

Chasing Dreams

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Chasing Dreams

by [flyingorfalling](#)

Summary

She knew who he was. She knew he was born to a rich family; his father owning the biggest record company in the country, his mother a world renowned opera singer until she damaged the myelin sheath to her vocal chords and the doctors told her that she would never get her voice back. She knew he was a few years older than her, majoring in piano studies, and had slept with half the girls from her singing class, maybe even all of them.

She had never spoken a word with him, but she knew he liked to talk about himself, and only about himself. He was a “me-first,” self-centered guy that she wanted nothing to do with. Little did she know that her first real conversation with Tony Stark would lead to meeting new friends, falling in love and discovering herself.

Notes

This is basically a college meets band AU. I've been flirting with the idea of writing college!Pepperony for months now and then I ended up creating this verse where they're both trying to make it in the world of music. It'll probably come off as a bit cliché sometimes, but I already got most of the plot outlined on paper and I have some ideas to make it interesting. Hopefully I manage to stay true to their MCU characters.

My knowledge of college life is based on the internet, television and talking to my American buddies, so bear with me if anything doesn't add up. This is mainly written from Pepper's point of view, but that'll change as the story progresses. Let me know if this is something you'd like to see me continue. Also, if anyone wants to be my beta for this, please say so :')

This Conversation Is Over

College was expensive and, despite her best efforts, Virginia Potts needed more money. Shortly after the start of her first semester, she decided to wait tables at The Black Panther, a pub and live venue where local bands got a chance to make a name for themselves during open mic night. The place was always upbeat, packed with young adults eating and drinking, dancing and having a great time. She had to bust her ass all night long, but it meant tips were great too, and that was what she depended on. If the audience was drunk enough, she made more in one night than she did an entire weekend.

“Show enough cleavage and you’ll have them eating out of the palm of your hand,” Edward Jarvis, the club’s owner and manager, had told her on her first day of work. “Just make sure that’s all they’re eating out of.” And even though she didn’t like to become an object of male desire—there was a crucial difference between the virtue of admiration and incessant drooling—she managed to find an outfit that didn’t have ‘slutty’ written all over it. She knew there was a subtle scent of sex in this business hence the tight hip-huggers and the cotton shirt with a couple of buttons open at the top, and she had learned to deal with it just like every other girl around here.

At 19, Virginia was allowed to serve alcohol in the state of New York, just not old enough to drink yet. But that really wasn’t her concern, because she wasn’t much of a heavy drinker anyway. Sometimes she worked at the bar, carrying a big chrome opener which she stuck in the back pocket of her tight hot pants. She noticed guys staring at her ass even more then. When she called them out on it, all they usually did was to give her a lopsided grin and the lame excuse that they were just staring at the thing in her pocket, thinking about ordering another beer. But there were also people who made her feel warm and welcome; people she could talk to if she wanted. She had gathered some good tips from her regulars over the last few months just because she had sat down with them and listened to their problems.

Admittedly, there were other things she could do that would pay for college, jobs that didn’t have this kind of heated atmosphere, but she liked her co-workers, had her wages raised twice during the year she’d been there and she loved getting to listen to free music. This place was all about music, and music was her passion. She could handle guys her age, some of them a lot older, drooling over her, if it meant she could learn a thing or two about performing for a crowd and meet other artists—people she already knew and people wanting to become the next rising star.

Growing up with a huge love for rock and country, Virginia Potts realized early on that music wasn’t just a passion, but a dream—a dream to be a musician. Her dream. She wanted to be a performing artist, to get up on stage and play her guitar while she sang her heart out to a big crowd of people. By the time she began the final semester of her senior year, a scholarship to an excellent college seemed within reach. Fast-forward to today, where she was studying at NYU Steinhardt, majoring in classical voice and opera studies.

One of her greatest idols was the famous opera singer Maria Stark, who she had seen live on stage for the first time at the age of four. She had been spellbound. Even though she sat in the

nosebleed seats, she had been filled with the music and the magic of the performance. While she had figured out over the years that opera wasn't the career path she wanted to pursue, she wasn't completely ruling out the idea that she could end up on Broadway doing musicals. She clearly did have a thing for theatrical performances; there was no denying it. Maria Stark was also part of the reason why she had chosen music business as her minor in college.

Because of what had happened to Maria—her singing was brought to a sudden end by the severe damage to her vocal chords— Virginia considered the possibility that the same thing could happen to her. That she could lose her voice to an illness some day and may not be able to sing anymore. She wanted to be an artist more than anything, it was all she'd ever wanted, but she didn't want to see her house of cards collapse because she had staked everything on that one card. She wanted to know how the business worked so she could join forces with other artists and maybe even set up her own record label should the worst case scenario happen.

She had thought long and hard about it and she was glad to have made that decision, because she really enjoyed learning about the business side of music. It wasn't easy, not as easy as singing at least, but she had always loved things where she needed to use her brain, like math and science. It made her believe that even if she would never lose her ability to sing, there was a future for her in music business. And she was certainly warming up to the idea of becoming a business woman someday. It was exciting and challenging.

Virginia wasn't the kind to share much of her personal life with her co-workers—the only exception was Natasha because she was her best friend—but she always sat down with them after the last shift of the night when The Black Panther was closed and the crowds had left. And then she usually stayed a few more minutes after everyone else was gone and cleaned up the place, because she liked the calm after the storm. It gave her time to think and be alone. She didn't quite get along with her roommate, and whoever lived above them apparently loved to tap dance at 3 a.m. every night.

She was still waiting for the opportunity to switch rooms. Until then, there was nothing to be done but exercise patience. Thank God she had a lot of that. She never seemed to run out of patience for people's antics, which helped her with her job, too. Maybe that was why Mister Jarvis was so fond of her, treated her almost like a daughter. She kept a cool head when things got rough, or spun completely out of control, and helped him deal with difficult customers as well as financial and business matters. They had a mutual, respectful relationship.

By one o'clock, she was restocking the coolers and draining the wash sinks, totaling out the bar's register and clearing tables. She sang to herself, like she always did—words of a Stevie Nicks' song that was stuck in her head—when she heard something. Turning to look, her eyes searched every corner of the pub. She saw a young man, standing close to the restrooms, wearing a cheeky smile on his face. Trapped in her gaze, he walked over to the bar and poured himself a drink. He sat down on a stool, his back to the bar, knees pointing to the open space, and smirked at her.

Her expression unsure, she scanned the smooth lines of his profile, and then finally realized who she was looking at. She just didn't know how to react. She had the authority to kick him

out, but she didn't want to cause a scene, though he probably would like that. Because judging by his inflated reputation, he loved all kinds of unnecessary drama. Maria Stark's son was the prime example of a grown man with the personality of a child. She had heard so many stories about him, she felt like she knew him personally. Most of her friends thought Tony Stark was the one who made college life entertaining for everyone on campus, she just thought he was extremely childish and annoying. All the more reason to avoid him.

"Do sit down," he invited.

"We're closed," she replied, as she approached him. She stepped behind the counter, getting the alcohol out of his reach, and he turned around and gave her a big, stupid grin. "But of course you already know that." She rolled her eyes and snorted. He laughed.

"What's your name?" he asked, taking a sip.

"None of your business."

"That's a rather odd name, dear," Tony answered. "Your tag says Virginia."

"So *now* you can read, huh?" She made him laugh again. She really hated that. He wasn't supposed to be enjoying himself. He was supposed to leave.

"I like your hair. It's so—"

"Red?"

"I was gonna say nice, but yes, it's definitely on fire. Does it reflect your personality?" He reached out to grab a strand of her hair, but she quickly backed away from him. She couldn't tell if he was drunk or just really rude, the way he invaded her personal space like that. "Cosmopolitan said, if you have red hair it usually means you're fun-loving, hate to be bored and have a good sense of humor." Things that all applied to her, but she wouldn't tell him that. "I think it suits you... the hair. And I like the freckles. They're cute."

"God, what do you want, Tony?" She flipped her hair away from her face. He guessed it was so he could see her rolling her eyes better.

"You know my name," he noted with delight.

"Everyone knows your name," she groaned.

"I guess that's true." He emptied his drink. "Is that why you didn't card me just now? Because you know I'm old enough to drink?"

Of course she knew he was legally allowed to drink. He was 21, and performed at The Black Panther with his band every week, sometimes on more nights than one. She had seen him play a game of chess in the manager's office with Mister Jarvis occasionally, knew they had a close relationship. It made her wonder how Edward Jarvis, who was great friends with her, could also be friends with someone like Tony Stark. But it seemed everyone loved him. And the people who didn't she had found to be just as annoying as him. Only some of her friends shared the same opinion as her.

In all honesty, though, she didn't like to be thinking about him that way. She hated to judge someone simply by the things she had heard and seen him do—this was the first time they were having an actual conversation. But with him, it was like he was deliberately trying to live up to his reputation, so should she even feel bad that she was judging a book by its cover?

“What do you *want*?” Virginia repeated her question with emphasis.

“Talk,” he answered, “I just wanna talk.”

“Well, I don’t,” she snapped at him.

“Man, we’re a bit stuck up, aren’t we?” Tony said with a chuckle. “When I saw you, I actually thought you were a nice person, Virginia... Vee... Ginny?” He arched one eyebrow at her in a silent demand for her to provide him with the right nickname.

“Virginia is fine,” she said callously.

She took the glass from the counter, properly cleaning it, and put it back with the others. Then she wiped the counter, washed the cloth, rung it out and folded it. She held it in both hands as if unsure what to do with it.

“I take it you don’t like me much,” he guessed, as he eyed her up and down.

He had seen her around many times before, but had never even bothered to talk to her. Now he understood why. She gave off vibes. Interesting maybe, but arrogant. Definitely the kind of vibe that she was somehow better than the rest, better than he was, and he usually avoided those kind of people.

“I don’t even *know* you.” She cast a downward glance and placed the washcloth over the faucet spout.

“Well, you see... You don’t *have* to know me to hate me,” he quipped.

She let out a harsh groan. “Amen to that.” When she looked up, his eyes were elsewhere. He stole a look at her breasts, the tops of which could be seen in her low-cut shirt, licking his lips. “Are you serious right now?” Her eyebrows rose in obvious disgust.

“What? You didn’t seem to mind when everyone else was looking.”

“Get out,” she almost yelled at him.

Virginia stared him down. He stared back. Then Tony got up from the bar stool and adjusted his worn leather jacket, which had a washed-out AC/DC logo on the back. He wore dark blue jeans and a black T-shirt that fit well over his toned upper body. He looked absolutely gorgeous, and she really hated to admit that.

“Tell Jarvis to call me about that gig.”

“Tell him yourself.”

“Wow!” He made a disparaging gesture with his hand. “Does it hurt to have a stick so far up your ass? Because I can pull it out, if it does.”

“Leave,” she said sternly. “Or I’ll make you.”

“No need... I’m going.” He turned and sought out his guitar case, found it standing next to the jukebox, and went over there to pick it up. But before disappearing into the night through the exit door, he looked at her one last time. “Maybe you should try being a little nicer every now and then. People like that, you know.”

“If you stop acting like an asshole, maybe I will,” she countered.

Tony laughed as he stepped outside. If only that girl would be as lovely as her singing voice. She was hot. Super hot. And the way she held her broad shoulders so proudly was incredibly sexy. She could have been a fashion model with her tall, slender figure. Her long legs were beautifully shaped, lightly muscled, teasingly displayed in those hot pants. Her body looked toned and glowing with health. He couldn’t help thinking about those lips, too. Those soft lips, raspberry pink and shiny, inviting. He wasn’t very fond of her personality, although he did have a thing for her feistiness and her big mouth and may even like that about her. But her voice... Her voice was beautiful, and he couldn’t deny how it had made him feel when he’d heard her sing.

A Song For You

Chapter Notes

This college fic is definitely a challenge, but it's fun and I don't wanna stop. Got so much exciting stuff planned for the next chapters. Let me know which other MCU characters you'd like to make an appearance, if there are any. I have so many ideas, but there's always room for more.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, how many times does Kyle have to ask you out until you say yes?” Natasha asked, taking a slurp of her strawberry smoothie. “He's really cute.”

“I don't know,” Virginia answered, shrugging her shoulders.

They were sitting on the front lawn under a large birch tree, taking their lunch break. Virginia had a bowl mixed with lentils, brown rice, roasted tomatoes and butternut squash with a lemon-tahini dressing; Natasha was eating a chicken wrap.

“I know you had your heart broken, V...” She leaned back against the tree trunk, gazing down the lawn at the other students. “But you need to learn how to trust someone again, eventually.”

“It's not that easy, okay?” Virginia insisted, sipping her smoothie through the straw. “And besides... my happiness doesn't depend on someone else—”

“Why's Tony Stark staring at you?”

“What?”

“Tony Stark.” Natasha nodded her head in the direction of a group of young man, the person in question holding a girl in his arms. “Why is he staring at you?”

Virginia turned her head. “He's not,” she said. Yet he was, kind of. “Well, we had...”

“Oh my God, is that why you don't wanna go out with Kyle?”

“What? No!” She shuddered at the thought. “We had a fight at the club last night and I threw him out. I don't even like Tony Stark. You know that.”

Natasha arched an eyebrow at her and Virginia shook her head, slightly annoyed by her friend's behavior. She dug into her bowl as if she had not eaten in days, simply enjoying the explosion of flavor happening inside her mouth. Natasha grinned and took another bite of her food, both of them not saying anything while they ate.

Virginia watched as Tony interacted with his pals, laughing at their jokes—she was sure he laughed most at his own—and sticking his tongue down his girlfriend’s throat occasionally. Although in the proper meaning of the word, Tony Stark didn’t have girlfriends. He had *girls*. Boys, too, if she were to believe the rumors, and most rumors she’d heard about him had turned out to be true.

He had dated a very good friend of hers once. They had been together almost a month, which was probably the longest relationship Tony Stark ever had. But once it started to become serious, he dumped her. Well, after he had cheated on her. That’s when Virginia really developed a strong aversion to him. Her friends meant everything to her.

“Kyle asked me to go with him to Steve’s party next week. I told him I’d think about it,” she said, as she grabbed the napkin from her lap. She blotted her lips with it and then wiped her hands on the napkin and stuffed it back in the paper sack. She put the empty bowl away, wadding up the bag, and looked at Natasha, waiting for her response.

Noticing Virginia’s raised eyebrow, Natasha chuckled. “What?”

“We *are* going to that party, right?”

“It depends... Will you throw up on me again?” Natasha quipped.

“Only if it sucks as much as the last one, “ she guffawed, loud enough to draw people’s attention—his, too. She could see Tony staring at her again with that familiar, stupid smirk on his lips and she quickly turned her face away. He was annoying, even when he didn’t say anything. “Kyle’s not the only who asked me, by the way, Bruce did, too.” She nodded in the boys’ direction.

“Bruce Banner asked you out?” Natasha couldn’t help but laugh. “I didn’t know you’re friends with someone from Tony Stark’s posse. That’s wild!”

“Ugh, we’re not friends,” Virginia slurped up the last of her smoothie and put it aside. “I’ve never even talked to him. But he came up to me a few days ago, asking if I wanted to go with him. It took him, like, ten minutes to even form a sentence, because he was so uncomfortable. I think it was just a dare... I don’t know. It was super awkward.”

She wasn’t a guy’s magnet, at least not in the Tony Stark kind of way. Her looks and her confidence—if she had to guess her aloofness, too—and the fact that she didn’t take shit from anyone, attracted people’s attention. She realized that, knew that if she was looking to have some fun, she certainly had options. But there were also those who clearly didn’t like her, and if she looked at the people they *did* like, she understood why.

Strong and independent women with high self-esteem weren’t everyone’s cup of tea obviously. She was loved; she might even be hated—not that she’d give a damn, though, because she didn’t surround herself with negativity. Sometimes she liked the attention, most times she didn’t. It distracted her from the one thing that was really important: To focus on her studies and never lose sight of her dream.

And while she couldn't change the fact that she got hit on a lot, nor did she want to, she never really showed any interest. It wasn't because she had had her heart broken and it was closed off for good—it had been almost a year now, so she was finally opening herself up again to let love in. She just didn't think any of those men had real intentions with her. And right now, *she* had no intention to fuck around, literally.

Kyle seemed like he did. He seemed like he meant all the sweet things he always said to her, and really wanted them to become, like, a serious thing, but Virginia didn't trust him either; at least not enough to let her walls down just yet. She still needed time, used music as a coping mechanism.

She was so popular with her professor because of the affecting way she could put her own emotions into her singing. And the heartache and the bitterness that surrounded Virginia's broken heart had filled her brown leather journal with deep-felt words, lyrics of songs she would probably never sing. There was a wealth of material written in it, about everything she had ever experienced in life, the good *and* the bad stuff.

Her journal was like a key to her soul. It contained her darkest secrets and her wildest dreams. And that was why she would never allow *anyone* to read it. She would have to open up some day, she wanted to, but until then, she felt lucky that she could put out her emotions musically. Sometimes, she listened to the very song that put her feelings into words perfectly and instantly felt better. Music was more than a passion or a dream. It helped her heal.

“Well, I dare you to say yes!”

“To going out with Bruce?” The expression on Virginia's face was a mixture of confusion and surprise.

“No, are you crazy?” Natasha laughed. “We don't socialize with Stark's people.” She grabbed her friend's iPhone and held it out to her. “I meant with Kyle, dumbo... Text him,” Natasha said, smirking. “I dare you to.”

“Alright, fine,” Virginia gave in, taking the phone into her hands. “But I'm making you responsible for everything bad that happens.” She sent a message to Kyle, told him to meet her at the entrance to her dormitory at seven next Friday. A response came right away. “I can't believe I'm letting myself be talked into this,” she mumbled.

“Did he send a heart emoji?” Natasha couldn't help but grin stupidly at the redhead.

“Nope. I only got a smile.”

“Disappointed?”

“Shut up!” Virginia got up from the lawn, grabbed her things and the trash and looked at her friend.

“Are you mad now?”

“No, I'm not mad,” she said with a chuckle. “I'm just annoyed.”

“By me?”

“You can be a real pain in the ass sometimes, Natasha, you know that? That’s one thing you and that guy over there have in common.”

“Tony Stark is a real pain in the ass *all* the time, though.” Both women laughed. “He’s still looking at you, by the way.”

“I don’t know what his problem is,” she snorted angrily. “Can’t he go back to *not* bothering me? Like, I was fine with him staying out of my life and now he’s—“

“Moving.”

“What?”

“He’s coming over here.”

“Oh, we are so going!” Virginia rolled her eyes as she started pulling on Natasha’s arm. “Get up and take your stuff. C’mon, quick. We gotta leave.”

Natasha laughed at her friend’s behavior, although she too wasn’t very keen on talking to Tony Stark. She didn’t like the look on his face. It was the same smug look he’d had on that pretty mug of his ever since she’d first laid eyes on him. Hurrying, she grabbed her bag and her jacket and followed Virginia to the main building. They heard him call after them—a simple ‘hey.’

Natasha peered over her shoulder. “What does he want?” she wondered, shooting a glance at the man in question. He was grinning at her, waving one hand like an idiot.

“I didn’t wanna wait to find out. It’s bad enough we’re on Tony Stark’s radar now.”

“I think *you* are on his radar. Tell me, how did that happen again?”

“I don’t know?” She uttered a sigh of frustration for she wished she could take back whatever she had done to attract his attention. “I was just cleaning up and singing to myself like I always do.”

“And you weren’t trying to lure him?” Natasha chuckled, and then went on talking as she noticed the confused look on her friend’s face. “Well, you know... Like a siren. Lure him to destruction by the sweetness of your song.”

Virginia laughed at the thought. “If only my voice had that much power.”

“Your voice can do a lot to people, V... Their emotions... Maybe your little performance last night warmed that guy’s cold heart.”

“Tony Stark doesn’t have a heart, Nat,” she callously joked.

Practice rooms lined the music building's two upper floors. But the rooms on the second floor facing the dorms were the best, with picture windows and enough space for a grand piano. It was rare to find one empty. The rooms Virginia usually had to settle for were the closet-size cubicles on the third floor, which had only space for an upright piano and a few chairs or a small couch. There was no window except on the door and the smell was most offensive. While she was proud to have worked her way into these rooms, she hoped that her talent was enough to get her out again, and carry her beyond the practice room and onto the stage.

An acoustic guitar strapped upside down against her back, she hurried down the hall and peered through one of the windows into a room. It appeared to be unoccupied and that almost made her raise her hands up in the air and cheer, because she had been searching for an empty practice room for what felt like hours. It was essential that she spend every minute working on her vocal performance. She needed the credit points and couldn't afford to suck at this assignment. Twelve percent wasn't enough. She had to give it her all. Failure wasn't an option. It never was.

Virginia shut the door and closed the venetian blinds, blocking out the outside world. Switching the lights on, she lowered her oversized tote bag to the floor and reached toward the guitar case on her back. As she dropped it on the couch to her left, she nearly jumped at the sound of a loud groan and froze for a second. She turned to the side, and when she spotted him, lying there with his arms and legs stretched out on the couch, she had to fight the urge to grab the tote sack and throw that at him, too.

She rolled her eyes back in her head, then with a sigh of exasperation, irritation, and downright annoyance, she ducked down and rummaged through her bag.

"What are you doing?" Tony asked, sitting up.

"I'm looking for a spark of decency to give you... seeing that you don't have any." He laughed out loud, gaily. He probably thought this was funny. "What do you want from me?" she asked as she pulled out her spiral-bound notepad that contained the chords and lyrics of the song she was working on. She dropped it on the table and looked at him.

"Nothing," he said with a chuckle.

"Then go! I need to practice. And, apparently, *you* just need to—"

"What was that earlier, hm? Why'd you run away from me?"

"I didn't. I was late for class."

"Yeah, right..." Tony smirked. "You know what? This place is way too comfortable right now and I don't have any more classes to attend, so I think I'll just stay here until I hear you sing."

"I'm not gonna sing for you," she retorted sharply.

"Then *I'm*... not going." He lay back down on the couch, one arm hanging loose and relaxed over his torso, the other flung lazily behind his head. His hair fell gently across his face and that smirk on his lips slowly grew into a grin, as he added, "Your call, honey."

“Did you just...?” She tried to ignore the word of endearment he’d used to address her—no, *provoke* her—and grabbed the case to pull her guitar out. She couldn’t bear to look at his smug, demanding, overprivileged face. “Fine,” she scoffed, pulling the strap over her head. “You want me to sing? Well, I know *just* the right song for you.” Virginia positioned herself in front of him and started strumming the first chords of a song she had written at the age of fourteen. She hummed, and then soon she sang, casting him a defiant glare.

Tony watched her as she was playing, his eyes sweeping over her features, taking it all in. Every time she opened her mouth to sing another verse, her voice came out perfectly. And that passive aggressive song she was performing—he assumed it was an original—made him grin even more. He had a feeling she hated that he was enjoying this. She was staring very hard at him, not blinking, with eyes that were narrowed to a slight slit. *Look around. There’s more people in the room, but of course it all revolves around you. Quit being such a dick*, she finished, and he dissolved into giggles, which only ended when she shot him another glare.

“Wow, high school was really fun, huh?” he noted, stretching his arms and feet.

“Believe me, this right here—,” she gestured between the two of them, “—is almost as bad as high school.” Letting the guitar strap catch the weight of her Seagull, Virginia crossed her arms over her shirt, which pushed her breasts up against the fabric. She noticed Tony’s eyes darting to her chest almost immediately. “Can you be serious for, like, *one* moment?”

“I can try,” he quipped, smirking, as he got up from the couch.

“You and I, we never...” She watched him as he took a few steps towards her, his hips swaying with every slow, measured step. “We never had anything to do with each other and I liked it that way...” She slowly stepped back. “Why are you suddenly so obsessed with me?”

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself,” he said, grinning. “I’m not obsessed. You have a great voice and I just like to hear you sing.” A chuckle escaped Tony’s throat, as she gave him a disdainful eye roll, which he had come to label as her signature move. “More than I like to hear you talk, actually,” he added amused.

She took a deep breath, then blew out through her nose like an angry bull. *Relax*, she told herself, as she looked at him. She knew he would love to see her lose it. “You know, you could just leave me alone,” she mumbled, “Do us both a favor.” She turned her back to him and flipped through the pages of her notepad until she found the right page, then cradled her guitar in her arms and began plucking at it idly.

“You really do need to work on your attitude,” Tony sneered in reply, thinking of last night. She was so fickle. “I was just making you a compliment.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Tony. I couldn’t have possibly hurt your feelings.” Her tone wasn’t polite. No, she was breathing fire at him, white teeth bared in a malicious grin when she faced him and an even more malicious glint in her eyes. “I mean, that’d require you to have any, right?”

“Ouch,” he let out, laughing off her mean accusation.

It did bother him, though—the way she just assumed that he didn't feel anything; that he was cold-hearted and lacked any real emotion. His own fault. He wanted people to think that about him. But, of course, she was wrong. Just like everyone else. He knew how it felt to be hurt. He only had to think of his father and the deep resentment Howard harbored toward him and that painful feeling of rejection crushed him like a building collapsing.

The man everyone believed to know was nothing like the person he really was. There was barely *anything* real about the persona he used. And sometimes Tony wished that someone would actually care enough about him to see beyond his sad exterior into his heart and soul; that he would find someone that he could trust completely so he could finally show himself to them. That kind of deep intimacy was the thing he desired most in the world, and the thing he was most afraid of.

Watching his face, Virginia saw the fractional changes of Tony's expression when that laugh had subsided, like he was thinking of something that made him feel uneasy. She had a talent for picking up on these things. Reading people usually wasn't hard for her. Reading Tony Stark, however, was a challenge. She had a feeling there was more to him than he let on, but the way he acted towards her was so irritating that she didn't care to learn the truth about him. If he wanted to be an ass, she wouldn't stop him. But she would stay as far away from him as possible. She didn't have time for whatever stupid game he was playing with her.

"Tony," she breathed his name on a sigh. "I really need to work on this song." She tried to be civil, to not sound as harsh as she had before. "Can you please go?"

"I got better things to do anyway," he said, a grin plastered across his face.

"You do now? Great!" she called out as if he had answered her prayers. "Bye!"

Tony shook his head at her brazen mannerisms and started walking. He was almost out the door when he turned back around. "That song you were playing before... Have you written anything else?"

"No," she lied.

He eyed her suspiciously. Her look was stern, her lips pressed tightly together. She seemed sincere, but he wasn't sure that was really the case. Maybe she was just a pretty good liar. "That's a shame, because you might really have it in you." He paused. "You know, to take all that anger and frustration, and all the shit that's going on in your life and turn it into a great song."

She forced away the unreasonably bitchy attitude that flared up at his comment. "My life's a) none of your business and b) perfect as it is... without *you* in it."

"I highly doubt that," he said, chuckling, as he closed the door.

Virginia couldn't help but grin wryly at this stupid boy, who was the epitome of the annoying, self-righteous smug type. It was the type of men she knew she should avoid. But there was something about him that whispered 'rebel' and 'independent,' and 'audacious'—qualities in

a man that attracted her. Something that just lit up the sexual fire in her heart to be naughty. Oh God, what was she thinking?

Chapter End Notes

The song she sings to him is [this one](#). I love the lyrics and thought it'd fit the occasion :D

I Don't Think I Can Love You

Chapter Notes

Writing this, I realized I spent an awful lotta time thinking about characters' backstories, even if it's a minor one like in this chapter. I hope it's not boring to you or anything :')

"I am completely outnumbered," Tony mumbled, looking at his black chess figures, slightly agitated at how he let his pawns, bishops and queen get taken away so quickly.

"That's because you *still* think this is about getting somewhere fast," Jarvis told him, laughing. "But this game is just like life. It's not about the decisions you make and how fast you make them. It's about the right timing. You need to think ahead, Tony. Act wisely, not quickly. Make sure you get to the finish line when the timing's right. That's when you'll win."

Tony looked up at him. "I'm quite—"

"Impulsive. Yeah, I know." Jarvis smirked. "That's why I thought this game would be good for you. It might teach you a little bit about slowing down and thinking things through."

"All these years and you still haven't given up on me." Tony laughed and reached to the side of the couch, grabbing the guitar leaning there.

"You don't wanna finish the game?"

"I lost, Jarvis," Tony answered while he began to play a melody. "What's there to finish?"

Jarvis smirked as he leaned back in his chair and watched the young man he had grown to love like his own son. Tony Stark certainly wasn't the easiest person to deal with, but he wouldn't change a single thing about him. He loved that boy just the way he was. It saddened him sometimes that he was apparently more of a father to him than Howard ever was, but at the same time it made Jarvis happy to know that they shared this deep connection.

"Listen, I'm really grateful we get to perform here anytime we want, but I was really hoping you could get us to play SummerStage."

"I said I'd try, but even if it works out, you won't go home with a pocket full of cash. It's not the kind of festival you get paid much."

"Oh, c'mon," Tony said, chuckling. "I'm not doing this for the cash. I have more money than I can count. I just wanna play. I want the—"

"Attention."

“Yeah, but not just for me, y’know? Banner, Quill, Christine... They all deserve more than playing in this dive bar every week. No offense.” He halted and ran his hands over the smooth body of the acoustic guitar, caressing it as he held it close to his body.

Things would have been a lot easier if he had a better relationship with his father. Stark Records, Inc. was the biggest record company in the country and it managed some of the world’s biggest-selling artists. Tony knew that if Howard had taken them under his wings, they would have had their very first major gig by now. But that just wasn’t how life had worked out for him.

Being one of Howard Stark’s artists would have meant being controlled by him and by whatever he considered to be right. But his father was never right about anything he needed. He never had been. And he had never understood that. Because if he had, Howard had long figured out that the thing Tony really needed most from him was to be loved. Just to be loved. But instead he was judged. In his father’s eyes, he was nothing more than condemned to failure.

So, Tony had chosen to become successful on his own very early on. He didn’t need his father. He didn’t need the numerous connections he had in the music business. He didn’t need his money. He didn’t need him to patronize him. And he certainly didn’t need to hear Howard make a disdainful comment every time he failed. He had broken with his father to become his own man. He was in control of his choices because he was in control of the sources of influence that determined them, and he wasn’t *going* to fail.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Jarvis told him, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Thanks.” Tony started strumming a quick tempo, thinking of what to sing while his fingers wandered the strings. Then he stopped again as if something had hit him. “Hey, do you know this girl that works here? The—the redhead?”

Jarvis put his coffee mug down on the table, a slight smile forming at his lips. “I gave her this job, son. Of course I know who she is.” His smile grew into a grin. “And here I was, beginning to wonder if there was something wrong with you.”

“What?” Tony’s head shot up and a look of surprise, then shock, crossed his eyes.

“She’s smart. She’s beautiful. She’s sweet... It was only a matter of time until she’d catch your attention.”

“Are you kidding?” Tony gave a soft laugh. “That girl is anything but sweet. She’s sweet to look at, I give you that, but when she opens her mouth, she’s downright unpleasant.”

“She’s feisty.”

“She’s arrogant.”

“She’s not—“ Jarvis had to laugh at Tony’s expression. He looked almost offended that there was someone out there who dared to stand up to him, a woman even. To Tony Stark, that must be considered blasphemy. It was hilarious. And Jarvis knew Tony would never be able

to let this go now. Let *her* go. “If you can’t stand her, why’d you ask about her?” Jarvis lips tipped up in a smirk.

Tony tried to ignore Jarvis’ teasing remarks and his looks. It was just stupid. “Where’s she coming from?” he asked, playing a few notes on his guitar to distract himself from the taunting he was sure wasn’t going to stop now. Jarvis loved teasing him more than anyone.

“Jersey.”

“No, I mean, does she have any famous parents or—or relatives?”

“You heard her sing, didn’t you?” Jarvis’ eyes lit up at once as he thought of the sound of Virginia’s voice—a voice quite like no other.

“What do you know about her?”

“Dad’s an artist,” Jarvis said. “That painting right behind you is from him actually. Great guy. Very talented, but struggling. Girl never talks about her mother. Got an uncle in the city, who runs a store in Chelsea. Don’t know much about him, but they seem to get along quite well.”

Picking at his guitar, Tony knitted his eyebrows in thoughtful silence, wondering if Virginia’s upbringing had anything to do with that slightly annoying attitude of hers.

“Please don’t break that girl’s heart, Tony,” Jarvis spoke in a tone half jest, half earnest.

Tony laughed, and looked at him, smirking. “You got it all wrong, pal. I don’t even like her. Would I have sex with her, though?” He ran his hand over his guitar appreciatively as if he was touching the smooth curves of a woman’s body. “You bet! I mean have you seen her legs?” Tony tapped the body of his guitar with his ring. The loud noise made his fatherly friend jump in his seat, almost spilling his coffee. “Damn, J! Who wouldn’t want those wrapped around his naked body while being balls deep inside her?”

“Me,” Jarvis muttered, screwing up his face. “*I* wouldn’t.”

She was like a daughter to him, and he didn’t want to be thinking of Virginia that way. It was gross.

Cackling, Tony strummed a chord and let it linger in the air. “You know, my mom really likes you.”

“Yeah, I don’t want your mother’s legs wrapped around my naked body either,” Jarvis responded. “We’re just great friends.”

“What *do* you want then, Jarvis?”

“I want you to find someone you can trust to love you... for *you*,” he answered sincerely. “For who you really are.”

Tony’s eyes darted up quickly, impulsed by tentativeness as he searched for words.

“You are worth so much more than you give yourself credit for, Tony. I just hope there’s someone special out there who makes you see that. And who makes you believe in love.”

When Jarvis smiled gently at him, Tony’s shoulders slumped in defeat and he sighed, turning his head away.

He feared love—loving someone and being loved in return. He feared it as much as he longed for it. Because he didn’t even know what love truly was. What had he ever known about it except that it hurt? His parent’s marriage had been over years before they decided to get a divorce, his father treating his mother with such a lack of respect and a great deal of shame that Tony questioned if they ever had been really in love. People around him cried more over their relationship struggles than they laughed tears of joy at the beauty of actually being in a relationship. Even the songs he performed with the band were more about the pain of losing love than the happiness of finding it.

About an hour before work, Pepper met up with one of her best friends. It had been a while since she’d last seen May. That woman was always busy, a bit of a workaholic, and she was also a mother, so there were days when she had to cancel their plans last minute.

Peter was fourteen now, a sweet kid with a big heart. May was going on thirty and had been raising her son all by herself, with a little help from her parents. Pepper didn’t know how she did it. Life as a single, working mom had to be tough, yet she never complained about anything. Ever. May Parker was a real hero.

When she was seventeen, May had started an internship at a gallery, and because of her impressive work ethics, soon got to head up a fashion photography program. She barely finished high school, never went to college, and was only about twenty years old when she opened her own space.

She started out mounting seasonal art exhibitions, running four months each, that mirrored the energy of whatever season it was, and that was the beginning of a surprisingly successful career. Sometimes she showcased pieces of art that she had painted herself, but she loved being a collector even more.

Getting out and about, seeing some art and getting involved in a workshop or arty activity had always been more fulfilling to her than to spend an afternoon sitting on the sofa—only because it allowed her to take Peter with her, though. He was the *one* thing she really did love more than art.

As an art dealer, May could directly impact the lives of artists working and practicing around the world. And she got a thrill from finding up-and-coming artists, and just having a hunch that they were going to make it big. But she also invested in artists who were already established, especially since it gave her some sort of stability, definite income. After all, she had a kid’s mouth to feed.

To find and identify artistic talent, May regularly attended shows, fairs and did online research. She did two or three studio visits every Friday during the gallery season, looking

for artists to represent and develop, to include in group shows, or recommend to others. Occasionally, she asked Virginia to tag along.

What Virginia loved about art was the power to change her mood. An inspiring, hopeful or light-hearted, maybe unusual, piece was a great mood-lifter. It was a source of encouragement, or simply a piece to make her smile when pressure was building up. And then art could also be soothing or powerful, a real source of calm and energy—kind of like the different sounds of music. And just the way Virginia put on a great song to lift her mood, she had come to understand, and appreciate, how hanging selected pieces in her home could truly impact her daily mood.

The two women connected. Virginia was happy to have someone to talk to who had nothing to do with the music business, and shared her love for art. May was different than Natasha. She was older, more mature—like the big sister Virginia never had, and Virginia truly adored her. And she loved Peter, loved how that boy could make her smile even when she didn't want to. It was May's son who had made her realize that she absolutely wanted kids of her own some day. She didn't know if she would be a great mother since she never really had a mom, but the happiness and joy Peter brought to May's life every day was something Virginia aspired to have in the future.

"Sometimes, I'm still wondering if I'm doing the right thing," she mumbled, staring down.

"What do you mean?"

Virginia circled the coffee mug with both hands, gripping tight while she tried to find the right words. "I don't know, May... Sometimes I just feel like talent is overrated and what you really need is someone with influence."

"And money?"

She nodded.

How easy did it have to be for someone like Tony Stark to become a big name in the music industry, with a father as powerful and rich as Howard? That boy already was a big name before he had even released his first record.

"You don't think you can do it?"

"I know I can sing... And perform. I know I have what it takes to make it out there, it's just scary to do it all alone. Maybe I should've put my main focus on business instead of—"

"Ginger... Babe... Do you love singing?"

Virginia looked at her friend, frowning. "Well, yes. More than anything."

"And do you love performing?"

"Uh, you mean apart from my stage fright? Yes, I do. You know I do. I love everything about it. It's my dream."

“Perfect,” May said, smiling. “Because, honey, when you do what you love, everything falls into place. I simply followed conversations I had with artists and the ideas that excited us the most, and my gallery grew out of that. And now there’s nothing more exciting to me than seeing an artist I fell in love with years ago, gracing the pages of a newspaper.”

Cupping her hands around Virginia’s, she stroked the back of them with her thumbs. “You know I take risks with this occupation I have, trusting my instincts and my eye, but it comes with a great reward.” May reached up, her fingers pushing a strand of Virginia’s hair back from her face. “And I feel the same way about you and your craft.” She paused. “You will do great things one day, I’m sure.”

Smiling, Virginia gave a soft sigh. “I love you,” she said quietly. “Thanks.”

“You can thank me with VIP tickets to your first sold-out tour,” May quipped, making Virginia laugh.

“You’re an idiot.”

“But you love that about me, right? So, tell me, baby... What else is new?”

“Met Tony Stark.”

“You what?”

“I swear it’s like he’s purposely following me around. Stalking me or something.” She stared at the creamy liquid, and then looked back up. “He talked to me while I was finishing work, then the next day he walked over to me, trying to make conversation, and *then* I found him sleeping in the practice room. He wanted me to sing a song for him.”

May laughed. “That really does sound like he’s obsessed.”

“That’s what *I* said.”

“And what did *he* say?” May grinned.

“That I have a great voice and he just loves to hear me sing.”

She remembered the other comment he made, about him liking her more when she sang than when she spoke, and she wanted to roll her eyes again at how obnoxious that was.

“Can’t say I blame him,” May replied. “I love that too.”

“He should leave me alone or just tell me what he wants, so he can stop annoying me and I can get on with my life.”

“Maybe he wants *you*.” The brunette bit down on her bottom lip, trying to contain a giggle.

“Please don’t say that,” Virginia groaned. “You’re like Natasha.”

Taking a sip from her coffee, May's eyes roamed over Virginia's flushed and angry face, thinking for a moment. She knew as much about Stark as anyone else who had come to know him from only a distance. Her opinion about him was based on mere speculation—assumptions and prejudices. She didn't know anything about who he really was. And maybe, just maybe, there was more to him than his silly reputation.

"If he were into you, would that be so bad?" she wondered.

"Yes, I hate him, remember?" Virginia raised her voice rather higher than she had intended.

"Hate is such a strong word." May had to grin. For someone who pretended not to care about that man, her friend was awfully concerned with whatever was going on with him.

"I don't like him. He's arrogant, and self-centered. He's a playboy and—"

"Very good-looking."

That he was. In fact, now that Virginia had seen him up close, she had to admit that Anthony Stark might even be the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on. Like all other men, Tony had his flaws, but he was sculptural in his beauty—art. And God knew she had a thing for that.

"I just wanna be left alone," she grunted and ran both hands through her hair, her nerves frayed by the last few days. Why did she let him get to her that way? He wasn't worth it. He wasn't even worth a thought, actually. "Do you think I can get a restraining order?" she joked. She shouldn't let him ruin her mood like that.

"Well, you know what they say about our country..." May said, laughing. "You can achieve anything you put your mind to in America, and I'm sure that does include getting a restraining order against Tony Stark."

Virginia smirked. "He really thinks the world revolves around him. Mine included. Said my life would be better with him in it... As if my world stops turning one day without Tony Stark."

"Oh, that's so sweet," May exclaimed with feigned excitement. "I bet *my* life would be better with him in it, too." Both women laughed. "Once that man has kids, his whole damn cosmos will change. Believe me." She smiled, thinking of Peter. "My boy's my world now. Every little thing revolves around him, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Virginia's smile reached her ears, as she thought of how it might be to feel that way about someone else—her own flesh and blood. Then her smile twisted into a smirk. "Maybe there's already a mini Stark running around somewhere without Tony knowing."

"That'd be scandalous," May said with a chuckle.

"I'm just saying... The way he's been sleeping around, I wouldn't be surprised if he knocked up some chick by accident." She emptied her cup of coffee. "I wouldn't let that man anywhere near my kid. He's toxic."

May grinned.

“What?” Virginia frowned.

“Can I say something?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“It seems to me like that guy has already made his way into your head.”

“No, he—“

“It’s okay,” May said, smiling. “Just promise be I’ll be the first to know if he made it into your heart.”

“You’re cheesy,” Virginia noted, and got to her feet. She set the empty mug into the sink and filled it with water.

“Promise me, Ginger! I don’t wanna be the last one to know, like the time you and—When you guys broke up.”

“There’s nothing to promise you, because it ain’t gonna happen.” She turned around to face May, leaning back against the kitchen counter as she did so, and pushed a few strands of her hair behind her ear before she gave her her full attention. “And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about... *that*... right away. I was in a bad place.”

“I know.”

“But do you really think after what happened with my last relationship, I would look for someone like Tony Stark?”

“I think you can’t choose who you fall in love with,” May answered.

“I’m going out with Kyle.”

“You’re changing the subject,” May remarked. “Which kinda proves to me that you’re already— You said yes?”

“He’s taking me to Steve’s party. Does that count as a date?”

“I think it does.” A smile touched May’s lips. “Are you excited?”

“I don’t know. A little. Maybe?” Virginia shrugged her shoulders. “Ugh, I can’t tell if I am. Like, he’s polite and sweet, and really handsome, but I’m not sure he’s—“

“Please don’t say ‘the right one.’ Because that person may never come until you’re, like, fifty years old, honey,” May said, laughing.

“No, I meant, I don’t know if he’s really my type of guy, you know? I feel like he’s too, um... *good*.”

Grinning, May got up from the chair and walked over to her. “You mean he’s too well-behaved? Looking more for a rebel, are we, Ms. Potts?”

Virginia grinned back. She was definitely looking for someone who could make life exciting, and adventurous, and a little bit dangerous—the thrill-seeking kind of a relationship. And Kyle? Well, he seemed more like the kind of guy who always played by the rules. Maybe being with him at a party, and seeing him have fun instead of burying his head in his books, his ink-stained hands cramping from exertion, would change what she thought about him.

“I know what you wanna say, so save your breath, babe.” Virginia shook her head, amused by the look on her friend’s face—May’s grin had morphed into a smug smirk.

“Let me just say, you two would make a *stunning* couple.”

Virginia clamped both hands over May’s mouth. “Shut up, loser!”

I Bet It Stung

Chapter Notes

Rated M for light smut. To anyone who's dying to read what happens at the party ~~totally looking at you Milene~~, the next chapter will finally tell. I just wanted to post this separately, because I think once you've read it you agree that this is a pivotal moment in their lives.

Almost a week had passed since the time she had caught Tony napping in the practice room, and he hadn't bothered her again after that. She didn't know how she got so lucky, but she hoped it stayed that way. Of course Virginia had seen him, occasionally, at work and on campus, and she had seen him notice her, but he had kept his distance from her and she was really glad that he had. She couldn't stand the idea of having to talk to him again.

Steve's party was tomorrow night, and she was certain that Tony would be there, too, but avoiding him should not be an issue, as the location was said to be huge and a large number of people were coming. Besides, she was going to be there with Kyle, so if Tony showed up she could easily ignore him by paying attention to her date. Thankfully, she hadn't thought much about Stark the past few days, and it had been nice to go on with her life as though they had never met in the first place.

Saying goodbye to her co-workers, Virginia closed the front door behind them and locked it. She would take the rear exit, as she always did when she was the last one in. Often times, she and Jarvis had one for the road; a final drink before each set off on their journey home. He always asked her if she'd had any trouble that night, if something had happened that made her uncomfortable, and she always gave him a big hug when she left, grateful that he cared so much about her.

Virginia grabbed her purse from the counter and rummaged around, looking for her cell phone. "Shit," she cursed, not being able to find it.

She tried remembering the last time she'd seen it, as she picked up her jacket and put it on, then walked to the back of the club where the staff lounge and Jarvis's office were, as well as the restrooms. She searched her locker, then the ladies' room—still no luck.

"Hey, Jarvis, have you seen my pho—" The word stayed stuck in Virginia's throat. Her jaw dropped and then she quickly shut it.

Inside the office, a blonde, slightly older woman was splayed across Jarvis's desk in her underwear, her ankles planted on the corner of the desk and her ass pulled toward the edge. Tony stood between her knees, his pants shoved down, not far, just enough so he could release his cock and impale her on it, exposing only a fraction of his butt. A cup of her bra

yanked down, he was latching on to her breast while the woman grasped the edge of the desk, begging him to fuck her, harder, faster and deeper. By the sounds of it, he was a pretty amazing lover. She could barely keep herself from cumming.

Witnessing them fuck like two dogs in heat, Tony slamming inside her as she moaned with every jolt, was disgusting. It was the last thing Virginia wanted to see that man doing. And yet it reminded her of how long it had been since the last time anyone had made her cry out in pleasure like that. In fact, she couldn't even remember a time any man had ever made her enjoy it *that* much. She missed having great sex. A mindless fuck could be so satisfying. Not as fulfilling as making love, admittedly, but Jesus Christ, she really needed to get back in the game.

"You do know this is a bar, not a brothel, right?" Virginia said, rolling her eyes rather dramatically.

When he stopped pumping into the mature woman and reared back a bit to stare at the intruder, she let out a moan of protest, whimpering as she reached for him. Tony ignored it. He smirked and eyed Virginia up and down like the connoisseur of women he claimed to be. "Wanna join us?"

She noticed his shirt hanging open and offering a tantalizing glimpse of his muscular bare chest, glistened with sweat. She made sure not to let her gaze linger, so he didn't become aware of her prying eyes.

"I can take two women at a time, y'know? You're not gonna feel neglected, I promise," he said, still smirking.

"Only two?" Virginia mocked him, her brows arched sardonically. Then she stiffened beneath her icy glare. "Fuck off, Tony. I'm just here because I'm missing my—"

She spotted her phone lying on the rug next to his feet. She had probably forgotten to take it with her when she had helped Jarvis with the bookkeeping. It wasn't hard trying to figure out how her phone had ended up on the floor. Every other thing that used to be on the desk was down there, too. Papers, pens and folders, even Jarvis's reading glasses—all scattered on the floor to make room for Tony's latest female conquest. Only the desk lamp was still in its place, surprisingly so.

"Whatever... I'll get it later." Huffing out a breath, Virginia turned on her heel and stalked out of the office.

"I guess that means no," Tony said with a chuckle. "Pity."

The woman writhing under him in frenzied abandonment encouraged him to pick up where they left off. "Fuck me, Anthony," she moaned and grabbed his ass to hold him inside as she ground her clit against his pelvis.

Tony exhaled sharply when she arched her hips, gasping at the sensation. His gaze dropped to her mouth as another plea fell from the woman's lips, but then shifted from her face to his feet where Virginia's phone was.

The heavy metal door slammed behind her, sending an echo down the street. The alley was dark, a pillar of blackness between the buildings, and quiet except for the hiss of steam from the vent on the brick wall of the club.

Heading for the nearest bus station, Virginia tucked her hands into the pocket of her leather jacket, and closed her fingers around the small canister she always made sure to carry with her. She shook her head briskly from side to side, as she walked. But it took more than that to shake off the picture that was splashed across her vision like the pages of a magazine—a Tony Stark exclusive.

“Hey,” a voice sounded loudly, and then someone grabbed her upper arm, pinching her skin.

Virginia flicked her thumb over the safety switch and yanked her hand out of her pocket. In one swift motion she twisted her body, flipped her hand around and turned her face sideways as she blasted her attacker with the pepper spray. There came a high-pitched scream followed by a gurgling sound, and then something hit the ground. She strained her eyes to see in the dim light. It all happened so fast.

“Are you out of your mind?” she screamed so loud and so hard Tony thought she had popped a blood vessel.

“I was attacked!” he yelled back at her hysterically, still covering his face with his hands. Tony’s eyes and nose stung painfully while his skin burned. He couldn’t believe she had done that to him, attacking him, as if she feared he would assault her sexually; blinding him so he could barely see.

Virginia dropped the can of pepper spray, her heart thudding, as she tried to slow her breathing. She closed her eyes for a minute and counted to ten the way she had learned in yoga class. Looking back at Tony, she saw him rubbing his eyes, groaning with pain. She felt sorry for him. But if he hadn’t sneaked up on her like that, she wouldn’t have freaked out and he would be fine now, so whose fault was it, really?

“You can’t keep rubbing your eyes, Tony. That’ll only increase the intensity of pain,” she said, watching him do exactly what he should avoid doing.

“I know that, okay? But it fucking stings,” he let out, agitated. “I can’t believe you freakin’ shot me with pepper spray,” Tony moaned, as tears dripped from his eyes. He tried to look at her, but his vision was still failing him. “I mean I know you don’t like me, but I’m—“

“I’m sorry,” Virginia apologized sincerely. She let the canister of pepper spray disappear into her pocket, then stepped closer and gently pulled Tony’s hands away from his face. “Let me see it,” she said, her voice going incredibly soft with him.

“Don’t touch it!” Tony grimaced, almost shouting the words at her.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she replied while rolling her eyes. “Let me see.”

His eyelids fluttered open, and even in the dim lighting Virginia could see that his big brown eyes were red and swollen from the harsh chemicals. He was blinking vigorously to encourage tears that would help flush the irritant from them. Pain was etched into his features, shadowing the depths of his eyes. Eyes that must have known love at one point in his life, she thought.

Tony was motionless, feeling a brief warm spark as her fingers touched the lines beside his eyes. She moved her fingertips lightly over his skin, very slow and very tentative.

“I can’t see,” he murmured to her, his breath tickling her skin, as she was only a few inches away from him.

“I know,” she said softly.

Stroking the fine bones of his skull, she noticed how fragile they felt. Tony appeared so tough, so hard, but really, he was anything but that. His smooth features showed not a trace of roughness. The skin beneath her fingers was soft and delicate like that of a child.

As if possessed a will of its own, her hand brushed against his cheek as she pulled away, giving it a tender stroke with her fingers. He seemed unconscious of the caress—little did she know that it had set his skin on fire.

“What were you doing out here anyway?”

“Wanted to give you that back,” he answered, pointing to her phone that had hit the floor when she’d pepper-sprayed him. “I’m not gonna buy you a new one if it’s broken, by the way, ‘cause this is totally your fault.”

She picked it up from the ground and looked at him. “Well, the good news is, you don’t look like you need a doctor.”

“What’s the bad news then?” Tony wondered, wishing he could make out the look on her face.

“The bad news is that I now have to spend *actual* time with you,” she answered, sighing. “We need to get back inside and rinse the area with water. I hope you finished that MILF off before you came after me... Fucking her with no vision could be a problem,” she said dryly.

“Not for me,” he replied, as Virginia led him back into the club.

“Please shut up,” she muttered, and Tony swore he could *hear* her eyes roll at him in disapproval.

After she’d helped him splash water on his eyes, they finally stopped tearing, and he stopped swearing, his eyes only marginally puffy.

“I look like a bee sting victim in a slapstick comedy movie,” Tony said, inspecting his face in the mirror. He didn’t notice her lips stretching thin into a weak smile.

She kept quiet, as she walked to the paper towel dispenser, pulled a piece of towel, and dried her hands.

“You know, this is actually the second time you attacked me,” he mentioned, turning around.

Throwing the towel in the wastebasket, Virginia arched her eyebrows at him, her eyes widening.

“First, you throw your guitar case at me in the practice room, and now you attack me with pepper spray in a back alley... You’re a menace, Potts!”

Confusion crinkled her forehead. “How do you know my last name?”

“Did some research,” he answered with a faint smirk.

“Am I that intriguing to you?” Her eyebrows winged higher.

Tony laughed. “I just like to know who I’m dealing with.”

“I told you, we don’t have to deal with each other at all,” she shot back, taking a few steps toward the door.

He stared at her. She stared back at him, giving him her frostiest look. He couldn’t believe that woman had her soft fingers dancing over his face only about thirty minutes ago. She turned hot and cold like the weather—mostly cold, but he hadn’t forgotten the way her hand had touched his cheek, so soft and tender. He had never been caressed like that from anyone else but his mother. What a feeling.

“Are you gonna tell Jarvis about—“

“Your intermezzo in his office?”

He cackled, nodding.

She shook her head. “I’ll spare him the embarrassment. It’s bad enough *I* had to witness that.”

“Did you like it?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

“Are we done here?” Virginia asked back, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of becoming exasperated.

Tony wanted to complain to her that it wasn’t fun if she ignored his teasing, but he figured he had upset her enough for one night. Despite what she may think, he could be a decent human being. So, he just nodded his head and grinned.

“Good,” she said, rushing out of the men’s restroom.

Tony looked after her as she left. He heard her bump into Jarvis in the hallway, and then shortly after, his friend poked his head through the door.

“Did something happen?” Jarvis looked him up and down, frowning. “Why do you look like you’ve been crying all night?”

Grinning, Tony answered, “Forget what I said, Jar’ ... I’m starting to like this woman.”

Old Flames (Can't Hold a Candle to You)

Chapter Notes

They're finally moving forward... **Rated M** for smut.

Posting anything new to this story still gives me anxiety so pls be gentle lmao bye

Virginia looked down at the stream of beer on her shirt and rolled her eyes. This was why she had stopped wearing fancy clothes to parties. Because she always ended up with her shirt stained from people spilling their drinks on her outfit, or even worse, throwing up all over her. Even tonight, when she was out on a date—kind of—she couldn't care less about her choice of attire. She was glad she hadn't chosen to wear a dress or a skirt and had just gone for the blue flannel and a pair of ripped jeans.

"You know, if you want to hang out with your friends, it's cool," she told Kyle, who was standing next to her as she used a napkin to wipe the beer off her shirt. Smiling, she looked up.

"You sure? I mean—"

"You and I both know this isn't the best place or time to hang out and get to know each other," she said. "Which is what we were trying to do for the last thirty minutes. I think we should take a rain check."

"You're probably right," he answered, chuckling. "Give me a call then."

Virginia nodded, watching Kyle as he walked away, then let out a deep breath. Good God, he was really nice and she liked him a lot, but she just wasn't in the mood for all this small talk. What she was in the mood for, however, was joining that game of Flip Cup a group of students were playing in the living room, and engaging in whatever other drinking games this party had going on. She hadn't been drinking in a while, so she could either let this party be boring or turn it into some fun.

Two hours later, she was stumbling upstairs, and through the door, out onto the rooftop of the apartment complex. The fresh air hit her, knocked her back. She stood a moment, breathing slowly, then walked, in mostly a straight line, toward the edge of the large patio. The roof terrace was deserted, a huge square, bounded by a small wall which was high enough to protect against anyone falling over but still let people admire the view—and what a spectacular view it was!

"Well, well," a voice sounded, "if this ain't the famous Pepper Potts."

She laughed out loud. “I’m pretty sure the word you’re looking for is *infamous*,” she corrected him, as she turned around, “not famous, ‘cause that’s just what I’d *like* to be.” Tony giggled uncontrollably for a minute, and she figured, by the sounds of it, he was even drunker than she was.

Virginia tied together her shirttails with a decisive yank, showing her narrow waist and giving Tony a quick peek at her navel—her navel pierced by a little treble clef belly ring—as she made the knot. She rolled her sleeves up and looked at him, noticing his stare. The expression in Tony’s melting brown eyes let her know that he liked what he saw, and as much as she tried to ignore it, she was already well aware of the growing connection between them, the sparks of attraction that had crackled between them from the first moment.

“If you’re up here, all by yourself, then this surely means this party sucks,” she said, looking at him.

“What do you mean, all by myself? I was just fucking someone against that wall behind you.” She made a quick step forward, away from the edge, as what he was telling her definitely sounded like something Tony Stark would do, and he laughed. “So you’re not enjoying this party either, huh?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Probably one of the worst parties I’ve ever been to,” she replied.

“Wanna hear some advice?”

Her eyebrow went up.

“Never go to any of Steve’s parties again, because all he does is put on a bad show.”

“Then why are *you* here?” she wondered, arching her brow a little more.

“Because I like to mingle,” Tony answered with a crooked grin. His low, husky voice sent a ripple of sensual awareness inside her. Then he came up to her, and Virginia’s first instinct was to step back, but she didn’t. “My mom always used to say, people are like songs. They come and go. Some remain Evergreens, you know, they’re those songs you just can’t get enough of no matter how many times you’ve listened to them in the past, and then there are others you never hear again and you’re glad, because ugh, they just suck.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “And it doesn’t matter if a song sounds like a poor copy or if it’s an instrumental. It can sound great and you still wouldn’t consider it original... or, uh, innovative?”

“What does *that* have to do with Steve?” she asked, laughing.

“I don’t know,” he answered with a chuckle. He was rambling, totally rambling. “I guess he’s not the worst song I’ve listened to, but he’s—”

“A poor copy?” She smirked.

“Instrumental. You don’t need words to understand the meaning of the song.”

“And that’s a bad thing, because...?”

“He’s being played by a variety of instruments, including my father and our dean.”

“So, that year you were suspended, it wasn’t because you were sick or anything, it was because of Steve?”

“You heard about that?”

“Did you buy your way back in?” She looked at him closely, and the expression on Tony’s face was speaking volumes. “That’s what I thought,” she commented. “So, what did he do to get you kicked out?”

“Needed a little help on a take-home examination that, naturally, called for independent work. Asked him. He—“

“You mean you *paid* him?”

“Does it matter?”

Virginia laughed. “No, but it proves how right I am about you. You don’t know anything about respect and decency, or hard work. You use people. And you use your money to get what you want. If anyone gets hurt, that’s just a causality for you.”

“Are you done insulting me now so I can continue?” he said with a huge grin. Tony loved that she was always so honest with him. He didn’t get that a lot from people. In fact, no one he had ever met was as upfront and opinionated as Virginia Potts was. It was sexy, really fucking sexy.

“Let me guess, he ratted you out?”

“I was already on probation, so that was it. Got kicked to the curb while he got a seat at the table, making all the big decisions.”

“That must’ve hurt,” she said sarcastically.

“I always knew Rogers was a rat, I just tried to see some good in him.”

“Yeah, right,” she laughed, “because you’re such a saint.”

He smirked.

“So, if Steve’s an instrumental work, what does that make you then? What kind of song are you?”

His smirk instantly grew wider. “*You tell me!*”

She thought for a minute, then said to him, “You’re that song that somehow became a hit and keeps playing on the radio every damn time I start my car.”

Tony chuckled. “Does that mean you can’t stop listening to me?”

“It means I’m switching channels right away, because you’re so annoying.”

“Oh, you’re so wrong,” he said, grinning.

“Am I?”

Tony nodded and slowly made another step towards her, closing the distance between them. “You wanna know what song I am?” He paused. “I am that haunting melody that softly tugs at your heartstrings stirring up volumes of unsaid, unfulfilled desire and longing,” he whispered. “That song you imagine making love to.”

Tony’s gaze dropped to her lips for a split second then back up to her eyes. His mouth was dry, the palm of his hand sweaty. He felt his heart racing, and something inside made him want to grab her and kiss her. He told himself that it was the alcohol—a habit. She was hot, hot and sexy, and he loved making out with beautiful women. But he didn’t move, her eyes holding him captive, like he was frozen in time, immobile by her gaze.

As they looked deeply into each other’s eyes, flickers of heat raced through Virginia’s blood. She leaned toward him, involuntarily or deliberately she didn’t know, or even care, and closed her eyes. Their faces were so close she could feel his breath feathering over her skin like a caress. Then she heard the sound of a siren wailing across the apartment complex, and it was like a wake-up call, pulling her harshly back into reality.

Virginia opened her eyes and backed away from him, and he stared at her in a way that left her feeling confused. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking; if Tony was mad she hadn’t kissed him or relieved, and for a moment she actually reconsidered her decision not to do it. But she was drunk, and she had never made any good decisions under the influence of alcohol. She didn’t need to complicate things. This wasn’t right.

Her lips felt dry, too dry, and she had to wet them before saying, “I need a drink.”

“Uh, yes, me too,” he mumbled, taking a step back. He had come so close to kissing her that he’d already decided how she would taste. Sweet like spun sugar, with just the slightest kick of exotic spice. “What can I get you?”

“I would like a... a vodka martini please,” she answered, “Very dry, with olives, a lot of olives. Like, at least three olives.”

“Okay.”

“But I can get my own drink,” she added quickly. “I’m just gonna follow you inside and then we... You know, I have to find Natasha. Somehow she always ends up making out with guys she doesn’t even like.”

When they entered the kitchen together, she noticed other people staring at them. It instantly made her feel uncomfortable, like they knew what had almost happened on that rooftop between her and Tony. He didn’t seem to be aware of the looks they were getting, or maybe he was, he just didn’t give a damn about it.

“Well, enjoy this stupid party,” he said, grabbing a beer bottle from the fridge.

“Mhm-hm,” she muttered, her glass of vodka in her hand, and turned on her heel to rush out of the room. She bumped right into another woman. “You?” Virginia let out, her eyes widening with surprise.

“Hi,” the girl answered, flashing her the perfect smile.

She was in her twenties, had dark hair and a very pretty face. There was a piercing wolf-whistle, Tony’s brows rising at the sight of her. He approached them, grinning broadly, then looked at Virginia, as if he was waiting for something.

“Why did you never mention that you have such good-looking friends?” His eyes darted to the other woman, and he looked her up and down with an appreciative smile on his face. “I think I’m in love.”

Virginia rolled her eyes and took a long sip of her vodka. “Tony, this is Maya, my um... She’s my...”

“Ex,” Maya said, smirking, “I’m her ex.”

“Wow, didn’t see that one coming,” Tony exclaimed, laughing. “You still manage to surprise me, Pepper Potts.”

“Pepper?” Maya cocked an eyebrow at her. “What did I miss? Are you two...?”

“Nah,” he said. “Your girlfriend here just pepper-sprayed me, is all.”

“I’m not her girl—“

“You did what?” Maya laughed.

“What are you doing here, Maya?” Virginia tried to ignore Tony, but of course she noticed the way he was looking at them, grinning foolishly.

“Having fun?” she answered. “It’s nice to see you, by the way. I’ve missed you.”

The sincerity in Maya’s voice ignited a spark of the flame that once burned brightly inside Virginia’s heart. She looked directly into her eyes, and the warm coffee in them still seemed to be able to melt her heart. She swallowed, remembering the pain that woman had caused her, and her eyes darkened, as she huffed out a breath and shoved a hand through her hair.

“Excuse me, but I need to find my *date*,” she said, pushing past her. “He must be wondering where I am.”

Tony watched as she left in a hurry. He looked at Maya, his eyes reading hers, and it appeared to him that the history she shared with Virginia was far from pleasant. There was a lot of anger and hurt between them, and, in Maya’s eyes, regret. This didn’t look like the end of two people who had had a fling once. It was more than that, deeper than any relationship he’d

ever had. And it made him wonder how it must be to be loved by someone as fierce and strong, dominant and mysterious, as Virginia.

"So you and Potts, huh?"

Maya gave him a lopsided smile.

"Didn't know she likes women."

"I bet there's a lot you don't know about her, Stark," she countered, turning his back to him as she went away. She made her way through the crowds of people until she found the one she was looking for, standing in line for the bathroom. "Do you really have a date?"

"Here's what I really have," Virginia mumbled. "I have no desire to talk to you. I just wanna freshen up and get back to Kyle... my date."

"I only need a minute," Maya said, pushing her way into the bathroom before Virginia could shut the door in her face. She put her beer down on the sink and turned to stare at the redhead.

"What?" Virginia raised a brow. She could feel, more than ever, the electric tension between them, that sensation that something was sizzling just below the surface.

Without saying a word, Maya suddenly crossed the short distance that separated them and kissed Virginia with such stunning force that the breath was knocked out of her. Maya's mouth swooped upon hers, twisting, rousing, her lips searing hers, possessing her. As she was trying to rustle up some logic in her mind, pleasure began to seep through the barrier of Virginia's own will.

"I don't love you anymore," Virginia said, moaning huskily as she felt Maya's hand underneath her shirt, cupping her breast. She did her best to disguise the slight tremble of her hand as she lowered her glass to the bathroom counter. "I'm over you. And I'm drunk. I don't —"

"So am I," Maya replied, a low chuckle easing past her lips. "This doesn't have to mean anything, baby. I just wanna fuck you."

She pinned her up against the wall and shifted her hand to her pants. Locking eyes with her former lover, she undid the zipper and slipped her fingers inside. She cupped the outside of Virginia's panties, feeling her heat soak into her, and started to move her middle finger, bending it so it slid up and down on her mound.

"Maya," Virginia murmured.

"What?" She grinned. "You want me to stop?"

"No," she moaned. "Fuck me."

Virginia bit her lip as Maya's fingers found her clit and squeezed it just enough to entice her. She wanted to cry out loudly but remembered where she was and that there was probably still

a line outside the bathroom. But God, it was so hard to stifle her cries.

She pushed her shirt up, revealing her toned stomach, her simple black lace bra. Her breasts were plump, her nipples poking against the delicate fabric. A moan escaped her, low and throaty, as Maya swiped her tongue across one lacy-covered nipple, then the other, while she kept stroking her. Virginia arched into her touch, her head thrown back, eyes closed.

Maya dropped to her knees, shoved Virginia's jeans and panties down and lifted her legs so she could remove them, brushing her lips over her soft thigh. Inches from her sex, she could smell the tang of her arousal. Turning her head, Maya breathed in her scent deeply. Then she returned her finger to its previous position, only this time she added a companion so she had two fingers moving in and out of her hot, tight hole. When her breathing got erratic, Maya knew another minute or two would have her at an orgasm, so she slowly withdrew.

The tip of her tongue found the sensitive bundle of nerves that unlocked Virginia's passion. Maya lavished her tongue on her clit, using her fingers to spread her so that she could have a clear view and taste of her swollen pink flesh. As she worked it mercilessly, holding tight to her hips so she couldn't pull away, Virginia cried out, clinging to her shoulders.

"That feels so good," she panted, whimpering when Maya sucked her clit as deep into her mouth as it would go—sex surely had never been the issue between them.

"God, you make me so wet," Maya rasped. She undid her own jeans and pulled them down, just enough that she could reach inside. She toyed with her sex while she kept fucking Virginia's pussy with her tongue until a flood of nectar trickled out.

"F-fuck," Virginia screamed out as Maya continued to lap up her creamy white liquid. "Oh God!" She fought to catch her breath from the orgasm consuming her body. "I forgot how good your tongue is."

"And I forgot how good you taste," Maya purred, grinning.

Virginia had never been patient enough to keep dating someone who couldn't get her off with their mouth—so far Maya held the record—but she wanted more than to ground her pussy into Maya's mouth. It was like all the unresolved sexual tension from her time with Tony was starting to release itself in this moment.

She wondered if she would rather be with him right now, fuck him, and she couldn't deny that the thought excited her, but then her gaze fell on the woman in front of her, and she felt dizzy just thinking about how great sex with her was—so much for never making any good decisions under the influence of alcohol.

"Well, I haven't," she said, licking her lips.

Maya gave her that sultry look and slowly sank down onto the tiled bathroom floor. With her pants unbuttoned and zipper down, she wiggled her way out of her jeans. Once they were past her thighs, her fingers slipped beneath the band of her lingerie, sliding it down over her hip under Virginia's watchful eyes.

“It’s right here... Why don’t you come get it?”

Virginia smirked and lay down with her head between her legs, parting her, not wanting to start easy. She licked her pussy, and then stuck her tongue deep into her, fucking Maya into frenzy. She could tell by the increased moving of her hips and the moaning that was growing louder in pitch that the brunette was ready to come.

Before she could, Virginia moved, slipping her thigh between Maya’s legs and grinding against her in slow, tantalizing movements. She groaned, feeling Maya’s wet slick as she rubbed against her, the friction exactly where she needed it so that she felt like she was on fire. Maya bucked up to meet Virginia’s grinds, gasping and moaning, begging her to fuck her harder.

Virginia ran her fingers through her hair while Maya’s nails dug into the redhead’s thigh, as they quickly picked up speed. They worked their bodies faster and faster, sharing no kisses, no soft touches, just a moment of sexual liberation—although it looked more like aggression. Virginia could feel the orgasm meandering up her spine as their clits ground together. Loud sounds erupted from deep inside of them both until they reached the ultimate heights. When she came to herself, Virginia was on her side, next to her ex-lover, her pussy still wet and pulsing.

Suddenly she started laughing hysterically. She didn’t really know why. Maybe it was the fact she’d just had sex with the one person in this world who had ever truly hurt her that made all of this so ridiculous, and that there was an audience out there who made it impossible for her to leave this bathroom unnoticed. Maybe she was laughing, because of that one moment she had thought of fucking Tony Stark, knowing she wouldn’t even be in this situation right now if he hadn’t turned her on so much in the first place. Or maybe she was just cracking up because she obviously had too much to drink and didn’t know what the hell she was doing here at all.

“I hate parties. I hate alcohol. I hate you. And I definitely, absolutely *hate* Tony Stark,” she mumbled after a moment of silence.

“What’s going on between you two?”

Ignoring Maya’s question, Virginia got up from the floor, raised the toilet seat and sat down.

“Did you fuck him?”

“No,” she scoffed, “and I’m not going to.”

“But you want to?” Maya chuckled. “Everyone wants to fuck Tony Stark.”

“Including you?” she shot back, rolling her eyes. She reached for paper, rose, and flushed. Then she grabbed her panties and jeans and put them on. “I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t trust me either, yet here we are.”

“You’re the reason I can’t trust *anyone*,” Virginia argued. “You broke my heart, Maya, and you are... you *were* one of the good ones. Tony... He’s—“

“Bad?”

“I don’t know *what* he is.” That man was a lot of things, but one thing he wasn’t was honest or trustworthy in any truly meaningful way. “But he’s definitely not one of the good guys, and if I can’t trust you, then I sure as hell can’t trust him.”

“Valid point, but this has nothing to do with trust. You could just fuck him for the fun of it.” She pulled her pants up her legs and stood up.

“And have everyone at college talk about it tomorrow? No, thanks.”

“You think I don’t know what this is about, V?” Smirking, she raised an eyebrow. “What just happened between us—“

“Was a one-time thing.”

“It happened because you *needed* it, not because you *wanted* it.” Maya paused, staring into her eyes. “I saw you coming down those stairs with him... Stark... and I know you well enough to see when you’re in desperate need of having your pussy fucked.”

“Oh, so you’re my hero now, who swooped in to save me from the pain of my aching pussy?”

Maya laughed out loud at the hefty dose of cynicism in Virginia’s voice. “I guess so.”

“Well, thank you,” Virginia grumbled, “I’m sure you had to sacrifice a lot for that.”

She emptied her glass of vodka, put it back down, and walked past her. Maya held her back by the arm to keep her from leaving. Virginia slowly turned to face her and instantly noticed the change in Maya’s expression; saw her swallowing hard as though she had to gulp down a lump in her throat.

“I’m really sorry for hurting you, babe,” Maya whispered. “I didn’t mean to break your heart.”

Virginia felt her features softening, felt her compassion even before she spoke. “You know, there was a time I thought you were the love of my life.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m not so sure true love even exists,” she answered quietly, sighing.

She stared at her ex-lover for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed her lips softly, closing her eyes. She’d known they were over the minute she had found out about Maya’s infidelity, but it still hurt. It hurt to feel that there was absolutely no going back. She could never trust her again, not even as a friend, at least not yet. Maya had been such a great part of her life; her best friend, the first real relationship—first girlfriend—and she hated to have to let that go. But she had to. She *wanted* to.

Virginia forced her mind to stillness as she broke the kiss. Then she smirked, asking, “Ready for our walk of shame?”

“I feel no shame,” Maya answered with a grin.

“Yeah, neither do I... These people are so drunk, they won’t remember any of this ever happened tomorrow anyway.”

Sexual Activities

Chapter Notes

I thought of a million ways how to introduce this character and this seemed most fitting. Let me know what you think... The plan was to write about two events in this chapter but because I barely have time to update these days, I'll publish both as stand-alone chapters. Forgive me if this is rather short, I just wanted to get this out.

Unbuckling her seat belt, Virginia opened the car door of her 1967 Chevy Camaro, pocketed the keys and strolled into the her uncle's store, The G-Spot, a legendary sex toy emporium.

The place was famous, and unlike any other sex store in the city, it lacked a lurid overtone. People weren't put into the embarrassing, secretive mission of pretending that they were using vibrators for backaches or foot massages. Instead, it had been designed as a gender-neutral business celebrating sexual freedom, where no one felt the need to avoid eye contact and pretend they were the only one there. It was a place that was empowering and informative for both men and women. For Virginia, it was a place where she had spent a great deal of her teenage years. It was kind of shocking to her sometimes that nothing about sex seemed to surprise her anymore. She had heard and seen *everything*.

The G-Spot was set up like a penis museum. Penis-shaped apparatus and glass cases decorated the walls like art framework—the love for art was obviously a family thing. Directly below the glass casings, sample toys were available for the customers' viewing and testing pleasure. In the rear of the store, there were various forms of erotica, sex-education books and a lubrication library filled with penis and vagina paraphernalia. There was also the fetish wear and lingerie section, and a section for wellness products.

Her uncle understood the art and science of advertising. He had started his masturbation workshops in the 1960s because of his belief that great sex was having an intimate relationship with your own body. Over the years he found a way to extend his expertise into the most disparate realms imaginable, obtaining a Master's degree in fields of psychology, therapy, and counseling, and gaining additional sex therapy training. He was dedicated to his profession, and his experimental workshops and intimacy retreats enjoyed great popularity.

Whenever Virginia came by the store, someone else was usually there looking to buy something. Sometimes three or four people. People of every shape, size, and nationality. Then she saw them enthusiastically playing with buttons on vibrators, sliding probing palms up and down dildos, and giggling joyfully at the complex models that looked more like kitchen appliances rather than pleasure toys. Today was no different, except it wasn't as crowded as the last time she had visited him.

“I got your food,” she said with a smile, as she went behind the counter, and up the winding metal staircase to the floor above that was reserved for residential use. While she was putting the groceries away, she heard a familiar voice. Frowning, she stepped towards the rail of the balcony that overlooked part of the shop and gazed down.

“I’m gonna have a lot of fun with this,” Tony said, smirking. He had a small brown paper bag in one hand—Morgan had sworn off plastic bags a long time ago—and a gold membership card in the other.

“Absolutely,” Morgan answered, grinning, as he reached out to give Tony the receipt. But then he halted, and eventually pulled back. “Sorry, son. I forgot that you don’t like to be handed things.”

Tony chuckled. “I don’t need it anyway. This—“ He rattled the bag three or four times. “—is all I need.”

Virginia started to wonder how many items he’d bought, and especially what kind. It was a pity that her uncle’s goods didn’t come in see-through bags. She couldn’t even get a glimpse of what Tony hid in there.

“Virginia, honey, why don’t you come on down here? I’d like you to meet—“

“We already met,” Tony cut him off, and his grin was wide and toothy as he looked up to the gallery where she stood, wishing she had never been caught staring. ““Though I do have to say, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I’m only here, because I’m family,” Virginia said, as she slowly walked down the stairs, her eyes fixated on Tony. The last thing she needed was him assuming she had any other business being in this store. He didn’t have to know that she could in fact give him some recommendations. “That man right there is my uncle,” she continued. “My very *annoying* uncle.”

Morgan was over six feet tall, dramatically thin and flamingly gay. He dressed like he had every color of the rainbow in his closet. Virginia had even seen him in colors she didn’t know existed. He did wear his outfits well, but his flamboyant personality and loud clothes were a lot to handle at times.

“How do you two know each other?” he asked, grinning at the sudden onset of a certain tension he noticed.

“College,” Tony replied. “Oh, by the way, did you hear about the crazy thing that happened at the party?”

“What thing?” Virginia responded.

Apparently someone had sex in the bathroom,” Tony said. “Rumors say it were two women.” He eyed her suspiciously, looking for anything that would give her away.

Virginia slapped her hand over her mouth, gasping loudly. “Wow, that’s *scandalous!* And they didn’t even ask you to join.”

Tony laughed and turned back to Morgan with a smirk. “Your niece really is something else.”

“His *niece* is standing right *here*,” Virginia scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Morgan stayed quiet, his eyes going from Tony to Virginia and back. He tried hard not to laugh but couldn’t wipe the stupid grin off his face.

“I should go,” Tony said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Not me you won’t,” she stated bluntly.

“I was talking to *him*,” Tony pointed to Morgan, chuckling. “You know for someone who’s got a family member owning a sex store you are surprisingly uptight.”

“Well, not when it comes to sex, trust me.”

“Morgan!” Virginia called out his name in shock. “Why would you—Oh my God!”

Smirking, Tony slipped the membership card in his pocket and turned around. “Next time you have to blow off some steam, just ask me,” he said amused. “I got a few things in here that I’m sure you’d like.” He laughed out loud, then nodded at Morgan and left the store.

“Ugh, that guy is seriously so annoying.” Virginia leaned over, planted her elbows on the counter, propped her chin in one hand, and stared right at him. “Why did you tell him that?” She sighed. “He’s never gonna shut up about it now.”

Morgan, too, planted his elbow on the counter and matched her gesture of putting his chin in his palm and staring right back at her. “Because it’s the truth,” he said, smirking.

She put her hand on his cheek and gave him a soft smack. “He doesn’t have to know that, though,” she replied. “In fact, Tony Stark doesn’t have to know *anything* about my sex life.”

He gave her a mocking frown. “Yeah, you made that pretty clear when you did the dirty in that bathroom, with all those people listening.”

Chuckling, she buried her face in her hands. “I was sexually frustrated,” she mumbled.

“So who was the lucky girl?”

“Maya.”

“I’m sorry... Did you say—“

Virginia looked back at him and shrugged her shoulders. “It just happened. But I don’t... I don’t regret it. It was great sex. I needed that.”

He laughed.

“No, that’s not... I did need the sex, but I also needed to feel that it’s really over,” she explained. “I guess a part of me will always love her, but her and I, that’s history. We’re done.”

“So it was goodbye sex then?”

Virginia nodded. “But, you know, the sad thing is, there’s part of me that wishes I never found out so we would still be happy.” She paused, staring at him in silence for a minute. “Come on, you can say it, Morgan... I was never really good at letting go. I mean, I still write songs about my mother and she left me, like, fourteen years ago.”

“You’ll find someone again, darling, I’m sure.” He molded his palm across the back of her hand. “Someone you can love and trust, and who makes you happy.” Smiling, he stroked his thumb over her skin. “You’re still young, so just enjoy life and worry about that other stuff later.”

“Apropos of that... What did Tony Stark buy to, you know, *enjoy* life?” All that time, she hadn’t stopped wondering what was in that bag.

Grinning, Morgan answered, “Client confidentiality.”

“Shut up!” She laughed. “You’re working in a freaking sex shop, you’re my uncle, and this is Tony Stark we’re talking about. The guy who puts screenshots of text messages, other people’s nudes, and women’s underwear on bulletin boards across campus. He doesn’t care about any kind of confidentiality.”

“Why do you wanna know?” Morgan asked, as he straightened himself up to serve another customer. “Are you having the hots for him?”

“You basically told the guy that I’m wild in bed, I think I deserve to know what he’s using to get off.”

Morgan chuckled. “Knowing him, I’m sure the only thing he really needs is his imagination, honey.”

Tony was still smirking when he opened the door to his car and got in. Holding the steering wheel, he paused for a second to think. He really couldn’t deny that the thought of having sex with Virginia, especially the thought of getting to fuck her in someone else’s bathroom, excited him. He still wasn’t sure if he even liked her, but he didn’t *have* to like her to fuck her. He had never liked anyone he had had sex with, at least not much. But that woman, she really was something else. All hot and feisty. It wasn’t hard to imagine what her body looked like underneath all that clothes. And the things he could do to her with the toys he just bought...

“Oh, c’mon!” Tony cried out, laughing, as he felt his penis go hard and press uncomfortably against his pants. He sighed, then grabbed his phone to send a message.

‘Got the toys. Ready to play?’

Just My Imagination

Chapter Notes

I changed the rating of the fic to *mature* because lbr they're horny fuckers lmao

“Oh, thank God!” Virginia called out, as she saw him jog through the gate. She had left her key card and her phone in her room and he was the first person who walked by her building for hours. She wouldn’t dare to ignore him just because he was Tony Stark. Not this time.

In deference to the heat, he wore a black tank top that exposed bronze skin, tight muscles, and a tattoo on his left bicep. It depicted a wounded heart, skewered with a knife. It was so small, she almost hadn’t noticed it in the orange glow from the campus lights. She knew what it stood for—loss and betrayal—and she wondered if it had the same meaning to him. It would explain so much about who he was, and why he was who he was, even more so because the heart was black. She couldn’t stop wondering about the story behind it.

As Tony bent to tie his shoes, Virginia noticed the way the sweat glistened on his shoulders and down his back to his butt. She noticed that his butt seemed to fit his pants a little too well for her. She could not take her eyes off of him, even when he turned toward her. The only thing that she seemed to be able to do was notice how defined his arm muscles were, and how her body seemed to want to be in them.

“Need my help with anything?” he asked, pulling her from her thoughts, and smirked.

She felt her cheeks blush. God, why did she have to be so turned on by someone so... annoying. “Can you please swipe me in? I was at the Laundromat and I forgot to take my key card with me, and my phone, so I’m stuck out here.”

“You always do your laundry at midnight?”

“I like the quiet,” she stated bluntly, thinking of all the songs she had written, while waiting for her clothes to dry.

He cackled. “Yeah, sorry, Potts, but I’m sleeping at my apartment tonight, so I don’t have my ___”

“You have an apartment? Then why the hell are you even bothering living in a dorm? Dorms are the worst thing to ever sleep in. They’re too hot, too cold, smell weird, have cracked ceilings, and just have the general feeling of being old. Come Friday afternoon, everyone is off the walls. There’s yelling, scheming, unicycling down the halls, and other things happening right outside your door. If you think you’re going to get a nap at any time after 1:00 p.m, then you thought wrong. In addition, if you have any food at all, then expect that to be gone very quickly if people come in and out of your room often. Just. Totally. Gone,” she

ranted. “If I had an apartment, I wouldn’t show myself anywhere near a stupid dorm ever again.”

“You know this would be an excellent TED talk,” he joked. She sniffed—and he found himself truly attracted to the way she crinkled her nose when she was mad. It was adorable. “And to answer your question... Living in a dorm is a lot more fun than staying at an apartment every night, all by myself.” He paused, then smirked. “Well, not *every* night of course, but you get me.”

As he stared at her, he noticed how hot she looked in that pair of high cut denim shorts and a men's button down shirt, mostly unbuttoned. Her hair was pinned up in a wild bun that spoke of the late hour with no need to worry about something as frivolous as a hairdo when all she thought about was sleep. He could tell by her looks that she had only wanted to do her laundry and then go to bed. She didn’t even have proper shoes on, just a pair of thongs. And she carried a large duffle bag with her that he figured contained a clean set of clothes.

“Got anything to sleep in in there?”

“What?” she asked back, confused.

“You can crash at my place if you want,” he proposed. Part of him couldn’t believe that he was actually offering a woman to spend the night at his apartment, like he was inviting her to a sleepover. Of course he wouldn’t mind if they ended up having sex... Would she?

“You’re asking me if I wanna—“

“Sleep at my apartment? Yes.”

“I’m not gonna have sex with you,” she said sternly—well, there was his answer.

“That’s a shame,” he replied, laughing. Tony looked at her for a moment, then smiled. “C’mon, Pepper, I really just wanna help you out here.” The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable. “It’s a two-bedroom apartment, the guest room has an en-suite, I won’t even bother you.”

She thought long and hard about his proposal. It was not like this was going to be the first time she had to stay at a guy’s place for one night. She had done that before, out of the same reasons she was forced to do it now—she tend to lock herself out a lot—but this was Tony Stark. She didn’t trust him. Looking into his eyes, though, the feelings she felt for him were new to her. He made her feel safe and cared for, which, under the circumstances, had to be bizarre to say the least. Safe with a man like him? Yet she did feel safe. She didn’t feel threatened. And so she agreed.

Virginia was surprised to find that his place was nothing like she’d expected. What she expected was something expensive, maybe on the Upper East Side, with an impossibly beautiful view of Central Park. She expected to be greeted by a doorman, before entering an elevator to ride to the top floor, and she expected top end furnishings, appliances, linens, and

electronics—an apartment furnished in modern minimal style that suited everything she seemed to know about him.

What she found was a walk-up. Four flights of stairs. She found a place that turned out to be a charming, authentic New York City loft in one of the most accessible, subway-friendly spots in Lower Manhattan. It had all the trimmings of an old-school loft—high ceilings, exposed brick, enormous windows, wood floors. It also had plenty of old-school quirk, with cast off furniture that no one else seemed to want, which were the perfect accouterments to his living quarters.

The living room, and kitchen, was one big open space, dominated by a vintage 1920's leather chesterfield sofa, the one thing that really stood out amidst all the old furniture. The whole place was neat and tidy, but still had that look of a project. She didn't quite know what she'd been expecting, something more bohemian perhaps, a bachelor pigsty. Looked at it in realistic terms, the loft was simply a storage room for assorted junk, but it had an energy and presence of its own that completely captivated her.

"The, um, fireplace needs some remodeling but it's summer, so..." Tony cleared his throat. "Anyway, this is where I live and—"

"Work?" Letting go of her duffel bag, she fingered the keys of his electric piano gently, then took his guitar down off the wall. "May I?" He nodded, watching her as she sat on the couch with the guitar across her knees and started strumming it, setting chords, marveling at its rich tones.

Soon she began to sing as if he wasn't there. It was more of a humming that she did, but she poured out such a beautiful melody that a thrill of admiration ran through him. After a while, she slipped a quick glance at him, startled to find him staring at her. He smiled. She smiled, feeling embarrassed and looked down as she felt her whole face going red. She didn't know why she suddenly felt so insecure in his presence. Maybe it was this place. There was definitely something magical about it, although magic was not a word she'd associate with anything that related to Tony Stark.

"I'm gonna take a shower," he said. "Your room's down the hall, on the left. Towels are in the cabinet. The bed squeaks a little but it's very comfy." She launched herself off the couch, and the way her legs moved as she walked, and her butt filled out the seat of her pants, made his groin tighten.

"I'm good," she replied, putting away the guitar and grabbing her stuff. "Thank you."

Tony nodded. "If you need anything else just let me know. My door's always open."

"Yeah, you know, I'm still not gonna sleep with you," she insisted, making him laugh.

"I got the message the first time. Thank you very much," he answered, smirking. He grabbed a water bottle from the counter, then turned around to walk to his room. "Goodnight, Pep."

"You really like calling me that, don't you?"

“What?” he said, facing at her.

“Pep... Pepper.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He grinned. “You got a problem with that?”

Virginia didn’t say anything for a moment, then told him no, she didn’t, and it was probably the first time since the two of them had started talking that she was completely honest with him. She liked the sound of *Pepper*. She liked how it seemed to fit her more than her real name, because that nickname manifested the fire that she had to her personality. It also looked way better on an album cover than *Virginia* would do—that is if she ever were lucky enough to release one.

“Then I’ll see you in a coupla hours,” Tony said, and his grin was even wider now. “Sweet dreams.”

He only took a quick shower, then brushed his teeth and climbed into bed with no clothes on. As he lay down, thinking, an image of Pepper’s tall, well-muscled form danced before his closed eyelids. She was naked, with her hair pulled back so he could clearly see the curves of her body, her breasts... And her fingers parting her outer lips to tease her clit. She opened herself, sliding her fingers deeper with a sharp sigh, making her own body jolt from the pure pleasure of it. She moaned softly at first, but the sounds grew louder and longer with each thrust of her fingers deep inside her pussy. Her other hand pinched her nipple roughly, and then she cried out his name as wave after wave of complete and total fulfillment coursed through her body.

Tony’s blood grew hot as he imagined her hands touching him, her mouth and tongue on him, her voice soft and full with need while she kissed and stroked him everywhere a man could desire. A web of arousal spun around him as he squeezed his shaft, his thumb caressing over the leaking head. He growled when he felt the tingle shooting up his spine. He imagined her lips hovering just above the tip, her tongue ready to touch him and send him into spasms of sheer pleasure. He imagined her wet mouth taking his cock, sucking the head deep in her throat—shit! He knew he had to stop this, but it felt so damn good.

Tony wrapped a fist around his cock and pumped slowly. He moaned aloud, imagining her hand caressing his heavy sac, massaging it gently and exploring it as it grew tighter and tighter. He imagined her soft, naked body under his, their skin hot and slick as he drove into her again and again. He imagined that icy cool facade hot and flushed with pleasure, begging him to take her harder, rougher. She’d wrap her long legs around his waist, and he’d thrust into her so deep it’d shake her to the core. He pumped again. Harder, faster. Up, down, over the tip. He imagined her hands clasped behind his neck and then sliding ever so slowly down his naked chest, teasing him with her slender fingertips.

He pumped vigorously now, his hand rough on his cock as he imagined her pussy clenching around him, milking him of everything he had. He imagined her fingers digging into his shoulders, as urgent moans came apart in a violent scream. The friction grew until he knew it was not possible for him to last any longer. Then with a shout, his climax consumed him. He roared into the open air, his seed spilling into his palm, his body shaking. He halted for a

moment, overpowered by his release, by his thoughts of Pepper. His cock softened in his hand to hang against his thigh. He had made a mess. His desire for her was undeniable.

Tony wiped a tissue across his chest and then his belly, and chuckled. “Sorry,” he shouted, guessing she must’ve heard him. And if she hadn’t, then she was still sound asleep, knowing nothing about the great sex they just had... In his mind.

When he came into the living room the next morning, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her thighs flat on the surface. A soft, loose-fitting black shirt covered her upper half whilst a pair of zebra-print leggings hugged her toned pins, ensuring pure comfort. In her lap was his Norwegian Forest cat, rolled onto its back, all four paws involved in a game of *capture the feather*.

“Now I know why you like to stay here,” she said, smiling up at him. They weren’t supposed to have pets in their dorms.

Tony smiled back at her, then explained, “Found that little fella outside in the cold, tried to distract the security guard and sneak him in, but that didn’t work, so now he lives here.”

“What’s his name?”

“Thor,” he answered. “I mean, he’s a cat, so falling from great heights without sustaining lasting damage isn’t really a superpower, but he acts like an entitled bastard and hammers at my guitar with his paws when I play, so...”

“Don’t call him a bastard,” she complained, “He’s cute.”

“Yeah, and he knows that. Always gotta have it his way and gets away with anything,” he said, chuckling. “I think he likes you. He hasn’t liked anyone so far.”

Lifting the cat from her lap, Virginia got to her feet. “That’s because I’m special,” she said, smirking. “And because he’s not like you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We connect.”

“You and my ca—“

“We’re totally vibing. Have been all morning. He may have even told me a few things about you...”

Tony raised an eyebrow at her. “Like?”

“You write songs,” she answered.

“You went through my stuff?” His voice suddenly changed, taking on a darker tone, and Virginia wasn’t sure if he was really mad or just a little upset.

“I didn’t. You just forgot to hide it,” she defended herself, gesturing at the coffee table. It was a paper with scribbled lyrics that she had found earlier, and it had taken her a moment to realize that she had heard the words before. “All the songs your band plays are *yours*?” Her voice went soft, her surprise evident.

“Is regular coffee okay?” he asked, ignoring her question, and walked over to the kitchen counter where he turned on the coffee machine. As he opened the cupboard to pull two cups out, he felt her eyes staring at his back, and it made him so uncomfortable that he chose to give her an answer after all. “Some of the music was a group sorta thing, but I wrote the lyrics,” he stated, without any emotion in his voice, and stuck a mug under the coffee machine before pushing a button. “I’d like to keep this between us, thanks.”

Virginia watched him, sensing that, for whatever reason, this was a touchy subject. She had no idea why he didn’t want anyone to know, almost had the feeling as though he was insecure about it—who knew Tony Stark had insecurities—but if that was how he wanted it to be, she would leave it be. One thing that she really wondered, though, was if he could sing. She imagined him to have a beautiful voice. She couldn’t explain what made her think that, she just did. And she would love to find out someday, to hear him sing.

“Here’s your coffee.” Virginia raised the mug to her lips and drank. He shoved the milk carton and sugar bowl toward her as she grimaced.

“Thank you,” she murmured, spooning a generous amount of sugar into the dark brew. Then she added an equally large amount of milk.

“Like a little coffee in your milk, I see,” Tony said wryly.

“I never liked the taste of the stuff, but sometimes I do need the effects,” she replied as she took a sip of the doctored coffee. “Tony?” She put the mug down and looked at him.

“Mhm?”

“Can I just ask one more question about the, um... the songwriting?” He raised the cup to his mouth, nodding. “How do you write such beautiful lyrics if you’ve never been—“

“What? In love?”

He sounded offended, but as she looked straight into his eyes, they seemed to tell a different story. His eyes were brown mirrors reflecting all tragedy in the world. Virginia swallowed. What she was feeling right now started to really confuse her. It was the first time she thought of him as someone who *wasn’t* a total asshole. But she just couldn’t imagine that Tony Stark knew what love was, let alone how it felt to truly love someone. So, how could he write songs about it? Songs that spoke of so much love and heartbreak?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—“

“Listen, you don’t want me to interfere with your life, so I’d appreciate it if you stayed out of mine,” he grumbled, emptying his cup.

“Fine,” she replied. “I should get dressed now anyway. It must be late. Thanks for the coffee.”

She bumped into him as they moved at the same time. His face was only a few inches from away hers. The fragrance of Tony’s cologne was interfering with her ability to focus, and all she could think about was, what if she turned her head and accidentally kissed him? Stepping back, Virginia looked at him. She was so wildly attracted to him, like a moth to a flame. But just like the moth, she too would get burned if she touched him. To be this attracted to a man she barely knew—that man being Tony Stark in particular—was scary. It was confusing, too.

Staring straight at the loose shirt covering Virginia’s breasts, Tony found himself speculating about them. Were they small and round, like firm apples, or plump, soft ovals? The kind that settled into a man’s palms, begging to be shaped by his fingers? Tipped by velvety pink nipples that tasted as sweet as candy, or brown ones that drew up tight and tart like berries? She was so sexy, hard for any man to resist, and sparking a desire in him to turn caveman, toss her over his shoulder and carry her to his private lair. He wanted to fuck her, just like he had in his imagination.

Virginia’s gaze drifted down and she saw his erection straining his boxers. The thickness and length made her swallow hard as she felt heat spreading to the inside of her thighs, and her good sense leaking away. “Maybe you should take care of that,” she said, as if she wasn’t already thinking about doing it for him. “It sounded like you really enjoyed yourself last night.”

He laughed out loud. “I always do,” he remarked, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “But it would be more fun if you’d join me.”

She couldn’t even deny that he was telling the truth—for once. But she wouldn’t allow herself to give in to the temptation, because knowing him, she would never going to live that one down. He would boast about it to everyone. *Everyone* would know that she’d had sex with Tony Stark, and she couldn’t risk that, because unlike him she still had a reputation to lose. As much as she wanted him, she didn’t want to make her life even more complicated. It wasn’t worth it. She didn’t need him. She just *wanted* him. That was her dilemma. Physically, she was really into him. Emotionally, she’d still rather stay miles away from him.

“Thanks for letting me stay, Tony. I appreciate it,” she replied, completely ignoring what he’d said. Even the look on her face didn’t give anything away about what was really going on inside her head, and lower—the way she wanted to sit on his cock, and slowly fuck her pussy up and down on his erection, then lock it inside her until she came.

“So you really wanna just leave, huh?” She nodded. “Well, then I’m just gonna let you go, ‘cause contrary to what you may think, I’m a decent guy,” he said, grinning. “And I don’t want you to feel threatened by me.”

“I don’t, trust me,” she countered.

“Good,” he replied, holding out his hand to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you a proper goodbye?” He noticed how she was staring at his hand and he laughed, shaking his head in amusement. “I did wash my hands after playing the pink guitar, Pep. You can shake it, it’s clean.” The metaphor he used almost made her laugh. She didn’t even realize she was smirking until he smirked back at her.

His hand looked rough and dry, as if used to hard work, but she bet it felt soft if it made contact with her skin. She hesitated before shaking it. When she did, touched him, even just to take his hand into hers, a profound warmth radiated up through her entire body. He squeezed her hand gently, and for a moment it was like he didn’t want to let go. She didn’t want to either. Their eyes met, and they both could feel the same strong desire they’d felt on the rooftop at Steve’s party—the desire to share but a simple kiss.

“Bye, Tony,” she spoke softly, grateful she had managed to form words.

“Until next time, Ms. Potts,” he murmured, finally letting go of her hand.

“There won’t—“

“Be a next time. I know,” he cut her off, grinning at how good he had already become at finishing her sentences. “I had a good time, though,” he quipped, as thoughts of last night entered his mind again.

“I guess it wasn’t too bad,” she said, her lips tipped up in a grin. She walked off, disappeared into the guest room and closed the door, sighing deeply as she rested her back against the wall. Maybe she was already far deeper into this mess than she had even realized. Her damn heart. She could never trust her damn heart.

Stabbed

Chapter Notes

It took me forever to update this, and trust me, I'm just as frustrated about it as you are... I promise this won't be one of those slow burn fics that takes like 50 chapters for the couple to get together but y'all know what they say about patience being key lmao Please excuse any medical inaccuracy.

Tony stormed into his father's office and leant over his desk, his face inches from Howard's. "I thought we had an agreement?"

It took a moment for Howard to regain his voice. "And that agreement still stands."

Tony leaned closer. "Then how come they just cancelled our audition for Phil Coulson, because someone else came up to them... someone who happens to be signed to *you*?" An angry glint rose in his eyes. "You know how long we've been waiting for a shot to perform in front of a famous record producer."

"Coulson's heavily linked to Fury Sounds. I mean, really, Tony? That's where you're trying to get a foot in the door?" Howard got out of his chair and walked straight over to the bar to pour himself a drink.

"You promised to stay out of it," he hissed.

"If you're accusing me of stealing your spot, you're wasting your breath. You wouldn't have made it anyway," Howard stated bluntly, taking a sip. "You still have so much to learn, son. But I told you before, and I'm telling you again, there's a contract in the top drawer of my desk, and all it needs is your signature. So why don't you come off your high horse and do yourself a favor."

"Or *you*?" He paused, just staring at him, then raised an eyebrow and said, "You know, Howard, for someone who claims we don't have what it takes, you seem rather desperate to sign us."

"I'm just looking out for you," he argued, sitting back down in his chair.

Despite his anger, Tony had to laugh at the ridiculousness of his father's words. "No, you are trying to force me into doing business with you, so you can dictate my life the way you always have, ever since I was a little kid."

"You still *are* a kid," Howard said, chuckling. "I mean, look at you. You're being childish. Forget about that *one* audition, Tony. If you really wanna work with the best people in the

music business, I can connect you with a thousand other Coulsons. You can have *five* auditions *today*, and an entire album ready to be released next *month*.”

“I just wanted *this* one,” Tony growled, his hot breath blowing in Howard’s face like the snorts of an angry bull in Pamplona.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry,” he scoffed. “You knew exactly whose spot you were stealing, but that didn’t stop you from pulling out that big ass check and ruining my fucking day.”

“Hey, take it down a notch with the swear words, alright? Have some manners.”

Slamming his fist on the desk, Tony called out, “God, I can’t believe this,” forcing a chuckle. He glared at his father for another moment. “The great Howard Stark teaching me about manners.”

“As long as you’re under my roof, you’re gonna treat me with respect, or I *will* have you escorted out of the building.”

Tony threw his hands up in the air, playfully, only to challenge him, and took a step back from the desk. “Oh, by all means, please do. Throw me out. Show me who’s boss, *dad*.”

He was so angry. And he was hurt. He didn’t want to be, but he couldn’t help how he felt. The fact that his father still managed to disappoint him, even after all this time, said a lot about him. He hadn’t changed. He was never going to change. Howard would always be the same manipulative person that he had always been. Tony tried not to let that get to him. He tried not to care about all the things his father ever did or said to him, but not giving a fuck was so hard. There were too many emotions to keep in check. Why couldn’t Howard just let him have this one thing? This *one* chance to prove himself? Why did he have to ruin everything?

When Tony’s face hit the sidewalk, he couldn’t help but laugh, seeing all the feet of people walking by as though he didn’t exist. Now, *this* was where he belonged obviously—out on the streets, completely unnoticed.

*I'm deep inside a bubble
And there's no one here to shoot me out
The storm inside my head
Got me tossing and turnin'*

*Each and every night
I've been a victim of my brain
I know I gotta take a rest
But I just don't know how*

*My twisted universe
Just won't let me go*

Virginia looked at the words and sighed deeply. She hated overthinking things, but lately it seemed to be all she did. She couldn't stop thinking of how she spent the night at Tony's and how different it had been from what she'd expected. She couldn't stop thinking about her father telling her that he hadn't sold a painting in forever and really started questioning his talent as an artist. He was so gifted. Different, but gifted, and she wished other people saw that too. She couldn't stop thinking about love, feelings in general, and how complicated they made her life sometimes.

When her phone rang, she jumped, then looked at the clock and wondered who would try to get in touch with her at this late hour. She didn't know the number, but chose to take the call anyway.

"Yes, this is she," she answered, frowning. "I—Are you sure? I'm not related to him or anything. I'm just someone he happens to know, so I'm a bit confused as to why he said you should call me." She paused. "No, I mean, I guess I could... It'll take me a while, though." She grabbed her jacket and her bag, making sure to take her key card this time, and went out into the hallway. "Can you tell me what happened? I understand if this is confidential but—" Her jaw dropped and she covered her mouth with one hand. "Oh God! How much longer will he be in surgery?" She waited. "What about permanent damage? I mean, his heart, is it—Okay, yeah... I'll be there soon." Outside, she walked half a mile until she found a cab. Her head was spinning like crazy and all she could think about was him.

As she arrived at the hospital, Virginia asked for his name, and when they told her, she could see him in about an hour, she started to get really nervous. She had been worried before but now she kept wondering why she was even there and it made her feel anxious. He had so many people he could've called. Why her? Of all the people he knew, why was *she* the one he chose to call in an emergency? Was it just a game to him or did he actually trust her with his life, like, wow, that would truly blow her mind.

She wore her denim jacket over a tasseled white flowing top which was reminiscent of the sixties but the denim offered an edge. The black pleated skirt coupled well with the upper outfit, and clinging to her feet were a pair of cream-colored flats. She felt totally overdressed for a hospital visit, but considering she had been only minutes away from getting ready for bed, this was still better than her PJs. Eyes downcast and hands plucking nervously at her jacket, she walked down the hall. Maybe she should write a song about this moment, because it sure was one of the most awkward moments of her life.

"Tony?" she whispered his name, not knowing if he could even hear her.

His face was swollen, and it was blue. His lip was busted and puffy. One of his eyes was bandaged with tape. On his brow, a line of sutures oozed with the swelling. He had an IV going to his left arm, and electrodes covered his chest, monitoring his heartbeat. His eyes were closed, but the eyelids trembled delicately, frantically, at the sound of her voice, as if there were two tiny creatures underneath struggling to escape. When the door shut behind her, Tony opened them and stared in confusion at his surroundings, before he noticed her standing by his bedside.

He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. What the hell had happened to him? He couldn't remember. He struggled to sit up. She reached for the controls and pushed a button.

The bed slowly rose. He noticed she swallowed thickly as she averted her eyes and stared at his chart. She could make nothing of the doctor's squiggles. Virginia wondered how much morphine they were pumping into him to help with the pain. Drugs scared her; she didn't like being out of control. That was one reason why she barely got drunk—Steve's party was a rare occurrence.

"You look beautiful."

"W-What?" She looked right at him, startled.

"I said... You look beautiful."

Instinctively, Virginia took a step back as though he had threatened, not complimented her.

"What happened?" he asked, touching the bruises on his face.

"You don't remember?" she asked back, gently staring at his pale, white figure.

"I remember arguing with my father, then I went to some bar to have a few drinks."

"A few?" she scoffed. "You had so much to drink you got into a fist fight."

He laughed until he collapsed in a coughing fit. She approached him and pounded on his back, then handed him a glass of water.

"This isn't funny, Tony," she scolded him, "Your heart..." She paused, swallowing.

"What?"

Her eyes shifted down, and he followed her gaze. Then he noticed the huge bandage on his chest, right where his heart was. When he touched it, he winced. It was so painful.

Virginia tried to recall all the things they had told her about his stab wound. How the knife had punctured Tony's chest and almost his aorta; the amount of blood loss he'd suffered. That scar tissue would now be a constant reminder to him that he had cheated death by just an inch.

"You could've died," she whispered, looking at him again.

"And you would've cried for me?" he quipped.

"Why did you list me as your emergency contact?" she asked, ignoring his question. "Why didn't you ask one of your friends to come? Or your mother?" Did he even realize the awkward position he had put her in? Did he even care?

"Well, I figured since you don't like me, you think the worst of me anyway, and so you won't judge me for... you know, *this*," he explained. "And my mother, she's... I don't wanna worry her."

“Oh, but it’s totally okay if *I’m* worried?” Virginia grunted, only realizing what she had said when she saw the look on his face. “Don’t flatter yourself, I meant hypothetically.”

“Sure you did,” he said, grinning. One thing he had learned tonight: She was feisty and quick-witted and when she wasn’t tearing strips off him her personality was sweet and caring. “You know, maybe I should get into fights more often, so you take care of me.”

“I’m only here to tell you that I’m *not* gonna be the one who makes sure your ass is taken care of,” Virginia answered. “I don’t care about what happens to you, Tony, I just wanna be left alone.”

“Now you’re lying,” he said, chuckling. “Who you’re gonna fight with when I’m dead, huh? You do care about me, Pep, I can tell.”

She rolled her eyes. “How much morphine are they giving you?”

Tony laughed and the lines creased around his mouth and eyes. How on earth did he still look so handsome, even with a bruised face like that?

“Mr. Stark?” A nurse came in to check on him, and as Virginia stepped aside, the woman looked at her and smiled. “Are you his girlfriend?”

“Yes,” Tony said.

“No,” Virginia replied.

“Well, you have a lovely *friend*,” the nurse answered, smirking, “but I’m afraid she’s gonna have to leave soon.”

Tony’s breath left him in a gasp as his face screwed up in pain when she touched him. “How long do I have to be in here for?” he growled.

“Two weeks maybe. At least a few days.”

“No, no, no, no,” he argued. “I can’t be in hospital for that long. Everyone’s gonna be wondering where I am.”

“Then you better tell ‘em,” Virginia said.

“You don’t understand. I—“

“I *do* understand,” she cut him off. “You don’t want anyone to know that you’re in here, looking like a train ran over you, ‘cause you wanna keep being the invincible Stark... Mr. ‘I don’t have a weak bone in my body.’” The words hissed out through gritted teeth. “Well, I got news for you, *honey*,” she said, rolling her eyes the way only she could, he thought, “You just had an emergency open heart surgery and you almost didn’t make it. You’re *actually* human. So, you might wanna think about dropping this Mr. Incredible shit and admit that you’re just like everyone else.”

The nurse smiled, and then left the room with a big grin on her face. The tension in the air was palpable, but she had been in enough situations like these, feeling like an intruder in a hospital room with two strangers, to know that whatever was going on between them was just like a volcano waiting to erupt. There was so much left unsaid, feelings, seething like molten lava in the breasts of these inarticulate people.

Tony needed a moment to find words, and when he didn't, he just started grinning at her. He had noticed it before but, God, she was really hot when she was angry. And sexy. She was so

"I can see this is all still a game to you, and since I already told you not to involve me in any of this, I have no more reason to stay."

As she turned around, Tony came to realize that she really wasn't the kind of girl to play games with. "Hey, I admit it! My fault. Sorry," he tried to speak with as much strength as he could muster. "I'm a piping hot mess."

"Oh, really?" Virginia looked at him, eyebrows raised. "Well, I didn't notice that, at all," she scoffed.

"C'mon, Pep, help me out here, okay?" He sighed. "I'm supposed to meet my mother for dinner tomorrow. Can you please cover for me?"

She was surprised to hear how soft his voice could sound.

"Please just tell her I ditched uni for a while and went on a bender. I was in pretty bad shape, so you had to drive me to rehab upstate. No visitors allowed."

"She's really gonna believe that, isn't she?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," he admitted.

Wait, did that mean he had an actual drinking problem? She frowned. Or was it drugs? With him, it could be both.

"I think my phone's in the... the bag over there, with my other belongings."

"You want me to call her right now?" Virginia looked at him surprised.

"It's only 10.30, I'm pretty sure she's still up."

"But don't you think she deserves a good night's sleep before hearing about... I mean, if I were a mom, I'd still be worried, even if this happened before." She paused. "Also, I have to warn you. I'm a really bad liar."

Tony laughed softly, and the move of his chest sent shafts of pain spearing through his body again. And still more pain was caused when a cough attempted to come on. "Just call her," he groaned.

After she let him unlock his phone, she dialed Maria, and felt her heart pounding in her chest. That woman meant so much to her after all, career-wise, Virginia couldn't believe she was actually going to talk to her.

"H-Hi, I'm... My name's Virginia Potts. Sorry, I know it's late, but I'm calling about your son." She couldn't stop her voice from shaking a little. Looking at Tony, she tried to make out his thoughts. Did he notice how nervous she was? "No, I'm not his girlfriend." She saw him smirking. "I'm just... No, I'm also *not* sleeping with him." Virginia turned her back to Tony, not wanting him to see her blush. Oh God, this was so awkward! "Listen, y-you don't have to worry about him, okay? I made sure he's in good hands." She hit her palm against her forehead. "Right, I didn't even tell you what happened yet. Oh my God, I'm so sorry." She mouthed *shit*, heard Tony giggle, and promised herself to kill him right after this phone call. "He went off the rails, y'know, with alcohol and... and stuff... so I-I had to... Yes, that's where he is." She ran a hand through her hair, it always helped with calming her nerves. "You're not allowed to see or call him, but he wanted you to know that he's sorry for..." She paused briefly. "Being such a narcissistic asshole."

Tony couldn't believe she managed to tell that to his mother with a straight face. As it turned out, she was really good at lying after all. He smirked, watching her finish that call, then arched an eyebrow at her. "Narcissistic asshole, huh?"

Virginia put the phone on the table, trying not to think of the fact that she really did just say that to her idol. She badmouthed Tony in front of his own mother. Good God, she would never be brave enough to face Maria now, after that horrifying experience. "Don't ever, ever, ever, ever ask me to do anything like that ever again," she said with a sigh.

"You know that wasn't the worst encounter with a fan she ever had," Tony answered, grinning.

"I did you a favor, so don't rub it in."

"Yes, you did." The look on his face instantly changed. "And you didn't have to do that, so, thank you, Pepper," he said with such sincerity in his voice, she felt her features soften. "I just need one more, tiny favor."

"Uh-huh." She shook her head. "I'm done here, Tony. I don't owe you anything."

"That's right, you don't, but I was hoping you'd take care of my roommate. You know, my friends aren't necessarily good with... *him*... and you two seemed to get along quite well, so..." He flashed her a smile. "I need someone to take care of my cat while I'm gone, and you are the most capable, qualified, trustworthy person I've ever met."

She was so surprised to hear those words from him, her jaw dropped slightly. Must be the pain killers, she thought. He wasn't usually this *nice*. "O-okay... yeah... s-sure," she stammered, "I'll take care of him."

"Thank you," Tony said, still smiling. "Just take my keys. And feel free to stay at the loft whenever you want"

“I-I... Uh, thanks... I guess?” This night had gotten so confusing. “I think I’ll go now.”

“Yeah, I’m actually pretty tired,” he replied.

“Goodnight then.” She waved at him, and then rushed out the door, the keys to his loft in her hands.

“What was that?” Tony mumbled, smirking at her awkward hand gesture, as he leaned back into the cushion. That woman really was something else.

Proof That Tony Stark Has a Heart

Chapter Notes

One thing this story has taught me is that it's best to finish a multi chap fic before posting it. But it is what it is, so I hope you'll stick with me until the end. Thank you for all the comments and kudos. It means the world!

Not much is happening in this chapter except it builds character :')

We're finally getting somewhere, folks!

I started calling her Pepper in this. Is that cool with you? :D

A few weeks later, May and Pepper found themselves sitting in their favorite booth in the corner of the pub.

"Okay, so what am I lookin' at here?" May asked, her eyes glued to Pepper's cell phone. "Is that Tony Stark holding a baby in his arms?" She frowned.

"Yep," Pepper replied, putting the phone back in her pocket. "I was at the hospital yesterday to tell him about Thor, his cat," she began to explain, "I couldn't find him in his room, so I went looking for him, and..."

"Aw, please don't tell me he's one of those people who spend their time in the NICU cuddling babies," May groaned. There was a pause. "Tony Stark? Really, babe?"

Pepper nodded. "Looks like he's not the cold-hearted bastard we thought he was."

"Wow, I'm shocked," May chuckled. "What else have you learned about him?"

"Well, he has a beautiful loft. His cat worships me." That part made her smile. "And all the songs that his band plays are written by him, but I don't know if he can actually sing."

"He writes the lyrics?"

"Apparently, he does. But he doesn't want anyone to know."

"I only saw them play a couple of times, but those songs were really good." May sipped her beer and continued, "Do you think he's embarrassed? Or is he insecure?"

"How the hell should I know?" Pepper said, laughing. "He didn't say. He just told me not to tell anyone about it."

"It's hard to imagine that he's the one who's written so much about love and heartbreak."

A deep chuckle erupted from Pepper's chest. "That's what I was thinking. But it looks like there's a lot of stuff he's hiding."

"What is going on between the two of you?"

Just as Pepper was about to answer, a wave of excitement swept through the pub as someone burst through the door. He made his way toward their booth, his face aglow with unspeakable joy.

"Mom! Gigi!" Peter yelled breathlessly. "You won't believe what happened today!"

The two women exchanged amused glances before motioning for Peter to take a seat. He slid into the booth beside his mother. Intrigued by his bubbling enthusiasm, she leaned forward, eager to hear his news.

"What is it, Peter?" May asked, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"I wrote my first song today," Peter announced triumphantly.

"Really? That's incredible," Pepper chirped, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She knew firsthand the thrill of creating music.

Peter nodded vigorously. "Yeah, it just poured out of me, you know? It was amazing!"

"Congratulations," May said with a smile as she placed a hand on her son's, her expression full of pride. "I'm so proud of you, baby. I can't wait to hear what you've come up with. Wanna tell us more?"

Peter took a deep breath. "I was sitting in my room, strumming my guitar, when suddenly these words came to me," he began. "I couldn't stop myself from writing it all down. And then one melody after the other started to flow, like a river of music".

Captivated by Peter's passion, Pepper laughed softly. She recognized that spark of inspiration, that magical moment when creativity took hold.

"It's a beautiful feeling when the music takes over and you're just swept away by the melody and the words." A warm smile spread across her face.

"Will you sing us that song?" May asked, running her hand through her son's hair. "Or perhaps later, alone?"

Peter glanced around the pub as if trying to count how many people were there, then reached into his backpack and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

With a tremor of nerves and excitement, he unfolded it and began to sing. The melody wrapped around the room, mesmerizing everyone within earshot.

May and Pepper looked at each other, their eyes shimmering with tears. As they watched the young boy pour his heart and soul into his music, unleashing a talent that he had only just discovered, they quickly realized the raw talent and potential that lay within his words.

At the end of his performance, the room erupted in applause, and May and Pepper stood up to join the ovation. Once they were all seated again, Pepper gave him a light slap on the arm.

"You have a gift, Peter," she said softly, her mouth twisted into a gentle smile. "The ability to create something that touches the hearts of the people around you is a precious talent. Cherish it, nurture it, and never stop exploring the depths of your musical journey."

"Thank you," he murmured.

"You know what?" Pepper went on. "I think we should collaborate. Let's work on your song together. Bring it to life. Your words and my voice intertwined in harmony. What do you say?"

Peter's face lit up, a mixture of surprise and gratitude washing over him. "I'd love that. Having you sing my song would be a dream."

May, proud of her son's accomplishment, beamed with joy. She watched as the two most important people in her life connected in a way that went beyond words. It was a connection that only those with a true understanding of the magic of music could possibly have.

"I'll be happy to find a studio for you."

All three jolted to attention. It was Pepper who was the first to turn her head.

"You?"

"Yes, me," Tony flashed her his trademark grin. "Missed me?"

Pepper quickly regained her composure. "Remember when I told you he was stalking me?" she growled, her words directed at May. "Well, here's your proof."

"I'm not stalkin' you. I'm just payin' my boy Jarvis a visit," Tony said, smiling. "Oh, and who is that young talent I heard singing a moment ago?" His eyes sought Peter's, and he grinned. "What's your name, buddy?"

A little nervously, he answered, "Peter Parker."

Tony gave him an appreciative nod and said, "You have a great voice, Peter Parker." The boy mumbled his thanks, but before he could say anything, Tony's focus had already shifted to someone else. "And this must be your mom. A little young for a mother, aren't you?"

"Wow, you weren't kidding. He *is* a tool," May sneered, eyeing Pepper.

"Hey, that was a compliment," Tony said with a chuckle.

"Aren't you here to see Jarvis?" Pepper said. "When did you get out anyhow?"

"Of prison?" Peter gasped, instinctively moving closer to his mother as if seeking protection.

Tony let out a big laugh. "You're funny, boy!" Then he looked at Pepper. "Today, actually. I feel as good as new." A grin appeared on his face. "Did my cat behave?"

"Better than you," Pepper muttered.

"Hey, Mr. Stark," Peter said, interrupting their conversation. "Do you really have access to a recording studio?"

"Sure do, buddy," he replied. "I'm in a band, you know."

"Oh, my God!" Peter jumped out of the booth, any reservations he once had about the stranger suddenly disappearing. "That is so cool!"

"Peter, sweetheart..." May got him to turn around and look at her by gently placing her hand on his back.

"Mom, please," he pleaded. "Can I go see where they practice? Can I go with Mr. Stark? Maybe he can teach me a couple of riffs on the guitar." He had a quick look at Tony. "Do you play?" At his nod, Peter's eyes were back on his mother. "He can teach me some stuff."

"I don't trust him, honey," May said earnestly and sighed. She had no desire to be a spoilsport with her son.

"Then trust *me*," Peter urged her. "I know what I'm doing."

Pepper's eyes rested on Tony as she wondered how sincere he was in sharing his experience with May's child. Her gut instinct told her to be more protective of Peter, to keep him away from that man, but something else inside her told her that having Tony around as a musician could actually be good for Peter.

"What do you think, Ginger?" May pondered.

The look on Tony and Peter's faces almost made Pepper laugh, as both now seemed to be waiting for her approval. She couldn't help but smirk.

"I don't know," she mused, dragging it out.

"Come on, auntie," Peter begged. It wasn't fair that he used that pet name. How could she deny him?

"Hold on. I got you, kid," Pepper said, pulling out her cell phone to make a call. "Hey, it's me. Are you in today? I could use your babysitter services." Her lips curled up in a small smile. "Great. Thanks. I owe you big time."

Before anyone could ask a question, a burly and robust individual with a solid build walked through the service door. His face was clean-shaven, and his hair was kept short and neat. He was of average height and had a slightly stocky build. Dressed in formal attire, a well-tailored

suit that showed professionalism and attention to detail, his presence was immediately noticeable among the other people in the pub.

Pepper turned to Peter and smiled. "You remember my cousin, Happy?"

"Hi, Peter," Happy greeted the young boy. Then he let his eyes drift over to Tony. "This is him? Thee Tony Stark?"

Pepper nodded, grinning.

"Uh, what's going on here?" Tony asked. His brow knitted in confusion. "Who's the big guy?"

"I'm the one who's gonna keep an eye on your behavior around the boy," Happy announced. "No worries, May. I have this under control," he said with a pat on Peter's back.

"So, does that mean that I can go now?"

"Yes, it does, Peter." May replied with a smile. "Just be back in an hour, okay?" She took his hand and gave it a light squeeze.

"Of course, I promise," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Thanks, mom. I love you." He leaned in to give May a kiss on the cheek, and then he turned to Tony and said, "What kind of music do you guys play? How many members do you have in the band? What's the title of your debut album?" He was shooting questions at him like bullets. "Have you ever played any festivals?"

Tony stopped him with a wave of his hand, "Whoa, easy there, champ. One question at a time, all right?" He gave Happy a suspicious look. "I'm not sure I like having you follow me around, but I kinda like the kid, so..."

Pepper looked at May, trying to make her eyes say, 'Did he just say that?,' and May returned the look with a lopsided smirk.

"I think my son likes your man," she said after the others were gone.

Pepper rolled her eyes. "He's not my man. He's..."

What was he to her, exactly? The answer to that question was so difficult that Pepper sighed deeply in frustration. Well, there was one thing Tony Stark was not: a nobody.

"What's wrong?" May asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

Pepper glanced over to the small stage that was set up in the corner of the pub, where Tony was showing Peter around, letting him sit behind the drums, strum a chord on the piano, or play the guitar.

Peter had the same look on his face that he'd had when he'd first come through the door. And Tony's expression was one of care and love. Even his smile seemed to be genuine. It was a smile that made her heart flutter. God, did she hate that.

May followed Pepper's gaze and had an instant smile on her face. "He's embarrassingly cute with my child, eh?"

Pepper looked at her, sighing. "You know, he's actually got me believing it's all an act."

"What do you mean by that?"

"His whole brand. It's just a performance," Pepper said, sounding convinced. "Almost like standing onstage and playing for an audience." She paused for a few moments to reflect.

"When I saw him in that hospital... I don't know, but some of it felt different."

"You're intrigued to dig deeper, huh?" May snickered. "But, you know... Some people can't be fixed, Virginia."

"I'm not trying to fix him, May," Pepper replied, "I just feel like there's more to him than he's letting on, and there's a part of me that really wants to..."

"Do you like him, then?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

"No," Pepper groaned. "But you know this—" she pulled out her phone and opened the photo she had secretly taken of him at the hospital, "—is proof that Tony Stark has a heart."

"And you wanna do what? Confront him about it?" May guessed.

"I just wanna know why he's hiding it," Pepper said, shrugging. "Now, can we talk about something else, please?"

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