Tell them that they will be very happy with the results.

Sincerely,
Tony Stark
Midshipman
Dear Dr. Richards,

Thanks. Signore Simoni let me know that you got my messages. He's helping me with a couple things on this end, and then I'll be home. Tell my parents, okay?

Thanks for the lift.

Tony Stark
Dear Commander Hopkins,

Thank you for accepting my offer of a position with my newly-established company. You will be responsible for the day-to-day oversight of the business and I will leave decisions in your capable hands as I will be traveling for some time. I have arranged to invest fifty percent of the net profits on the company in the attached list of companies in exchange for a small share in each. You are tasked with reinvesting the rest of the profits back into the company, but please be sure to keep ten percent with which to pay out to yourself and any deserving employees.

I have arranged that my investments can't be touched, and have engaged the law firm noted on the attached page as well, as it may be some time before you hear from me. You will see an instruction entrusting all of my personal accounts to the sole discretion of a Mr. Isaac Edward Stark of New York. Don't worry about that. He'll show up eventually.

Thanks for everything, except the lashes to the back. Those were terrible.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
President
Stark Shipyards and Ironworks
Dear Steve,

Sorry I was out of touch for so long. I ended up going on a much longer summer vacation than I expected, and there wasn't really a way to write. I'll write you a longer letter soon! Promise!

Hope you guys had a good honeymoon!

Tony
Dear Sirs,

I apologize profusely for my absence during the first month of the academic year. I assure you that it will not hinder my schoolwork, and humbly request re-admission to your institution.

Yours Sincerely,

Tony Stark
11th Grade
Dear Dad,

Doctor Richards was very nice about the whole thing and encouraged me to apply to MIT next year. I'll think about it.

While I understand why you're angry about me missing work all summer, you should probably read something about how your great-grandfather got his money before scolding me about family responsibility.

Your son,
Tony
September, 1983: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Warren,

I am so sorry I disappeared on you. I swear it wasn't on purpose; I don't know what anybody said. I know my parents told people I went to camp, because that sounded completely plausible when it was a last-minute decision and I didn't tell you anything. You would think that with my father being such a genius, he'd be able to fabricate a good lie. I wrote you a bunch of letters while I was gone, but there was no way to send them. I'm grounded from pretty much everything right now until I get back to school, including the phone, which is utter bullshit. I just want to be able to hear your voice and tell you I'm okay.

Here are all the letters I wrote. I kind of stopped writing them after a while because I knew I could send them. I guess the short version is I accidentally traveled in time to the 1780s. Then I got pressed into the Navy. The Navy was full of idiots, so I improved their ships and ended up buying a shipyard. In the 1780s. I promise promise I'll explain the rest when I get a chance. See you soon, as soon as they give me permission to come back to school.

You're the best. I miss you like crazy.

Tony
September, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Steve,

Hi! I'm firmly ensconced back in school, albeit late. Don't worry about my absence...it had to do with the family business, and it's all sorted. Dad's still a jerk, but he's still a sober jerk, and that's what matters.

Warren and Christian are talking again, which is good. I guess me not being around forced them both to hang out with each other. They're not as close as they used to be, but it is something. The only annoying part was that when I got back, they'd put this Cameron kid in with Warren. Warren didn't mind him, but I thought he was annoying as heck, you know, one of those kids who has to be just like you, only better? Not like Ty, even, because Ty actually competes. This kid just mimics everything Warren does. But I guess he's not bad or anything. Just annoying. Anyway, they did finally let me get my room back. Which is good; I think Warren was getting pretty lonely.

Ty's also not being as much of a jerk. I guess he missed me, the dumbass. I came back really, really, really tan, so I think everyone thinks I was just on an extended vacation. Oh. So I feel kind of bad not giving you more details, but the only people who know where I was are my dad, one of my dad's friends, and Warren. It's not that I don't trust you. I probably wouldn't have told Warren, either, but I had to tell somebody, and he's here with me. And he's been having a hard time for a while, like you know. So it seemed like the right choice.

Anyway, Ty and I have that same shitty computer teacher this year, so we're going to just ignore our assignments and improve the AI we worked up last year to see if we can actually make it do our homework for us. It would be pretty cool to have a computer program that can write computer programs. The teacher kind of had it in for me already but now that I missed a month of school, he's really on my case. Oh, well.

Glad to hear the honeymoon was fun! Thanks for the Mouseketeer ears! These are hilarious. I'm going to wear them to class tomorrow.

Tony
September, 1983: Dear Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Henry,

Hey! Sorry for the long silence. A lot of stuff happened. Anyway, everything is good on this end and I have an awesome present for you! I managed to get a whole bunch of chestnut moth DNA samples. I know you were talking about how it sucked that they were extinct. Pretty cool, huh? Anyway, they're in the enclosed petri dishes. I can't tell you how I got it, because it's probably kind of illegal, but I hope you have fun with it.

I am sorry I completely dropped the ball on K.O.S.M.O.S. over the summer. We should get that started back up. Are you still in? Do you think the name is kind of babyish? I mean, I'm thirteen now and I'm the youngest so none of us are really kids, are we? Then again, no one knows what the acronym stands for, and it's pretty cool, so maybe we should keep it and just make something else up for it to stand for. Brand recognition is important when you're starting a scientific society.

Anyway, think about it and enjoy your moth DNA!

Tony
September, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Virginia,

Hey, how's the new school? Getting into the Governor's school is a pretty big deal, isn't it? Congrats!

Look, something came up over the summer and I was somewhere where I couldn't send letters. I... sometime I'll tell you about it, just not now. It was pretty weird, is all. But things are good on my end, no hard feelings here. Seriously. You couldn't do anything that would make me that angry, ever.

I missed the first month of school. Warren's wings are pretty huge, now, and hiding them is a pain. I'm rebuilding the harness, and fortunately one of the things I learned about this summer while I was gone is rigging and pulley systems, so I've been able to incorporate that into the new design.

Things are okay otherwise. I think we're about ready to try another go at flying. Warren and I kind of... it was a little rocky when I got back. He was upset that I disappeared without warning. And things had been a little strained before that, but they're okay now. It is really nice being roommates this year. I've been spending most of my time in the computer lab, but Warren comes and gets me for dinner every night, then I go back to the lab until lights out (and sometimes later) and usually when I get back, he's asleep in my bunk and I get to crawl into bed with him. I think I keep him awake a lot because I'm a terrible sleeper, but apparently wings are pretty cuddly. Ha.

I actually didn't come in last in a track meet! I apparently got a lot more athletic over the summer, haha. It makes it a lot more fun when you don't feel like your lungs are going to explode. Oh, and growing a few inches helped. You'll never recognize me. I'm gigantic and my voice sounds like a broken theremin. Seriously, for the first time in my life, I don't want to speak up in class because everything I say comes out sounding ridiculous. I think the teachers are a little relieved to give somebody else a turn, though.

I hope school is treating you well, and you're making lots of friends and boys are drooling at the sight of you. (Of course they are. You're a Peppermint.) Talk soon and good luck!

Tony
Dear Susie,

Thanks for the note! Glad to hear from you. You're pretty cute, yourself. Ha. So anyway, yes to hanging out, that would be great and I'd love to meet you at the arcade the next time I can leave campus, but I just wanted to be up front and tell you that I'm dating somebody. Not that I assume you're asking me on a date, but just in case. You never know.

What's going on with you and Ty, anyway? He told me you were back together.

Tony
October, 1983: Hey, Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Hey, Ty--

Here's the camera. Just pay me back for whatever film you use, and have fun with it!

Yeah, I think you're write about those classes in the core program. We'll have to go over those, good catch. I think your fix is going to make it run way more smoothly.

What do you think about trying to do speech synthesis? I know computer voices sound super weird, but it would be so funny if we could actually have this thing teach the class.

All right! I promised Warren I'd hang out with him tonight because we've been spending so much time in the lab. See you later, don't break my camera, doofus.

Tony

P.S. Hey, also, this might sound weird, but can you check on Christian? He's been acting a little strange.
Hi, Emma!

More comics for you! I went through my old Batman comics and found all the ones with Catwoman; I know you said you like her the best.

Sure, I can keep an eye on Christian. I asked Ty to, also, since Ty's his roommate. I didn't say you said anything. Thanks for letting me know about your mom. I've had problems with my dad like that. Do you have any grownups you can talk to? Grownups will be able to help a lot more.

You're a great little sister, just so you know.

Tony
Dear Steve,

I need some advice. Christian's little sister sent me a letter and told me that she's pretty sure Christian took some of their mom's pills. She...I don't know how to put this. I think they're pain pills. It sounds like pain pills. But some of the other stuff in her letter reminded me of what my dad was like when he was drunk all the time.

I know Christian and Ty have been kind of...well, they smuggle beers in a lot and I'm pretty sure I smelled marijuana in their room the last time I was in there. I don't have a problem with them doing stuff like that, except I don't drink around Ty at school anymore, since he doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut. But Emma makes it sound like their mom does it to cover up that she's unhappy, and I don't want Christian to be doing that, but I don't think I can really say that to him. I don't know.

Also, I did some research and it sounds like if he's taking pain medication and drinking at the same time, it can activate enzymes that metabolize the chemicals in the drugs differently than they would if he was taking them separately, and it can cause tissue damage to internal organs. It looks like you need to do that a lot, but obviously I don't want Christian's liver to suddenly stop functioning, you know?

What would you do? I don't want to get them kicked out of school, so I'm not sure I can talk to any grownups here.

Tony
Okay, I talked to Susie. We're going to meet her at the arcade. And then we're going to go out to the old railroad bridge and it's flight time. Ready? I've built two inflatable airbags we can use if either of us crash; they'll double as flotation devices if we go into the water.

I figure if we do these both in one night, we can tell Susie we have to be back on campus earlier than we do, and nobody on campus will be looking for us.

I'm really excited. This is going to be so much fun.

Tony
October, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Virginia,

Warren did it. He did it, but not how either of us ever expected.

It's kind of a problem when someone with wings is scared of falling. We walked up a hill and climbed onto an abandoned railroad bridge, edged out along the rails until we were square over the water. Warren's legs were trembling, he was so white I was worried a little he might faint. He wouldn't let go of me, not even for a second, and by the time we got all the way out, I had red marks where his fingers were digging into my arm.

His wings are too large for us to hold hands anymore. I had to let go. I told him to just try, but that if he didn't want to, we could come back another day.

He said no, kissed me, and pushed off. He actually did get in a few good flaps before, I don't know, I think he lost confidence, and wobbled, and started down. Fortunately he remembered the inflatable thingies I made-- They increased surface area to slow descent, and then cushioned impact and worked as floatation devices, so even though he splashed down pretty badly, the only thing that happened was he got wet. When I saw he was falling, I just took off after him.

I felt kind of bad being better at flying than the one of us who has wings. Anyway, I helped him paddle to the shore, and we sat on the ground till he dried off a bit, and went back to school.

Except that when we were getting close, it was really obvious something was wrong. There was a weird orangey haze around the building, and, well, you know, smoke. There was a huge fire. HUGE. In our wing of the dormitory.

We both kind of freaked out, because obviously our stuff and our friends were in there. I didn't care so much about my stuff, except that I had some cool prototypes in there and some rare coins from the 1780s, but people in a burning building is scary. And we could hear people shouting from one of the upper floors.

I was standing there, trying to figure out if there was a way to build a makeshift fire extinguisher or something, when Warren coughed into his hand and said, "I think I can make it."

The problem with my wings is that my wings were made out of stuff that wasn't as heat resistant as it could be, and the inner structure would probably melt, like a modern day Icarus or something, but, well, Warren's wings were no, as long as he didn't get his feathers singed.

I asked him if he was sure, and then realized that was a kind of shitty thing to say. And he stopped, and frowned. "I can do it," he said. "But then they'll all know it's me."

So I took off my hat, rolled the brim down, and cut two eye holes in it. We covered his face as well as we possibly could,

And he did it. He got up to the window and got people out. I set up the other inflatable raft thingy (I don't know what to call it. I have to think of a cool acronym.) under the windows, just in case, which was good, because Warren could lift himself with his wings, but the added weight was too much to carry people too far.
There weren't that many kids trapped, but they were all really young kids from the floor right above ours. There was apparently a wastebasket fire on our floor, which is how the whole thing started.

So pretty much most of our stuff is destroyed. My coins are good, and our room didn't get totally burnt up, but everything has smoke damage. School sent our clothing out to be cleaned, so we're both wearing other people's stuff right now. Which is just as well, because Warren ditched the hood in the woods so no one would know it was him.

I'm going to have to do something about redesigning his clothing to accommodate his wings when they're open. As much as I am not going to complain about watching him fly around without a shirt on, it's really cold in October. Usually we're trying to hide them. I don't know that much about clothing construction but I guess I can figure it out. It can't be that hard, right?

This is getting really long, and I have more to tell you, but I'm gonna go eat something and I'll tell you more later. Warren and I are going to go flying for real tonight. It's going to be amazing.

Tony
October, 1983: W--

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

W--

You are the closest thing to a superhero any real person is ever going to be.

I miss you. Stupid temporary housing. Meet me tonight after lights out?

--T
Ty,

This isn't okay. You need to say something. I know it was Christian's cigarettes, but you were smoking them, too. It doesn't matter which one of you threw one in the wastebasket. Don't you care that there was a huge fire, and now they're going to kick your roommate out of school?

And quit it about Susie. It wasn't a date. Warren and I just went and played video games and had pizza with her. I'm just a tiny bit insulted that you think I would date your ex-girlfriend.

Tony
October, 1983: Christian--

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Christian--

I know it doesn't really help much now, but this isn't your fault. Actually, I take that back, because it is kind of your fault, since you shouldn't be smoking at school anyway, but I know that sounds really sanctimonious of me. I don't know what to say about this. I know Ty is just as much to blame as you are, I guess, is what I'm saying, and it's not okay that you're getting kicked out of school and he isn't. I don't want either of you to get kicked out!

Do you want me to talk to the teachers about this? I can do that if you want me to. Not that I have exactly the best reputation around here, but I'll tell them anything you want me to tell them.

Warren says he'll say something, too.

Tony
November, 1983: Steve--

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Steve--

Thanks for that. It really helped a lot. I mean, my dad's gotten a lot better, but he's never going to be Mister Parental advice, so it's nice to know I can get some kind of direction when I need it.

Stuff with Christian just got a lot worse-- there was a wastebasket fire on our dorm floor, and they found Christian's stash of...well, everything, in his room. And I know he shouldn't have it, and it's breaking the rules, just like when I drank on campus, but Ty's been doing that stuff, too, and he's not getting in trouble at all. I'm pretty sure Christian's going to get expelled. And knowing what Emmie said about their parents, I kind of feel like that's just worse for him. Seriously, the Frosts sound worse than my dad. I know my dad's not terrible in the grand scheme of things, but he's kind of the bare minimum of acceptable parenting. I think you have to put in extra effort to be much worse.

Do I tell on Ty? That's not going to help Christian; it's just going to make things fair. Do I appeal on Christian's behalf? What do I do?

I'm probably going to do something before I hear back from you, I guess. I feel like I need to. I'm gonna talk to Warren about it some more. We also got split up into different dorm rooms, which is dumb. But they had to put us somewhere while they fix up the damaged rooms.

Tony
November, 1983: Mom--

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Mom--

Thanks for the nice note. Yeah, I should have told you guys about the flying before I told the papers, but I didn't think it was that big a deal. It was nothing, really. I haven't heard from Dad lately, so I thought I'd ask you-- is it okay if Warren comes for Thanksgiving again? I might want to ask Christian, also. I know that's a lot of people, but it's been a weird year, after the fire.

I also wanted to ask you, since Dad's been sober two years, should we do something to celebrate? I think it would be good to let him know we noticed.

See you in a few weeks!

Tony
Dear Virginia,

Well, things just turned into a giant pile of shit. Pardon my language and all that. So, Warren did all that amazing rescuing, and that was great, but it turns out that either Ty or Christian started the fire, and Ty is letting Christian take all the blame. And since the blame means taking the blame for also having cigarettes and beer and a bunch of other things they shouldn't have had, Christian's definitely been suspended for the rest of the term and might be expelled, and I remember how awful that was.

That's the short version. I'm sick of talking about it right now. The long version is that Warren rescued those kids, but people KNOW about the flying from the science fair, and people assumed I did it. Well. Ty assumed I did it. And he told everybody I did it. And then the newspaper reporters came, and they wanted to talk to me, and I was stuck in this weird spot of having to lie and take credit for something I didn't do, and protect Warren, or tell the truth, and give the right person the credit, but tell people something about one of my best friends that he doesn't want anybody else to know.

I talked to Warren about it and he told me to take credit, that he'd rather nobody knew it was him. So I did. And it was pretty cool, having all these people congratulate me for something, and get to show off the wings I didn't get to show off during the science fair. It kind of made up for the past couple times when I didn't get credit for the really cool things I did, but it still felt pretty bad, since I didn't do anything.

It was pretty funny, having to tell the journalists that I was Julie from the Bronx. One of them even asked me for a photo in the wig, and I had to explain that that was my real hair and I cut it off.

The problem with the whole thing is that the wings really can't withstand the kind of heat that a fire produces, so if anybody inquires too closely, they'll know I'm lying. It's just as well, because now I have some motivation to design some wings that can withstand really high temperatures. No Icarus for me, ha! I think my dad has some high-temperature silicones I can play with over Thanksgiving break.

In other news, I need to come up with a project for this year's science fair. I kind of want to expand on the AI, but that's half Ty's work.

Tony
Ty,

You're being ridiculous. I've given you plenty of time to say something about it. If you don't do it yourself, I'm going to the school and telling them for you.

Tony

P.S. And shut the fuck up about Susie. She doesn't even like you anymore.
Henry,

Well, yeah. Warren just didn't want anyone to know. Which is dumb, but it's his prerogative, I guess. At least the cool part about these news articles about the fire is that K.O.S.M.O.S. actually got fan mail today! From a girl! We are actually going to have a girl! I mean, maybe, if she's cool enough. I'm gonna write her back-- she's going to be at the science fair this year, so we can meet her then!

Tony
Ty,

Did you seriously just BLACKMAIL us? Using my own Polaroid trick? Did you...Oh, forget it. I don't even know why I'm surprised anymore. I'm not showing you anything cool ever again.

Tony

P.S. If you say a word to anybody, I will punch you in the face. And I'm sure then you will get up and laugh it off, because I’m incredibly shitty at punching anything, but I hope I've made my point clear.
November, 1983: W (passed in the hallway)

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

W--

Ty has a photo of us kissing. That he took on my stupid camera that I loaned him like an idiot. I don't know how he got it. He said he'd show it to everybody if I said anything about the cigarettes.

Also, I got a call from my mom and I'm not sure how to take it. About Dad. I kind of need to talk to somebody.

Everything bad always happens at once. (Don't worry, you're still perfect.)

Are you free tonight? Meet me in the computer lab?

--T
Dear Sunset,

Hi! Thanks for your interest in K.O.S.M.O.S. We were really excited to get your letter. We don't have anybody with your particular talents (or gender, haha), and we'll be pleased to meet you at NERYSC this year!

Right now, it is only a four-person organization but we are looking to expand membership. If you have any friends who would like to join, let me know. We don't have a behavioral scientist yet, so that would be pretty awesome.

Sunset is a neat name. Is that your real name?

Tony Stark
Co-President of K.O.S.M.O.S.
November, 1983: Mom

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Mom,

This really isn't fair. When were you planning on telling me? Were you hoping I'd come home for Thanksgiving and just not notice? Can you call me, at least?

I know this can't be easy for you, but I'm thirteen years old now. I'm not a little kid, and I deserve to know things and make my own decisions about them.

Tony
Dad,

I'm really proud of you for not drinking for two years. I know it was hard for you. But I'm not coming home for Thanksgiving if you're drinking again. I talked to Warren's parents and they invited me to stay with them for the weekend.

I made plans with Mom to come over for lunch one day, but I won't have Thanksgiving dinner with you.

I'm willing to reconsider under the following conditions.

1) There is nothing alcoholic on the table during Thanksgiving dinner.

2) You're sober for forty-eight hours leading up to Thanksgiving.

I still won't stay at the house for the weekend, but I will come for dinner.

I know you can stop drinking for two years, so if you want to see me, I think you can do this.

Tony
November, 1983: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Ty,

If you give me back the camera and all the pictures, I will sign the current iteration of the AI we've built together over to you. All the software, all the credit, all the intellectual property, everything as it exists now. It's all yours. 100%.

I've drawn up the papers and marked the places where you need to sign.

You have twenty-four hours to give me the camera and the pictures, and return the signed papers. I'll sign them in front of you when you hand off the photos, even.

You'll see the stipulation that I am permitted to continue coding artificial intelligence projects as long as I use nothing in the current code base. Also see that if you produce any further photos, or it comes to light that you've retained any photos, rights to the software revert back to me.

Fair?

Tony
November, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

I've got the pictures. Lets burn them, and then we're going to the principal.

Tony
Christian,

Hey, how are things at home? Do you want to come stay with me and Warren at his house for Thanksgiving? We checked with his dad.

I talked to the administration about Ty. I told them he was just as responsible, and it wasn't fair to punish one of you and not the other. The stuff obviously didn't belong to him, so he's not in as much trouble as you are, but he's going to have a disciplinary meeting. Ty's pretty angry, but he knew it was coming, and he'll get over it.

Tell Emmie I say hi!

Tony
November, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Yeah, I signed Ty the rights to the AI. Don't worry about it. I was very careful about how I worded it. He got to keep everything in the current code base, which I thoroughly stripped and dismantled before writing up the papers.

I've got the important parts saved, and I'll start writing anything else I need from scratch, alone. I guess on the bright side, I have a science fair project now.

I know Ty's going to be really mad once he figures it out. It was kind of a dick move on my part, but the photos were a dick move on his part, so I feel like we're even. He never stays mad for that long, anyway.

Tony
Dad,

Fine, but let me register the sentiment that I will be there under protest. This is patently unfair.

I didn't shove whatever you're drinking down your throat; I shouldn't have to put up with the consequences if I don't want to. I shouldn't have to be in the same place as you against my will.

You had better figure something out for Christmas.

Tony

PS I know. I'm going to upgrade the materials over the break to something heat-resistant. You're the only one who figured that out, so I don't think it was *that* egregious. I'm not at liberty to say who it really was, though.
Steve,

Yeah. A lot's been happening. That's really cool about Maureen's job; I hope it works out.

So my dad's drinking again. I don't really know what to do about it. I know I can't do anything about him drinking, but I asked Warren's parents if I could go there for Thanksgiving and he threatened to call the school and tell them he didn't want me rooming with Warren anymore if I did.

He said I was airing his dirty laundry and I have no right to do that but he doesn't seem to get that it's my problem, too.

So I'm home right now and locked in my room. Warren's going to come over Friday so at least that'll be better.

I did end up telling the school about Ty. I think they're letting Christian come back to school next semester, but only because Mister Frost promised to build us a new library or something. They made Ty sit through a disciplinary hearing but he somehow got out without getting in any real trouble. He had to write an essay about how smoking is bad for you or something. I'm pretty mad at him, because when I told him I was going to tell the school he'd been doing stuff with Christian, he actually produced photos of me and Warren and threatened to put them up all over the school. I kind of tricked him into giving me the photos, but knowing Ty, he probably didn't give me all of them.

I think you're right about Ty. I don't think he does it on purpose, he just always puts himself first. I guess that's not a bad thing to be able to do on its own, he just makes bad judgments about it. But he's also always really sorry later. Anyway, Ty and Christian aren't allowed to room together anymore. We'll see how that goes.

I'm not building the AI with Ty anymore. I'm building my own AI and he's building his own and I'm basically going to kick his ass in the science fair. You know, if nothing crazy happens this year. I'm starting to think its cursed.

Say hi to Maureen!

Tony
Thanksgiving, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Virginia,

Yeah, I'm home.

It's pretty shitty, but thanks for asking.

My dad...I don't know who else to day this to. He's drinking again, and he's...he's mean, Pepper. Really mean. It's like he says things just to try to cut me down. I guess I don't remember him being like this the last time. But I was also...shit, I was eleven. He was a jerk, but this time it feels...more deliberate, I guess. He keeps criticizing everything I do, and I just...

He caught me in a lie. A big one. I told people I was the one who flew up and saved those kids with my wings, because Warren didn't want the attention.

My dad accused me of lying because he knew the materials in the wings were flammable and not heat resistant. He told me it was lucky he was the one who noticed, and someday it would be worse, and something I said would bite me in the ass.

Which, ha, happens all the time. Not that he pays attention.

He asked me who it was. I said I wasn't at liberty to say. I don't know what he guesses or doesn't guess.

I also told him I was upgrading the wings to make them non-flammable.

I feel like fucking Icarus. Or, I guess, technically like Daedalus, since I'm the one building them. But I'm kind of scared of getting burned. I'm worried somebody's going to figure out what's going on with Warren. Warren's dad is the nicest guy, but he's one of those people who thinks mutants should be locked up. I don't know what he'll do if he finds out his own kid is one.

There's so much weird stuff going on and I have to remember who knows what. I keep almost accidentally saying something about Warren's wings to people who don't know about them.

How's school?

Tony
December, 1983: Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Henry,

Oh, hey, that's great! Congrats on early admission! Doctor Richards who I met this summer really wants me to go there. I'm thinking about it.

It would be crazy if after all these years, we end up at the same school, wouldn't it?

Interesting about the moth DNA. I don't know too much about genetics, but it sounds pretty cool. I'm wondering if there would be any way to...wouldn't it be cool if we could insert AI into a living thing? Or insert biological materials into a robot? Lemme know what you think.

Tony
December, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Steve,

I wish I had gone to Warren's for Thanksgiving. That whole threat of my dad's to not let us room together anymore seems to have panned out-- we're moved into new, more permanent temporary dormitories, and they're still not completed. The best (and I mean that sarcastically) part is that the school decided to put me in with Ty instead.

He figured out pretty quickly that I tricked him into giving me the photos.

So the first night in the new dorm room, I found peanut butter on my pillow.

So I superglued all his dresser drawers shut.

So he cut holes in my sheets.

So I cut three inches off the cuffs of all his pants.

So he replaced my shampoo with toothpaste.

So I bolted his bed to the ceiling.

I'm in the computer lab right now and I'm sort of interested to see what he comes up with next. It's actually sort of fun, really-- neither of us have done anything harmful, and it's kind of a challenge to decide what to do. I think the bed thing might have escalated it a little bit, especially since I glued his pillows and even the dirty laundry hanging over the foot of his bed into place so it would really look just like the bed had decided to turn upside-down.

To be fair, he actually laughed his ass off. And then I helped him get it down so he could actually sleep. I'm not that much of a jerk.

Henry got into MIT. That's one more reason to go there; I'm pretty excited. I've been looking at other programs, but access to the media lab sounds like it would be really incredible, and they're supposedly going to have their own building finished by the time I get there. We all had to take the PSATs a little while ago...I sort of completely forgot about them in the middle of everything else that happened, but they seemed pretty dull, so I decided to answer all the math questions as if they were in Swedenborg's octal system instead. I figure any college I want to go to will judge me on my own merits and not some stupid test scores, so it's sort of a good filtration system.

Dad's still a drunk, but what else is new? I'm kind of dreading Christmas. I don't suppose you'll be in New York, will you?

Tony
Virginia,

Hey, thanks.

You know I think what that teacher said about math is bullshit, right? If you're not doing well in math, it's because he's a shitty teacher, not because you're a girl. I'd tutor you if we lived closer. Look, I can get phonecalls on weekends. If you want to call I can explain cartesian graphs to you no problem. It makes sense that you're getting the equations but having trouble with the graphs; they're two totally different disciplines, really. It's stupid to grade someone's mathematical abilities based on their visualization techniques, anyway.

Other than that, I'm so glad school seems good for you. Seriously, this is going to sound ridiculous, but have as much fun as you can. Junior year they just keep heaping work on you. None of it is hard, but it's just...time-consuming, you know? The PSATs were a joke, I didn't study for them. I mean, I also deliberately put in all the wrong answers, but that's because they were a joke to begin with.

I guess maybe that makes sense about dating. I don't think it matters if you have a boyfriend, though. You're so smart and so talented at so many things, people are going to know you get what you have on your own merits because you deserve them. You could probably get any boy you want, though, so there's no need to just settle for dating somebody who doesn't meet your standards.

Warren's rooming with that Cameron kid again, and I don't like him. Warren really seems to, and I don't know if I'm being jealous that they're spending all this time together. Cameron seems to do everything Warren does. He follows him around and started using the same shampoo and eats the same food and it's a little bit creepy. I said something about it and Warren laughed and told me that I used to copy his haircut, which is true, but it's also...I don't know. It's different when it's not me. Does that sound dumb?

Tony
December, 1983: Hey, Bruce

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Hey, Bruce,

Good to hear from you. Haven't heard from you in a while. You are totally not bothering me. I love to get mail! Please send me all your letters!

Yeah, of course I'll be at the science fair this year. Where did you think I'd be?

Your aunt sounds worse than my dad. I mean, we're teenagers, right? We can totally handle ourselves with an evil organization of scientists, and anyway, they're not even sponsoring the competition anymore. Anyway, I'm building some small portable weapons just in case. Not, like, anything that we could seriously get in trouble for, but we'll definitely have tear gas and smokescreens and flares this time around. I'm pretty much prepared for everything. Just tell her there's nothing to worry about.

How's everything going? Stuff here is kind of weird, but mostly okay, I guess.

Tony
Dear Sunset,

Oh, how cool! Henry Pym, my co-President, is going to be at MIT next year, too. You guys should hang out. He's a bio person, but he's really cool. I'm known him for like a zillion years.

I'm really into robots, too. We should compare notes or something. I'm building an AI this year; I'm pretty excited by it. You're doing remote control applications? We should come up with a way to combine them. Let's talk about it at the science fair, okay?

Sure, we'd love to have more girls. It would be great to meet your friends. What do they do?

Tony
Dear Henry,

Hey! So this girl who wrote to me is going to be at MIT next year. She's into robotics, which means I guess she's more in my field than yours, but she seems pretty cool. You should talk to her! And she says she has a couple friends who she's going to introduce us to.

So, yeah, I was thinking about what you said-- do you think we could use an AI system to communicate very simple messages to insects? I mean, they use pheremones, right? We did this last year. So what if you had, like, a box, that analyzed the pheremones an insect was producing and then responded by emitting a pheremone that would be an appropriate response? So, if the box could tell the bees were scared, you could have the box tell the bees it was friendly?

I mean, it's kind of basic but it could be cool.

Tony
Dear Steve,

That's really cool; working in the movies must be awesome. Tell Maureen she needs to pitch a Captain America movie! That one they made a few years ago was terrible. Maybe they'd let you write the script.

Man, I haven't read any comics in ages. I should do that over vacation.

I think I'm going to stay at school and not even bother going home. My dad's being a giant dickhead and I don't want to deal with him. I have a whole year before I have to apply to colleges, and he's already telling me he wants me in New York so I can work at the company while I'm in school, which...I don't know. I mean, it's not like he needs me there to save money, and I really want to go to MIT. I think. The school career counselor made me a list of colleges and it's pretty much just a list of Ivy League schools, and I looked at the programs and they're not really what I want. I have to look at some other places, too. NYU and Columbia and Cooper Union are out--there is no way I'm staying that close to home when my dad's drinking. Maybe I should look at colleges in New Zealand or something. Do they even have colleges there, or are there just sheep? I don't know. Anyway, my dad is pretty much insisting I stay close to home, and I don't get it. He's spent my whole life trying to keep me far away, and now I have a chance to go somewhere and really do things I've been working toward my whole life, and he suddenly cares about whether I'm around? Bullshit.

So I talked to the administration and they keep the dorms open through the holidays anyway, so maybe I'll just stay.

Have a nice Christmas. I ordered a couple of the things off your wedding registry that didn't get bought, so look for the package.

Tony
December, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Look, I really don't want to talk about it any more. I'm just going to stay here at school. I don't want my dad to take it out on you. I'll see you at dinner, but can we please, please talk about something else?

Tony
December, 1983: Mom and Dad

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Mom and Dad,

I'm not coming home for Christmas. You can't make me.

Fuck off.

Your son,

Tony
December, 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warren,

Thanks for the cold pizza.

I'm sorry I missed dinner. I was in the lab and lost track of time. Just come get me next time, okay?

Ugh, it's three in the morning. Why do we have class?

You're the best.

Tony

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slower updates-- been writing a TON on 1796 Broadway, so that there will be material to post while Rainproof is traveling! AND I've been working on my Halloween costume!
Hey Susie,

Thanks so much for the invitation. Let me think about it, but I think it would be really nice to have Christmas dinner with somebody's family instead of here at school. It's pretty vacant and lonely around here, and I'm getting a lot of work done, but it's way too quiet.

I'm sorry stuff is still weird. I didn't really want to talk to you with Ty around; he's still acting super jealous of us being friends.

Do you want to go see Scarface this weekend? Warren said it was really good. Give me a call and I can walk to the mall.

Tony
Dear Dr. Xavier,

Thank you so much for the very nice letter. I've read some of your articles in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and that really cool one in *Scientific American*. I didn't realize you knew my dad, but I guess that makes sense. I think he knows everybody. Thanks also for the compliments on my science projects. I'm working on an AI system right now that I think is going to be really cool when it's done. Maybe I could show it to you sometime when you're in the city.

What my dad said about the wings is true. He really wasn't supposed to tell anyone, though, so I'm kind of mad. The person in question is a friend and he doesn't want people to know about it. I guess I can ask him if it's all right for me to tell you-- he's really mostly worried about what people will think and I think your reputation precedes you in that regard.

I guess I'll get back to you if it's okay.

Thanks again for the nice note. Have a great holiday.

Tony Stark
December 1983: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren--

I miss you like crazy. School is really empty. I'm getting a lot of work done, but the silence is kind of killing me. There's nobody here to remind me to eat. I actually programmed it into the AI, an eating reminder. Maybe that'll help.

I got this letter I really should talk to you about. This guy wrote to me-- you know that guy who does all that research about how mutants are simply extraordinary humans and should have a place in society where they can use their talents? He sent me a letter. And asked if he could speak to the kid with the wings.

I guess it's up to you. It might be...I mean, if there's going to be a grown up who gets it, it's probably him. He might be able to help you figure out how to tell your parents, or...I don't know. Other stuff I can't really help with.

Let me know. I don't think you have to tell me right away. Think about it.

I sent your Christmas present today. I'll see you for New Year's, okay? Somehow we'll figure out how to get a New Year's kiss.

You're still the best. Always.

Miss you,

Tony
December, 1983: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Ty,

Hey, thanks for the letter. Yeah, it kind of sucks up here, but you know.

I was kind of surprised to hear from you. Are we cool? I'm still pretty mad at you about the photos. That was a shit game to play. But I'm actually kind of having fun with this whole prank war.

How's your AI going? We should totally set them up on a blind date or something; that would be hilarious. Mine is pretty okay. I think you write cleaner code than I do, but, you know, the ideas are there.

Oh, hey, so I've been writing to this girl who does robotics, too. Henry said he's cool with her joining K.O.S.M.O.S. We're going to have lunch during the science fair weekend if you want to join. I know it's not for a couple months.

And I just want to tell you, I'm going to the movies with Susie tonight. It's not a date. She knows it's not a date. I'm not actually interested in dating her. I guess you know about why I'm not interested now, so I don't have to explain. I just felt like maybe it would be good for you to hear it from me so there's no confusion. I like her all right, I guess, but I wouldn't date her.

Have a good Christmas. Are you coming to Warren's for New Year's? Christian's coming down, just so you know. He's still really mad at you. That Cameron kid is coming, too, ugh. I don't understand why Warren puts up with him.

Tony
Warren--

Shit. So Susie kissed me.

I just...I told her to stop. She started crying. She kept asking me why and I didn't know what to tell her without hurting her feelings. And it just got...I told her I had a girlfriend. I didn't know what else to say. She didn't believe me, so I showed her that picture of me and Virginia. And it spiraled from there.

She's going to find out I lied, and she's going to be really mad, but I had no idea what to tell her.

I'm supposed to have Christmas with her family. I can't-- I just can't do that. What am I supposed to do? I can't come back to New York; it'd be like letting Howard win.

I don't know. The idea of spending Christmas alone in this building that's pretty much like a tomb is really awful.

Not that you're going to be able to do anything by the time you get this, sorry for making you worry or something.

Still miss you.

Tony
Virginia,

Merry Christmas!

Christmas in Richmond sounds like it's really great. I hope you're having fun with your family. I didn't know anybody HAD that many Christmas trees. My family doesn't do trees or anything. We just have a big dinner and my parents give me gifts. One time when I was a kid, I asked for a tree, and my dad rattled off some speech about how he didn't put stock in the Christian assimilation of pagan mythology or something like that, and I decided it was better to shut up and eat.

I--

Anyway, expect a surprise to be delivered on the 23rd. I'd say more, but it'll spoil it.

Tony
Virginia,

Go down to Perly's Restaurant on East Grace Street when you get a chance. Your present is there.

Tony

PS I already tipped the courier. This corned beef hash is amazing.
December, 23, 1983: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Steve,

Uhhh, you're probably noticing the Richmond postmark on this. I think I just got in more trouble than I've ever gotten into in my life.

So, this thing happened. I went to the movies with Susie. You know, Ty's ex-girlfriend? I went to a really, really, not-datey-at-all movie so she'd know it wasn't a date. It was Scarface. I mean, you'd have to be pretty dumb to think that's a date, right?

SHE THOUGHT IT WAS A DATE.

She actually kissed me. It...

I don't know really how to say this. I don't think I can tell this to anybody else. I actually really liked it. I haven't kissed anybody but Warren. I thought I'd hate kissing somebody else. But it was different. Her lips were different, she tasted different, she smelled different, she made these little, soft sighing noises and had to stand on her tiptoes because I'm actually taller than her. usually I'm the one on my tiptoes, you know?

And it made me feel awful, and I told her to stop, and I told her I couldn't, but I can't help that I liked it. Can I? Is there something wrong with me?

I kind of want to do it again. I won't, but I want to.

I was supposed to go to her house for Christmas, because I was up at school. She's really the only local person I know.

And I didn't want to see her again, because I'm sort of scared that if I did, she'd try again, and I wouldn't make her stop. It was hard enough to make her stop as it was.

And I was really upset, because I knew I couldn't go there, but I was really excited, because you know how my family doesn't celebrate Christmas, really, except for the gifts part, and the parties, and Susie's family has a real, normal family Christmas with church and stockings and a tree and all of that, and I wanted it so much. I wanted that more than I wanted to kiss her again.

So I sort of booked a train ticket to go see Virginia. Virginia the person, in Virginia the state, because she does a big family Christmas. She'd been telling me about eating turkey and Yorkshire pudding which is apparently this puffy bread thing, and watching Christmas movies and going caroling and all these things I've never done.

I figured it would be a really good Christmas present, right?

Apparently it's not. Her parents are furious, and I had to explain to them that she didn't know I was coming, and I don't think they believe her, so she's mad at me, and they made me call Howard, and now he's revoking pretty much every privilege I have for the rest of eternity, and they're making me go home tomorrow morning, so I'm not even going to get to have a real Christmas. I'm grounding for New Year's, which means I'm not even going to get to have a New Year's kiss, and I'm getting stuck back at home, which was exactly the thing I was trying to avoid.
And I don't know how to tell Warren, or apologize to Virginia, or anything.

I guess I also never realized how small normal people's houses are. Virginia's house doesn't have a guest room. I'm sleeping on the sofa in their living room tonight. It's really beautiful, all the twinkly lights on their Christmas tree and up and down the bannister. They have this cute little electric train that runs around the room, with a little Santa Claus figurine in the first car. There's fake snow, and stockings on the chimney, just like in the poem. Everything smells like cinnamon and apples-- Virginia's mom baked pies. I really wish I could stay here. I don't even mind the lumpy sofa or the scratchy blanket or the way Virginia's dad keeps glaring at me. It's like being in a magical place.

I'm going to run out to the mailbox and post this, and then try to get some sleep. Maybe. If I can stop staring at the lights.

Merry Christmas. Say hi to Maureen.

Tony
December 24, 1983: Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Virginia,

I really, really didn't mean to make you angry. I thought you'd be happy to see me. It just… everything you said about Christmas made me want to see what it would be like to have a Christmas like normal people do. I didn't know your parents would be mad. I didn't ask you because I thought it would be a great surprise, and I knew that if I suggested it, you'd tell me it was too much and I shouldn't come, but that then you'd say something later about being sorry I wasn't there.

It's really early in the morning. I know you probably don't want to see me, and your parents don't want me here, and they're probably not going to let you visit me again at this rate, so I'm going to just get out of here on my own steam and head back to New York and spare you any awkward goodbyes.

I know this was a mess of a Christmas present and obviously not what you wanted, so I did a little work on your living room while everybody else was asleep. I guess it's a day early for Christmas morning and Santa and all that, but it's what I could do. I rewired most of your lights and that cool little train on portable fuel cells that run off of alcohol, so you shouldn't really have to pay an electric bill on those; you can just buy isopropyl from the drugstore. That should make up for the inconvenience of having me here, for your parents and everything.

I also sort of restrung the outside of your house. It's pretty bright. It might be too much, but I guess you can always take them down and put them back if you don't like them. I sort of rigged some rudimentary timers so the lights kind of dance around and stuff.

There's a foot switch under your hydrangeas. Don't…I guess, don't tell anybody else about it. Just go out really late at night and push it by yourself, then stand across the street. It's not really anything big, but it's sort of something special just for you.

Again, I didn't mean to mess things up. I'll call when I get back to New York, which should be in time for dinner.

Tony
Warren,

I'm back in New York. At home. Grounded from telephones. Not allowed to come for New Year's. I really, really don't want to talk about it. I mean, I will, but I don't feel like writing it all down. I guess whenever I see you.

You're always the best. I miss you a stupid amount.

Tony
December 26, 1983: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Virginia,

I'm not allowed to talk on the phone right now. That phone call you refused to take was the only one Howard let me make, because he said I should let you know I didn't get kidnapped and murdered coming home.

If you change your mind and want to talk, can you write me? I hope your parents are less mad, and I hope you liked my do-over present. I guess probably not, if you're still angry. Sorry about that, then.

So I heard these Cabbage Patch things are really popular right now, and hard to get, so I had Jarvis get you one. That's why the box is so big. If you don't like this one, either, I can get you something else.

Tony
Dear Steve,

I'm back home and not allowed to talk on the phone or leave the house until school starts up. Howard restricted my computer use to schoolwork only. I mean, everything I do on the computer is schoolwork on some level, so that's fine, but it's annoying. I've just been working on the AI a lot. It's really the only thing I can do. The problem is that my code base is stuck at school, and I didn't bring anything with me, because I thought I'd be in Richmond for a few days and then back at school, and Virginia's family doesn't have a computer.

Virginia wouldn't talk to me when I got back to New York. I don't really get why. I improved their Christmas lights and stuff before I left, it was pretty cool, but I guess she must not have liked it.

There's a thing I've been thinking about a lot, with the going there, and Susie, and all of that, and I guess maybe part of it was that after Susie kissed me, I couldn't help thinking about Virginia.

It was dumb, really. And I know she'd only get mad if I told her so.

And now I don't know when I'll see Warren, or be able to talk to him about any of this, and I really, really want to talk to him about it.

Happy almost 1984. It's kind of funny to think that we're supposed to be living in an Orwellian dystopia, haha. Maybe my next letter will be entirely in newspeak.

Tony
January, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

That was the best, best, best New Year's Eve ever.

I really wasn't expecting you to show up like that. I honestly think it's the nicest thing anybody's ever done for me. I know I tell you you're the best a lot, but you really, really are. I don't know what I ever did to deserve to have somebody so amazing around. When you knocked at my window, I seriously had no idea what was going on; I kind of thought it was going to be one of those creepy AIM guys again.

But it was you. You, absolutely perfect you. And champagne. And a whole box of jelly donuts. I still have one left. It's hidden under my bed and I'm saving it for tomorrow. I had one just after you left. I hope you don't get in trouble for disappearing like I did. I guess Long Island is a little closer than Richmond, though.

Thanks also for talking about Virginia. It's nice to know you felt that way about me even when you were dating Christian. On top of just knowing that it's normal. I don't really know how I feel about her, I guess. Mostly, she's my oldest friend, and I'm closer to her than anybody but you. Sometimes I think I just want to be her friend, and sometimes I think I want something else. Sometimes, I think she wants something else, but then she just acts so weird about things. It's pretty confusing. I wouldn't cheat on you, though. I promise.

Howard's still being pretty much an asshole. He accused me of sneaking somebody into the house, but I don't think he has any proof and I don't think he knows how-- or who it was.

I wish you were still here. I miss getting to curl up in bed with you, since that stupid fire. Fucking Ty ruins everything even when he doesn't mean to.

But that was nice. And it was nice to get a New Year's kiss after all. Or a lot of them.

See you back at school. You're still the best.

Tony
Howard,

I'm sick of your drunk asshole bullshit. I'm going back to school, and you can't stop me.

There was nobody in my room. I don't even know how you think anybody would have gotten up to my room. You haven't been able to produce one shred of evidence, this is obviously some kind of alcoholic paranoia thing.

I'll see you this summer. I'll work three days a week in R&D, but you'd better fucking pay me what I'm worth or I'll see if Ty's dad will give me a job. I know your PR department would just love that, won't they?

You want to play hardball, I can play hardball. Don't send Uncle Obie or whatever the fuck he wants to call himself to try to convince me otherwise.

That kid you decided to have for some inexplicable reason since you obviously hate being a parent,

Tony
January, 1984: Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Steve,

I'm back at school. Nothing much to report except that I still haven't heard from Virginia, Warren is pretty much the greatest person ever to exist, and Howard is the worst dad ever. Just wanted to let you know where to address mail.

Got your letter. Thanks for the vote of confidence. Warren said pretty much the same thing. Why do things have to be so mixed up?

I'm going to go code more, Computers are way more straightforward than people.

Tony
January, 1984: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Ty,

Uh, I thought I should tell you, they switched our room assignments. I swear I had nothing to do with it-- I would rather room with you than somebody I don't know. But I sort of told my dad that if he wouldn't stop being a jerk, I'd ask your dad for a job this summer, and he called the school, and now I guess they're putting me with Christian. Which is fine, I like Christian just fine, and I guess it solves that whole problem of who he's going to room with when he comes back, but it was totally not my doing and I kind of wanted you to know.

How's your project going? We should compare notes when you're back.

Tony
Dear Dr. Xavier,

I spoke with my friend and he says he guesses it's okay to talk to you because he saw that television interview you did.

His name's Warren Worthington, he's fourteen years old, and he's in the tenth grade here at my school. He started having these problems a little over a year ago.

We don't know any other adults like him--or like you, I guess-- and I think it would be really good for him to have someone to talk to. I built him a harness that he can wear under his clothing to disguise himself, but he hates that he has to do that, and he gets gloomy about it a lot. He used to be my roommate, and then it was better, because he didn't mind me knowing, and we could just hang out, but now he's rooming with this other kid and I'm pretty sure he doesn't want anyone else to know, so lately he's been sleeping in his harness, which wasn't meant for that and is probably really uncomfortable.

I think he'd really appreciate a letter or phone call or something.

Thanks,

Tony Stark
Hey, Christian,

I'm really pleased to be rooming with you. I think it'll be a lot of fun. The only problem I feel like I should talk to you about is that I'm kind of worried how Warren's going to be about it. I mean, he seems a little uncomfortable with it. I've already assured him that we're not going to, like, start dating or anything, but he said something about drinking. I guess...you know about my dad, so I don't have to explain. I'd really rather the booze stays at home, okay?

But yeah! Super fun! Tell Emmie I say hi--shit, I should send her another letter.

Tony
January, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Hi.

Hi hi hi hi hi hi hi hi hi hi hi.

Back at school back at school.

See you at lunch see you at lunch.

You're the best

Tony
Dear Sunset,

Oh, that sounds really cool. So you're kind of creating robots that are really good at single, specific tasks? I was more really just focused on intelligence at this point-- haven't tried building any kind of body for this, though I have some stuff I did experimenting with fuel cells. Pretty rudimentary, though. I'm really trying to create a system that appears to have a personality--right now that's modeled off the asshole comp sci teacher from last year. So I'm less focused on the physical aspects than you are. Lemme know if you want to collaborate, that would be cool.

Tony
January, 1984: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Virginia,

Hi. It's been almost a month. I really miss you and I'm really sorry. I guess if you're still mad and don't want to talk to me, that's okay, but...

No, it's really not. I miss you. I don't understand what I did wrong. Can you at least explain it to me?

Tony
February, 1984: Henry

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Henry,

Thanks for sending me the samples to test. I think that sounds like it'll work. If we can synthesize these (which is waaaay outside my realm of expertise, but I bet Bruce can figure it out, and I'd rather go that route than ask my dad for help right know, for sure...though Howard is totally an option if Bruce can't do it) then I pretty much have the apparatus built that will measure and combine the right compounds. And then you'll be able to communicate with your hives—except figuring out how to let them communicate back will be trickier.

Sunset's doing some pretty cool robot stuff, but it sounds pretty different from what I'm doing...I feel like I'm building brains and she's building brawn, which actually sounds like a good place for collaboration.

I want to have a plan in place in case the science fair gets attacked again. I already talked to Bruce about it. I'm not sure his aunt's gonna let him go, though. I'm pretty sure Sunset'll be in if we ask her, and Ty for sure doesn't want to get kidnapped again. I've built some pretty basic portable weapons but I don't want to get in trouble for them, so nothing too dangerous, and they're pretty close range. I called city planning and got the hotel blueprints, so I think we can work out things like points of access and escape routes ahead of time. I've included a copy with this letter. Let me know what you think. I'd like to try to have a plan that doesn't potentially jeopardize your bees this year. I bet you would, too.

How are the moths coming along? Are they going to be ready in time?

Tony
Dear Happy,

Holy shit! I thought you'd forgotten how to write.

Umm don't you have anyone else you can ask for advice? I'm really flattered but I don't know anything about professional fighting.

The way I see it, you can totally do college later. Lots of people do college at twenty-five or thirty or even older. I mean I guess I get why it's important to your mom and dad when they worked really hard to send you to good schools, and I guess being the first person in your family to go to college is a big deal. But there isn't that long you can fight professionally for. If people are telling you to do that now, I think you should do it while you can, and go to college later. But you should probably ask a grow up.

Anyway, great hearing from you after forever. I hope you write again soon. Like, sooner than a whole year or something.

Tony
February, 1984: Dear Virginia

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue). teaberryblue

Dear Virginia,

Um. I still haven't heard from you. Are you still mad?

Tony
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

That's amazing. It sounds perfect. I'm gonna find out what I need to do to transfer over with you. We would have the best time together, and if it's that small and they don't do grade levels, we can totally be in all the same classes and things. And I bet they won't make me keep taking all these stupid classes in things I already know because of the curriculum requirements. That would be amazing. We could go back to rooming together--I mean, I'd have to get Howard to relent, but if there's no one else, it makes for a better argument. Anyway, I bet he'll be pleased if I ask to go to school closer to home.

I'm so happy for you. This is gonna be excellent.

Tony
Dear Dr. Xavier,

Warren told me about your proposal. I think that sounds really great. Your school sounds pretty amazing and even though I like itI was wondering what I need to do to transfer as well. I'd love to be able to go to a smaller, more specialized school closer to home.

Thanks again for all your help,
Tony Stark
February, 1984: Dear Dr. Xavier

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Dr. Xavier,

I don't know how to answer that really. I get that your school is highly selective, but I really think I could excel there. I mean, I don't have anything like Warren does, but I'm really smart, like, really, really astoundingly mindcrushingly smart. I'm so smart that I stymie IQ tests and never get above a 50 because I overthink all the answers, which means no one is really sure how high it is, but I would say easily over 200. I can build pretty much anything you ask me to, and I've got an AI system that almost passes the Turing test and can teach 101-level computer science better than an actual teacher.. I have an eidetic memory. I can pretty much remember everything I see, read, or hear. So, I mean, I'm probably what people would call gifted. I think. I got skipped three whole grades, and my schoolwork is still too easy for me. So I'd really like a chance to study somewhere where I can challenge myself. I promise that if you accept me, I'll be the absolute hardest-working student you've ever seen. If you can send the application, I'll fill it out right away.

Thanks,
Tony Stark
February, 1984: Dear Dr. Xavier

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Dr. Xavier,

Oh. I thought you meant it was for any gifted kids. I just...I don't know what to say. I would still really, really like to go, if you're willing to make an exception. I feel like I'm that different a lot of the time. I don't have a lot of friends and I guess I scare off most of the ones I do have, so I think I probably have a lot in common with mutant kids.

I would really do anything to go there. Anything. I could get my dad to donate a new wing to your school, even, I bet. Just tell me what I have to do. I will literally do anything.

Tony
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Please don't go. I don't know what I'm going to do here without you.

Please. I need you here. Really.

Tony
Hi. I know I haven't been writing as much as I should. I'm sorry. I just...now I feel stupid. I don't mean to only write to you when I have problems but it seems like that's all I do these days, maybe I just always have problems.

Warren got asked to go to a special school. He's leaving. I tried to apply to transfer there but they say I don't qualify. I'm not gifted enough in the kind of way they want me to be, so...

That's that, I guess. Warren's going away.

He says he'll write and see me all summer, but it's not the same. And I have this stupid science fair and I don't even know how I'm supposed to compete. I can't sleep and I keep forgetting to eat. Warren always reminds me to eat. What happens when Warren leaves? I don't know how to do things by myself.

I don't know what to do. What do I do?

Tony
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Okay. I'm really sorry for yelling at you. That's not how I want you to leave. Meet me in the computer labs? I'm so sorry. I just want you here. I'm going to be all alone and I'm going to miss you so much. I don't know what I'm going to do without you.

And no, I forgot dinner. A sandwich would be good. Thanks.

You're the best, always.

Tony
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

All right. I just wanted to give you a letter to read once you're gone. I mean, I promise I'll still write and talk to you on the phone and all of that, but it's not the same. I don't know what I'm going to do without you here, really.

It's like…you're not leaving till the morning and I already miss you so much. I thought it was bad enough we didn't get to room together anymore, but this is the worst.

Sorry. I know this is great for you. I hope you have fun and make a ton of new friends. Which you will, because you're pretty much the coolest person I know.

Write soon. I already miss you like crazy.

Tony
Virginia,

I don’t understand why you haven't written back. I don't think I deserve that, really. I mean, you could at least write and tell me you never want to talk to me again.

Look, I really, really need to talk to somebody. I tried calling your house but your dad answered and I was scared to talk to him so I just hung up. Can you please write back? Please? It's fine if you don't want to be friends anymore. I just need somebody to talk to who knows, you know. Everything. I will make it up to you any way I can.

Tony
Dear Dr. Xavier,

I don't think you understand. Don't think I'm not grateful that you're helping Warren out because I want him to be happy and he's definitely going to be happier there than he is here and he totally deserves something better, but

I don't really have any other friends. My other best friend stopped talking to me because I ran away to her house without warning her. My other other best friend is really cool half the time and then tries to destroy my life the other half of the time. Almost nobody at school likes me, I'm way younger than everybody in my classes and even though I don't really get bullied like I did at my old school, the other kids pretty much ignore me. I'm pretty sure my parents never wanted a kid because they don't have time for me, ever, and my dad just tells me everything I'm doing wrong all the time, even when I do things I'm really proud of.

I know I shouldn't be calling mutants freaks. I don't think you're freaks. Warren is pretty much the best person I know. So don't think that's what I'm saying. I'm just saying that I feel like a freak, all the time, and you just took away the only person who made me feel normal.

Does it matter if I'm born with a special power? Really? Why? How do you decide what constitutes a mutation and what just means someone is a really weird normal person? Who gets to decide that?

I really, really, really miss Warren. Please reconsider. I mean it when I say I'll be the best student you ever have. I'll work so, so hard you'll never even know I don't have powers. I'll build myself powers if I have to. Whatever you tell me to do. Just please don't make me stay alone at this stupid school.

Tony Stark
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

I don't even know what to say. I just miss you.

Tony
Dear Dr. Xavier,

Thanks for the invitation. I guess coming to visit for a weekend would be okay. I have to get permission from school and from my parents. It won't be till after the science fair, though; I really have to get my act together and work on that.

I understand why I can't go to your school. I just wish there was a school like that for people like me.

Tony Stark
Christian,

Thanks so much. I don't know what was in those, but it's the first time I've slept in weeks. I just hope I can get my project finished for next week.

Do you have any more? If they're expensive, I'll buy them from you.

Thanks,

Tony
February, 1984: Susie

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Susie,

Hey, I'm really sorry I kind of ran away at Christmas. I just have to say this. I really like you, you're a gorgeous girl, and really fun to spend time with, but even if we were both totally available, I'm not sure how I would feel about you. I guess things are sort of weird for me right now but I don't think it's fair to Ty either way-- he still really likes you and talks about you all the time.

Anyway, I guess what I'm saying is I would like to be friends, if you still would. I could use a friend. I've got the science fair this weekend, but if you're free this week, let me know, and I'll sneak off campus.

Tony
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Oh. Right. Valentine's Day. Thanks… I sort of forgot about it. I'm really sorry! I ordered you a bunch of chocolates to make up for it. That's... I don't know what boys are supposed to get other boys, do you? But chocolates seem okay.

I hope you're still settling in okay. The other kids sound pretty cool, but, you know, I don't think it's a good idea to piss off the guy who can shoot fireballs from his eyes, even if you think he's an asshole.

So this school is brand new? Everyone there is brand new? That must be pretty weird. I mean, I knew it was for mutants but I thought there would be more there.

I'm doing okay, I guess. I'm finally sleeping. Christian's been really helpful. I still keep forgetting to eat, though.

I ended up scrapping my AI because even though it was way better than Ty's, I couldn't finish it on time. I'm working on a better ethanol-powered robot, like the one I built last year but with more sophisticated controls. It'll still be cool, I guess. I just have to learn that my first project always gets fucked up and I always end up changing it.

I really miss you. I know it probably doesn't seem like it because I missed Valentine's Day, but I do. Write soon, okay?

Tony
February, 1984: Susie

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Susie,

Thanks a bunch; I had a really nice time.

It was good to talk to somebody who kind of has an outside perspective. Sometimes people are just way too close to the problem.

We, um. I'm not sure how to put this. We really need to stop doing this kissing thing, though. I know this time it was kind of my fault, too, so I'm sorry. I really want to be friends, but that's it. We probably shouldn't have drunk all that rum, I guess. It didn't really seem like a lot until I looked at the bottle and saw how far down it had gone. No rum next time, okay?

I've got the science fair coming up, but I'll talk to you when I get back.

Tony
February, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

I'm back from the science fair. Totally uneventful this year. I was so prepared for there to be a catastrophe, but nothing really happened.

It was okay, I guess, but I didn't really feel up to presenting and I didn't place or anything. Everyone was super impressed with Henry's moths, and he got first place in his division, easily. Bruce did his usual coming in first place in like a billion divisions while barely talking to anybody the whole time. Ty came in third in the robotics division, Sunset came in second, and Sunset's friend came in first, this girl Meredith, who seemed pretty cool. She's my age and my year in school, which totally surprised me. I'm not sure why I never met her before. Her dad's another one of those brilliant engineers I met at a convention once who Howard hates. I'm not sure why. Someday I'll make friends with someone whose dad doesn't piss my dad off, I guess.

Howard called to ask how I did. It was nice that he remembered, but then I got to hear a lecture about how brains never mean anything if you don't work hard enough. He doesn't know how hard I was working, and...you know, I don't know why I care. It's just Howard.

Write soon? I keep checking the mail. It's the best when I get a letter.

Tony
February, 1984: Dear Meredith

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Meredith,

Hi! Thanks for giving me your address. It was really great to meet you, and I'd love if you were interested in joining K.O.S.M.O.S., even though we haven't really had any adversaries since last year. I was really impressed with your project-- robot psychology is something I hadn't even considered and I guess it is important if you're building artificial intelligences. Listen, would you be interested in taking a look at the AI I've been working on? I think you might be able to help me with the glitches in it that I haven't been able to smooth out-- and the reason I didn't bring it to the science fair.

I am really not as dumb as I seemed all weekend, I promise. I've just been having a rough couple of months, so I'm sorry I was kind of awkward and not talkative. I mean, I'm always awkward but I usually don't know when to shut up. Either way, yeah, I really would like to work with you if that's something you'd be cool with. And once I'm back in New York for the summer, I would love to hang out. It would be great to have more friends to do things with.

Write soon! I want to hear all about your project, like, the stuff you didn't include in your presentation. It really was super impressive.

Tony Stark
Dear Warren,

Good to hear that you're enjoying school, but I really wish you would say more. It's not like I'm going to tell anybody. I get the whole confidentiality thing, but it's me. I don't count as people. Will you at least be able to tell me more of what you're doing when I see you, and we can talk about things in person and not write them down? What the hell is the Danger Room, anyway? You keep mentioning it like it's some kind of class, but you never say anything about what it is. I feel like I'm missing so much.

Things are still okay here. I've been hanging out with Christian and Susie a lot. Haven't really had a chance to work on my AI lately, which is fine, since the science fair is over, anyway. And, you know, if I'm not in the lab, I remember to eat more often, so I guess that's good.

There's really not too much going on, I guess. We're reading *1984* in English class, double plus ungood and all. I told the teacher that I read it once already and thought it was kind of stupid and got into a kind of argument about the government regulating industry and I ended up getting detention, but that's fine, because I read most of the book so I could confirm my hatred of it. Seriously, we're talking about a guy who likened private businessmen to a corrupt government and said intelligent people were totalitarians. What an ass.

Anyway, I miss you. Still. Keep having fun,

Tony
Hey, Emma!

Here are some more old comics for you. It's sort of weird, because I was looking through them and I totally don't remember the stories being, well...I guess it's because I'm getting older, some of them seem like kid stories. I don't mean that to insult you; I know you're a smart kid. But if you don't like them, it's okay to just throw them out, I guess.

Christian's doing okay, just wanted to let you know. We're having a great time as roommates and he seems to be a lot happier.

I'm not sure my dad is going to let me come up to Boston after my accident last summer, but I will definitely try to make it if I can.

Tony
March, 1984: Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Steve,

Hey, uh, this is a kind of weird question. I was reading some old comics, and is it just me, or are they actually kind of bad? I hadn't read any in ages, and I picked up some old ones to send to Christian's sister (not yours, I would never give away yours), and they seemed…less interesting than I remembered. More cliches and overly expository dialogue. Less subtlety. Less blurred morality than I remember. That can't be right, can it? I know I remember complaining about them all the time, but I was complaining about the science, which was mostly just kind of dumb of me, wasn't it? Nobody cares if the science in a comic book they're probably just going to throw away is laser-accurate, right? Wow, I was a bratty kid, wasn't I?

I'm doing a little bit better, thanks for asking. I mean, I still miss Warren, but I'm kind of falling into a routine here. And we'll see each other this summer, of course, so that's really not so far off.

That is, if Howard lets me leave the house at all.

Tony
March, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

What do you mean, you don't get a summer vacation? Why not?

Tony
March, 1984: Dear Captain America

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Captain America,

Hi. So, I haven't read any comics in a really long time, and I just sort of decided I should start again, so I picked up the most recent one.

The Tumbler seemed pretty cool, but I guess what I liked best about this issue was the whole plot with the insurance policies. Insurance fraud! With supervillains! It's a pretty brilliant idea, and I liked how it sort of muddled the lines of ethics from the perspective of, I guess the question of whether it's wrong to abuse the reputation of a known villain to perpetuate fraud-- because certainly insurance fraud is less harmful than actually being a supervillain, but at the same time, it's a tricky question.

Thanks! I'm really glad I read this one. It reminded me why I enjoy comics. I'll try not to get behind again.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
March, 1984: Dear Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Warren,

Sorry I was so brief in the last letter. Are you really not coming home at all? Dr. Xavier told me that I could come visit the school, but I obviously need Howard's permission for that, and I feel like the chances of that happening are on par with a fucking Dirac ratio.

I'll see what I can do, I guess. When are we going to see each other, otherwise?

I really miss you. I mean, things are better now than they were, but it's definitely not the same without you here.

I don't really have anything exciting to tell you about. I've been reading comics, but I feel like the old ones I just to really like have gotten kind of babyish. I feel like you know what classes are like, and what lunch is like, and all those things. You don't want to get letters about that.

Write back soon. If we can figure out a way to see each other, I am totally in.

Tony
March, 1984: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Ty,

Oh, for fuck's sake, no, I'm not dating Susie. We're just friends. Why are you even asking me this?

Tony
Dear Meredith,

Ha, did your dad really say that? I PROMISE I'm not as much of an asshole as Howard is. I mean, it would be pretty hard to be as much of an asshole as Howard is.

I haven't even bothered mentioning you to Howard. Then again, Howard barely speaks to me, so I don't mention a lot of things to him-- he'd probably be pretty mad, though. He doesn't really like any of my friends-- you met Ty, whose dad owns Viastone. He can be a jerk sometimes, and he has really, really bad judgment, but he's mostly fun, and he's one of the few people I know who's as smart as I am.

I mean, present company included in that few people. You're sort of the intersection of a bunch of sets in the Venn Diagram of my social circles, haha. I have, like, one other friend who's a girl, and she's really smart, but not the same kind of smart. She's good at practical things and understanding people and social criticism and stuff I just don't get. She talks about feminism a lot and while of course I get why it's important for men and women to be equal, she sometimes takes it a lot further than I can understand and it kind of confuses me. She also hasn't really been talking to me a lot lately.

Oh, I guess I have two friends who are girls, besides you, but one of them is Ty's ex-girlfriend, so that can be a little weird.

So you live at home, right? And go to a normal school? I mean, a school where you go home at the end of the day and don't sleep there? Is it a public school or a private school?

I don't mind boarding school (it's better than spending any more time around Howard), but I feel like I'm missing a lot of jokes and references to things that almost everybody else in the country does. And there are zero girls here. (I should probably say that I'm not pointing out the girls thing because I'm complaining about dating or anything, but I think I would get those arguments about feminism more and be less likely to get people mad at me if I spent more time around girls.

But I also hear that schools like that don't really have many options for smart kids. How do you not get bored?

All right, the bell just rang; I need to get to class. Good to hear from you.

Tony
March, 1984: Christian

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Christian,

Hey, I ran out of those pills a few nights ago and I haven't slept since. Do you have any more? I'll take care of your math homework. Just leave it on my desk.

Tony
Ty,

Okay, weird question. What the hell happened in English class today? Was I actually crazy, or what? I know I should be reading the book along with the rest of the class, but I finished it already and I could swear I remember that happening. There's a weird love scene with a bird in the middle of it, and all this stuff about the Junior Anti-Sex League. I mean, I thought it was a really big deal in the book. That's why I was so surprised we were reading it in class.

Look, about that other stuff, you need to ask Susie. I already told her I wouldn't date your ex-girlfriend. I mean, if I'm being completely honest, yes, we kissed a couple times, but it wasn't anything serious, and it's not going to happen again.

Tony
Susie,

Why are you telling Ty all this stuff about me? Why are you talking to him at all? I thought you were still mad at him.

Can we talk about this?

Tony
March, 1984: Dear Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Steve,

This is probably a weird question, but you've read 1984, right? The Orwell book? The one with Winston Smith and his job censoring fiction and Big Brother and thoughtcrime and all that stuff?

Okay. So. We're reading it in English class. It's way darker and more challenging than anything else we've ever read in English, but I think somebody in the administration thought that because it's 1984, we should read 1984. I guess it makes some kind of sense. But I kind of feel like no one read it ahead of time, because there's no way adults would give that book to a bunch of 16-year-old boys.

I read it a while ago. I mostly read it because I was interested in past predictions of future technology, which are always interesting. It's like watching Star Trek, or reading Isaac Asimov. Or even comics. You know. I mean, I don't know about teleportation or robotic armor but things like live video communication will totally happen in twenty, thirty years. So I read 1984. That's the long version, I guess.

But I distinctly remember there being a lot of sex in that book. The sex was...I don't know. I mean, Warren and I have obviously done some stuff, but not really...we've never gone that far, and I don't know the first thing about sex with girls, so maybe I don't get it, but it felt like the sex was really...political? I can't think of a better word for it. Anyway, that's why I remember the sex.

So I didn't bother rereading the book for class. I've kind of had better things to do, like trying to get back to work on my AI, which I would be doing if I could just focus.

So I mentioned something about it in class and kind of hoped we'd either gotten that far, or the teacher would be impressed with me reading ahead.

But the teacher actually gave me a funny look, like I shouldn't be talking about sex in class, and I said, well, if we're not supposed to talk about it, why are you assigning us a book about it?

And the teacher insisted it wasn't in the book.

So I thumbed through my copy, and figured I would just find one of the scenes. I mean, I remember there being a lot of them. There's that girl, Julia, and she has sex with pretty much everyone and talks about it being a rebellion. But I couldn't find one.

And that's the part where I just said, "what the fuck? Are we actually reading a censored version of 1984?"

And then I got detention for saying "fuck" in class.

So I went to the library, and looked for a copy there.

What the hell? Who censors 1984? Doesn't that defeat the purpose?

Do you mind sending me a real copy from the outside world? I'll pay you back for it.

Thanks,
Тону
Hey, Meredith,

Wow. Thank you for such an amazing long letter. I don't think I can really do it justice with my reply, but I'll give it a shot. You're pretty excellent, you know.

So, yeah, boarding school. It's like...I don't really know what to compare it to because I've been going to boarding school since I was seven. I accidentally broke some stuff in Howard's lab and he got kind of ragey at me and my parents decided that maybe having a tiny child in the same house as a crazy drunk supergenius who spent most of his time designing weapons that could level a small country might not have been the best plan. So they shipped me off. But Howard kept finding reasons to complain about my various schools until we found the one I'm in now. I've actually been here for all of high school, which is the longest I've been in one place. It's not too bad; the facilities are pretty good and the teachers are mostly cool with the fact that I sort of do my own thing--except my English teacher right now, apparently, since I just got sent to detention for questioning the censorship of a book about censorship, because somebody thought that was a great idea.

So that's where I'm writing you from, is the library, where I have to sit with nothing but my schoolbooks for a full hour. I thought I'd put the time to better use. They wouldn't let me get any of my computer stuff so I can't even work on any real work. Just pens and paper and textbooks. Sometimes I actually write bits of code down that I can type in later. Do you do that, or do you need to have the computer in front of you?

Anyway, I thought I'd get a jump on trying to reply to your NOVEL. Man, normal school kids must have way more free time. Do you write a lot of letters? I couldn't decide if the length of this letter meant you're a seasoned and skilled letter-writer, or if you never write letters and wanted to get more bang for your buck.

I don't really know what to say about school. I guess it's like your school, if you slept there. We have dorm buildings and class buildings, no, we don't actually sleep in the same building with our classes. There are kind of covered walkways for when it snows, though. I mean, we're in New England. It's gonna snow.

I have a roommate named Christian. He's from Boston; he's pretty cool. I used to room with a boy named Warren, but Warren moved to a different school, which is kind of shitty, because he was pretty much my best friend, and now I barely get to talk to him. I don't really have a lot of friends, which is fine, because Christian and I mostly either hang out in our room, or we sneak off campus and hang out with my friend Susie and her friends. (Susie is a friend-who-is-a-girl, not a girlfriend, even though I'm pretty sure she wants to be the latter, but she’s my other friend's ex-girlfriend, so I feel like that's not a cool way to go.) Sometimes we get beers and hang out on one of the old railroad bridges; it's pretty nice up there. You can see all the constellations, even more than you can see at school, which is way more that you can see in New York City. Of course, you start naming constellations and people look at you funny. I wasn't even naming difficult ones. Everybody knows Orion.

Have you ever been anywhere super dark where you can see the stars like that? I mean, so dark that you can see the dusty ring of the Milky Way. That dark. The Vanderbilt Planetarium doesn't count, even if it's cool to hear Spock talk to you. I feel like if we went way out on Long Island, we could see them. Maybe this summer. I'd tell you to come up to school, but that's kind of far and I don't
know what you'd do once you got here.

What are you doing this summer? I think I'm working for Howard. Really fun, right? Ugh. We'll see.

I think the biggest problem with boarding school is that it's kind of like a vacuum. I don't really get to watch TV or movies, and when I talk to kids from the normal world, I don't really get a lot of their jokes.

We have a dining hall where we eat. The food is pretty okay, but not as good as the food at home when my parents let me eat with them. The rest of the time, I eat a lot of leftovers or sandwiches at home. I'm not very good at remembering to eat if I'm really engrossed in something, but sometimes our butler reminds me and brings me something. He's a good guy, I guess. I mean, he doesn't make me feel like I'm getting in the way.

Oh, right, so, yeah, dining hall Food. We have a bunk bed in our dorm room, but we unbunked our beds. The rooms are small, but it's great, it's just like our whole room is covered in mattress, and we can store shit underneath.

Whoa, uh, I just wrote a ton. I want to answer your other questions and stuff, though! I promise!

Tony
Hi, Meredith!

Okay, finally getting around to answering more of your letter. I'm trying to do it in order so I don't leave anything out.

I don't really play any sports, no. I tried track for a while, because Ty-- you met Ty, the super blond one with the super-anally documented code? I kind of lust after his documentation sometimes. Not him, just his documentation. I need to tell you sometime about the AI we were building together before I got pissed off and dismantled it, because it was kind of genius. Anyway, Ty runs track, and he actually has some medals for it, and he tried to get me to do it. I did it for a year or so, met my goal of coming in not-last, and dropped out because I didn't see the need to keep doing something I was mediocre at when I could do things I'm actually good at, of which there are many. So that was my brief altercation with sports. Tennis sounds cool, though. I mean, I would just be more interested in building a racket with a sensor that could calculate the exact trajectory of the ball. That would be pretty neat, and I could see a lot of really useful applications for that outside of sports, measuring the trajectory of an object in flight just by pointing at it. Hmm.

I've tried drawing, but I'm not really good at it. I've been working on a drawing program, though, where you input some data and the computer spits out some lines, but that's mostly to create schematics. It's sort of like a better version of LOGO. I also set it up so the cursor actually looks like a turtle because what's the point of calling a triangle a turtle? Turtles are way cuter than triangles, right?

I used to spend a lot of time reading, regular books and comic books, but I've kind of gotten out of that. It makes me feel bad, not reading any comics, because they were so important to me when I was a little younger. I mean, I know Captain America is a semi-fictional character but I feel like I should maybe apologize and tell him I'm sorry I haven't been paying attention to his life. Is that dumb? It's probably dumb.

I am really good at building stuff, though. I guess you heard about my crazy prototype wings, right? I think everybody who's ever done the science fair heard about those. I'm glad you weren't there that year, but it's seriously shitty that your school only sent boys. My school only sends boys, but that's because we only have boys. You totally killed our division, there's no way you wouldn't have been the best the year before, too. My friend Virginia is the one I was talking about, who does all that feminism stuff. She hasn't spoken to me in a while, though, but maybe if you wrote to her, she's answer. I feel like you two would be really good friends. You're the smartest girls I know-- okay, but I only know five girls total and one of them is like, nine. But I do mean that as a compliment, because the other ones are pretty smart, too. I just think you'd really like each other. I'll give you her address and if you feel like writing, you can. Would that be weird? I don't know if it's weird. I write unsolicited letters to people all the time. And solicited ones, as evidenced here.

Oops, I just realized its three AM. I should probably get to bed, haha.

Tony
Okay, first off, Ty had no right to do that. He asked. I answered. I felt like he deserved an answer, but I thought it was for him; I didn't--

I didn't tell you about it because it didn't mean anything, okay? She kissed me. She kissed me and I told her it needed to stop. Like I said in that note.

I knew it would upset you, and you're so far away and there's no way to talk about things, so I just kept it to myself. I'm not trying to hide anything from you or anything like that.

It's kind of ridiculous for you to be upset when you left and won't even be able to see me for almost six months at the earliest. I'm at least trying to get permission to come see you. Do you know what I'm having to put up with from Howard for that?

This isn't fair. It's really not fair. Ty is just jealous because his stupid ex-girlfriend kissed me, and this is how he wants to get back at me. Why are you letting him?

Tony
Ty,

You fucking sent my note to Warren.

What kind of asshole does that?

Seriously.

Look, if you want Susie that badly, go fucking apologize to her or something, like a normal person. Don’t mess with my life because I’m actually friends with her.

Tony
April, 1984: Ty

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Ty,

What the fuck? No, this is nothing like me telling Susie about you and Virginia.

Tony
April, 1984: Steve

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Steve,

Thanks for the book, but this one seems to be censored, too. Or at least abridged. But I can't find anything in it that I wanted to find. Where did you get this from?

Things are fine. I mean, Warren's mad at me because Ty sent him a note I passed to Ty where I admitted that I kissed Susie a couple times. He seems more mad that I didn't tell him than mad that it happened, but it's not like I was trying to hide it from him. He's not here and it didn't seem to be that important when he barely writes me anything anyway. All his letters come back telling me about some "cool classified thing" he did and no hints about what's actually going on in his life and it's like he's so much better than me and has all these new secrets with new people who aren't me.

And he's not going to be home, and I don't know how to talk to him about this when he either can't or won't even tell me about all his classes.

Tony
April, 1984: Meredith

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Meredith,

So one of the problems with going to a boarding school is that if you have a friend who doesn't go here, it's very hard to stay friends. You can write letters and see each other in the summer, but that's pretty much it. If they don't live in the same city as you, or don't come home in the summer, then you've got letters. And phone cells, but we're really not supposed to use the phones except on weekends, and there's a line a lot of the time.

My best friend from my last school isn't much of a writer, so I've barely heard from him in four years. And my best friend from this school just moved to a different school, and when I do hear from him, it's like he's in some kind of different world with people I've never met and classes I'll never take. Sometimes, I feel like it's easier to write to you because I don't know you that well, so there are tons and tons of things I can tell you about that I know you've never heard before. Plus, you ask me questions, which means I can just chat about whatever you ask me, and they're specific things, not "how are things?"

How do you even answer "how are things?" Things are okay, things are exactly the same way you remember them, except you're not here, things are weird and I miss you and no matter what other friends I make, they're not you? I mean, this is obviously the proverbial you (maybe not so proverbial, I guess you know that I'm talking about someone specific, I just mean, obviously not-you since you never went to any of my schools, as far as I know). But you've got to share things. They don't have to be questions, stories work okay. Ideas. Feelings. Things that someone can compare to their own experience. Anecdotes about your day. That kind of stuff.

I know I'm not great with people but I feel like I at least get this. And he gets it too, he's really good with people. Better than me. He's just not doing it and I don't understand why. You have somebody you tell literally everything to, all your secrets, and then suddenly, you don't? That's shitty.

Sorry, I'm kind of in a bad mood. How are things, haha?

Tony
Dear Steve,

Okay, this is getting really weird. We finished 1984. We started reading *Hamlet*.

Nobody dies.

I know this isn't how this book goes.

Seriously. I mean, there's the ghost at the beginning. Polonius gets punished for spying. Hamlet doesn't get struck with the poisoned blade. Ophelia just sits in the water for a really long time.

Even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *don't die*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are electing to remain in England* doesn't even sound Shakespearean.

I'm pretty sure I'm going to get detention if I bring it up again.

Tony.
April, 1984: Warren

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Warren,

Okay. Look. Yes, the kissing thing happened. A few times. But you won't even tell me what you're learning in class. You won't tell me the names of your new friends. I mean, seriously, Marvel Girl? Cyclops? You don't actually call each other these things, do you?

I get that people are supposed to get to be anonymous or not have their identities revealed or whatever, but you know I wouldn't tell anybody, and you know that I think the whole mutant thing is totally fine.

It's not just that I don't see you anymore, it's that you don't talk to me. And I don't even know when I'm going to see you again. You wouldn't even be at that stupid school if it weren't for me, and now you're acting like I don't matter. I don't matter, but you still get to tell me what I can and can't do.

I was going to say you remind me of my dad, but that's too mean and I know it. I still feel that way a little bit, though. You were ignoring me until you had a reason to be angry. If I'd known that's all it took, I would have pissed you off a while ago.

I miss you.

Tony
April, 1984: Meredith

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Meredith,

Look, you can go to a public library, right? One with a photocopier?

Can I ask you a favor?

Photocopy random pages from the following books, would you?

The Scarlet Letter
To Kill A Mockingbird
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Hamlet
Romeo and Juliet
Fahrenheit 451
Slaughterhouse-5
Wuthering Heights
1984
The Catcher in the Rye

Especially if you can find a really racy bit or really, like, a part with a lot of murder, can you photocopy those? I can pay you back for the copies.

I know this is a weird request. I'll explain later.

Thanks for the letters. It's really nice of you to spend all this time writing to me. I'm sure you have a ton of friends of your own and lots of other things to do, and I know exactly how long it takes to write a letter.

I don't know. I don't think your dad sounds like my dad. He sounds kind of harsh, yeah, but...it sounds like you talk to him a lot. He encouraged you to write that program, didn't he? My dad could care less. He just expects me to do it. I only get disappointed lectures when I don't do what he wants; he never tells me he's proud of me for anything that I do well.

Also, he's a drunk. And he actually told me that he wouldn't drink as much if I wasn't around. So he's an asshole drunk.

My mom is okay, I guess. My mom spends a lot of time running her charity and going to parties to impress people so they'll give her money. I know that sounds really negative. It's not. I am really proud of my mom for all the really good things she does for other people's kids. It's just that it sometimes feels like she spends more time taking care of other people's kids than she does taking care of me.

Shit, I keep writing you these long letters where all I do is whine. I need to cut that out. Do you have any plans for the summer? Are you going on vacation with your mom again? I always wanted to go to camp, but Howard wouldn't allow it. I guess I'm probably just going to work for my dad, so I'll be on Long Island for the summer. We should do stuff. A lot of stuff, since I apparently don't have any other friends. You should come over to the house, we have a really nice pool.

Tony
April, 1984: Meredith

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Meredith,

Thanks for looking into it. Look, I kind of got in trouble for having those photocopies, so I'm giving this letter to my friend Susie to give to you.

So your photocopies, when I got them, were all cut up and had words whited out, and so did your letter. I'm pretty sure that at the end of To Kill a Mockingbird, Atticus says Bob Ewell falls on his knife, because we read that in ninth grade. Not just "Bob Ewell fell."

Here's a dollar for the photocopies, anyway. I got called in to speak with Vice Principal O'Brien and he made me watch this shitty video about our duty to our school with a few other kids. Ty was there, too. He said he'd asked a question about something that didn't sound right in his History class.

They took away our access to the computer labs as punishment. And they confiscated both of our AIs. Do you have that copy I sent you for debugging? Can you mail it to Susie? She's cool, don't worry about her.

I still don't get what we did wrong.

Anyway, I've been told that I'm not allowed to write anything complaining about anything at school anymore, so, um. You'll be getting much cheerier letters. Keep an eye out, though. Read between the lines.

Tony
Steve,

This is going to sound really weird, but can you call my parents? They revoked my phone privileges at school and I suspect they never read anything I mail them. I mean, not in a malicious way, just in a they probably let it pile up in the corner way. I need one of them to call the school and get angry at somebody. School took away my computer access, my phone access, so all I can do is send letters. But they won't let me send any "inflammatory" letters, and they're checking my mail. I actually gave this one to Susie and she's mailing it for me.

Sorry so short. I'll tell you more when I'm not squeezing tiny letters onto a tiny scrap of paper.

Can you check the name of the Ministry of Love guy in 1984? I think something super fucked up is going on.

Tony
Ty,

Yes. I found one in my room, too. This is fucked up. I'll meet you after class.
Christian,

If you go back to the room, don't go anywhere near your stash. They installed a camera there.
Ty,

No. Phones aren't safe. I'm thinking we just head over to Susie's school and try to find her. That's how I got her to mail letters before.
Dear Sirs,

I apologize wholeheartedly for my transgression earlier this afternoon. My friends and I were taking a walk on the grounds and did not realize we'd gone off-campus until it was too late. Thank you for advising us, and we will endeavor to get permission to leave campus before making such a mistake in the future.

Sincerely,

Tony Stark
April, 1984: Meredith

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Meredith,

Sorry for alarming you. Disregard my last letter; I was overreacting, obviously. Everything is fine here. Don't worry-- there is nothing I require. School is actually going very well. All my classes are excellent and I am excelling in my courses without assistance. I thought it would be a good idea to contacte you and let you know that everything was all right.

I hope you are doing well and that school is going well for you. I haven't heard from howard in a while, but that is typical of my father. He tends to refrane from contacting me unless he's angry about some individual error that really isn't so big and then he will attempt to interfere with pretty much everything I do. It's pretty annoying.

Anyway, like I said, sorry for the alarm. I'll talk to you soon!

Tony
T--

I got a letter out to M. She's smart enough to figure it out.

In the meantime, remember the end of the book. They're going to try to divide us. You know what to say, right? Play it the way we talked about.

Here's H's prototype, and here are three pills from C. If you're stuck, these won't kill you, but they should make you really sick. We've got our own.

--T
April 1984: Dear Sirs

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Sirs,

I am afraid I cannot submit a written report against either Christian Frost or Tiberius Stone, as they have committed no infractions.

--Tony Stark
April, 1984: Dear Sirs

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Sirs,

I am aware that Tiberius Stone may have implicated me in a report suggesting my disloyalty to your fine institution. That being said, I have no interest in reporting any untoward behavior on his part. Thank you very much for your query.

--Tony Stark
April, 1984: Dear Sirs

Chapter by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), teaberryblue

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for your offer of lenience. Tiberius Stone is deathly afraid of bees. You can corroborate this with Christian Frost.

--Tony Stark
April, 1984: Dear Sirs

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for your invitation. I will report as requested to Room 101 at 1:30 PM.

Tony Stark.
April, 1984: T--

T--

Changing the rendezvous spot; this one's been compromised. I've got Tony. He's dictating for me, but he's a little messed up. If you get this, meet us at S's secret spot.

--M

PS God, you boys are dumb. And heavy.
May, 1984: Steve

Steve,

Hi there!

So, I'm Tony's secretary for the next little while. I don't know if he's told you about me, I'm kind of his other penpal. He sort of messed up his hands, but he's fine. He just can't really hold anything.

I'm hanging out with Tony at his parents' house for now-- this place is pretty massive! We live in a really big house, but it's nothing like this.

So, Tony's being a grouch because he can't do anything, but he says he'll write as soon as his hands are healed. His dad is kind of ignoring me because our dads kind of hate each other, but I'm trying to convince his mom to let him come to the public school here instead of spending all this money on freaky Orwellian boarding school.

So, the doctors say 4-6 weeks? You'll hear from him then. In the meantime, he says he's going to try to go visit Warren for a couple of days.

Good to kind of meet you!

Meredith McCall
Ty, 

Hey, this is Mere writing for Tony. Are you okay? Tony knows you didn't cock things up this time; they really got to Christian, something about his sisters. I mean, Christian's fine, too, we talked to him on the phone and he's really upset and really freaked out and really sorry about the whole thing, but he got out okay.

Look, we tried calling you, but your dad said he didn't want you and Tony talking anymore. Is this, like, a permanent thing? He knows this wasn't Tony's fault, right?

So anyway, yeah, sorry this isn't coupons for free game tokens at Nathan's. We just figured your dad would give you that, because who's going to deny their kid free video games? I mean, Howard might, but normal parents wouldn't. (And oh, my god, don't tell Tony I said this, but have you met Howard? The man is intense. I'm starting to get it now.)

Mere
May, 1984: Warren

Warren,

I had a nice time, thanks. I guess it's nice to see you're making friends, although after the stuff I told you about, the Danger Room seems a little too creepy for me. Sorry about that.

Thanks for the birthday cake and stuff. I'm sorry you won't be able to come here for my actual birthday. Call me, will you?

I miss you already. My hands really hurt and I'm not supposed to be writing yet but I wanted to send you a thank you. Say hi to Bobby and Scott and Jean and Hank for me. Tell them I had a great time. And oh, hey, tell Hank if he wants to trade letters, I totally will once my hands are better.

You're the best, always.

Tony.
Hey, Mere,

So I remembered I used to write to this blind kid-- and I should probably write to him again-- by recording letters on tape. Yeah. Here you go.

My birthday's gonna be weird. No Ty, no Warren. You can still come to dinner with me and my mom, right? Howard's going to be gone on a conference, so it's just going to be us. I don't really want to celebrate but I guess I should let my mom take me out if she wants to.

I mean, fourteen's not a really important year, right?

My hands are driving me crazy. Going to the doctor tomorrow and I guess I'll find out how long they have to stay like this.

I know you want me to talk about what happened. I'm sort of...I don't really want to. Every time I try, my hands start to hurt again. But everybody keeps asking me, Howard keeps asking, and he doesn't ever bother to ask about anything anymore. Maybe when I can write it down, so I don't have to look in people's faces.

Tony
Hey,

So, sorry it's been a while. I got distracted by some stuff. But I hurt my hands and I can't write, so I got out the old tape recorder and was making tapes for this girl I know and that's been pretty fun so I thought I'd write to you.

How's school going? You're a senior this year, too, right? Any ideas what you're doing for college? Still into pre-law? It sounds like I'm probably going to be at MIT. I haven't really looked anywhere else, and a few places have sent me these scholarship offers, and I just want to ask them if they're joking and tell them to give the scholarships to poor kids who actually need them. My family has a lot of money-- it just doesn't seem fair to give them to me.

I know I'm really smart and they want me at their schools, but seriously, you would think they would realize a kid with money to burn is probably looking for a different incentive. I'm really looking for an advisor who will let me work on really cool stuff. I think one of the professors I met at MIT is the right choice for that.

Anyway. I might actually be staying home for school this year. Go to public school and work for my dad. My friend Meredith goes to the public school here in town and she really likes it, so that might be fun. Let me know if you want to hang out, maybe. I could come into the city sometime.

Oh. And my name's Tony, by the way. We never did actually get around to exchanging names, did we? I figure now that we're way older and you're not Steve's student, it's probably fine, right?

Tony
May, 1984: Steve

Steve,

Hey, it's Meredith again. I keep telling him he should write to you anyway, and he finally agreed, so I'm taking dictation again.

He says he's fine, but his hands are still messed up (He's not fine, and his hands are still messed up for another couple of weeks.)

He says he misses being able to build things. (He got irrationally upset when Sunset and I were talking about the rockets we built last week.)

He says thank you for the birthday present; he loves it. (He hasn't opened it.)

I think that's all for now. He says he doesn't really have much to say about what happened at school (he won't talk to anyone about it). But he says he'll write soon and I'll kick him if he doesn't.

Meredith (and Tony)

So.

Thanks for letting me work in robotics this summer even though I fuc--er, messed up last year. I promise you nothing like that is gonna happen again; I am pretty much at zero patience with surprise adventures right now.

Okay, Dad. I know you're really busy, but please don't turn this off. It's pretty important.

Mere keeps telling me I should talk about what happened at school. And you keep asking, and, look, not to be an asshole or anything, but you're never interested in my life so it's just making me feel kind of...I dunno. I don't know what to think about it, Howard, okay? And there's a chance you're asking because you're suspicious or want to find someone to blame, or want to pick it apart and tell me why it's my fault, why I didn't do well enough, why I deserved to have this happen to me. And I hate to say I'm kind of expecting it's that, and if that's what you want to do, hell, just turn the tape off. Don't bother. But just in case there is actually a tiny chance you give a shit about what happens to me, I guess I should at least try this.

Okay. Are you still with me? Then good.

So stuff was getting weird, right? All the books in the library were getting censored, the ones we read in class...and we started getting punished for really, really weird transgressions. And if we fought, the punishments got worse. They started censoring our speech, there were words we weren't allowed to say, and I don't mean swears and things. Words like punishment. Escape. We couldn't even say "fire escape."

They started censoring our mail, taking away put phone privileges, and the punishments got worse. They cut our access to the computer lab, anything we could use to give us the upper hand. Searched our rooms. I lucked out, because my room is way at the end of the hall, and Christian's already super good at hiding stuff, we got a few things hidden away. They found some contraband, but not all of it.

Then kids started showing up at lunch looking-- really freaky, okay? With black eyes, or really pale, or-- one kid showed up with his hair gone, shaved completely off.

It was just one or two kids a day, but it was totally the troublemakers. So I decided to see if I could track them.

And I figured out they were taking kids to this room. Well, not taking them. Telling them to meet them there for a skills assessment test. They called it Room 101.

Okay, so, Howard, look, I have no clue if you even read fiction, right, because that would require ever paying attention to anything but your work and considering how much time you have for me and Mom, no offense, I somehow doubt you have time for George Orwell, and even if you did, I think you'd call science fiction a crock of shit, especially dystopic science fiction, but anyway. We read Orwell in school. And Room 101 is this thing, right? It's this thing where they interrogate you and threaten you with your greatest fears.

So that's what they were doing.
Kind of fucked, right?

Okay, my hands are itching like crazy. I'm gonna stop this and I'll record you more later. Actually, why don't I just give you this tape and if you actually get to the end of it, I'll tell you the rest. Plan?

See you at dinner.
Hey. Um. Hi. So. I realized I could record things, so let me try doing that.

I miss you. I tried to call but they said you were all on a school trip. Life is stupid. Stupid stupid stupid I miss you.

So I told Howard. Well, I'm in the middle of telling Howard. I sort of started making him a tape and then I got scared, because, what if he gets pissed off, or doesn't even listen?

I think not listening would be worse, right? If he gets pissed off, at least he cares. Mom is always trying to convince me that if Howard's angry, it's only because things matter so much to him, but ugh.

But if he listens I have to tell him the rest and that might be worse.

Warren, this probably sounds dumb but without you here, I kind of feel like I don't know what to do. It's harder to make decisions by myself. Ty's really good at planning things, but I don't always know if I can't trust him. And he always seems to-- I don't know. He gets surprised when I get upset because he just does things for himself.

Mere is great, you'd really like her, I think, but she's-- I feel like I'm-- I don't know. You always listened to me. She's got this habit of doing what she wants, even if I tell her not to. She could have gotten herself killed, breaking into the school like that, and when I said so, she just laughed. I was really angry at her, and all she did was laugh. And then packed up her backpack and told me she'd see me tomorrow.

I guess that's girls.

So. I miss being able to talk things over with you. You're good at that kind of thing. I know you're busy, but if you can call when your trip is over-- can you? Thanks.

Okay. I'm going to go see if Mere wants to go to the beach. I'll talk to you later, I guess. Bye.
June, 1984: So I didn't really think you were going to listen to that and ummm… [Recorded on Audiocassette]

So I didn't really think you were going to listen to that and ummm…

Okay.

Okay.

I said I would do this, so okay.

Room 101.

We knew what happened in the book, in the book, the main character ends up going into Room 101 and they threaten him with rats, and he gives up his girlfriend. And the next time he sees her, she's got cuts on her and stuff.

His girlfriend's a pretty cool character. She really hates the government and is out to change things, and convinces him that it's the right thing to do.

Right. Uh. Okay, that's not what I'm here to talk about.

So we sat around and came up with a plan. We knew we were all going in there. We thought they were going to take Christian first, then me, then Ty. We came up with fake fears that we could supply if they asked us what the other guys were afraid of. And we planned it pretty well; we pretended to hold out at first and didn't admit anything right away.

Everybody at school knows that Ty and I are kind of-- well, sometimes we're friends, and sometimes we're not. We knew that people would expect him to spill first. So we used that. He told them I was afraid of falling and that Christian was afraid of drowning-- Chris is a really good swimmer, and I have my wings, so we were all set.

So they started pushing me and Christian to tell them what Ty was scared of. They told me he'd ratted me out, and I told them I didn't care. They kept threatening and cajoling and trying to bribe and blackmail, and then finally I gave up my answer: that Ty is terrified of bees.

So we were all set. I don't know if you know about this, but I've been working on this thing with my friend Henry who's going to MIT next year-- oh. This is part of why I'm really set on going to MIT. Henry's brilliant, and he's into the kind of science I've always been really bad at, the natural stuff, like, plants and animals and micro-micro-micro things. And our friend Sunset's also going there, and she's great at robotics stuff, too, but her application's totally different from mine, and I love the idea of getting to work with people like that, and I just-- okay. Um. Henry. He and I have been doing this thing with bees. We built this prototype little robot together that-it's really simple, not really anything to brag about or anything, so I didn't really think about showing it to you, I guess, because you wouldn't have liked it, but anyway, we have this friend in Ohio who does chemistry stuff, and the robot puts together the chemical compounds to mimic pheromones to communicate with bees. The idea is for beekeepers to be able to keep bees calm and friendly when they need to harvest honey and things like that, but it also has the ability to mimic the pheromones that make bees attack, which is something they only do when they're afraid. It's the thing we used at the science fair last year with those AIM people.

And I told Meredith to get in touch with you. I don't know what happened; I told her to get in touch
with you and not try to do anything herself, but I guess she decided to do things her own way.

So I gave that to Ty.

But then they changed the order of our interviews without telling us. And they pulled Ty in first.

They started asking questions, Ty refused to answer, they released bees in the room, Ty pushed a button, and the bees attacked everybody but him.

Ty got out.

But then they knew we had a plan, and then they got Christian.

Okay. Sorry. Give me a minute, I need to drink something, my throat is getting really scratchy.

So Christian gets nervous a lot. And when he gets nervous, he takes these pills to calm himself down. And, uh, drinks, sorry, there's no way to tell this story without saying that Christian does some really dumb stuff because he gets nervous and drinks.

He says he didn't tell them anything, but I think he messed up. And they sort of figured out…I don't know what they figured out, because he doesn't even remember half of what he said, but…

Okay. Christian has all these pills, right? So we figured out that if we took the right combination, they would make us really sick, too sick to help them. Which is what happens in the book, right? There's this group that give pills to people who are in jail and waiting to be sent to Room 101. Only those pills kill you, so you don't betray anybody. Ours just made us really sick, I promise we wouldn't have taken anything that would have killed us. So Christian took his, and started puking like crazy, and they couldn't get any more out of him, and he got out okay, I guess, if being woozy and covered in vomit is okay.

Um. Okay. So…we didn't see each other. We'd been planning on meeting off-campus as soon as we got away. I just knew I had to meet them as soon as I got out; I didn't even know we'd gone in a different order.

So I got in.

And they handed me a paper bag and told me to open it.

I had no idea what to expect. I mean, it was just a plain old brown paper bag, right?

I opened the bag.

And then these things crawled out. They were…I don't know. Like these buggy crabby things that were made out of metal and they clamped onto my fingers and wouldn't let go, and they started--like, eating at my skin, making tiny skittle slices with their-- I dunno what you would call them? Teeth? Teeth. I guess. I tried to shake them off, and then--

A bunch of things happened at once.

The window smashed. Someone dressed in black, like a cat burglar, came crashing into the room.

I heard a crack. I simultaneously realized the crack came from one of my finger bones AND felt the worst pain I've ever felt-- like, searing, numbing pain.

The men in the room all turned to the intruder, who--
Okay. I need to go back a little bit again. For the science fair this year, I made a bunch of little portable weapons that we could sneak in, in case there was a problem like last year. We never used them, but I gave them out to a bunch of kids, just in case. They were, you know, simple atomizers with stuff that would burn people's eyes, things like that.

The intruder was using them.

One of them grabbed the intruder's face mask and tried to tug it off, and she-- oh. Well I didn't quite realize it was a she, yet, but she shoved her fist at him, and her glove-- well, it was pretty much a taser, but she built it herself, you need to see it, we'll show it to you sometime, I guess. So she did that, but she lost her mask about the same time she set off a smoke bomb, and all I could see was a blonde ponytail swinging in the fog, and I realized it was Mere.

This was all really, like, a few seconds. Not that long. I know telling it makes it sound longer than it is, but those things-- they *crunched* down on my fingers, and all I could feel was *agony*, and then everything went white.

And I guess then the next thing I remember, Mere was half-carrying me through the woods behind the school.

So that's what happened. And I…okay. Howard. I know I fucked up. I really fucked up. I should have been better-prepared, and I didn't think on my feet, but the minute those things got on my hands, I just…

I don't know how they did that.

Okay. Um. I guess I'm just going to turn this off now before I say anything else stupid.
Dear Steve,

Sorry it's taken me so long to write. I know Mere told you, but my hands got pretty smashed up for a while. I have to do physical therapy stuff which is a pain in the ass, but it's better than the alternative, right?

It's a really long story, and I don't feel like telling it again, so I made a copy of the tapes that I made for Howard.

Howard's actually been pretty great about this. I'm probably going to need more surgeries on my hands to get them back to fully-functioning order, but Howard is talking to some orthopedic surgeons and testing a bunch of metal alloys in case they decide to replace any of the bones. He says he knows some people who've done some stuff with replacing bones with metal. It still kind of creeps me out, but I guess you can't break a finger if it's made of titanium.

I get to work in the robotics division this summer. I'm not going to get to build anything, at least not till my hands are fixed up better, but they're at least going to let me watch and ask questions. It's probably going to drive me nuts, but I feel like I should lay low for the summer.

My mom agreed to let me go to the public school here in Old Westbury for my senior year-- it's where Mere goes, so I'll have a friend there. I'll miss Ty and Christian, but Ty's at least going to be going to a school in the city, and he'll be close.

Mere's excellent. She just left for genetics camp (did you know they even have genetics camp? I wish I'd known that was a thing), so she's gone for the summer, but it's going to be pretty great going to school with her next year.

How are things? I know I missed a lot.

Tony
June, 1984: Warren

Warren,

Hey. The things are off my hands, so I can finally write again. They're really stiff, though.

They sent SHIELD agents to the school, and I guess no one was able to find anything wrong. I told them to check the books. The books were all uncensored. I told them how to get to Room 101. They couldn't find a room on that corridor.

None of the other kids, except for me, Ty, and Christian, remember anything. The school is saying the three of us were drinking and I got into an accident in the shop and came up with a crazy story to explain it away because we knew we'd get expelled if we were caught drinking again. They were able to produce Christian's pills.

The next time I visit, I'd kind of like to see if I can get permission to try your Danger Room. It can't be worse than Room 101, right? At least the effects aren't real.

How are you? Your last couple letters have been really short. Is everything okay?

Tony
Mere,

Hey, how's camp? I know you haven't been there long enough to really have anything but first impressions, but I expect to live vicariously through you all summer, haha.

You'd think my parents would send me to camp, wouldn't you? All either of them ever wants is to get me out of their hair. But now? Now they're hovering and it's driving me crazy. Howard has been dragging me to work-- which is fun, it's great, but he keeps asking how I'm doing, like the answer's going to change every half hour. Mom keeps having dinner with me. I asked her the other night why she wasn't going out and she said something about how there was nowhere else she would rather be, and I told her she was a liar, and she looked stricken, like she hasn't spent the part fourteen years ignoring me.

I went to my room without dinner. Good to just do it before she tells me to.

Howard's not drinking, which good, I guess. But he keeps trying to apologize to me. Something about defects of character and removing them, or some bullshit like that.

He bought me a bunch of comic books, like I still even read those stupid things.

Sorry. I'm angry, I guess. I'll shut up about my parents now.

Tell me about camp. Are they letting you, like, splice genes and things, or is it all baby stuff like Punnett squares? Are the other kids there cool?

Hope you're having fun. Don't forget to write. It seems like everybody else does.

--Tony
June, 1984: Mere

Mere,

Yeah, two more surgeries and they think I'll be okay.

Hey!

I started replying to you and I realized that you wrote to me before you could have possibly gotten my letter considering the speed of the US Postal Service.

So that was nice, thanks.

I'm sorry. I hope camp gets better. I really hate being treated like a baby; what do you mean, they won't even let you centrifuge shit by yourself?

Yeah, I don't know what to say because I want to wait for your reply first! It's like we crossed the postal service!

Working for Howard seems pretty all right so far. Since I can't do a lot of manual work right now, he's actually got me critiquing designs. He says one thing I need to do is learn to be objective enough to apply that same criticism to my own work. He says my enthusiasm is great but that I overlook things because I get too excited, that I have to be more critical before I let my pride get to my head. I think I get what he's saying, but it's definitely easier to point out the problems in other people's work.

I'm thinking maybe when you get back from camp, maybe you could come over here (I'm actually at work right now) sometimes, and use the lab. Then we could hang out and work together. Are you going to do the science fair this year? I sort of feel like it's my white whale at this point; I have to win before I graduate, right? Since we're actually coming from the same school, maybe we could work on something together.

Jeez, I'm going to need help with this navigating school when you get back. I got this sheet in the mail to pick my electives, and you guys don't even have computer science. Keyboarding? Is this seriously a class just in how to use a keyboard? Who would take that?

I do think video production looks like a cool idea, and I'm obviously going to keep taking French. What foreign language do you take? Are you still taking one? It also looks like New York State law requires me to take either art or music before I graduate, and I'm so bad at both. Do you think I can do an independent study? Which one are you taking?

Okay, I have to get back to work! Lunchtime is over! Write soon!

Tony
July, 1984: W-- [unsent]

W—

Please don’t
July, 1984: W-- [unsent]

W--

I’m sorry I hung up on you. I
July, 1984: Mere--

Mere,

Are there phones at camp? Can you call me? Tell them it’s an emergency if you have to. Make something up about my surgery or something.

Just so I don’t freak you out, it’s not that kind of emergency. I’m physically okay. My family is fine. I just really need to talk to somebody.

Tony
July, 1984: W--

W—

I guess I’m not surprised. It’s okay. Jean seemed like a cool girl, and you guys see each other every day, I guess. We’re still friends, right?

—T
July, 1984: Steve,

Steve,

So, Warren just dumped me. He called, he actually called, I keep asking him to call and he never does, and I was so excited to talk to him, and it turns out he just wanted to dump me.

I feel like an idiot because I should have expected it. You can’t date somebody you never see. I shouldn’t feel this bad about it, right?

He likes a girl at his school and I guess he thinks he has a shot with her, so he wanted to, I guess, he said “officially” break up, like we’d already broken up in his head and he hadn’t bothered to tell me about it. So he could ask her out with a clear conscience.

The thing is, listening to him, I feel like I must have made a mistake. He just seemed so normal about it, like he thought this should all be clear to me, and I know Warren. He doesn’t hurt people if he can help it. He’d really try not to hurt me. I think. It just sounded like he thought he’d been obvious about how things were going when I don’t think he was, I really don’t think he was. It’s like he didn’t even think we were dating anymore.

I can’t talk to anyone here about it. I asked Mere to call me if she’s allowed to, but I had to write to her to ask her, so I won’t hear from her for probably almost a week. If it were a girl, I could probably talk to my mom or Howard about it, maybe, because they keep saying I can talk to them about things, but they’re not going to understand this.

So I got Jarvis to buy the new issue of Captain America. I thought it would make me feel better, but it didn’t. It was awful, it was so full of death and grief and exactly the opposite of what I wanted to read. I don’t know if you have any idea what is happening in the comic these days, but it starts out with Steve blaming himself for Dave being in a coma, and then Baron Zemo tricks him into hurting Arnie, and I think Arnie might be dead, and it’s going to be Steve’s fault if he is, and I just don’t think I want to read it. Steve’s had so many shitty things happen to him, I don’t see why people have to keep piling more shit on his head. I guess he has Jack fighting with him now, but I don’t know, the way the comics are going, Jack’s probably going to die, or Bernie’s going to die, or everyone’s going to die. It’s miserable.

I just want to read a story where something good happens, you know?

Anyway, I guess it’s okay. I barely talk to Warren anymore. At least now I don’t have to worry about why he’s not writing. And I’ll have more time to work for my dad.

I can’t wait for the summer to be over. At least then I’ll be in school, and maybe I can make some new friends.

I probably sound like almost as big a downer as that stupid comic right now. Sorry. Thanks for listening.

—Tony

Chapter End Notes
Tony is reading his universe's version of *this comic*. 
Okay, I get it, I know you feel bad, but can you stop calling? I don't want to sound like a dick about it but I don't want to talk to you about your stupid new girlfriend, can you give me like a couple weeks?

T
July, 1984: M--

M--

Sorry about that last letter. Everything's fine, I guess. You don't need to call.

I got the letter you sent, I guess before I asked you to call. I didn't know you painted; you're going to have to show me some of your stuff when you get back. I guess it's too bad, though, if you're in the advanced class, and I'm going to be having to take Level One painting or whatever it's called. This is ridiculous. I can model things just fine on the computer; I don't need to do it with a pencil. It's so much neater to just feed in some coordinates. You know it'll always come out exactly right every time.

That's interesting about the gene splicing. I've been thinking a lot about the X gene. If it's just a bit of DNA, theoretically it could be inserted into a non-mutated strand, right? I know they only let you work on little tiny bacterial organisms and stuff at camp, but would it be theoretically possible to do the same thing to a bigger animal? I also wonder how it works, since the variations in how it exhibits seem pretty much infinite. It doesn't just give everyone the same trait. Does that mean that "X Gene" is a misnomer and it's actually a series of mutations to the human genome? I guess this is more Bruce's or Hank's line of work than mine.

I found that gum wrapper chain you made me back when I was convalescing and I realized it was supposed to be a bracelet, so I've got it on. I'm going to have to take it off for this last stupid surgery but it's a good reminder to take those pills when my fingers start cramping and stuff.

I don't know if you heard about that robot accident out in, I think, Michigan, but my dad's been asked to speak to some people about it and I think I might tag along to this conference with him. I have some thoughts about it. I'm gonna ask him if I can go, at least. I kind of need to go to something.

So if I'm not as fast as I've been replying, it's just temporary. Anyway, you shouldn't be writing so much; you should be doing camp stuff! I counted: your last letter was twenty-two hundred words. That takes hours to write, and you only have a few weeks at camp. If we're going to the same school, we're going to see each other every day, so you should spend time hanging out with your camp friends. And I should be letting my dumb hands recover.

Okay. Okay, I'll write in like a week maybe?

--T

Chapter End Notes

Harry Allen died in an accident at Diecast Corp, in Michigan, on July 21, 1984, and is often reported as the first US robot-related death in history.
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That’s interesting about the gene splicing. I’ve been thinking a lot about the X gene. If it’s just a bit of DNA, theoretically it could be inserted into a non-mutated strand, right? I know they only let you work on little tiny bacterial organisms and stuff at camp, but would it be theoretically possible to do the same thing to a bigger animal? I also wonder how it works, since the variations in how it exhibits seem pretty much infinite. It doesn’t just give everyone the same trait. Does that mean that "X Gene" is a misnomer and it’s actually a series of mutations to the human genome? I guess this is more Bruce’s or Hank’s line of work than mine.

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I might not be about to write back to you for a little while. Howard asked if I wanted to go with him to a conference, and I said yes, so I’ll be gone for a few days. I don’t really know what there is for me to do there, but he said it’s never too early to start learning to network. Anyway, your last letter was almost 2200 words long, and I know exactly how long that takes to write, and you’re only at camp for a few weeks, so you shouldn’t be wasting so much time writing to me; you should be doing stuff you can only do at camp.

Okay. Okay, I'll write in like a week maybe? I'm not going to stop writing completely. Just, you know, slower. Have fun at camp and I’ll write when I get back.

--T
W--

Thanks for calling back. I'm sorry I hung up, I'm really sorry I hung up the first time. I mean, I guess you can ignore the last letter, because I can't fish it out of the mail. I know I jumped to conclusions and it doesn't matter if it was sort of the right conclusion, because I didn't let you finish talking.

Is it okay for me to say I don't know? Because I don't. And I feel like you deserve a straight answer, but there isn't one.

I know it's got to be great and all to finally be around people like you, but you act like it's the first place you've ever belonged, and you never had to prove yourself to me. It feels like shit to be left behind, and even more like shit to hear you talk about your new friends like I don't count anymore. Don't be mad at me. I know it's shitty to hear, but it's also true.

I know we have totally different lives now. If I had somewhere I wanted to be as much as you want to be at school, I'd probably ditch everything else, too. I'd take all the reasons I couldn't have to put up with Howard's sanctimonious bullshit. So I get it, but it doesn't mean I like it.

I really had no idea you thought that was what was going on. I would have told you if it was, so, yeah, I'm pretty pissed you thought I wouldn't say anything.

I guess I have some things to think about. I'm going to a conference with Howard. I'll let you know when I get back.

—T
July, 1984: Steve,

Steve,

Warren called me back.

He said I'm in love with Mere, and I've been in love with her for months, and I'd never do anything about it because I'm not good with things changing and I'm too scared of losing people.

I got mad, but I didn't hang up this time. He said all I did when I went to visit was talk about her. And I said, well, duh, because she's my best friend.

And then I realized what I said as soon as it came out of my mouth, but Warren got really quiet.

I didn't even think about it, it was like a reflex.

But he's supposed to be my best friend, or he was, and now he's not anymore, and we both know it.

And now I don't know what to say to him, and I don't know what to say to Mere either, because the ludicrous part of it all is that I think he's right.

You know he barely writes me, and Mere writes me almost every single day, even if she's got nothing to write back to, and she's only gone for a few weeks.

It's not like it's the first time. Harold stopped writing because he's just not good at it, Pepper got mad and stopped writing. Ty doesn't really write; he just passes notes at school. Christian's baby sister writes more than he does. I didn't think Warren of all people would stop. I don't know what I thought would happen, but it wasn't this. I think I figured the excitement with school would wear off, and maybe it still will, but it hasn't yet.

I get upset every time he talks about school, and I keep insisting it's because I miss him, but I know it's because I'm jealous. I've spent my whole life having people tell me I'm special and all it ever seems to cause is problems. But Warren’s got wings, so suddenly people want to make things better for him, even though no one ever thought he was different, he never had problems talking to people or making friends. My life is awful, but somehow I'm not special enough.

Howard is taking me to a conference. It's an emergency thing; some guy in Michigan died in a robot accident. I guess the robot was cleaning a room and this guy went into the room, but the robot hadn't been built with protocols to tell it what to do if someone was there. The robot kept on cleaning, and the guy was crushed to death. So now a bunch of companies that build robots are getting together to talk about safety procedures and stuff, and Howard said I could come along to talk to people about AI.

I feel really bad. For the robot, I mean. It’s not its fault somebody wrote it a shitty program. I know it’s not a person, or even a pet, for that matter, but it reminds me of when people want to put down a dog because it bites a kid. It’s not the dog’s fault nobody trained it right. So the robot was just doing its job the only way it knew how. It’s not the robot’s fault no one taught it to stop if there was a person in the room.

And what kind of idiot builds a robot that way, anyway?

I probably won’t get to write till after the conference. I’ll tell you how it goes.
Тону
Hi.

Sorry I haven't been around. I know you're back from camp, and JARVIS said you've stopped by the house a few times, but I haven't really felt up to talking to anybody. I just thought I should probably write and make sure you know that I'm not avoiding you.

Well, I'm not avoiding you specifically.

The truth is

Anyway, I'm sorry if I've been rude. I'm back from that robot conference, which was pretty okay. Howard was on pretty okay behavior for once, but he spent a lot of time introducing me to people and then quizzing me on them later. Not just the usual "what was their name and position" type stuff but information, and he never told me what to look for first.

I did better the more I practiced. Remembering isn't the hard part; figuring out what Howard might want to know about them is.

Anyway, it's interesting to listen to people talk about robots. They sort of fall into two groups: people who think of them as machines, and people who consider the possibility that they could be more. Most of them were talking about creating the types of safety precautions that would prevent workplace accidents, but the more they talk, the more it gets me thinking that to have what they want is getting awfully close to creating true intelligence. You can have a safety shutdown procedure, equip a robot with all kinds of sensors, and people toss around the term 'human error' a lot, that that's what robots improve upon but robotic error is just as real, and it's more swift and uncompromising, made with calculations instead of intuition. And of course those calculations are only programmed to do as much as their human engineers can foresee. If you want a machine to make the right call every time, the only way to do that is to approximate human intuition, right?

Not that we all have the best intuition. A lot of us are wrong a lot of the time.

I got off on a tangent. My dad, I guess, was chatting with this guy Jim, who I guess is an old friend of his or something, and it sounds like Jim's going to do some research for SI. But get this: he's also going to tutor me in physics.

The closer we get to school starting, the less Howard seems into this whole "public school" plan. I'm a little worried that he's going to decide the curriculum is sub par (not that that ever bothered him about that fucking creepy boarding school) and pull me out at the last minute and have me homeschooled by the R&D team. So I made a deal with Jim: he'll tutor me on the stuff they're not covering in my physics class, and in exchange, I'll babysit for him. Howard seems okay with it since something about building character.

So that's going to be pretty interesting. I don't really spend any time around kids, besides Christian's sisters sometimes. Wanna help me babysit?

Anyway, I guess come over or call me if you want to hang out. I'm at the lab three days a week, but I'm free Tuesday and Friday.

Tony
August, 1984: Steve,

Steve,

I haven't talked to Warren or Mere in like a month. It sucks and it's stupid but I'm still mad at Warren and now every time I think about talking to Mere I start to feel sick.

I sent her a letter though. Also stupid, since it took longer to write than walking to her house even would take, but I wouldn't know what to do if I saw her right now.

I hope you enjoyed your summer. Howard always makes a big deal about how only kids think that way, that grownups have to work through the summer, you know, blah blah whatever. Is that really how it is? Obviously I know you work, but it still seems like there's the beach and the heat and the long days and does it still feel different to you?

This summer was lonely, I guess, and it's maybe the first time since I was a kid (okay, yes, fourteen is still a kid to you, but you get the picture) where the summer just seemed to stretch on like time to fill until I could go back to school. And I'm scared. Mere's going to be there, obviously, but it's a whole other group of people I'm going to have to prove myself to, kids who've known each other their whole lives and have no reason to make a new friend senior year, especially one who's so much younger than them. Why waste the time when we're all leaving in a year?

And I don't know; Mere probably hates me for not talking to her. You can't explain that you stopped talking to someone because you're afraid you accidentally fell in love with them and you're going to fuck it up.

And of course there's the teachers, who have always been the biggest problem. For every teacher who lets me skip math class to work on my own projects because the curriculum isn't prepared for kids who learned calculus when we were seven, there's a teacher who accuses me of being a smartass on purpose and spends the whole school year trying to prove they're smarter than me. And you can't tell them that it's okay that they're not as smart as their students, because those kinds of teachers take it as a personal offense. Which is usually around the time I do actually start being a smartass on purpose, and that only adds fuel to the fire. Of course.

I'm going to try really hard not to be a smartass this year. That's my personal challenge. I feel like I should be able to make it through at least the first quarter.

I read this month’s Captain America. I found it disappointing; I think I’m gonna write a fan letter. I was expecting it to be about one thing, but it was about something different.

How are you? How’s Maureen?

Tony
Editors,

Hi. I’ve been reading Captain America for about five years now so in some ways I feel like I grew up with him. Even when everything pretty much sucks in my life, he’s around, and it’s nice to be able to get my comic every month and count on that being there for me.

I just read this month’s issue, though, and I was kind of disappointed. The story inside the comic didn’t live up to the cover at all. From the cover, I thought it was going to be a story about Steve aging and dealing with the consequences of getting old very suddenly, but only one panel inside the actual book reflected the premise proposed by the cover.

I would really like it if you would explore that idea more. The idea of someone who has always been young suddenly growing old sounded really cool and started making me think about it from a medical perspective, like, ideas about delaying aging and the stress of aging on the human body and all kinds of things. Biology isn’t really my strong suit but I sometimes wonder about how robotics might be employed in medicine.

Anyway, I don’t want to send a comment that’s just all complaining. I like the Sisters of Sin a lot. Thematically, the idea that they each have a specialty that’s built into their character design is pretty cool. I also liked Steve’s attempt to reason with the Mother Superior.

But I also am getting a little bored with people being kidnapped and Steve blaming himself for them getting hurt. There have got to be cooler things for superheroes to do than to rescue kidnapped friends. Especially Captain America. Shouldn’t he be, like, battling things that deal with modern day political issues? I hope he goes back to doing that soon, instead of whole dinner theaters full of Arnie robots.

I do like Jack and Steve as a team, though.

Tony Stark

End Notes

This is really my first foray into this fandom, but also my first try at writing a longer fic. I’ve been betaing and brainstorming (so, alphaing, really) rainproof’s awesome story Two's A Crowd since before she started writing it, and it kind of dragged me in. I’m attempting to write my Tony as if it could plausibly be the same Tony the she's writing as an adult. I didn't know what I was getting into, I swear. I'd just like to say thanks to everyone who's been so kind and welcoming and supportive and excited to read.

Looking for something else to read in the same vein? I’ve got that! Set in the present day, a series of letters written between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers: 1796 Broadway. I swap places and write for Steve, while rainproof writes Tony.

If you want to read the letter that started it all, it's here, although it's much more written for humor value as a gift to a friend.
Works inspired by this one: **Dear Captain America Solutions** by geniusbillionaireplaygirlphilanthropist (teaberryblue), **Scribbling** by Roodles, **Kissed by an Angel** by quandong_crumble, **Dear Captain America-1984- The decisions I could have taken...** by CatChan

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