### Black Eye, Bleeding Heart

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**Summary**

Steve learns the hard way that things aren't always what they seem.

**Notes**

Trigger Warning: Domestic violence is a minor theme in this story.
Steve clambered into the kitchen, his legs automatically carrying him toward the freshly brewed pot of liquid salvation. Once he poured him a cup, he braced one hand on the counter and breathed in the stimulating aroma – the familiar scent was one thing that hadn't changed much in 70 years.

He had a sneaking suspicion that Tony had picked this brand with Steve's particular preferences in mind. Pepper had told him once that the beans were a special blend imported from somewhere overseas, but he couldn’t recall from which country the coffee had originated - if he had to guess, he’d say somewhere in Europe. He did know with an aching certainty that the flavor was familiar and brought back certain memories, reminding him of the quiet mornings he had shared with Bucky before death had pulled him into an endless whirlwind of white.

A quiet gasp jerked him out of the dark turn his thoughts had abruptly taken. Steve startled so badly that he almost dropped the cup cradled in his hand. He whirled around and met the equally surprised eyes of Pepper Potts. She was slumped at the mahogany table, her elbows resting on its smooth surface.

Her light azure eyes were wide and red-rimmed, and her cheeks were stained with tears. However, the most alarming detail among her pale and crumbling features was the bruise blooming around her left eye. Her strawberry-blonde hair swept easily over the purple contusion, but Steve could easily imagine how far the injury extended.

As Steve continued to study her, Pepper broke eye contact and hung her head.

“God, stop looking at me like that. I'm not some damsel in distress, Steve,” she mumbled, her voice soft and controlled.

A wave of protective anger washed over Steve, and he struggled to keep the overwhelming emotion from seeping into his voice. He set the coffee cup on the counter harder than he intended. The scalding liquid splashed against his knuckles, but he barely noticed. “Did Tony hit you?”

“No,” she answered curtly. Her clipped and defensive tone immediately had Steve questioning the truthfulness of her response. “It was an accident.”

“Pepper...” Steve started, crouching at her side and resting a comforting hand on her shoulder. She flinched slightly.

“How dare he,” Steve managed through clenched teeth. He stood and strode quickly through the
common room, heading straight for the elevator.

“Steve, wait! You don't understand. He didn’t...” Pepper's shouts were cut off as he entered the lift and the doors slid closed.

“JARVIS, I need to talk to Tony. Where is he?”

“Sir is in his and Madam's suite, but...”

“Thanks, J. Take me there.”

“Captain, there's something you must know,” Jarvis responded hesitantly.

“Do not make excuses for him. Take me there now.”

“As you wish, Captain. But I must remind you that I have defensive measures in place to protect Sir from anyone who poses as a threat. Proceed with caution.”

“Noted,” Steve hissed. “Perhaps you should consider developing a protocol to protect Pepper from Sir.”

“Captain...”

“Jarvis, either take me there quietly or let me out so I can take the stairs.” The elevator began an agonizingly slow ascent and Steve sighed impatiently. Once he arrived on the appropriate floor, he stormed out of the doors, arriving at his destination in less than 30 seconds.

He hovered at the threshold of the bedroom, searching desperately for Tony – no, not Tony. He was no longer Tony – his best friend and fellow Avenger. In his mind, the eccentric and selfless genius had been wiped from existence and replaced by an arrogant billionaire and abusive boyfriend. Had all those redeeming qualities been an act?

The sound of retching interrupted his internal debate and fueled his rising anger. Steve tensed – a
sudden realization washing over him. *He was drunk. He had to be.*

Steve paused at the bathroom door and turned the knob. It was locked.

He pounded on the wood and the heaving stopped. Harsh breathing and soft muttering filled the silence.

“Stark, open up! I need to talk to you,” he growled. He almost fell forward as Tony wrenched the door open. The billionaire caught him by the shoulders and leaned heavily on the door frame to maintain his balance. Steve jerked away from his touch and Tony slid toward the floor, kneeling and swaying in place.

Tony gripped his chest, and his chin dipped, causing his sweaty locks to shield his brown eyes. He was pale and the air hitched in his lungs as he struggled to breathe evenly. *Panic attack,* Steve thought absently but immediately dismissed it as unimportant.

“Pepper... I thought... she was okay. Is she okay?” he choked out.

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” Steve snapped.

Tony flinched and crumpled, landing ungracefully on his behind. A sob slipped past his lips and a shiver racked his body. “I deserved that.”

“Damn right...” Steve began, but was cut off by Tony's AI. “Actually, Sir, you didn't. Captain, if you would just let me explain...”

Steve looked up sharply. “Explain what, Jarvis? That Tony is an abusive alcoholic who hit the woman he claims to love? There is nothing to explain – the evidence is right in front of me.” He glared at Tony's hunched form. “I thought you were a better person than my father – than Howard – but you're not. You're just like them.”

“But I didn't... I wasn't... I didn't mean to,” Tony whispered, curling his knees against his chest and resting his head between them.

“That's what they always say, and it's a lie every time.”
“That. Is. Enough,” Pepper Potts shouted from behind Steve. He spun around and one wide blue eye was introduced to Pepper's white-knuckled fist. The force of Pepper's punch caused the super soldier to stumble back in surprise.

“Tony would never hurt me, you arrogant prick. He had a nightmare and one of his arms flailed and happened to hit me.”

“But you were crying...”

“I was upset because Tony locked himself in the bathroom and refused to let me in. After a while, I decided to give him some space.” Her voice cracked slightly on the last word, and she cleared her throat before continuing. “I couldn't just stand there and listen to him suffer, so I left. I wasn't really thinking about where I was going, and I ended up in the communal kitchen.”

“Oh,” Steve muttered, still reeling from the unexpected altercation.

Pepper ignored the super soldier, pushing past him and kneeling in front of Tony. The billionaire raised his head and immediately flinched. He lifted an arm, the movement slow and hesitant, and gently traced the purple flesh adorning her eye. Pepper stayed perfectly still, her eyes radiating compassion and trust as she watched him. She leaned forward until their foreheads touched, and Tony closed his eyes. Tears silently spilled down his cheeks, and his composure completely shattered.

“God, Pep. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't keep doing this... to you... to us. I never thought... I can’t believe... Oh God, I hurt you. Are you okay? Jarvis, scan her again.”

“Tony, he's already thoroughly scanned the entire left side of my face. I'm fine. Nothing's broken. It's just a bruise.”

“Yeah, this time. Next time it could be so much worse.” Tony swallowed thickly. “I think I need help, Pepper. Professional help.”

“Sir, I've already compiled a list of local psychiatrists whom I have deemed as highly qualified. Each of the professionals I have researched offer state-of-the-art treatment for PTSD and all of them guarantee anonymity.”
The billionaire smiled softly. “Always one step ahead of me, aren’t you, J? Thanks, buddy.”

“You’re welcome, Sir,” Jarvis replied. If Steve wasn’t mistaken, the AI sounded almost fond.

Tony stood slowly, leaning on Pepper for support. Steve stumbled out of the way, slinking backwards until his back hit the wall adjacent to the door.

Steve watched the couple shuffle toward the sink. Pepper squeezed Tony's hand and reluctantly let go as he turned on the tap. She passed him a washcloth, and he dampened it with hot water. The billionaire inhaled deeply and folded the soft material before gently pressing it against his eyes.

Steve frowned. Most people just splashed cold water on their face to help refresh themselves. Suddenly, understanding flashed across his face. He mentally face-palmed. Tony was water-boarded in Afghanistan. Of course he would have an aversion toward cold water. Steve wasn’t too fond of the cold himself. A tremble shook his sturdy frame, and he closed his eyes.

When Steve opened his eyes, Tony was peering at him through the mirror. He almost gasped at the level of understanding in Tony’s unwavering gaze. “Cap, stop it with the guilty puppy dog face. I know you’re sorry. You were scared for Pepper. I get that. I know how hard it is to trust people because of what you and your mom went through.”

Steve smiled gratefully at him and Tony simply shrugged in response, a soft smile gracing his face. The super soldier wiped at his eyes as he tried to reign in his emotions.

“Oh, boys. I hate to interrupt, but I think Steve's face broke my hand,” Pepper muttered wryly.

“Shit, Pepper, I'm sorry,” Steve managed hoarsely.

She waved away his apology – a hint of steel glinting in her blue eyes. He immediately knew that she wouldn’t be forgiving his earlier behavior as easily as Tony had. And he was thankful for that. He deserved every ounce of hostility she would undoubtedly keep throwing his way.

“I can get Bruce to patch me up. No big deal.” Pepper's eyes locked with Steve’s, the azure orbs blazing with fiery determination. “It was worth it. Next time I’ll just have to remember to use one
of Tony’s gauntlets.” She turned innocent eyes toward Tony. “You don’t mind if I borrow the armor sometime, do you sweetie?”

Tony giggled, and Steve’s heart flipped at the sound. “You should see your face, Cap. I’ve never seen you look so scared, and we fought aliens together.”

Pepper smirked triumphantly, and Steve wondered how he had ever thought that this woman would allow anyone to push her around.

End Notes

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