The Captain's Bride

by CreativeReading

Summary

Steve Rogers finally meets someone who understands him, but she's harboring a secret of her own. Warning- Since this is a mystery, any comments for this story may contain spoilers for some of the plot points! Set after "Avengers", but before "Captain America: The Winter Soldier".

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Notes

Author's Note - I own nothing from Marvel. All the OCs are mine.
Chapter 1

Ch.1

Everything went by too quickly. Life was a blur. Steve thought he would get the hang of it, that he would somehow be able to adapt to losing seventy years of history. But he constantly felt like he was on edge, drowning. He was always a step behind, smiling blankly when someone made a pop culture reference or joke.

Life seemed crude and over the top nowadays. It's not as though Steve was a prude. He did travel around with showgirls and their costumes were hardly nun's habits. He'd spent time in the army surrounded by the other guys' drawings and photos of pin-up girls. However, that really didn't compare to reading about a celebrity's lack of underwear on a magazine cover while trying to buy bread at the local grocery store.

And it wasn't just the current stuff that threw him off. A mention of the Beatles or Marilyn Monroe would send him into a scramble, trying to quickly figure out what people were talking about. He thought this time-based culture shock would wear off in a few weeks, but here it was, months later, and he was still floating, unsure of himself and always feeling out of step.

He liked being sent on missions the most. After the Battle of New York, he began working for S.H.I.E.L.D. full time. On missions, he had a job and he could do it well. They still called him Captain and let him make most of the military decisions, although he didn't fail to notice that there was someone with extensive technological training sent with him to modify his commands if need be. At first, he resented these babysitters, but he had to admit that, on more than one occasion their counter-commands had meant the difference between success and failure on a mission.

It was the down time in New York that was the hardest. He had been relocated to the "Avengers" Tower, since several floors of Stark's building had been transferred over to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s control. It was an uneasy alliance at best. Tony didn't fully trust S.H.I.E.L.D. and vice versa. It helped that Tony spent a lot of time at his house in Malibu, only jetting out to New York a couple of times a month.

Stark was so hard for Steve to deal with. He was brash, impulsive and definitely not a team player. Although they had bonded over fighting the Chitauri invasion, they had a hard time getting over their basic personality clashes. Nobility and self-sacrifice didn't come automatically to Stark and it frustrated Steve to no end whenever they went out on rare missions together.

But Stark's attitude when they were back in New York was the worst. His snide jokes and put-downs just grated on Steve and reminded him of the schoolyard bullies from when he was a kid. He tried to remind himself again and again that Stark had many great qualities, but it was lost whenever Tony hit him on the back and called him, "Gramps."

Being out of touch with technology and the modern world was especially grating living in the Tower. There was an omnipresent A.I., JARVIS, which would, all of a sudden, without notice, begin giving him messages or reminders. Luckily, Bruce Banner was staying at the Tower also and helped him whenever he could. When not rampaging as the Hulk, Bruce was a quiet, thoughtful scientist and tried to smooth things over between Tony and Steve as best he could. Bruce was the one who filled him in whenever Steve felt lost. Normally, Steve wouldn't have much in common with an advanced scientist, but Bruce's sense of decency and kindness made him one of Steve's few
friends.

So, Steve's life alternated between missions and staying holed up in his room at the Tower.

His few attempts to get out in the world ended in failure. He actually dated a waitress from his favorite cafe, Beth. She had been so thankful and enthusiastic after the Battle of New York that when he saw her at the newly rebuilt cafe, he agreed to go out to dinner with her, even though he had a few reservations.

They went out twice, and although she was pretty and sweet, he didn't feel anything more for her than friendship. It shouldn't have hurt so much, then, when he received a voicemail the following week that she was back with her ex-boyfriend and "working it out". He received a wedding invitation from her a few months later, so he guessed they were successful.

Steve had been avoiding the cafe for weeks, but one day, in a lull between missions, he forced himself to leave his room and venture downstairs and the few blocks to get some coffee. He had found out from one of the other waitresses that Beth had gotten another job in the city where her fiance lived, so there would be no more awkward hellos on the rare occasions that he treated himself to an overpriced coffee.

The inside was overly crowded, not a free table in sight. He motioned to one of the waitresses that he'd be at one of the outside tables and then made a beeline for the last free one. Just as he was about to sit down, he saw a blur out of the corner of his eye. Once seated, he looked up to see a woman in the chair across the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't see you. I was just trying to snag the last table. It's really busy today," she said as way of apology. She was pretty without being obvious about it, long reddish blond hair that curled wildly, light green eyes and an enormous smile. He told himself he wasn't checking her out, although he was more than a bit disappointed that her bulky sweater left her figure completely obscured.

"It's fine," he replied with a smile. "We could share?" he suggested.

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Everyone around here always has their laptop out and they hog these tables like mini offices all day."

Steve nodded. He'd noticed the same thing, people spending hours camped out in one spot.

She cleared her throat, "Um, can I ask for another favor? Could we switch seats? I don't want to stare at that the whole time." She gestured to the newly reconstructed Tower.

"Sure, I can understand; bad memories," Steve said as he stood. After moving, he asked, "Did you know someone that got hurt in the attack?"

"A kid in my class; his mom was working in one of the buildings. She's still in a coma. Doctors don't know what kind of brain damage she'll have when or if she wakes up."

"That's rough. How old's the kid?"

"Five. I teach kindergarteners."

That hit Steve hard. He had assumed that the girl was talking about a college classmate, not a little kid. Five years old.
"So, I take it you're not reading that for class?" he asked.

The girl looked down at her book, a worn paperback copy of Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis. She smiled and shook her head, "Sometimes, when life doesn't make sense, it can help to go back to the basics. Have you ever read it?"

"Can't say that I have."

"That's understandable. It's an older book. It was first published, let's see," she flipped to the inside cover, "in 1952. Way before your time."

Steve had to grin. It seemed this girl didn't have any idea who he was.

"It's one of my favorites. I must have read it at least four different times. Lewis had this amazing ability to articulate complex ideas that I've always wanted to be able to say so succinctly."

"Sounds a bit old-fashioned," Steve said offhandedly.

"Try timeless; there's a difference." She blushed. "Sorry to get so worked up, like I said, it's one of my favorites."

"So, do you study lots of different religions?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Big Bad Voodoo Daddy," Steve read upside down from the card she was using as a bookmark.

"Oh, it's the name of the band. Have you heard of them?"

"Can't say that I have." Steve didn't want to admit that he really didn't know any bands after 1944.

"You have to hear them; they're great." She began to fiddle with her phone and Steve began to fidget. Modern music, on the whole, was a bit too jarring for him. Stark's favorite band, AC/DC, was considered "old school" and it was still too much for Steve to take.

"Here; listen," she said, offering him an earbud.

To Steve's surprise, he heard music that was squarely in the the swing / big band era. His eyes widened a bit.

"Great, aren't they? They've been around for ages, since the late 80s."

Around for ages. The phrase made him grin.

"So, you like this kind of music?" he asked neutrally.

"They're my favorite. My friends and I go to their concerts whenever they're in New York."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they're playing this Saturday night at the Crimson Lounge. We go all out; get dressed up in period clothes, swing dance; it's so much fun."

"Dressing like the 1940s and listening to swing music is your idea of fun?" Steve asked incredulously.
"You have to give it a try. I know it sounds silly, but I promise you that you'd have a great time,"
she said with a smile.

Steve thought for a moment. He had to admit, it was the most tempting offer he'd had in a long
time.

"Maybe I will."

"Here, take the card," she said, handing over her bookmark.

As she left the cafe an hour later, she looked down at her phone. A text was waiting for her.

*Has the target taken the bait?*

Stacy sighed and typed, *Yes.*
Chapter 2

The next morning, Steve woke up with the oddest feeling. It was hope. He was actually looking forward to his week. He had real plans to do something social with someone who wouldn't look at him oddly if he referenced World War II or rationing.

He took a shower and got dressed, humming tunelessly to himself. He made himself some coffee and then made the mistake of looking at the morning's newspaper that had been delivered to his front door. There was nothing but bad news in the world, it seemed. He glanced down at the card that Stacy had given him and smiled. Their talk had been so unusual for him exactly because it had been so normal. It had been just two people trying to get to know each other.

In the past two years he had met a few women, but most came off as overly starstruck, much more interested in Captain America than Steve Rogers. Back in the 40s, when he was travelling with the showgirls drumming up business for the war bonds, he allowed himself a few flirtations based solely on his fleeting fame, but they were empty and hollow in the end. The women had only been attracted to the image, not who he really was.

Then, once he had gotten to know Peggy Carter, all other women just seemed to fade into the background. But fate had cheated him from even getting to dance with her, much less having any kind of future with her. After he woke up, he debated going to see her, but ultimately he didn't. He was resigned to let those memories just stay memories.

He tapped the card against the table and turned his mind back to the present. He desperately needed to get out of the apartment and meet people who were at least somewhat normal. He had gone on quite a few missions with Natasha Romanoff and she was a flawless operative, but she was hardly someone you would describe as warm and fuzzy. She was all business while on assignment, although she did make an effort to be helpful, especially when Steve felt lost or confused, which happened far more often than he liked.

Bruce had been kind as always, but he basically lived in one of Stark's labs. Steve could count on one hand the number of times Bruce had left the Tower to do anything social in the last year. Bruce was always willing to help Steve or talk to him when Steve stopped by, but it didn't escape Steve's notice the Bruce had never once sought him out.

And, Stark was, well, Stark.

The more Steve thought about, the better Saturday night sounded. It would be great to get out and be around people. Even in his pre-serum days, Steve had been a loner with only Bucky as his constant companion, but even loners needed to get out of the house once in a while.

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It was Saturday night and Steve looked nervously at the mirror. He fiddled with his tie. He felt ridiculous, getting ready to playact like it was seventy years ago. He had met Stark down in the lobby earlier and lied when he'd asked Steve if he was going out. Steve couldn't endure the thought of Stark teasing him, ridiculing him for trying to relive his past. He'd rather let Stark think of him
as some pathetic shut-in rather than some loser desperately trying to cling to his past.

He plopped down on his couch and contemplated just forgetting the whole thing. Then, he remembered that girl's smile. He stood up. If he could face down machine gun fire, he could surely handle yet another awkward social situation.

He grabbed his leather motorcycle jacket and locked the front door, heading for the stairwell. He took the steps two at a time, allowing himself to fly down the stairs, eager in anticipation.

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He arrived at 6:30 p.m and parked his motorcycle near the entrance. The card had said that doors were open at 6:30 p.m. and that the concert started at 8:00 p.m. Once again, Steve hesitated. On the one hand, he didn't want to wait around in a bar for an hour and a half by himself, on the other, he didn't want to show up at eight and find out that Stacy and her friends had been there the whole time.

He went up to the line outside the bar, noticing that only about half the people were dressed in anything that could be remotely considered period clothing. He started to feel uncomfortable and wondered if he should just leave his jacket on and not check it. He waited in line and craned his neck to look for Stacy.

All of a sudden, he heard a voice behind him and a finger tap him on his shoulder. "Hi, mind if we cut in line?"

He turned and saw her, bundled in a long coat, standing with two other girls and two guys.

"Yeah, sure, hi," he said, beaming.

"Everyone, this is Steve," she said, motioning to him.

"Hi," he waved with a smile to the group.

"Pero, que guapo," said one of the girls to Stacy. She was taller than Stacy, maybe only a few inches shorter than Steve himself, with short brown hair.

"A lo mejor habla español," Stacy replied, warning evident in her tone.

"Pues, estoy segura que no, pero vamos a ver," she said to Stacy. "Hablas español?" the girl asked Steve.

"Uh, what?" Steve said, confused.

"See, I told you," she retorted triumphantly to Stacy.

"Sorry," Stacy said to Steve with an apologetic smile. "This is my roommate, Monica." Monica waved. And this is my other roommate, Erica."

Erica stuck out her hand to shake. She was at least a foot shorter than Steve, even in heels, and her dark hair was pinned up in an elaborate hairdo. "They get like that all the time. When they do, Josh and I just start up in Tagalog," she said with a wink.

"Nice to meet you," Steve said, not knowing what to say.

"This is Josh," Stacy said, motioning to one of the guys that had come with them.
"Hey, man," he said with a nod. He had a stereotypical zoot suit on, dark with white pinstripes. His black hair was so short that it resembled a military crew cut.

"And this is Michael," Stacy pointed to the second guy; he was taller than Steve and heavy-set, built like a football player. He wore a white fedora that matched his suit and contrasted against his dark skin.

"Nice to meet you," he said, extending his hand. "I am glad I won't be the only one left out of the conversations tonight."

"Aww, poor baby. I offered to teach you Spanish and I know Erica was going to teach you Tagalog," Monica said in a teasing tone.

"Well, let me finish grad school first before I try to tackle another language," Michael said dryly.

"So, how do you all know each other?" Steve asked.

"Well, Monica and I have been roommates since freshman year of college. I never would have made it through my Spanish classes without her. She moved here from Spain."

"Mis tíos, my aunt and uncle, they live here. I wanted to go to university abroad and that's how I ended up here," Monica said with a grin.

"Erica, she lived across the hall from us in college. And Josh and Michael, well, we all went to the same college group," Stacy explained.

"College group?" Steve asked.

"Oh, yeah, at our church."

"Oh," Steve said with a polite smile. He used to go to church every Sunday with his mother. Once she passed, it almost hurt too much to go, like it reminded him of her too much. He'd go on holidays or to weddings. Sometimes, Bucky would give him a hard time for not attending or he'd tell him the pastor was worried about him. He realized with a start that he hadn't been to church once since he awoke from the ice, not even on Christmas or Easter, preferring to spend those days on mission, so that his teammates with families could have some time off.

Steve saw that he was almost to the front of the line. "Do you already have your tickets?" he asked.

"Yeah, we got the cheapest ones," Stacy replied.

"Oh, okay," and he winced when he saw the prices. S.H.I.E.L.D. paid him an excellent salary, especially considering that housing and utilities were thrown in for free, but for a man who remembered paying a nickel for a cup of coffee, paying $35 to sit on a bar stool at the back of a crowded bar seemed steep.

He bought the ticket and followed the group into the club to the coat check area. One by one, everyone shed their jackets.

"You did a great job keeping to the period with your clothes," Stacy said.

"Thanks and you look . . . . great." He didn't know if it was the hair, her smile or the way she looked in her green dress, but he was struck by how much she reminded him of Rita Hayworth.

Let's be honest, it was the dress. It hugged every curve and he forced himself to look away to avoid
staring.

"And you look amazing," Michael said, looking down at Erica.

"You have to say that. You're my boyfriend," she said.

"Doesn't change the fact," he said, spinning her around, her red dress flaring around her. He leaned down and kissed her.

"Ugghh, we get it; we get it; you're madly in love. Don't ruin it for the rest of us single people," Monica said in fake disgust before sticking out her tongue.

All of a sudden, Stacy felt her phone vibrate in her clutch purse. She took it out and her expression darkened.

"Bad news?" Steve asked.

"No," she smiled. "Let's go find our seats."

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As they moved across the bar, trying to figure out where their seats were, Stacy looked down at her phone.

"Has the target arrived?"

Stacy's fingers shook slightly. Yes, she wrote. She hesitated a moment and then hit the send button.

"Are you alright?" Steve asked.

"I'm fine," Stacy lied, a wide grin plastered on her face. "Let's get something to drink."

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Steve didn't bother ordering any drinks for himself. It was physically impossible for him to get drunk because of the super-serum and he would need to drink pitchers and pitchers of beer to even get tipsy. At $7 a glass, he wasn't about to waste his money.

He offered to buy the first round and found that it boosted his popularity with the group greatly. Stacy offered to go up to the bar to help him carry the drinks back.

"That was really sweet of you, offering to buy the first round," Stacy said as they started over to the bar.

"Well, I really appreciated you telling me about this concert," Steve said.

"Gotta spread the Big Bad Voodoo Daddy** love around," Stacy said with a grin. "So, do you live around here?"

"No, I live . . . . near the cafe," Steve couldn't bring himself to tell her where he lived. He loved this feeling of normalcy, of being just another face in the crowd. He hadn't realized how much he missed it. He didn't want to ruin it by revealing who he was.

"Wow. Swanky. Are you some type of investment banker or something?" she asked.

"No, um. Military." He hoped she didn't ask him any more questions. Lying to her made him
uncomfortable.

"Cool. My grandfather was in the Army. He served in Korea," she said.

They reached the bar and Steve ordered and paid, leaving the bartender a generous tip. Drinks in hand, they made their way back to their seats.

"So, are your friends teachers, too?" Steve asked.

"Monica teaches third grade at my school. We were so lucky to find jobs at the same place. The job market has been really tough. Michael and Erica are getting their doctorates in biochem together. I'm glad they came out tonight. I feel like they live at the library. And Josh, he's a junior stock broker."

"And you three girls live together?"

"Yep, tiny little studio all crammed together. The good thing is that Erica practically lives at the library and Monica is probably the most popular person I've ever met, so she's out every other night. So, a lot of the time, I get the place to myself."

A chorus of shouts greeted them as they returned to the group with their drinks. Steve grinned. Some things never changed.

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Before he knew it, the concert had started. The music resembled 1940s swing music, but Steve definitely noted modern influences, especially in some of the lyrics. However, it felt familiar and comfortable. It was one of the first social outings he could remember feeling relaxed in.

Steve was relieved to see that the majority of people were not dancing, choosing instead to sway to the music. Steve might have been from the 40s, but his experience with swing dancing was nearly non-existent. He did notice that Stacy and her friends danced to nearly every song and knew all the lyrics, singing along. Michael and Erica were a perfect team, despite their height differences, and were mesmerizing to watch. Josh alternated between dancing with Monica and Stacy and was quite good himself.

After several polite refusals, he finally gave into Stacy's haranguing and let her try to teach him to dance. He had a hard time paying attention to the steps, hyper-aware of how close she was, how it felt to hold her in his arms, even if only to learn how to dance. After the third time he stepped on her feet, she suggested that they take a break.

"Sorry about your foot," Steve said.

"Hey, no worries. The first time I tried to learn to dance I elbowed Josh in the face. I nearly broke his nose. There was blood everywhere."

Steve chuckled. That made him feel better about his own misguided attempts at dancing.

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Steve noticed that throughout the night, Josh would look over at him, eyes narrowed, teeth clenched. He hadn't said two words to Steve the whole night, even though Steve had tried again and again to engage him in small talk.

"Hey, Monica. Can I ask you a question?" Steve asked her during a lull in the music.
"Yeah, sure. Ask away."

"Did I do something to offend your friend, Josh?" It wouldn't be the first time Steve had offended someone. Natasha Romanoff gave him no end of grief for calling her "ma'am".

"Oh, yeah, he's probably just jealous. Ignore him. He'll get over it."

"Jealous?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, he and Stacy used to date and now she shows up with this cute new stranger. Also, he's used to being the fox in the henhouse," Monica said.

"What?"

"In our group of friends, there are a lot more girls than guys, so the guys get a lot of attention."

"Sounds like a good group," Steve replied.

"See, you would say that." She winked at him and wandered off to dance to the next song.

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They stayed until the last song, appropriately entitled, "So Long-Farewell-Goodbye". Then, the lights came back on, their harsh glare causing everyone to squint.

"Ugh. I am never wearing heels again," Stacy said, limping as she left the club.

"You say that every single weekend," Monica teased.

"Well, this time I mean it. One of you guys want to carry me home?" she asked, vaguely waving to the guys in the group. Steve was sorely tempted to say he would, but he knew she was joking. He noticed that Josh stiffened and pulled out his phone to ignore the group.

"If I didn't wear heels, I don't think I could reach you," Erica said wistfully to Michael.

"Honey, I'd lift you up," and with that, Michael lifted Erica off the ground.

"Put me down! Put me down!" Erica shouted, laughing so hard that she could barely breathe.

Josh looked up from his phone. "There's an all-night diner open around the corner. Anyone up for coffee?"

Stacy beamed. "I am always up for coffee."

"Girl, you are an addict. I swear. You better get decaf. I'm not having you bounce around the apartment all night," Monica said.

"I have precisely one vice, coffee. Let me enjoy it," Stacy said.

"One vice? For someone who teaches kindergarten, you'd think your counting would be better," Erica teased.

"Ahhh. The abuse I put up with from my so-called friends." Stacy turned to Steve. "Are you coming?"

"Sounds great," he said.
The diner was one of those retro 50s places, where the waitresses wore short red and white pin-striped dresses. Steve chuckled. It seemed as though he was in for a night of manufactured nostalgia. The waitress seated them quickly and took their order, six decaf coffees.

They were in a large booth. On one side, Erica, Micheal and Josh sat together, on the other were Monica, Stacy and Steve. Steve caught Josh staring at him from across the table and then looking down at his phone. After a few minutes, he blanched and quickly put the phone away, giving Steve a nervous smile.

"So, biochem?" Steve said, looking at the happy couple across from him.

"Yep. Erica and I are going to cure cancer," Michael said confidently.


Erica rolled her eyes. "That's what all biochem majors think."

"But you and me, we're going to do it," Michael said with a wink.

"I wish my adviser had your confidence," Erica replied.

"Give it time. Give it time," Michael said.

"Are you greeting tomorrow?" Josh asked Stacy.

"Yeah," Stacy said, stifling a yawn, "but at the 11 o'clock service. You guys want to meet at Starbucks at 10:30?"

Micheal and Erica nodded, but Monica shook her head.

"Sorry, I've got nursery duty at the 9 o'clock," she said.

"Oh, honey, I don't know how you do it. After a week with little kids, the last thing I want to do on Sunday is to be anywhere near someone under 18," Stacy said with a rueful grin.

"What can I say? I love the babies," Monica said.

They chatted for about a half hour more and Steve was surprised at how relaxed he felt, inserting himself into this group of strangers. Monica stood up, apologizing, but pointing out she'd need to get up early. Steve quickly snagged the check and paid for everyone, earning another round of thanks from the group.

Steve was the first one out the door once the bill had been paid and he noticed that Josh ran up to walk next to him.

"Hey, I am so sorry about being such a jerk earlier. I just figured out who you are. I apologize; that was so not cool of me," he said to Steve.

"That's okay. But, can you do me a favor?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, sure."
"Please don't tell anyone. It's nice just being Steve for once," Steve said, hopeful that he'd agree.

"Oh, yeah, I can see that. I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks, buddy," Steve said, glad that he could breathe easy now.

The girls caught up to them with Michael and Erica walking arm in arm.

"We all took the subway here, did you?" Stacy asked Steve.

Steve shook his head, sorry that the evening had to end.

"So, how'd you get here?" Stacy asked.

Steve pointed to his motorcycle down the block.

"Wait, where's your helmet?" Erica asked.

"Um . . . I don't have one," Steve said. He wasn't sure, but he was pretty certain he'd survive most motorcycle accidents due to the super-serum.

"Where are you even from? You can't ride around New York City without a helmet. The cops'll pull you over for sure," Stacy said, her voice rising in concern.

"Not to mention, you could die," Monica pointed out dryly.

"And you could die," Stacy reiterated, gesturing wildly.

Steve was oddly struck by their concern. He didn't want to break the moment by bringing up the unlikelihood of him getting hurt.

"I'll . . . I'll pick one up tomorrow," he replied to her. "Bye, it was nice to meet you all," he said to the group, waving as he turned to walk to his bike.

"You'd better. So, did you like the concert?" Stacy asked, leaving the group behind and following him to his motorcycle.

"Yeah, it was great," Steve replied.

"See, I told you! Are you up for another one? There's one next Saturday night. I got the card for you," Stacy said with a smile.

"Thanks," Steve said, taking it from her and tucking it into his pocket. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"See you next Saturday," she said with a wink, before turning and walking back to her friends.

He watched her leave. Next Saturday couldn't come quick enough.

It wasn't until he got home that he realized that he'd forgotten to get her number. Well, he thought, he'd just see her at the next concert.

Unfortunately, that's not what happened.
Author's notes -

*Rough translation-
How cute is he!
Maybe he speaks Spanish.
Well, I'm sure he doesn't, but let's see.
Do you speak Spanish?

**Big Bad Voodoo Daddy is a real band. No, I am in no way affiliated with them. I wish I were; they are awesome.

***Here's the thing. When I watched that last scene in Avengers, with all of the superheroes riding off, seeing Captain America without a helmet really bothered me. I mean, I can handle alien hordes, green rage monsters, and the glow sticks that rob you of your free will, but have a guy ride around on a motorcycle without a helmet on just broke my suspension of disbelief. And yes, I'm just kidding . . . mostly.
Steve woke up the next morning to JARVIS's artificial voice ringing in his ear. "I'm sorry sir, but you have an urgent phone call on the line that has requested to be put through."

Steve looked blearily over at the clock next to his bed. It was 6:34 a.m. On a Sunday. He couldn't even remember how late it was when he finally fell asleep. "Fine," he said, "Patch it through."

A voice reverberated through the stereos placed around the apartment, "Good morning, Capsicle."

Steve groaned. Of all the people to call him this early in the morning, the last person he wanted to talk to was Stark. Truth be told, he never wanted to talk to Stark.

"I hate to break up your morning routine of prune juice and shuffleboard, but it looks like we got a lead on a Hydra plant."

Steve sat straight up in his bed. S.H.I.E.L.D. had been on the trail of a Hydra weapons facility for weeks, hitting one dead end after another.

"Where?" Steve asked as he got out of bed.

"France. I'm already enroute. Natasha will meet you on the roof in ten minutes. You'd better suit up, buddy."

"I'll be ready," Steve replied.

"Sounds good, Ice Capades. Let's go blast some bad guys."

Ice Capades. Steve gritted his teeth and briefly wondered exactly how much trouble he'd be in if he "accidently" shot Stark in the foot during the next raid.

Steve suited up and grabbed some protein bars and his shield before heading to the roof. He was there in under eight minutes and saw the helicopter coming in for a landing. He hopped on board and seat belted himself in next to Natasha, the pilot. "Good morning, Natasha," he said, trying to mask the exhaustion he felt.

"Late night?" she asked and she grinned as she maneuvered the helicopter in a wide arc.

Steve smiled. Nothing got past her. "Yeah, it was."

"Good night?" she asked offhandedly, but Steve could detect the concern buried in her tone.

"It was great night," he said, grinning in spite of himself.

"Good for you; so let me fill you in," she said and started going over all the mission details. They would arrive at the hellcarrier in a few minutes and then take a plane with a small hand-picked crew to France. Once there, they would coordinate with a contingent of local S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives that would act as backup for the raid.

"And the intel's good?" Steve asked. There had been a lot of false leads lately. At times, it felt like they were chasing their own tails.
"I conducted the interrogation myself," Natasha said, landing the helicopter.

"That's good enough for me," Steve said. He'd seen her work. It was brilliant, the way she was able to play people. Truth be told, it made him a more than a little intimidated by her after seeing her reduce hardened enemy operatives to a puddle of tears, using only words.

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The next day, Steve was crouching outside the warehouse, leading dozens of agents in the raid. Stark was working as air support and would come in through a skylight on Steve's command. There weren't any guards posted, but the tech team had confirmed that the warehouse had been heavily shielded to prevent anyone from detecting how many heat signatures were in the building, a Hydra tactic they'd used more than once. Steve hated going in blind, but there wasn't any time to hesitate.

"On my mark, we'll go in on three . . . One, two . . .," Steve said. There was the telltale sound of glass breaking. Once again, Stark had jumped the gun. Steve shook his head in frustration.

"Three," he said and the S.H.I.E.L.D. forces began to pour into the warehouse from every entrance.

"Well, that was . . . anticlimactic," Steve said as he reached the middle of the empty warehouse, Natasha by his side. Stark slowly descended in front of him, flipping open his helmet, and the rest of the operatives formed a loose circle around them.

"Why does this keep happening? You know I missed a perfectly good massage session to attend this shindig of yours. What a waste of time. You guys obviously have a mole in your organization," Stark said.

"In our organization? What about your organization, buddy?" Steve bit out.

"My organization consists of . . . let's see, . . . me, so unless you're accusing me of . . .," Stark began angrily.

"Guys, guys, settle down. There's a leak somewhere. We need to track it down. What we don't need is to be at each other's throats," Natasha said, placing herself between the both of them.

They left a small contingent of agents behind to look for clues in the warehouse, but it was fairly obvious that the place had been scrubbed and any useful information was gone. Stark returned to New York and Natasha and Steve headed to the local S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters in Paris for a debriefing and, as usual, several hours of pointless meetings. Steve was overwhelmed at how much bureaucracy there was nowadays. He typically spent at least ten times as much time on writing and reading reports or attending meetings as he did planning or commanding missions.

Steve finally ducked out of the last meeting at 6 p.m., deciding to take advantage of the temporary layover and walk around the city. Paris was beautiful, although as he saw couple after couple walk around arm in arm, he felt more than a little lonely. After a quick dinner at a restaurant that he was sure was a tourist trap, given the menu posted in several different languages, he returned to the hotel that his team was staying in. He was tired, still a bit thrown off by the time change and ready to get some shut-eye.

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The next day was another endless round of reports and meetings. He actually wasn't sure what was worse. While his eyes ached from staring at a computer screen, if he had to listen in on yet another presentation done by an analyst who had clearly never been in the field, much less ever seen a
Hydra agent, he might punch a hole in the wall. Every meeting was full of analysis based almost solely on probability and statistical predictions. When did life change? When did people start living their lives hypothetically and theoretically instead of dealing with what actually happened?

As soon as the meetings broke for an afternoon coffee break, Steve bolted from the room, itching to be anywhere but there. Natasha caught up with him. "I've got some good news," she said.

"Please tell me that it is anything but another meeting," Steve said, groaning.

"You're in luck. I just received a text from Director Fury. We have a new assignment."

"Oh, finally," Steve said, relief flooding him.

"Get back to the hotel, pack up your stuff and meet us out at the airfield in an hour," Natasha said.

"I'll be there," Steve said. He was so ready to get some actual work done.

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Sadly for both Natasha and Steve, the next week and a half consisted of criss-crossing the globe, chasing one bad lead after another. Their team was disheartened and Steve's usual good-natured leadership began to sour as more arguments and back-biting broke out among the agents under his command. Finally, Natasha contacted Director Fury and he put the team out of their misery, ordering everyone to regroup back in New York while they tried to figure out another strategy.

Steve arrived at his apartment, weary and frustrated on a Friday night. He had missed the concert with Stacy and her friends the weekend before and, to him, it was just one more thing that caused him to punch his poor pillow in irritation. He kept thinking how nice it had been to have something other than work to hold on to, how carefree he had felt, if only for a few hours. He sighed as he went to bed, hoping that he'd figure out some way to track Stacy down in the morning.

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Steve woke up the next morning with renewed enthusiasm. He could do this. He worked for an organization that tracked people for a living. Surely, he could find one girl in all of New York City.

After getting dressed and making breakfast, Steve sat down to the laptop that S.H.I.E.L.D. had provided for him. He had been introduced to the basics of Internet searches, so he was confident that he could find her in a matter of minutes.

After almost two hours of fruitless searching, Steve nearly crushed the computer in his hands. He realized that after meeting the girl twice, she had spent far more time asking questions about him than he had about her. He doubted the fact that she really liked coffee would help him track her down.

In frustration, he turned to his last resort.

"JARVIS?" he asked the room at large. He was faintly nervous about the response.

"Yes, sir?" the disembodied A.I. responded politely with its faintly cultured accent. It still gave Steve the creeps to talk to JARVIS, made him feel like his every move was being watched.

"I need to find someone. Can you do that?" Steve asked. He almost wished the answer was no.

"Yes, sir. I have access to several different databases not available to the general public," JARVIS
replied.

"Alrighty. Let's get started. Her name is Stacy. I don't know her last name. I do know that she's a kindergarten teacher in New York City."

"Public or private school? Is it a charter school? Do you know the borough?" JARVIS asked in quick succession.

Steve shrugged, but then realized he needed to reply. "I don't know."

"Well, then, I can pull up an array of possible matches," JARVIS said.

All of a sudden, a collection of images was projected onto the far wall. There were only four photos and Steve instantly found Stacy's smiling face among the group.

"That one. On the far left," Steve said.

"Her name is Stacy O'Sullivan. I have programmed her home address, email and cell number into your phone. Would you like to know her current location?"

"Her current location?" Steve asked, bewildered.

"The GPS on her phone puts her at the Café Mystère, located 0.17 miles from Stark Tower."

She was at the café were they first met. Steve grinned. Finally, it seemed as though things were going his way. "Thanks, JARVIS," he said as he tore out of the apartment, grabbing his phone as he charged out of there.

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He saw her sitting at an outside table. Her back was to him and she was hunched over a cup of coffee and playing with her phone.

"Hi, Stacy," Steve said tentatively as he walked around to face her.

Stacy gave a bit of start and quickly put her phone in her jacket pocket. "Oh, sorry, you surprised me. Hi, um, Steve, how are you?"

"I'm good. Do you mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Sure. Go right ahead," she said, her tone friendly, but guarded.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm so sorry that I missed the last concert. I got called out of town for an assignment and I didn't have your number."

"Oh, yeah. You're in the military, right? Look, no worries, it's fine."

"Are you on your way to the gym?" Steve asked, pointing to the gym bag at her feet. She was wearing an oversized red T-shirt under her jacket as well as form-fitting black pants and tennis shoes.

Stacy sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I hate it though. I only go 'cause it's cheap."

"Why don't you like it?" Steve asked.

"It's so crowded, at least whenever I'm off work and can go. And, well, . . . " She blushed and
looked down.

"What else?" he asked, leaning forward.

"It's just," she huffed. "It's got a bit of a meat market vibe. I just hate having a pushy jerk try to hit on me while I'm trying to work out."

"I could see that," he replied, sympathetically.

"So, where do you work out?" she said brightly in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"How did you know I work out?" Steve asked, a bit surprised by the question.

"Yeah, well, muscles like that don't magically appear overnight," she said, waving a hand at him.

Steve chuckled and shook his head. "You'd be surprised."

"So, where? If it's cheaper than what I'm paying now, I'd be tempted to switch," she said as she leaned back and readjusted her messy ponytail.

"There," he said, pointing to the Tower.

"Oh, is that where you work? Are there some sort of military offices there?" Stacy asked.

"Not exactly," Steve sighed. "Now was a good a time as any to let the cat out of the bag. "You see, I haven't told you my last name."

"Is is Stark? Are you his brother? 'Cause you don't look like you're related to him," she said, teasing him.

"No, it's Rogers," Steve said, his body tensing.

"Steve Rogers," she paused. "Wait, you're Captain America?" she asked.

"Yep."

"And I took you swing dancing and tried to tell you about proper 1940s attire. Ugghh, why is there never a sinkhole to swallow you whole when you need it? I'm so, so sorry. I must have seemed incredibly lame," she said apologetically.

"No, not at all. It was refreshing. It was nice just being Steve for once, just a normal guy," Steve replied.

"Wow . . . Oh, no. I hope I didn't offend you with the whole Stark comment. I am sure you guys are like best friends or something like that."

Steve bit back a laugh. "Hardly. So, are you still interested in trying out my gym?" he asked. He was desperately trying to think of a way to make her feel better.

"Am I even allowed in there? Isn't it like superhero only or something?" she asked.

"There's a gym one door down from my apartment. I am the only one on the floor who ever uses it. You're free to come and work out as long as I'm there to let you in," Steve said.

"Really? Because that would be beyond cool," Stacy said and Steve could hear the excitement in her voice.
"Would you want to try it out?" Steve asked and stood up.

Stacy drained the rest of her coffee in one long gulp. She set down the cup and waved over the waitress to pay her bill. "I'd love to."

Steve snagged the bill from the waitress and paid it for Stacy. "It's the least I can do, considering I stood you guys up," he said as he added a large tip, giving Stacy a wink.

"Thank you so much," she said and they started towards the Tower.

As they entered the glass doors of the Tower lobby, Steve waved at the security team seated behind the enormous curved desk to his right, staring at the monitors. There was a team of eight uniformed guards on duty at any one time and Steve had tried to get to know them.

"I'm going to sign her in as my guest," Steve said to the group of guards and one of them nodded back.

"So, I should warn you. Considering what we do, security is pretty tight around here," Steve said with an apologetic smile to Stacy.

"First off, you'll need to have them scan your hand," he said, waving to the device on the security desk. "If your fingerprints are in any database, they will use them to confirm your identity."

"Well, they are," Stacy said as she placed her right hand on the machine inside the lighted outline.

Steve looked over at her. He realized he didn't really know this girl very well at all. Perhaps, she had some sort of a checkered past.

She smiled at him. "I'm a teacher. All teachers are required to be fingerprinted."

"Oh, huh. I didn't know. They didn't do that, back when I was in school," he said, trying to cover for his lapse.

"I'm sure a lot of things have changed," she said.

"You have no idea. Every single day I find out something new," he said.

"Well, that's got to be fun," she said lightly.

"Not as much as you'd think," he said.

"Identity confirmed. Stacy O'Sullivan." The machine responded, sounding vaguely like JARVIS but with a more mechanical twange.

"Next is the full body scanner," he said, pointing to the large machine in the middle of the lobby.

"Kind of reminds me of going on a flight," Stacy said as she approached the chamber.

"According to Stark, this one's a bit more . . . advanced than the ones you'd typically find at an airport."

"Okay, so does my gym bag go through the X-ray machine on the side?" she asked.

"Yeah, along with anything that is metal."
She took her phone and keys from her pocket and put them inside her bag.

"All ready to go," she said.

He waved her through to the scanner and looked over to the guards. After a moment, one of the guards gave them a thumbs up sign and she walked through to the other side, collecting her gym bag and fishing her phone out of it. She put it back in her pocket.

Once Steve finished with his own security checks, they walked towards the elevator together. The doors opened and they went inside.

"Eighth floor," Steve said.

"Yes, sir," JARVIS replied and the elevator doors closed.

"What was that?" Stacy asked.

"JARVIS. He's the real security here. The stuff downstairs was mostly just for show. He's the one who keeps an eye on everyone here."

"Interesting," Stacy remarked as the elevator began to quickly ascend.

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Stacy felt for her phone in her jacket pocket. Without taking it out, she wrote a quick message. "Inside." She looked over at Steve and gave him a smile as she hit send.
Chapter 4

Ch. 4

When the elevator door opened, Steve gestured for her to step out, "Ladies first."

"See, now I know why you're such a gentleman," Stacy said.

"Don't modern men act like gentlemen?" Steve asked as he turned to the left and walked down the hall.

"Some do. A lot don't."

"Well, here's the gym," Steve said, opening the door next to his apartment.

"There's no lock?" Stacy asked.

"Like I said, JARVIS is the real security here. There's some type of electronic locking device on the gym doors, in case of emergency, but I don't think they're too worried about someone walking off with a dumbbell."

"That makes sense."

"If you'd like, you can go ahead and get started and I'll be in once I've changed my clothes," Steve said.

"Sounds good. Thanks again," Stacy said as she entered the gym.

Steve walked one door down to apartment number 6 and placed his palm on the device next to his door to open it. He looked around his apartment as he crossed the threshold and he winced. He usually kept the place rather tidy, but it was a bit of a mess with the dirty cereal bowl and coffee cup out on the kitchen counter, the pile of nearly two weeks of old newspapers strewn across the dining room table and his pajamas from the night before crumpled in a corner. He tore around the apartment, cleaning as quickly as he could, acutely aware that he was racing against the clock.

He went to his bedroom and changed clothes, putting on the usual grey sweatpants and tight white undershirt he wore while boxing. He was aware that many men nowadays seemed to drown in their clothes and often wore outfits that were several sizes too large. He knew he might blend in better if he followed suit, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

He was just about to leave the apartment, when he caught sight of his laptop on the dining room table. The last thing he needed was for her to find out he had tried to investigate her whereabouts. He wanted their meeting at the café to seem like a happy coincidence. He powered down the machine and then decided to stow it in his bedroom. He took one last look around the apartment before heading next door.

He found Stacy already working out in the far corner of the cavernous room. She pulled an earbud out of her ear as he approached. "Did you know you get T.V. on these ellipticals? And the internet? I may never get off of this. I may just have to live in your gym," Stacy said between huffing breaths.
"I'm glad you like it," Steve said. He had never once been on one of those machines. It vaguely reminded him of photos that he had seen of mice running on wheels. He couldn't see the appeal.

He walked over to the heavy punching bag on the opposite side of the large room. He wrapped his hands, preferring that over the bulky boxing gloves. As he began to punch the bag, his eyes kept wandering over to Stacy, the mirrored walls reflecting her image. He caught himself more than once. **Focus, Steve. The only reason she's here is to get away from degenerates. You don't want to seem like a lech.** For a few minutes, he would focus on the bag, the feel of his knuckles against it, the swing of his arms. And then, once again, he'd spot her out of the corner of his eye, bouncing up and down, and he's lose the rhythm of his punches.

After about a half an hour, Stacy finished and started wandering around the gym with her arms crossed. She looked at one weight machine after another and then frowned, biting her lip.

Steve stopped punching the heavy bag and walked over to her. "Do you need some help?"

"Well, it's just that the hardest part of going to a new gym is the weight machines. They are all a little different, so it's hard to know which one here corresponds to the one I usually use at my gym."

"I can see that. Well, what kind of weight machines do you usually use?"

"Well, let's see. I normally just focus on upper body since I figure the elliptical is plenty for the lower. So, I do back, shoulders, biceps, triceps and chest," she said, pointing to various parts of her body.

"Have you considered boxing? It's a great upper body workout."

"Boxing? I don't really know anything about boxing," she said with a shrug.

"I could show you," Steve said, trying to mask the eagerness in his voice.

"Really? Wow. Captain America as my personal trainer. Who could refuse that?" she said, grinning.

"Out of uniform, I'm just Steve," he said, exasperated, his jaw clenching and his words sharper than he'd meant them to be.

"Sorry, I... I didn't mean...," she looked down, obviously nervous and Steve felt like a heel.

"No, I'm the one that's sorry. Why don't we get started? I usually just wrap my hands, but why don't we get you a pair of gloves."

Steve took Stacy through a few of the basics that he learned as a kid. He started with the right way to plant your feet and how to hold your arms. Once she had a good idea of the proper stance, he had her try a few preliminary types of punches. He decided to begin with the jab, correcting her when she twisted awkwardly, showing her how to follow through with her body.

After twenty minutes, Steve could see that Stacy's arms were shaking from the effort.

"Let's just stop here," he said gently.

"But, I didn't get the chance to learn hardly anything," she said plaintively.

"When do you normally work out?" Steve asked.

"Tuesdays and Thursdays after dinner and Saturday mornings," Stacy replied, taking off her
gloves.

"Why don't you come over this coming Tuesday night and you can work out and I'll show you some more?" he said, excited at the prospect of seeing her on a regular basis.

"Really? That'd be great," she said. "I'd better go hit the showers. I've got to meet Monica for lunch."

Stacy grabbed her gym bag and headed to the women's bathroom at the back of the gym. Less than ten seconds later, she emerged with a panicked look on her face.

"There are no showers!"

Steve nodded. That made sense. Since everyone who used the gym on this floor lived in the Tower, there was no reason to add showers to the bathrooms.

"I have to meet Monica in an hour. I don't have time to go home and shower before seeing her," Stacy said, her voice rising.

"You can," Steve paused, not wanting to scare her off, "use mine. It's just next door."

"Are you sure?" she asked, hopefully.

"Be my guest," he said with a smile.

"You are a lifesaver. Thank you so much!"

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Steve sat on his couch, trying to ignore that fact that there was a girl showering in his bathroom, tapping his fingers against the coffee table in front of him. He jumped up, thumbed through the newspapers, not really reading a single story and rearranged the cushions on his couch. Four times. Finally, there was the sound of the water turning off and then, of a hair dryer turning on. Fifteen minutes later, Stacy emerged. Steve sucked in his breath. She looked great, her hair a cascade of strawberry blond curls. He smiled when he saw what she was wearing, jeans that looked like they were painted on. Not all modern fashions are bad, he thought.

"Thanks again for letting me use your shower. I feel like a whole new woman," she said. "I love your apartment. Your bathroom is three times as big as my kitchen. And your kitchen is bigger than my entire apartment."

Steve looked around his home. He had thought it rather large when it was assigned to him. Truth be told, he had seen entire families live in apartments smaller than this one.

"I love all the black and white photos on the wall. That's V-J Day in Times Square, right?" she asked.

Steve looked up at the framed posters on the wall. The place had been decorated before he even moved in and he couldn't be bothered to change anything, not really noticing the artwork much before.

"I guess so. Pepper Potts, Stark's . . .," Steve groped for a good description. Girlfriend seemed wrong for some reason. " . . . companion, had the place set up before I even got here."

Stacy smiled. "Well, she's got good taste. You know, I actually have that nurse's uniform. I found
one at a thrift shop right after Halloween and bought it on a whim. It's in the back of my closet, waiting for the next costume party."

She walked around and pointed to a framed black and white photo of yet another couple kissing. "And that's The Kiss by the Hotel de Ville. So cool."

Steve smiled tightly and mentally promised himself that he'd get rid of them as soon as she left. The last thing he needed was an apartment filled of reminders of romantic couples.

"So, is there another Big Bad Voodoo Daddy concert tonight?" Steve said lightly, trying to downplay his interest while he changed the subject. He knew it was bad manners to angle for an invitation, but he couldn't imagine spending the rest of the day in his apartment staring at the four walls.

"I wish. They've moved on to the next city. No, tonight will be something entirely different," Stacy said ruefully.

"What?" Steve asked.


"Babysitting?"

"Yeah, two of our friends, Rick and Angelica, fell in love and got married two years ago, the traitors," she said with a smile. "Now, they have twins and they haven't left their apartment in months. Monica offered to babysit for them tonight so that they could finally have a date night and then she roped me in since twins are a lot of work. I got Erica to volunteer too, and, since Erica was coming, Michael decided to tag along. Then, Josh found out that we were all going to hang out without him, so he decided to come over, too."

"So, the whole gang?"

"Yeah, I mean, hopefully the babies will sleep a lot. We'll eat pizza, play video games, maybe watch a movie. Just try to make the best of it."

"Sounds like fun," Steve said wistfully.

"It should be," she said and then paused, looking at him intently, "Would you . . . would you like to come along?" Stacy asked incredulously.

"Yeah, I would," Steve said.

"You don't have some cool superhero plans on a Saturday night?" Stacy asked.

Steve shook his head and tried not to laugh. "Not so much."

"Well, great. Um . . . Let me write down the address and my number in case you get lost. We're meeting there at 5 p.m. sharp," Stacy said as she took out her phone to get the address. "Do you have a pen?"

Steve grabbed a pen and writing pad from the kitchen counter. "Here you go," Steve said as he handed them to her.

Stacy started to write down the information. "I know you like just being Steve, but is it alright if I tell my friends who you are? It's just that if Monica finds out I'm keeping a secret from her, she'll
"Yeah, you can tell them, but I really just want to be treated like a regular guy."

"Regular guy. Got it," she said with a smile as she handed him the paper. She looked down at her phone. "I'd better get going. I've got to meet Monica. She gives me such a bad time if I'm late. See you at five."

"See you then," Steve said as he escorted her to the door.

Steve arrived at the building at 4:55 p.m., a bit early as always. He pressed the intercom button for the apartment, letting it buzz for a few seconds.

"Who is it?" a high-pitched voice asked.

"I'm Steve, a friend of Stacy's."

"Oh, yeah; come on up," and the buzzer rang to open the lobby door.

Steve took the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the door of apartment B. A tall, dark-haired woman smiled at him as she opened the door.

"Hi, Steve. I'm Angelica. Stacy said you'd be coming over. Come on in," she said, waving him in.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

She cocked an eyebrow at "ma'am" and Steve inwardly cringed. He couldn't shake the habit, even though he knew it made him stand out.

"Well, you can go ahead and sit down to wait if you'd like," she said, gesturing to a sofa in front of a large flat-screen T.V. "Make yourself at home. You're the first one here."

Steve tensed a bit, but smiled and sat down.

"Honey, do you know where my good shoes are? All I can find are my tennis shoes," said a man emerging from the bedroom, dressed in a dark suit and black dress socks with a pair of white sneakers in his hands.

"I think they're under the bed. Say hi to Steve; he's Stacy's new . . . friend," Angelica said as she walked into the bathroom.

The man smiled at Steve and walked towards him, hand outstretched.

"Hi, I'm Rick," he said as he shook Steve's hand heartily. He was a bit heavy-set and shorter than Steve with reddish-brown hair and a half-grown, scraggly beard.

"Nice, uh, beard," Steve said, not knowing what else to say.

"No, no, no. We do not like the beard! Do not encourage the beard," Steve heard Angelica shout from the bathroom.

Steve looked at Rick, a bit bewildered.

"Sorry, dude, you stepped right into that one," Rick said to Steve. "See, Steve likes the beard,"
Rick yelled towards the other room.

"Yes, but Steve isn't the one who's going to be kissing you at the end of the night," Angelica snapped back as she entered the room, fluffing her hair and adjusting the golden locket she had just put on.

"You gotta respect the beard," Rick said plaintively, tongue firmly in cheek, as he ran his hand over his chin.

"No, mi amor, I really don't. This the first time we have been able to go out in months. I spent three hours getting ready. Please, please lose the beard. I promise; I will make it worth your while," she said affectionately and gave him a wink.

Rick gave a sigh. "The things you do for love. Fine, I'm going to shave," he said reluctantly.

The door buzzed again and Steve breathed a sigh of relief. As much as he liked this new couple, he felt a bit out of place.

"Steve, can you buzz them in? I've got to go find Rick's shoes," Angelica said as she walked towards the bedroom.

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Moments later, Stacy and the rest of her friends were in the apartment. Steve noticed that Stacy was the only one who had taken off her jacket; the rest of her friends were still bundled up.

"Pero, que guapa estás," Monica said to Angelica.

"I know; Mira," Angelica replied, twirling around, showing off her long royal blue dress. "It's the first time I've been out of sweatpants since the twins were born," she said with a grin.

"Well, you guys go out and have a great time. We'll take care of the little ones," Monica told her.

"Thank you guys so much. They're napping in their cribs right now and they'll probably wake up around seven or so and want their bottles then. I've left clean bottles out and there's pumped milk in the freezer. They'll need another bottle around ten or so and then they should fall asleep pretty much right after that. You guys have our cell numbers, right?" Angelica said, looking a bit anxious, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Yes, yes. Don't worry. I take care of babies all the time at church. It'll be fine," Monica said reassuringly.

"Okay, thanks so much. I'm so looking forward to this," Angelica said. "Honey, are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, I had to get my coat. We should get going. Thanks, guys, for watching the kids. Bye," Rick said to the group as he ushered his wife out the door.

Josh waited a moment and then looked expectantly at the rest of the group. "Okay, they're gone. Ready?"

At once, all of Stacy's friends took off their jackets, revealing matching Captain America Shield T-shirts.

"Guys, that is totally not cool. I am so sorry, Steve," Stacy said, blushing bright red.
"Look, if you want to be treated like a regular part of the group, you have to deal with the teasing. We only tease the people we like," Monica said, grinning.

Steve laughed in spite of himself. "It's okay; it's fine." The teasing didn't really bother him; it didn't have the same edge as Stark's name-calling did.

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After about half an hour, the debate about dinner began. Steve just watched, not too particular about what he ate. On mission, he'd eaten MREs in the desert and freshly killed snake in the jungle. It really didn't bother him whether or not his pizza had pepperoni on it.

After the decisions had been made, Josh went around collecting money. "Okay, regular guy, it's eight dollars for the pizza and sodas and that includes the tip."

Steve took a twenty dollar bill from his wallet and handed it over.

"Wait a sec and I'll get you some change."

"That's not necessary. It's fine," Steve said.

"Really? Cool," Josh said and turned to the rest of the group. "We're getting hot wings!"

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Stacy smiled at Josh's shout and ducked into the kitchen. She pulled out her phone. "He's here," she texted, stowing it back in her purse once she'd hit send.

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"Alright, Call of Duty time!" Josh shouted and began to rifle through some game boxes nestled in the entertainment center as soon as the pizza order had been called in.

"No, please, no Call of Duty! Let's try something we can all play," Erica begged playfully.

"Like what?" Michael asked, clearly skeptical.

"Let's see. They have Dance Central. Let's do that!" Erica said brightly.

"Babe, c'mon, this may be the only time I'll ever be able to play Call of Duty with a certified war hero," Michael pleaded.

"And he'll probably kick your butt. With all that experience and superhuman speed, you don't stand a chance. You saw him dance. You might actually win at Dance Central," Erica countered.

"She's got a point there," Michael said reluctantly to Josh.

"Fine, fine. Dance Central it is," Josh replied, grabbing the game and putting it in the machine.

Steve smiled wanly at the group. He wasn't that eager to try a game that had dance in the title, although Erica was probably right about the other one.

"So, how do you play this game?" he asked Stacy as Erica and Josh began to set up the system.

"So, first you choose a song, then you choose a level. There's easy, medium or hard. Then, you dance, following the icon on the screen. On the side, there will also be hints on what the upcoming
dance moves will be. At the end of the dance, you get rated on how accurate you are," Stacy answered.

"How do I get rated on how accurate I am?" Steve asked, feeling lost.

"See this?" Stacy said, pointing to a rectangular box on a slender mount resting on top of the entertainment center. "It has a sensor and it will detect your movements. There will be a little outline of you on the upper right part of the screen."

"It sounds a bit confusing," Steve said, hesitantly.

"Yeah, I guess it does at first. Why don't you watch us do a few and then you can try?" she said with a smile.

"Okay," he said.

He watched the first few players to get the feel of the game. The players would swipe their hands in the air to choose a song or level. It reminded him of Tony Stark and how he could manipulate images in the air. He noticed as the players danced that hundreds of thousands of points would accrue and one by one a series of five stars would fill in. A fake crowd in the game shouted encouragement and the words, "Flawless" or "Nice" would appear from time to time.

Steve's turn came soon enough. He was in the center of the living room in front of the TV with Stacy and her friends encircled around him on the sofa and love seat. He took a deep breath.

"Which song should I choose?" he asked Stacy.

"Let's see; Why don't you do 'I Know You Want Me' by Pitbull?" she replied. "The easy level for that one isn't too bad. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Okay," Steve said and began to swipe his hand through the air to choose the song and level. He grinned a bit in spite of himself, seeing why Stark enjoyed doing it so much.

The song began with a count-in and Steve did his level best to follow along. He laughed at some of the names of the dance moves that popped up on the screen, such as "muscle man" and "candy cane". Two minutes later, the song was over and Steve had earned two out of the five stars. He was actually proud of himself, given that his last attempt at dancing had almost broken one of Stacy's feet.

Before the next dancer could begin, there was a distinctive cry in the far bedroom, followed quickly by another.

Monica reached for the remote, snapping off the T.V. "Now it's time to work."

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Monica, Stacy and Erica went into the back bedroom while the guys sat in the living room. Michael brought up Angelica and Rick's streaming Netflix account on the T.V. and began scrolling through the options.

"Josh, have you seen the newest Bond movie? It's out," Michael said.

"No, I wanted to watch that," Josh replied eagerly.

"Steve, have you seen it?" Michael asked.
"Uh, I . . . I don't know who Bond is," Steve confessed.

"You don't know who Bond is? You've never seen a James Bond movie?" Josh asked.

"No, never."

"Well, that settles it. Bond it is," Michael said. "We'll have to wait a bit, but that's the movie."

A few minutes passed and Monica and Erica emerged with the babies perched on their hips. Stacy was holding a thick, yellow blanket that she then laid out in front of the sofa along with some toys.

"Okay guys, watch them for a bit while we get the bottles ready. They can't crawl very well yet, but they can roll, so be careful," Monica warned as she and Erica placed the babies on the blanket and handed them each a toy. Then, all three girls went into the kitchen.

Steve peered down at the little tykes. Although twins, one was a boy and another a girl and they were dressed in respective blue and pink knit sleepers. They began to coo and giggle next to each other and it brought an involuntary grin to his face. He really couldn't remember the last time he was around a kid, much less a baby.

"Alright, here we go," Monica said as they returned with the bottles and she scooped the little boy while Stacy picked up the little girl. Both women settled onto the couch, giving the babies their bottles.

Steve looked over at Stacy, a small grin gracing her face as she fed the baby. He was about to say something, but the buzzer rang, indicating the pizza delivery had arrived.

Once the delivery man had been paid and paper plates found in the pantry, Michael quickly said grace and everyone tucked into the pizzas. Both Monica and Stacy balanced feeding a baby and eating themselves. They had tried to lay the babies down, but they began to cry and fuss. As soon as he had finished eating, Steve offered to hold the little girl so that Stacy could eat in peace.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"It'd be my pleasure," and he sat back down on the couch, baby nestled in his arms and holding the bottle as she finished.

"Thank you so much," she replied with a smile.

After the second bottle at ten o'clock, the babies were put back down in their cribs and the group could finally relax on the sofa and love seat.

"Man, I don't how Rick and Angelica do it. There were six of us watching them and I'm exhausted," Erica said, absentmindedly rubbing the stain on her jeans where one of the babies had spit up.

"You and me both," Michael said, putting his arm around Erica as she nestled her head on his shoulder.

"Did you guys pick a movie?" Monica asked.
"Yeah, Steve's never seen a Bond film and Skyfall just came out on Netflix," Josh answered.

"Yeah, let's watch that," Stacy said. "You'll like it. It's a big action movie. Lots of car chases, explosions, secret agents, shootouts."

Steve nodded and smiled. It sounded a lot like his job.

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Steve enjoyed the movie, although he had to laugh at more than one of the stunts. He wasn't sure he could have pulled off half of them and he had superpowers. He liked the interaction between the technology expert and Bond; he could definitely relate to the tension between tech support and field agents. He noted that these movies never showed the sheer amount of paperwork that was usually involved and he mentally tallied up how many reports Bond would have had to fill out if he were a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent.

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Rick and Angelica came home soon after the movie finished. They were tired, but so grateful that Steve felt a bit chagrined to accept their thanks. All he had really done was hold a baby and eat pizza, but the couple was so effusive you would have thought he had saved them from a burning building.

As Steve went to the kitchen to retrieve his jacket and helmet, he saw Stacy. "So, I'll see you on Tuesday?" he said, hoping that he didn't sound too aggressive.

"Yes, definitely. Seven p.m. work for you?"

"That'd be great," he said, smiling.

After he said good-bye to the rest of the group, he raced down the stairs, resisting the urge to slide down the bannister. It had been a simple night, but it was the happiest that he had been in a long, long time. Somehow, because of the easy acceptance of this group of friends, he felt young again. He finally started to feel like he belonged in this time. He smiled to himself. He couldn't wait until Tuesday.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note- Rough translation of Spanish

My love

How pretty you look

Look
Chapter 5

On Sunday, Steve busied himself with the typical, mundane tasks and errands that everyone gets done on the weekend: finishing up his laundry, picking up dry cleaning, going grocery shopping. He knew that a lot of the errands could have been relegated to JARVIS via a delivery service, but spring was just starting to take hold of the city and he'd wanted to take advantage of being outside and feel the sun on his skin.

When he went grocery shopping, he made a point to pick up several different types of coffee and creamers for Stacy's visit the following Tuesday. He was amazed at the variety available. Back in his day, most people might take cream or sugar with their coffee, but that was usually the extent of it. As he looked over his full shopping cart, he winced a bit, thinking he might have gone a bit overboard, but the thought of having her stay just a little bit longer at his apartment was incentive enough to buy out the entire store.

Steve woke up Monday morning with a groan. He was not looking forward to the day ahead. Unless there was a mission scheduled, he would be spending the rest of the day alternating between writing and reading reports or attending teleconferenced meetings. He would be stuck in his apartment for the entire day, held hostage by his laptop.

After a quick breakfast and a half a pot of black coffee, he powered up his work laptop and scanned through the morning's emails. Unfortunately, there were no missions scheduled. There were more reports of suspected leaks in the organization and Director Fury didn't want to waste resources by having even more agents in the field on wild goose chases. Although Steve knew that there were more S.H.I.E.L.D. operations going on at the moment than the search for the Hydra weapons facilities, he also knew that Fury was wary of spreading him too thin.

The morning passed slowly as Steve read report after report. He was embarrassed by how many times he had to Google unfamiliar terms or reread a section of a report time and time again before he understood what it fully meant. He had never even been to the S.H.I.E.L.D. academy that most of his fellow operatives had graduated from and he felt lost from time to time at the jargon and acronyms they used. He had to make himself a list so that he could keep track of them all.

Lunchtime rolled around and Steve rubbed his eyes. He was beyond ravenous, but the thought of yet another meal eaten alone depressed him. He decided to go up to the lab and see if Bruce was up for getting something to eat.

Once he reached the eighty-fifth floor, Steve went directly to Bruce's lab, placing his hand on the device next to the door, secretly pleased that he was one of the few people allowed to enter freely into Stark's top-secret labs.

"Hi, Bruce," Steve said as he entered the room. Bruce was hunched over a laptop, alternating between clicking between various screens and pinching the bridge of his nose. He didn't look up from his work; instead, he waved vaguely in Steve's direction.

"Hi, sorry. I'm just in the middle of something," Bruce said.

Bruce was always in the middle of something.
Steve smiled. "I'm going to go grab some lunch. Do you want to come?"

"Lunch?" Bruce asked, looking up, and Steve was shocked at what he saw. Bruce's face was ashen; his eyes were bloodshot with dark circles under them.

"Bruce, when's the last time you ate or slept or left this lab?"

Bruce sighed. "What day is it?"

"That's it. We're going out to lunch. You need some fresh air," Steve said.

"I can't. I just can't. I'm so close. The simulations have been driving me mad. If I can just find the right formulation, we'll be able to detect the specific gamma signatures of the Hydra weapons, and by extension, their manufacturing facilities," Bruce said, gesturing towards his laptop.

"Okay. That's it, buddy. You need to leave this lab. Now. That's an order. You're no good to us if you work yourself to the point of exhaustion." Steve knew he sounded a bit harsh, but he needed to get Bruce out of the Tower, if only for an hour or so.

Bruce opened his mouth, clearly wanting to object, but just shook his head. "You're right, man. Let me just grab my jacket. Where are we going?"

Steve thought for a second. "How about the Café Mystère? It's nearby; we can just walk there. I know that they serve food."

"Okay," Bruce agreed, shrugging on his jacket and following Steve out the door of the lab.

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"It's a lot warmer than I thought it would be," Bruce said, taking off his jacket and unbuttoning the top few buttons of his blue long sleeve shirt. He placed the jacket on the back of his seat and shifted his chair slightly so that it would be under the shade of the outside table's umbrella.

"When is the last time you left the Tower?" Steve asked, concerned that his friend had been wasting away and he hadn't even bothered to check up on him.

"Days, maybe weeks? It was colder when I did. Feels more like spring now," Bruce replied vaguely.

Guilt surged in Steve. He had been completely ignorant of what Bruce was going through. Steve had just been wrapped up in his own problems and his own life.

"So, how've you been doing?" Bruce asked before taking a massive bite of a club sandwich.

"Good, actually really good," Steve replied.

"Really?" Bruce asked incredulously, his mouth full of food.

Steve smiled. He wasn't surprised at Bruce's reaction. He knew he had spent months moping around the Tower, spreading his misery around to everyone he met. "Yeah, really."

"So, what's changed? I know work hasn't improved any," Bruce said carefully since they were out in public.

"No, work is more frustrating than it's ever been," Steve said ruefully.
"So what?" Bruce asked, leaning in and stuffing a fry in his mouth.

"Well, I met this girl," Steve began, a bit embarrassed.

"A girl? Well, that'll do it," he said with a smile.

"It's not like that . . . at least, not at the moment," Steve said.

"So, what's it like?"

"I don't know. It's just that she's been really kind and she's got this great group of friends, and they've kind of, I don't know, adopted me into their group. I can't tell you how nice it is to leave the Tower for something other than an assignment," Steve explained.

"Well, I'm glad for you. That's great news."

Steve grinned. "And you?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "Well, I'll admit. I got a bit obsessed about the current problem I'm working on."

"I'll say," Steve replied, tucking into his own sandwich.

"Thanks for getting me out of there. I guess I'm just so close to the end of this that I got tunnel vision."

"No problem, buddy," Steve said.

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On Tuesday, Steve repeated the pattern, reports and teleconferences until noon, then dragging Bruce out of the lab for lunch. They found a nearby diner that served massive burgers and fries. Steve felt, for the first time in a while, that his life was actually settling down into a comfortable rhythm.

After lunch, Steve spent the afternoon wading through weapons reports. The fact that he knew that Hydra was stockpiling weapons for who knows what purpose, chilled his blood. He vividly remembered their weapons from when he fought them during World War II. He saw men completely obliterated, leaving nothing behind, no body to bury. The thought of seeing that again spurred Steve to do whatever he could to completely destroy Hydra.

There was, however, a feeling of weariness that ate at him. It had been seventy years and Steve was still fighting the same battles. He was still going after the same enemy. Some things had changed so very, very much in the last seven decades and some things were exactly the same.

He clicked through a few more reports and shifted uncomfortably when he realized one of them was an update about the S.H.I.E.L.D. phase 2 Tesseract-based weapons that he had discovered on the helicarrier before the Battle of New York. His stomach lurched when he flashed back to breaking into the secured room full of advanced weaponry. When he saw that S.H.I.E.L.D. had manufactured weapons so similar to the ones engineered by Hydra, his faith in the organization had faltered. Luckily, the weapons had turned out to be riddled with technological bugs and rarely worked properly, so they hadn't made it past field testing. Yet.

Even though Steve preferred more conventional firearms, he wasn't naive. Whether you used a Hydra weapon, a S.H.I.E.L.D. Tesseract gun or a regular pistol, your opponent would be just as
dead. His parents would lose a son, his wife would lose a husband, and his children would lose a
father. Steve was hardly a pacifist; he knew that you had to make hard, even heartbreaking choices
in war. But that didn't mean he was oblivious to the lives he had taken, even if it had been done to
save others.

He paused a second while scanning report titles and clicked back a few screens. He found a report
titled, "Neural Disruption as Defensive Weaponry." He clicked on it and up sprang a report
written by Dr. Fitz and Dr. Simmons that detailed an experimental weapon that had been used with
great success on several assignments for their team. The "Night-Night Gun" (Steve smiled at the
nickname) would consistently incapacitate opponents, rendering them unconscious. After a short
summary written in straightforward English, the report began to delve into the technical biological
and mechanical aspects of the device which made Steve's head swim when he tried to decipher it.
The more he thought about it, though, the more excited he got. Why wasn't this type of weapon
standard issue throughout S.H.I.E.L.D.?

Steve took a deep breath and decided to email Director Fury about it. He dashed off a quick email,
exhorting Fury to please read over the report and look into the weapon's widespread use throughout
S.H.I.E.L.D. Although the email only took five minutes to write, he wasted another fifteen minutes
trying to figure out how to attach the report to it.

Once he hit send, he sighed in relief. He looked up at the clock on the wall and saw that it was six
o'clock. Stacy would be there in an hour. He looked around the apartment and was satisfied that it
was as clean as it was going to get. He powered down his laptop and then put it in his bedroom.
For a moment, he hesitated. Stacy would be in his bedroom alone if she used the bathroom to
shower again, since the bathroom was off of his room. He knew there was sensitive information on
the laptop and that S.H.I.E.L.D. had entrusted it to him to keep it safe, but he hardly thought he
needed to worry about a kindergarten teacher. Anyhow, it was password-protected to prevent
anyone else from using it. I'm sure it's fine, he told himself as he stowed it and changed into his
workout clothes.

He heated up his dinner, microwave meals that he bought in bulk. One of the downsides of the
super-serum was near-constant hunger to fuel his enhanced metabolism. He knew he easily ate two
to three times as much as other people did. He had eaten five sandwiches before going out to
babysit with Stacy's friends, since he felt a bit uneasy about ordering two pizzas just for himself.

He looked at the lackluster heated meals before him and sighed a bit. He had never learned to cook
from his mother, not really thinking it was a skill that he'd need much. After she passed away, he
spent an inordinate amount of time at Bucky's house and his mother always made Steve a hot meal
and pushed him to take home any leftovers. Truth be told, he had felt a bit like a stray cat, but her
kindness and hospitality were such a welcome balm to the overwhelming grief he felt after his
mother passed away. He smiled a bit, remembering pot roast and potatoes, warm rolls and butter.
He looked down at the watery mess he was about to eat, the meat unrecognizable, the pasta
rubbery and tasteless. He really needed to learn how to cook.

After bolting down five microwaved meals in quick succession, he turned on the T.V. to while
away the time until Stacy would be there. He was so fascinated with all of the channels, although
he rarely found programs that he enjoyed. Television was just getting introduced to America in the
1940s and it was odd to see how ubiquitous it had become. He was delighted when he found a
channel that almost exclusively ran "old" black and white movies. Although considered classics,
most of the movies were from the late 40s or 50s and he'd never seen them. The ability to see a
movie in his own home, without having to go to a movie theater, was wonderful.

He began to get engrossed in a western featuring John Wayne when he looked up and saw that it
was ten minutes until seven. He fumbled for the remote and turned off the television. He was a bit unsure of what he should do next. He could just wait for her call and then go downstairs to sign her in and help her through security. Or he could go down now, and wait for her in the lobby. He didn't want to seem too eager, but neither did he want to seem rude.

After a minute of going back and forth about it, he grabbed his phone and left the apartment. He took the stairs like he always did, two at time, looking forward to seeing her once again. Once in the lobby, he waved at the security guards on duty.

"Hi, I have a friend coming by," Steve said, as way of explanation.

"Wow, really? Good for you," said Sam, a guard that Steve had gotten to know fairly well in the past few months.

Steve grinned. Everyone seemed to be surprised that he actually was making friends. "So, how are the kids?" he asked.

"Great, great. Growing like weeds. Eating me out of house and home. Thanks again for all of those Captain America toys. They went nuts when I brought them home."

"You're welcome. Glad they liked them," Steve said. At first Steve was a bit uncomfortable with S.H.I.E.L.D. licensing his image and those of the fellow Avengers for merchandising, but some of their lawyers explained to him that if they didn't, someone else would just come along and do it anyways. The royalties Steve got from the sales rivaled his S.H.I.E.L.D. paycheck and he was happy to give away toys or lunchboxes to people he knew. From time to time, he'd be approached by a charity to sign an item and donate it to raise funds and he always obliged.

The lobby doors opened and Stacy walked in, head down, busily texting on her phone. After a moment, she looked up, saw Steve, and waved.

"Hi, I was just about to text you," she said.

"Hi," he said, glad that he had come down. Although he was vaguely aware that his phone could receive texts, he'd never done it himself. He was so proud when he finally figured out the voicemail. He remembered when he first got the phone, a gift from Stark, and went up to show it to Bruce. He had been so glad to finally get a cell phone and that it was one he could use easily. Unfortunately, Bruce gently told him that it was the type of flip phone that was marketed to senior citizens and that Stark had most likely meant it as a joke. Steve remembered feeling so crestfallen at that. Still, Steve kept it as he doubted he'd do well with anything more advanced.

"Ready to work out?" Steve asked Stacy once she'd gone through security.

"Oh, yeah. Definitely," she said with a wink and they headed to the elevators. "Wait, we can take the stairs, if you'd like. I mean, we are going to work out. Seems silly to take the elevator."

"Sounds good," he said and he walked her to the stairwell.

Once Stacy finished working out on the elliptical, she walked over to where Steve was punching the heavy bag, gulping the entire contents of her water bottle along the way. "Okay, I'm ready for lesson number two," she said, a little out of breath.

Steve nodded and handed her the boxing gloves. He helped her get the second glove on when he saw her struggle. Once her gloves were on, he started going over the basics again, focusing on her
stance and follow-through. He decided to limit this lesson on one type of punch, the jab, for two reasons. One, she really needed to work on her technique as she consistently twisted to leave herself a bit off-balance as she punched. Two, he wanted an excuse to have her come back to learn more.

Again, after twenty minutes or so, he could see that she was beginning to falter and that her punches had lost any semblance of precision. "I think that might be enough for one lesson," he said as kindly as he could.

"Am I making any progress at all?" she asked.

"Yes, definitely. You just need to keep at it," he said as he helped her with her gloves.

"Thank you so much. It's been great of you to show me so much," she said.

"I could . . . show you some more. There are a lot of different types of punches and boxing techniques I haven't taught you yet."

"Are you sure? I'm not . . . bothering you?" She looked up at him, uncertainty written all over her face.

"Bothering me? I've been looking forward to this for days, he thought. "It would be my genuine pleasure."

"So, Tuesdays and Thursdays at seven? And Saturday mornings around ten? Would that be okay?" she asked tentatively.

"That'd be great," he replied, trying to seem casual.

"Umm, I don't want to impose, but I did bring a change of clothes. Could I use your shower again?"

"Please, go right ahead. You're welcome to use it, any time." Steve walked her over to the apartment, letting her in. He sat on the couch as she entered the bedroom with her gym bag.

Thirty minutes later, she emerged from his bedroom, after having showered and changed clothes. "Could I get your wifi password for here?" she asked. "I wanted to check something on Facebook."

"Oh . . . uh," Steve gritted his teeth. He hated to deny her anything, but he knew that it wasn't something he was supposed to give out. "I'm sorry. I can't. It's just with security being so tight . . ." he began.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I totally forgot. I completely understand. No worries. I'll just check it when I get home. I should probably get going anyhow. I've got work tomorrow," she said, putting her phone back in her purse.

"Do you want some coffee before you go? I've got decaf."

Her eyes lit up. "Coffee? Okay, but just one cup."

Three cups later, Steve was glad that he had bought decaf. They spent the time talking about Stacy's job and she kept him entertained with stories of her students. "One day, one darling little girl came up to me and asked me, 'are you a mommy or a little girl?'"
"Really? What did you say?" he asked, chuckling.

"I told her that I was older than a little girl, but not a mommy yet. You should have seen her; her eyes were wide as saucers. In her mind, all women just fell into one of those two categories."

"Whatever happened with the mother of one of your students? The one that was hurt in the attack?" he asked.

"Oh, good news. She woke up from her coma and it looks like there's no permanent damage. It's such a blessing. She'll have to do some physical therapy, of course, but it looks like she'll be fine, in the end."

"That's great," Steve said.

Stacy looked up at the clock in the kitchen. "Oh, it's almost nine thirty. I need to get going."

"Um, how are you planning on getting home?" Steve asked.

"Just the subway. I really should go before it gets too late."

"I could give you a ride, if you'd like," he said.

"I've never ridden on motorcycle before. Do you have a second helmet?" she asked, head cocked to the side.

"Yeah, I got one on Sunday. Just in case," he said, feeling nervous. He knew it was a gamble to offer, but he just didn't want to say goodbye just yet.

"That'd be great. Thank you," she said.

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The feeling of her arms around his waist, her pressed against his back as he sped through the city was the highlight of his week. He didn't want the ride to end, but they arrived at her apartment building far too soon for his tastes.

Stacy took off her helmet and handed it to him. "Thanks for everything. I'll see you Thursday."

"See you then," he said, watching her as she fished her keys from her purse and walked to her front door. He waited a moment or two after she went in, letting the moment sink in, grinning to himself.
Steve's Wednesday passed much like the previous Monday did with reports, lunch with Bruce and looking forward to the next day. Bruce was much more optimistic this time around. He had tried a few more variations of his algorithms and the initial simulations look much more promising. He needed to adjust some of the parameters to make sure his design could withstand field testing, but, on the whole, he was hopeful. Steve, for one, was just glad that Bruce was getting out of the Tower on a regular basis. He had lost the unearthly pallor to his skin and he looked at least ten years younger.

The only frustrating aspect of Wednesday for Steve was the fact that he must have checked his email at least ten times an hour waiting for Fury's reply. It was the first time that Steve had actually pushed for new technology to be used in the field and he had hoped that Director Fury would have responded quickly. He tried to remind himself that Fury had a lot on his plate and he could hardly be expected to respond immediately, but it was with some relief that he finally received a response at six o'clock that evening.

*I'll look into it.*

- Director Fury

Steve fought the urge to roll his eyes. Nearly eight hours of constantly checking his email and that was all he got as a reply? He debated writing back and pressing Director Fury for a more definite answer, but, in the end, he decided to wait a couple of weeks and see what happened then.

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Steve couldn't remember much of Thursday. He was so focused on seeing Stacy later on that night that he was distracted all day. He kept reading the same reports over and over again. He really wasn't getting any real work done. When he should have been paying attention during videoconferenced calls, he found himself absentmindedly doodling. It wasn't until the third call that he looked down and realized that he had drawn dozens of smiling Stacys. He moved the paper ever so slightly to the side to hide it from the laptop camera.

Bruce called him out on his woolgathering during their lunch together and Steve apologized. Bruce said that he understood, but Steve tried his best to focus on his friend during the rest of his meal.

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After yet another workout, boxing lesson and shower, Steve looked up expectantly as Stacy came out from his bedroom.

"Look, I switched to a backpack for the motorcycle ride. I thought the gym bag was going to fall the last time we rode," Stacy said, stuffing her dirty gym clothes into a black backpack.

"So, are you up for some coffee before you go?" Steve asked.

"I shouldn't. I should really get going."
"Oh, okay," Steve said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice and utterly failing. "But, what are you doing on Saturday evening?" she asked quickly. "No plans at the moment," Steve said. *Like I ever make plans for a Saturday night,* he thought. "Well, it's Michael's birthday. We're all getting together and going bowling."

"Bowling?" he asked.

"It's kind of an inside joke. We all took a bowling class in college to take care of a required P.E. credit. Michael and Erica actually got really good at it."

"And the rest of you?"

"Let's just say it's a good thing we took it pass/fail."

Steve smiled. Bowling didn't seem like the most physically active sport he'd seen. "Sounds good. What time?"

Stacy grabbed the pen and paper on the kitchen counter. She double-checked the address on her phone. "So, six o'clock. We'll probably order some pizzas from there, although, I have to warn you, they aren't very good."

"Okay, what . . . what should I get him . . . for his birthday?" Steve asked. He didn't know Michael very well, but he didn't want to show up empty-handed.

"Let's see . . . he and Erica go to the movies a lot. How about a movie gift card? Here are the theater chains they usually go to," she said as she wrote them down next to the bowling alley address. "Most grocery stores have a display with gift cards. You can just pick one up there."

"Thanks," Steve said, glad that he had asked. "We should probably get going," she said, picking up her backpack and heading towards the door. "Okay," he said and followed her out the door.

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After their Saturday morning workout, Steve offered her coffee again. "Oh, yes. A thousand times, yes," she said brightly as she followed him into the kitchen.

Steve grinned. After she had said no on Thursday, he was worried that maybe he had come on too strong, been too forward. Maybe he had misread her friendship for something more than it really was.

Coffee cup in hand, Stacy curled up on the easy chair, a blissful grin gracing her face. "You know, I tried to stop drinking coffee once. Worst day of my life," she said with a wink.

Steve chuckled. He liked coffee, but he had never seen someone quite so devoted to it. "So, do you mind if I ask you a nosy question?" Stacy asked.
"Ask away," he said. *Ask anything if it will make you stay here longer,* he thought.

"So, of course, I Googled you. You were in a touring show, selling war bonds across America. What was that like?" she asked.

She had Googled him. He shouldn't have been surprised, but it was an uncomfortable feeling. He imagined meeting a girl in the 1940s and then going to his local library to look up old newspaper articles about her. It would have seemed odd, beyond unsettling. And yet, he knew it was a common occurrence nowadays. Just another change that he had to get used to.

Steve took a deep breath. He was going to have to be careful to not reveal any classified information when he explained his origins. "Well, it was presented to me as a way to help the war effort. Of course, I wanted to fight, but it was either work promoting war bonds or be experimented on."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories," Stacy said as she set her coffee down, looking apologetic.

"No, it's okay. Um, let's see, I travelled all around the U.S. I guess, I felt a bit silly at first. You know, the costume, the showgirls, knocking a fake Adolf Hitler out. But, to tell the truth, I had never really left New York before and I sort of," he looked down, "I know it's going to sound a bit old-fashioned, but I sort of fell in love with this country. I mean, I was always patriotic. Nearly everyone was back then. But, after actually seeing it, meeting people from Texas and Michigan, California and Florida, it changed me. I no longer wanted to fight for an abstract idea, America, I wanted to fight to protect those people, those families."

Stacy smiled gently at him. "It doesn't sound old-fashioned at all. It seems very sweet."

There was a short pause as Stacy picked up her cup and took a sip. When she had finished, she looked at Steve expectantly, "Um, so you know I'm a kindergarten teacher at a private school."

He nodded, wondering where she was going with this.

"So, um, private schools don't pay much. And I've got huge student loans. So, money's tight. And I've really been enjoying working out here," she said. She took a deep breath and looked at him with a tentative smile. "Would it . . . would it be okay . . . if I cancelled my gym membership and just planned on working out here? It just seems silly to pay them and never go there," she said quickly.

Steve struggled to hide his delight. "Sure, of course, I think you're right. Go ahead and cancel it. Makes sense. No reason to waste money."

"Great," she said, standing and taking her empty coffee cup to dishwasher. "I need to go meet Monica for lunch. But I'll see you tonight. Are you up for bowling?"

Steve nodded. "I'll be there."

At 5:55 p.m., Steve strode into the bowling alley. He looked around and although he didn't recognize anyone, he was getting used to arriving too early to these social get-togethers. It just felt rude to him to be late. He looked around the bowling alley and he felt the tension ease out of him. He had actually been bowling a few times back in the 1940s, so he wouldn't feel too out of place. He walked through the alley a bit, getting the lay of the land, so to speak, and when he walked back towards the entrance, he saw Stacy and her friends. He waved at them as he approached and
Stacy's face lit up when she saw him.

"Hi," she said, grinning. "We're going to snag one of the big tables in the back room. There should be about twenty of us all together."

He nodded and followed the group as they walked towards the back of the bowling alley to a large semi-private room with long tables.

"Happy Birthday, Michael," Steve said, shaking his hand.

"Thanks, man. I'm glad you came. You know, you may be a superhero, but you had better be ready to get thrashed at bowling," Michael said with a wink.

"Looking forward to it," Steve said. He took off his leather jacket and made sure to place on the seat next to Stacy's. He noticed that Monica and Erica were holding large pink boxes that reminded him of when the new recruits brought in pastries for the morning debriefings.

"Donuts?" he asked Stacy as she hastily put her phone away.

"Better," she leaned in and whispered in his ear, "Cupcakes from Michael's favorite store. Normally we'd just bake them ourselves, but these have salted caramel filling in them. Michael raves about them."

Steve nodded. People nowadays were very, very serious about their desserts.

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Slowly, the rest of Michael's friends filtered in and began to fill up the seats around the table. Stacy explained to him that they knew almost all of them from their now defunct college group. Nearly all of them were couples; most of them were already married, and a few of them even had babies with them. Rick and Angelica were there with the twins in a double stroller. Once the majority of people were there, the great pizza debate began to rage once again, only this time, Steve observed that it was even more contentious since there were so many people.

After a good fifteen minutes, it seemed that there was at least some type of consensus, and money was dutifully collected and Josh sent to put the order in. Steve sat back and let the conversation swirl around him. He didn't really know any of the new people and he didn't bother to try to remember their names. He was so proud he could recall all of Stacy's friends. He was glad to realize that no one seemed to recognize him. He figured that the helmet he routinely wore as part of his uniform obscured enough of his face to afford him at least a little anonymity.

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After pizza, cupcakes and presents, it was time to start bowling. Everyone began to split up and reserve lanes. Since Erica and Michael were known to be such good players, they were forced to be on separate teams. "Steve's on my team," Stacy called out as everyone was finalizing the teams.

She turned to him. "Sorry to stick you on my team, but without you, there's no chance my team will win."

"Are you really that bad a player?" Steve asked, amused.

"Absolutely horrid," she said. "I always did my English homework during bowling class. I never paid attention to anything that the instructor tried to teach us. On the other hand, I did get an A in my English class."
"Well, I'd be honored to be on your team. Although I do have to warn you, I haven't played in about seventy years."

"You'll still be better than me," she replied.

She was right. Except for an initial hiccup when Steve threw the first ball a bit too hard and smashed the pins to smithereens, Steve was able to bowl strike after strike. Stacy's balls, on the other hand, spent most of their time in the gutter.

"You weren't kidding," Steve said after Stacy sent yet another ball to the side.

"I did warn you. You know, I have many other fine qualities," she said, a bit sarcastically.

"I know that you do," he said and gave her a wink.

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After they had all bowled a few games, Michael came up to Steve with a huge grin on his face. "Thanks again for the gift card. I've been talking to the group. We're thinking of getting together next Saturday night and going to the movies. There are a couple of good ones out. Are you up for it?"

Steve smiled. It was the first time someone from the group, other than Stacy, had invited him out. "I'd love to."

"Great. I'll text Stacy some time this week and we'll settle on a time."

"Sounds good," Steve replied.

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The next week passed quickly. Steve decided that Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays were his favorite days. He existed for those moments when Stacy entered the lobby, bounding in and a brilliant smile would engulf her face when she saw him.

Thursday at noon, Steve walked into Bruce's lab, ready to tear him away from his work once again. Bruce was becoming reclusive again, trying to duck out on their lunches together to spend more time on his simulations and tweaking his algorithms. He winced when he saw who was standing next to him, pointing at the laptop.

"How's my favorite representative of the greatest generation?"

"Fine, Stark," Steve said as he smiled wanly. He was sure that there was an insult buried in there somewhere because, well, it was Stark, but he couldn't find it.

"You know, it's been months. We've saved the world together; you live in my building; I think you can actually call me Tony."

"Alright . . . Tony."

"So, lunch?" Bruce broke in.

"Yeah, lunch," Steve said, realizing that now there'd be no way to exclude Stark.

Tony smiled and started towards the door. "I've made reservations at Luigi's, best Italian in the city. They've got massive portions, big guy," he said as he slapped Steve in the stomach with the
Steve gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to snap back. "Okay. Let me just grab my helmet and I'll meet you there."

"No, no, no. My car's out front waiting for us. We're all going together," Tony said over his shoulder as he headed towards the elevator.

Steve shot Bruce an exasperated look. Bruce mouthed back, I'm sorry.

"Fine," Steve said aloud as he and Bruce followed Tony to the elevator.

Steve did have to hand it to him, Tony was right about the food. It was amazing and the portions were substantial. Steve only needed to order two entrees on top of the soup, salad and bread he had eaten. He finished his homemade porcini mushroom ravioli and chicken picatta before Tony and Bruce were even halfway through their meals. When the check came, Steve reached for his wallet, but Tony waved him off.

"It's on me, big guy. To make up for that kerfluffle in France."

"Thanks," Steve said, not knowing what else to say. His friendship with Tony was always this uneasy mixture of comradeship and snark and Steve never knew what was going to happen next.

"So, have you guys ferreted out the leak in your organization?" Tony asked.

"Tony . . . ." Bruce began.

"What? They've been chasing their tails for months. You think I don't read the reports Fury forwards me? Tell me, Capsicle, how many S.H.I.E.L.D. agents have died over this leak? Twenty? Thirty? Did you read yesterday's report? Last week, eight of your guys died when they tripped an explosive left behind in a vacant Hydra plant. Fifteen wounded. How many more people have to die before you guys get your act together?" Tony asked, his expression hardening with every question.

"For someone so incredibly concerned about security, you sure seem to be running your mouth a lot in public," Steve said, fists clenching as he fought the desire to make Tony stop talking.

"Look, I own this restaurant, Gramps. My employees are loyal to me," Tony shot back.

"Guys, let's just calm down. We need to work the problem, not attack each other," Bruce said calmly and deliberately.

Steve took a deep breath. Tony did have a point. They were no closer to finding out the source of the Hydra leaks and the stakes had escalated. Now, instead of S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives arriving at empty warehouses, they were arriving at ones that were extensively booby-trapped. After the first few attacks, S.H.I.E.L.D. had wised up, sending the bomb squad first into every compound they raided, but they were no closer to finding out where the weapons were.

"Do you have any helpful suggestions?" Steve asked slowly. He needed to start using Tony as a resource; see him as a team member and not just as a thorn in his side.

Tony smiled. "See, that's how a team is supposed to work. Give and take. I actually have some brilliant suggestions, AARP."
Steve sighed. He was not looking forward to the next few hours.

It was three o'clock. Steve shifted uncomfortably in the padded booth. Tony had spent the last two hours droning on and on about different technological options S.H.I.E.L.D. had to track down the Hydra leak. Bruce spent the time nodding thoughtfully, so Steve assumed Tony's suggestions were valid, but he was utterly and completely lost.

Tony looked over at him, "So, Fury forwarded me that report about the Night-Night Guns. Cute name, by the way. So, in essence, you want us to set our phasers on stun?"

"Phasers . . . I don't know about that, and it's not stun. It'll make your opponent go unconscious," Steve said.


"It's a Star Trek reference. From the 60s," Bruce added helpfully.

"Oh . . . I get it," Steve said. He didn't get it, but it wasn't worth spending the time having them explain it. It was just another reference that went over his head.

It was Saturday night and once again, Steve was too early. He checked the time, 6:55 p.m. He looked around the entrance of the movie theater and didn't recognize anyone.

There were quite a few people out front, so Steve decided to get in line and hope that Stacy and her friends would arrive before he reached the front. He had no idea which movie they were supposed to be watching.

Five minutes later, the line had barely moved when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hi, have you been waiting long?" Stacy asked as he turned towards her.

Steve sucked in his breath as he saw her. He had just seen her earlier that morning, but the sight of her still threw him for a loop. It took him longer to respond than it should have, "No, not long."

"Great. Thanks for saving a place for us in line," she said, as she leaned into him a bit. Her hair brushed up against his face and she smelled of vanilla and almonds.

"So, what movie are we watching?" Steve asked, trying to distract himself after waving to the rest of the group that came with Stacy.

"Star Trek. You'll like it," Stacy said with a wink.

"Wait, is that the one with the phasers set on stun?" Steve asked, so glad to have finally made a connection.

"Yes, that's it. It's science fiction. You know, aliens and all that," she said excitedly.

"Actually, I'm not that keen on aliens," Steve said, dryly.

"Oh, no. I didn't even think. I'm so, so sorry. Did you want to see something else?" Stacy asked, anxiously.
Steve looked up at the marquee. He didn't recognize any of the other titles. "I'm sure that this will be fine."

After getting their tickets, they hit the concession stand. Steve was starving once again and got the biggest bowl of popcorn they had and bought a few others for the rest of the group as a thank you for the invite.

Once they had found seats, Stacy leaned over and whispered in his ear. "You know, it's really sweet of you, but you don't need buy popcorn for everyone."

"It's nothing," he said, waving it off.

"Good, 'cause I am totally going to eat all of yours," she said with a giggle, swiping a handful from the bowl in his lap.

Steve smiled, but shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was going to have a hard time paying attention to the film.

Steve actually really enjoyed the movie, although it was a bit overwhelming to be in a theater and hear the loud explosions going off all around him. The character of Khan in the movie reminded Steve disturbingly of Loki. They were even both in similar clear prison cells. The all too familiar air of superiority and haughty disapproval was palpable on screen and made Steve more than a little unsettled to watch it.

Afterwards, as they spilled into the lobby, the girls huddled together and began giggling about one of the actors in the film.

"Which one was Benedict Cumberbatch?" Steve asked Michael as the girls went off to the restroom.

"He's the guy that played Khan," Michael said as he headed towards the men's room.

Steve rolled his eyes. What was it with women and villains? A vaguely British accent was hardly the mark of good mate.

He and Josh were left standing in the lobby, waiting for everyone. Steve decided it was time to ask the question he'd been wanting to ask for weeks. "So, Josh, I know you both dated for a while, but why did you and Stacy break up?"

"Honestly? I was an idiot."

"Really?" Steve asked.

"I had been dating my girlfriend for three years. I thought she was the one. I thought we were going to get married. Then, out of the blue, she tells me that she wants to see other people. I was devastated. I went into a tailspin. And there was Stacy. Kind, sweet, understanding. Just what I needed. We went out for a few months. Everything was going really well. I mean, you know her, she's great," Josh said with a smile.

"And then?" Steve said to hurry the story along. The last thing he wanted to hear was how blissfully happy she was with another man.

"My ex called me, crying. Saying how she had made a mistake. Saying how she missed me. That's
when I made my big mistake," Josh said as he looked down.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Well, I tried to juggle them both. Without them knowing. As you can guess, when it came out, I lost both of them. But that wasn't even the worst part."

"What was?" Steve asked, prompting him to finish.

"Well, in a group like this one, you break up with someone and you lose all your friends. Of course, both Monica and Erica hated me. And, Michael was one of my best friends, but he had to side with Erica. I had been a jerk. And it cost me, man. No one talked to me for months. Finally, Stacy started inviting me out with the group again, offering an olive branch. It's fine now, but I really learned my lesson."

Steve swallowed. He thought of losing this group of friends. The thought of going back to lonely nights, rereading the same paragraph over and over again in a book he wasn't interested in made him blanch. He thought of weekends holed up in the Tower, only living for the next assignment. He couldn't do that. Not any more.

Also, he reasoned to himself, Stacy had been friendly, but had never crossed that line into indicating any kind of romantic interest. She had complained more than once of crass men on the subway, of uncomfortable encounters with persistent would-be suitors on the bus. Steve was worried that if he asked her out, she'd reject him, and he'd lose not only her friendship, but that of her entire circle. While he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms, the thought that he might lose her forever made him hold back.

Maybe it would be better to just keep everything the way it was, he thought. No need to rock the boat.

The next morning, Steve was out picking up his dry-cleaning when his phone rang.

"Hello", he answered, hoping it was Stacy.

"Where are you?" asked Natasha. He could hear the tension in her voice.

"Out running errands. I'm about fifteen minutes away from the Tower," Steve answered.

"Well, hightail it over here. We've got an assignment. Grab your gear and meet me on the roof," she said.

"Will do," he replied as he hung up and started back towards his motorcycle.

Once Steve had boarded the helicopter, he looked over at Natasha. "So, is it Hydra?" he asked hopefully.

"No," she replied as she maneuvered the aircraft towards the hellicarrier waiting in port. "We're going after Centipede."

"Okay," he said. Steve had kept up on the reports on Centipede's work. They were trying to create supersoldiers, much like himself. For what exact purpose, no one seemed to know, but it could
Three days later, Steve collapsed into his bunk. He had lost count of the number of countries they had visited, the number of would-be supersoldiers he had fought. Even with his enhanced abilities, he had some limits. He had just inhaled ten MREs to stop himself from shaking from hunger and now all he wanted to do is sleep.

As he grabbed the thin pillow to fold it under his head, his fingers brushed up his phone that he had left on his bed; its cord was still connected to the outlet. He was about to put it on the ground when he noticed the tiny mail icon was illuminated, meaning he had a message. He debated not listening to it, but, he thought, perhaps it was important. Not many people had his number.

He entered the passcode as he stretched out in bed, piling the blankets on him.

He heard the automated voice speak, "Tuesday, April 30th. One new message."

"Hi, um, Steve. It's Stacy. This is like the third time I've tried to call you. It's about 7:20. I don't know where you are. I hope you're okay. The security guards won't let me up without you to sign me in. . . . I bet you're working or something. Maybe . . . maybe I should just plan to go back to my old gym if you might be gone a lot. Anyhow, call me back."

Steve sat upright in bed. It was Wednesday. He had totally forgotten about Stacy. He felt horrible. How long had she stayed in the lobby, pacing back and forth waiting for him? He looked at the clock and then did the mental arithmetic to figure out what time it was in New York, nine in the morning. Her phone was probably off while she was teaching.

He called the security desk at the Tower and made all the necessary arrangements and then called Stacy's phone and left a message.

"Hi, Stacy, it's Steve. I am so sorry that I didn't call you. I am working right now, out of the country. I’ve talked to the security guards and you are now cleared to come into the Tower even when I'm not there to sign you in. You already know that the gym is unlocked. I might be gone from time to time because of work, but please, use the Tower gym from now on. I should be back in town Thursday morning and I'll give you a call then."

Steve let out a yawn as he hung up. That was a near miss. He couldn't believe that he had forgotten. He put down the phone and crawled into bed, sleeping for the next eight hours straight.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

1) I played around a bit with the release dates of Skyfall and Star Trek Into Darkness so that one would be on Netflix streaming while one was in the theaters.

2) I happen to disagree with Steve. Vaguely British accents and real British accents are a treat.
3) MRE - Meal Ready to Eat – military field rations
Steve arrived back at the Tower at ten o'clock on Thursday morning. He was completely exhausted, his inner clock thrown off by constantly crossing time zones. Although he was dead tired, he couldn't help but smile. It had been the first time in months that he felt like he had made progress in taking down S.H.I.E.L.D.'s enemies. Although they certainly hadn't completely dismantled all of Centipede's organization, Steve felt like they had at least closed a few of their labs and rounded up some of their top scientists. It was a lot better than their raids against Hydra.

When Steve reached his apartment, he nearly stumbled across the threshold. Before going to bed, he called Stacy and left her a quick message letting her know that he was back and that he was looking forward to working out together that night. He put down his phone and he sank into a dreamless sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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He woke up, hours later, to knocking at his front door. He quickly got up and went to answer it.

"Hi," Stacy said as he opened the door. She was dressed in her workout clothes and carrying her backpack.

"Oh, hi," Steve said. "I'm sorry. I must have overslept. I was in a different time zone."

"I can see," she said with a smile, crossing into the room as Steve held the door open for her. "Are you up for working out?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Steve said, closing the door and wiping the sleep from his eyes, still feeling groggy and disoriented.

"Well, maybe, you could change?" Stacy said, waving her hands towards him with a blush.

Steve looked down and realized he was wearing nothing but a pair of boxers and a white undershirt. "Sorry," he said, coloring. "I'm sorry. Yeah, let me get changed," he said and he jogged over to his bedroom.

_smooth move, Rogers, _Steve berated himself. First, you completely forget about her and leave her high and dry and then, you answer the door in your underwear.

After quickly changing, Steve came out. "Thanks for waiting. I just got back this morning and it usually takes me a little while to get used to the time change."

"No worries," she said.

Just then, Steve's stomach growled. He realized he hadn't eaten in hours and he was famished, but he didn't want to make Stacy wait for him.

"Have you had dinner yet?" Stacy asked, concerned.

"No, but I can just grab something quick if you want to get started working out."
"Actually, I tweaked my ankle today, playing with the kids during recess, so I'm going to skip the elliptical. Why don't you go ahead and get some dinner and then you can show me some boxing afterwards?" she asked.

"Okay," he said, glad to have company during dinner. It made him smile to picture her running after a group of little kids on a playground.

He busied himself grabbing one frozen meal after another. As he put the first one in the microwave, he saw Stacy staring at him with wide eyes.

"Are you going to eat all of those?" she asked, looking at the pile of five microwave meals he had taken from the freezer.

"Um . . . yes," Steve admitted, self-consciously. "One of the side effects of the serum is increased metabolism. I can't really get drunk and I'm almost constantly hungry."

"Oh . . . well, that must suck," Stacy said sympathetically.

"I was never a big drinker, so that's not so bad, but being ravenous all the time, well, it does create some awkward social situations."

"Wait, why didn't you eat so much around us?" Stacy asked. "We've eaten together loads of times and you haven't eaten more than the other guys."

"I would always eat before I met you guys. I just . . . I guess I just didn't want to stick out," Steve admitted.

"Okay, that's just silly. Next time, just be yourself. That's the Steve we want to hang out with."

Steve grinned to himself.

Stacy continued, "But we have to talk about your food choices. Microwaved dinners?"

Steve shrugged. "They're convenient. I'm gone a lot on missions and food tends to go bad when you're gone for weeks at a time. Also, to be honest, I've never learned how to cook."

"Well, I can see that, but you live in New York City, one of the food meccas of the world. How many hundreds of restaurants are there in this city?"

"It's not much fun eating at a restaurant by yourself," Steve said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice and failing.


Steve blinked. He rarely strayed from typical American fare while in New York. On mission, the food was rarely gourmet and his main focus was just making sure he ate enough of it.

Seeing the lost look on his face, Stacy said, "How about we start off with something simple? Pizza. I know you like pizza. You've eaten it twice with us."

Steve nodded. "Yeah, I like pizza."

"Okay, we could do this on my phone, but it'd be easier to teach you on your own computer. Do you have a laptop or something?"
"Let me go get it," he said as he went to the bedroom to retrieve it.

He brought it to the dining room table, sat down and turned it on. Steve was about to begin typing when he hesitated. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to look away. It's a work computer and it has a password."

"Oh, yeah, no worries," she said and she turned away as he keyed in the passcode.

"Okay, I'm done," he told her, glad that she wasn't offended by the request.

"Okay, once you're on the internet, just go to Yelp," she said.

He typed in the address. "Okay," she continued. "Type in pizza in that box and your street address in the other and press enter."

She leaned over him to peer intently at the screen and, all of a sudden, Steve was acutely aware of her. She had one hand on the back of his chair and the other on the dining room table next to him. He didn't even realize he was staring until she looked over and smiled.

"Do you see anything you like?" she asked.

"Hmm?" he responded, feeling a bit embarrassed.

"Do any of the restaurants look good? That Luigi's has high ratings, but it looks a bit expensive."

Steve looked back at the screen, glad he hadn't gotten caught gawking at her, and shook his head. "No, not Luigi's." The last thing he want to do is order from Tony's restaurant.

"Okay, how about Marco's?" she asked, pointing midway down the screen. "It has good ratings. You can click on the link for their website and see if there's anything you'd like."

Steve went the website and clicked on the menu. Stacy pointed to the sizes and toppings listed. "So," she began, "be honest. How much pizza can you realistically eat in one meal?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes, I'd prefer that," she said, grinning.

"About one and half to two large pizzas. Maybe more if I've had to do anything strenuous."

"Wow . . . that is a big appetite. Well, why don't we order two larges with lots of toppings?" she suggested.

Steve shrugged his shoulders. "Sure," he replied.

"What kind of toppings do you like?" she asked.

"Anything but anchovies," he answered. A new recruit had once brought an anchovy pizza to a lunch meeting and ended having to eat the whole thing by himself at the end of the table.

"Okay, there's a combo pizza that has some pepperoni, sausage and lots of veggies on it. Why don't you get two of those? There's the phone number at the bottom of the screen."

Steve called in the order. "It should be here in about forty minutes," he informed her as his stomach growled once again.
"Good, do you have anything here that can tide you over?" Stacy asked. "Sounds like you're a bit too hungry to wait for that long without a little something in your stomach."

Steve powered down his laptop and closed it. He stood and walked to the kitchen looking through his pantry and refrigerator, eventually deciding to heat up the frozen dinner that was already in the microwave. Stacy prowled around his kitchen, peering into every cupboard.

"Wow, you weren't kidding about the whole no cooking thing. You only have one pot, one pan and a spatula that looks like it's from a dollar store. Your pantry's practically empty. You've got no seasonings other than salt and pepper. You really are a stereotypical bachelor. Didn't your mom ever teach you how to cook?"

Steve shook his head. "She passed away when I was seventeen. I spent a lot of time at my best friend's house after that."

"Sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a lot of bad memories. I keep sticking my foot in my mouth around you."

"It's okay," Steve reassured her. "It's nice having someone to talk to," he admitted sheepishly.

The microwave dinged and Steve took out the meal that bore absolutely no resemblance to the photo on the package.

Stacy peered at the sorry excuse for a meal. "That is neither Salisbury nor steak."

Steve smiled. "I can't tell you how disappointed I was the first time I made one. I thought, great, this is the future. I bet the food will be amazing. Then, I heated up one of these."

"In our defense, a frozen meal is hardly representative of modern cooking. Have there been any types of modern food that you have liked?" Stacy asked.

"I've been to a couple of restaurants that have been swell, but like I said, they're no fun alone."

"Well, now that we've got you set up in the wonderful world of takeout, you'll be much better off. I know it's more expensive that frozen meals, but the quality is much better."

After the truly delicious pizzas arrived and they had their boxing lesson, Stacy took a quick shower. Steve was impressed by her progress. She was now able to last at least twenty-five minutes and her punches had much more power and precision behind them.

When Stacy came out of his bedroom, she had a shy smile. "So, do you have any plans this weekend?"

"None at the moment. Why?"

"Saturday night, we were thinking of going to laser tag, but everyone else won't do it unless you're there to even out the teams."

"Why?" Steve asked, perplexed.

"Well, I, quite frankly, kill it at laser tag. It's so bad that the rest of the group won't play with me anymore, but, I thought if you were on the opposite team, you would even the odds."

"You 'kill it' at laser tag? What's laser tag?" Steve asked.
"You wear an electronic breastplate and if someone can hit you with the laser, you lose."

"Does it hurt?" Steve asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. It just lights up if you get hit."

"And you're good at this game?"

"No, I am beyond amazing at laser tag. I started target shooting with my dad when I was just a kid and I have a hidden superpower."

"You do?" Steve asked, amused.

"Yep, I'm unbelievably sneaky. You'll never see me coming. So, are you up for playing?"

It was actually very similar to the virtual training simulations at S.H.I.E.L.D. and sounded like anything but fun to Steve. But Stacy looked up at him so expectantly that he couldn't bear to disappoint her.

"Sure. I'd love to," he said.

"Great! Let me write down the address. We'll meet there around eight. Afterwards, winner treats everyone to coffee."

"The winner does? Why not the losers?"

"'Cause I'm gonna win again and I don't want to make everyone mad at me," she declared with a cocky grin.

"You seem very sure of yourself," he said.

"Like I said, superpower. Now, umm, do you have any plans Sunday?"

Steve's eyes widened a bit at that. She had never asked him to do anything on a Sunday before.

"Not really, I usually do errands, but I can get them done on Saturday. What are you thinking?"

"Well, you know that all my friends that you've met, we all met through our church. So, I was wondering if you'd like to come on Sunday? We usually all sit together for the 11 o'clock service and then go out to lunch together. I mean, no pressure. But, I thought I'd ask," she looked so nervous when she said it, all the cocky bravado drained from her.

Steve sat there for a moment. He was a bit hesitant. He loved the idea of spending more time with Stacy and her friends and did miss going to church from time to time, but thoughts of church were always wrapped up with memories of his mother.

"You know, it's okay, if you don't want to," she said looking down.

"I'd love to come," he said reassuringly. *Maybe it's time to make some new memories,* he thought.

Saturday night, Steve made it to the laser tag site right on time, having finally broke himself of the habit of arriving too early. A few minutes later, he saw Stacy and her friends walk in and wave at him as they approached.
"Okay, let's divvy up the teams. How about Michael and Josh with me and Erica and Monica with you?" Stacy said, literally bouncing up and down on her heels in anticipation.

Erica shook her head. "I want to be on Michael's team."

"Is that because you want to be with me or because you want to be on Stacy's team?" Michael asked, skeptically.

"A little of both," Erica admitted as she gave Michael a wink.

"Okay, how about you and Michael on my team and Josh and Monica on Steve's team?" Stacy suggested.

"I am totally flashing back to picking teams in high school," Josh said, slight bitterness tracing his words.

"Don't you want to be on my team?" Steve asked, feeling a bit hurt.

"No, it's not that. It's just that Stacy is going to win. She always wins," Monica said with a grin.

"Well, I do this kind of thing for a living. I'm pretty sure my team is going to win," Steve said, smiling reassuringly at Josh and Monica.

"Keep trash talking, guapo. It'll just be that much funnier when she beats you," Monica said, stifling a laugh.

A half hour later, it was down to just him and Stacy. On his team, Josh had taken out Erica, Michael had gotten Monica and then, Steve shot Michael.

Steve knew he wasn't trying very hard. He really didn't want to win against Stacy. When she shot Josh, however, Steve's instinct took over and he finally fired back on her, but she was angled in such a way that the laser shot didn't register.

The arena was purposefully disorienting with flashing lights and Steve lost her for a moment. Then, he heard a cry up ahead.

He ran towards her, as she lied on the ground, clutching her ankle. "Are you okay?" he asked as he knelt to the ground to inspect her leg.

All of a sudden, he heard the telltale sound of his breastplate and saw the lights blinking on his chest. "Never better," she said, springing up and holstering her laser gun. "I told you I was sneaky."

"That was a dirty trick," he said through clenched teeth.

"There is no honor in laser tag," she said, chuckling, as she bent over and ruffled his hair. "C'mon, don't be sore. I'll take you out for coffee."

As they all sat around drinking coffee at a nearby café, Steve stared at Stacy. There was something about the tactic that she had used that seemed so familiar. And then, it hit him. Natasha. She did the same thing all the time. She called it "the wounded gazelle" gambit. You get someone to think you are weaker or more vulnerable than you really are. He wondered how often someone underestimated Natasha because she was a woman, because she was beautiful. Natasha always
knew how to turn it to her advantage.

"Okay, Stacy, I hope you know that this was the last time. If we can't possibly win with Steve on our side, there's no reason to even try to play," Josh said crossly, interrupting Steve's thoughts.

"Alright, alright. I'm sorry. No more laser tag," Stacy said, although she looked anything but sorry.

"I'm sorry, too, Josh," Steve said. He hadn't really done his best.

"No worries, next time it's chess. Or poker," Josh said.

"I love poker," Stacy said. "Let's set up a poker night."

"So, Stacy told us that you're coming tomorrow morning," Michael said to Steve.

"Oh, yes," he replied, nodding.

"Great! I usually get there early to save seats together. I'll make sure to snag another one so that you can sit with us. We usually sit in the back so that Stacy can join us after she's finished greeting."

"That'd be great. Thank you," Steve said.

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The next morning, Steve parked his motorcycle down the street from the address he had been given. It was about ten minutes till eleven and he saw Stacy standing out front, shaking hands and welcoming a stream of people inside. He wavered for a moment, almost thinking of making up an excuse and going back. Finally, he took a deep breath and headed towards her, waving as he caught her eye.

She shook the hand of the woman in front of him, smiling and then turned to Steve. He felt a bit unsure for a moment and stuck out his hand. "Don't you dare try to shake my hand," she said with a grin, diving in for a hug, arms around his waist, her cheek against his chest.

He was surprised for a moment. He had known her for weeks now, but it was the first time she had hugged him. He hesitated for a split second before embracing her, noting that how natural, how right it felt.

After a few seconds, she let go, a sheepish smile on her face. "I'm really glad that you came. Michael's already inside, saving seats. I'll be in as soon as I'm done greeting."

"Alright," he said as he entered the building.

The church was not like anything he had ever experienced. Although Stacy had said that many of the parishioners wore jeans, Steve couldn't imagine showing up to church that way. He opted for khaki slacks and a light blue button-down shirt, but even that felt too informal for his tastes.

The church service took place in a converted warehouse with folding chairs instead of pews. He estimated that there were at least four or five hundred people there already. It was about 75% full. Up front, there was a band playing on a raised stage. There were large screens on either side of the stage with the lyrics projected on them so that the congregation could sing along. The congregation tended towards the younger side, most of them in their 20s and 30s with some older people dotting the congregation.
He spotted Michael and Erica in the back and waved at them as he made his way over. Michael shook his hand, "Glad to see you can make it. Stacy won't be in until after the songs. Can you save her the seat at the end?"

Steve nodded and sat down near the end, taking off his jacket and placing it on the seat next to his to save it for Stacy.

After a young man in his 20s got up to go over the church announcements of upcoming retreats and special programs, the band began to play once again. Most of the songs were completely unknown to Steve, although he did recognize "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art". Both songs sounded strange to him backed by electric guitars and a drum set.

As soon as the songs ended, Stacy sidled up next to him, picking up his jacket and handing it to him. "Thanks for saving me a seat," she whispered in his ear as the pastor took to the stage and began to speak.

The pastor looked out into the crowd. "So my question today is . . . who are you?"

Steve shifted a bit in his seat. He had asked himself the same question from time to time. Was he the 5'4" sickly weakling or the 6'2" superhero? Was he Steve Rogers or Captain America?

After pausing a bit, the pastor continued, pacing back and forth across the stage as he spoke. "Who are you? Where do you get your worth from? Is it from what you do? What you look like? What happens when you lose that job your identity is based on? What happens when you lose that relationship or your looks? What happens when that thing that you base your identity on crumbles around you?"

"In those darkest moments of your life, know that you are extravagantly and abundantly loved. At the times that you feel worthless, because you don't wear the 'right' clothes, drive the 'right' car, say the 'right' things, have the 'right' job, look the 'right' way, you need to know, in that moment, that you are so very loved that someone died for you. You are the son or daughter of the King who lavishes his love upon you everyday because you are his child. Everything else, everything the world tells you is important, is just transitory. It is here today and gone tomorrow. You are precious beyond measure just as you are. Not if you were taller, shorter, richer, thinner, stronger, smarter, but right now, just as you are."

"And the thing is, so is every person you meet. C.S. Lewis once said, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit."

"We need to see our own value and worth through God's eyes, as well as the value and worth of those around us. And that means the guy who cuts you off in traffic, the woman who pushes ahead of you in line at the coffee shop."

The congregation nervously laughed. The pastor smiled at the crowd.

"How would you live your life differently if you truly rested in the fact that you are a child of the King; if you gave up striving to prove yourself? How would the rest of your week be different if you truly treated others around you as immortal, beloved brothers and sisters?"

After the last song, the people began to stand and slowly make their way towards the exits.
Stacy turned to Steve, her expression expectant, "So, how did you like it?"

Steve smiled, "It was great. Different than what I was used to, but I really liked it."

"Do you think you might want to come again?" Stacy asked hesitantly.

"Definitely," he said with a wink.

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They all went to a nearby sub shop to grab a quick lunch. Monica and Stacy were chatting about the upcoming school week. They only had a little more than a month to go in the school year and both the teachers and their students were looking forward to summer vacation. Erica and Michael were talking about some lab results that looked promising for their research.

"So, any big summer plans?" Josh asked Steve before he could start eating the three foot-long sandwiches he had ordered.

Steve thought for a moment. He really didn't make any plans, tending to just float along day by day. "No, not really, you?"

"I'm going to visit my aunts and uncles back in the Philippines for about a week. I haven't seen any of my cousins for ages. Skype's nice, but I'd rather be there face to face."

"That should be good," Steve said, wistfully.

"Do you have any family? I mean, any that are still around?" Josh asked.

"A couple of distant cousins. I was an only child, so no nieces or nephews," Steve replied.

"That's rough. I've got three sisters. The youngest one still lives with my parents. We all get together on Sunday nights for a big family dinner."

"Wow. That sounds wonderful," Steve said, feeling a bit envious.

"Yeah, I guess I'm just used to it. There isn't a lot of privacy, but it's good to know that they always have your back."

Steve looked over at Stacy and briefly thought about what it would be like to have a family of his own. A wife. Kids. People who would always be there for him.

He shook his head briefly to clear his thoughts. "It must be nice."

Chapter End Notes

Author's note- Spanish translation - guapo - handsome, good-looking
Chapter 8

The next morning, Steve woke up before his alarm clock even sounded. He decided to take a shower first and then get his breakfast ready. When he’d finished his shower, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror, wiping away the condensation that had formed and took a good, long look at himself. The words from the previous day’s sermon kept repeating themselves over and over in his brain. Who was he?

While he had spent the last three years of his life looking like a muscle-bound superhero, the previous twenty-five had been spent as sickly and weak. He was constantly in and out of the hospital during his childhood and early adolescence. His poor mother spent countless nights nursing him through one illness or another. Petitions for his health was a constant component of her prayers and he tried to do anything he could to downplay how wretched he felt, not wanting to see her face full of pain and anxious from worry.

When she died, he struggled on alone. Sometimes Bucky or his mother would come by the house and check on him, making sure that he had enough to eat or drink. Most of the time, he was completely fine, but there were nights beset by fevers or night sweats from one illness or another where he was just alone, suffering in the darkness, not knowing if he’d live to see the morning.

After the serum, he was plagued with repeated nightmares where he would wake up someday and the serum would have worn off and he would revert back to the way he was before. The nightmares intensified when he began to fight Hydra during WWII. A typical nightmare would begin as a raid with all of his squadron with him and then, right in the middle of a firefight, the serum would wear off. He would no longer be able to protect his crew and, one by one, they would be mowed down in front of him.

He shook his head to brush away the thoughts. He had been promised that the transformation was permanent. However, he still remembered the words of Tony's ringing in his ears, "You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle."

Steve tried not to dwell on it. He tried not to hear those words again and again whenever he saw Tony.

But he still did.

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After getting dressed and having breakfast, Steve poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down to his laptop. Now, whenever he drank coffee, he thought of Stacy and it brought a smile to his face.

He began to scan his emails, trying to pick through the ones that actually concerned him and the ones that seemed to be sent almost at random. Most of them were uninteresting, but three stood out. The first was from Director Fury. He had decided to authorize wide-scale field testing of the night-night guns and if all went well, they would become mass-produced and available for all S.H.I.E.L.D. agents.

Steve couldn’t help but grin. He felt that he had finally pushed for a solid, positive change in the organization. How many lives would be saved if their operatives were only issued night-night guns to bring down their opponents?
The second email was from Tony, who had CC'd Director Fury. He had worked with Bruce to implement some of the ideas they had thought of to track down their Hydra leak. Tony wrote that the Hydra technology was incredibly advanced, but they were able to narrow the leak to somewhere in the city of New York.

It made Steve a bit sick to think that someone, in the city that he loved, was working for Hydra. The insidiousness of their organization never ceased to amaze him. He had assumed the leak was located in one of the cities that they had visited for their warehouse raids. Having the leak be so close set him on edge.

The last email was from Agent Romanov. She would meet him at the S.H.I.E.L.D. hellcarrier in port at ten this morning. They had yet another Centipede assignment and it looked like they would be gone for a while.

Steve was eager to finally get a good assignment and appreciative that he finally had at least a little advanced warning. He called Stacy and left her a voicemail to let her know that he'd be gone for a while, that she should continue to use the gym in his absence and that he'd call her once he was back in town.

He looked at the clock. It was eight thirty. He had time to pack up a few things before riding his motorcycle to the port.

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"So, Cap, do anything fun this weekend?" Natasha asked, more out of habit than anything else when she met him on the hellcarrier. It was a standard Monday greeting, but one that Steve was actually beginning to enjoy, now that he finally had the beginnings of a social life.

"Yeah, I did. Saturday, I played laser tag with some friends and Sunday, I went to church. First time in ages," he said as he followed her inside on their way to the main debriefing room.

"Laser tag? You played laser tag with civilians?" Natasha asked, turning back to him as she walked, a smile on her lips.

"Yep. It was nice," Steve replied defensively, not eager to get into the details.

" Didn't they get mad when you trounced them?" Natasha asked.

"Well . . ." Steve began.

"Wait! You didn't win? How is it that you didn't win?" Natasha asked excitedly, stopping in the middle of the corridor and staring up at him.

"Well, um, my friend was a bit sneakier than I had anticipated," Steve answered, looking down sheepishly.

"Oh my goodness, you've got to let me tell Stark. This is priceless," Natasha teased.

"No! No! Anyone but Stark. Please, I'm begging you. I'll never hear the end of it," Steve said.

"Fine, fine. I won't tell him. But I just can't believe it. Captain America lost at laser tag. That has seriously made my Monday."

"Glad to brighten up your day," Steve replied ruefully as they made their way once again to their debriefing.
"So, we're dismantling the majority of their operation in this assignment?" Steve asked as he sat next to Natasha in the large conference room.

"Looks like. A team out west captured one of their lead 'recruitment' officers, a woman named Raina," Natasha said, shuddering slightly.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, I led the interrogation myself and there is something definitely off about that woman," Natasha said as she leaned back in her chair and looked down at her hands in her lap.

"How so?"

"It's almost as if someone has broken her into little pieces and then forced them back together again. There are the oddest gaps in her personality. I don't know; it was unnerving," Natasha confessed, looking up at Steve.

Steve blinked. He had seen Natasha question some of the most crazed and evil people that S.H.I.E.L.D. had ever gone up against, but she had never reacted this way before.

Natasha gave him a brief smile. "Don't worry. The intel's good. We don't have a bead on the head honcho yet, but we'll bring the rest of his organization crashing down around his ears."

"That's the spirit," Steve replied.

A few weeks passed before Steve was once again back at his apartment, exhausted, but feeling glad that the majority of the madman's empire had crumbled. Although they hadn't discovered the identity of the main backer of the Centipede supersoldier experiments, nearly every lab that he had bankrolled had been shut down and his scientists were behind bars.

When Steve discovered the supersoldiers were under someone's control the entire time, he was heartbroken. He had always justified the violence he had to inflict on his opponents. Knowing that they had no choice in the matter, that they were fighting him only because there was a figurative gun to their heads, made it that much harder for Steve to do his job. He was so relieved when they got the recall notice from Director Fury and his team was sent back home.

It was a Tuesday morning when Steve returned. He called Stacy and left her a voicemail to let her know that he was back in town. He spent the rest of the day on errands. He picked up his dry cleaning, got groceries (including extra coffee and creamer), and did his laundry. He sat and relaxed, watching yet another black and white western from the 1950s while he folded laundry.

At seven p.m. that evening, Steve heard a knock at his door. Right on time, he thought with a grin. He opened the door and smiled when he saw Stacy, dressed for the gym.

"Hi, it's so good to see you! We've all really missed you. Are ready to work out?" she asked.

"Hi, yes, come in. I just need to go get the gloves."

Stacy spied a mess of mechanical parts strewn across the kitchen counters as she followed him into
the apartment. "What happened there?"

Steve frowned as he grabbed the gloves. "The toaster broke. I was trying to fix it. I'll have to take it in to be repaired."

"Oh, Steve, that is so adorable. Sometimes I forget that you are from a totally different era."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, feeling a bit irritated.

"Well, that toaster probably cost fifteen, maybe twenty dollars at most. If you try to take it to any type of repair shop, they are going to charge you at least two to three times that."

"So what are you saying?"

"Well, you have a few options. You can try Googling the problem and fix it yourself . . . ." Stacy began.

"Or . . ." Steve prompted. He was not blessed with an abundance of mechanical skill.

". . . or do what most people do and just buy yourself a new toaster and throw that one away," Stacy finished.

"Throw it away?" Steve asked, stricken by the concept. He remembered all the scrap metal drives during the war and the absolute desperation that accompanied growing up during The Great idea of just throwing away a machine that advanced seemed incredibly wasteful.

"I don't know of any places that accept broken Toasters as a donation," Stacy said dryly. "Look, Steve, I know it seems a bit excessive. My grandpa's the same way. He hates to throw anything away. But you don't want to end up with a bunch of broken junk that you'll never use again. You know, a lot of things are made a bit more cheaply than they used to be. I guess we've become accustomed to just replacing items instead of repairing them."

Steve nodded a bit and didn't say a word. It stung him more than it should have to have Stacy compare him to her grandfather, although he had a sinking suspicion that he was born even before her grandfather was. At times, he could forget the gulf of seventy years that stood between him and Stacy, and then, something like this would happen, and it would all rush back at him.

"Are you okay?" Stacy asked, tentatively. "I didn't mean anything by what I said. You know, if you want, we can try to fix it together after the workout."

Steve looked at her, disbelieving. "You know how to repair Toasters?"

"Oh, I haven't the foggiest. But, I know how to Google with the best of them. That's how I learned how to fix my toilet when the super was taking too long to get it done. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Okay, thanks. I appreciate it," Steve said as he walked with Stacy towards the gym.

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After the workout and boxing lesson, Steve and Stacy returned to his apartment. "Why don't you start looking up some different ideas for how to fix the toaster while I take my shower?" Stacy suggested as she walked towards the bathroom in his bedroom.

"Good idea," he said, taking the laptop from his room and putting it on the dining room table to begin his search.
When Stacy came out of his bedroom a half hour later, her cheeks still flushed from the warm shower, Steve looked over at her and shook his head. "I've tried. I really have. There just doesn't seem to be any helpful information."

"Let me try," Stacy offered.

"Be my guest," Steve said as he stood, pulled out the chair for her and pushed it in for her slowly.

After she sat down, Stacy twisted and grinned up at him. "You are always such a gentleman. I can't tell you how unbelievably refreshing that is."

"Doesn't that just make me stick out? Mark me as different?" Steve asked with a trace of bitterness, sitting down in the seat next to her. It was yet another example of how he'd never fit in, never really be a part of her world.

"Only in the best way," Stacy said earnestly, briefly putting her hand over his on the table before snatching it back. She turned back to the laptop screen and peered at it intently. "Now, let's see if we can fix that toaster of yours."

Forty minutes later, even Steve was ready to give up. Stacy was on her third cup of decaf coffee, her eyes narrowed as she tried again and again to fix the broken appliance. She had found the manual on-line, watched several YouTube videos on how to fix toasters, and had even spent fifteen minutes on the phone, wrangling with the customer service for the company that manufactured the toaster. Finally, she looked over at Steve and sighed, "Okay, I'm going to call it. Time of death: nine fifteen. All that you can do for it now is give it a proper burial."

"I agree. Sorry to have you waste so much time on a lost cause," Steve said, scratching the back on his neck.

"No worries. I'll send you my bill," she said with a wink as she stood up. "Oh, before we go, I was going to ask you a question. Do you like baseball?"

"I love it," Steve replied, although he was still a little heartbroken about the fact that the Dodgers had left Brooklyn.

"Great! Josh and Michael go to the games all the time and they wanted to know if you were interested," Stacy said as she picked up her backpack.

"Oh, Josh and Michael," Steve repeated, a little crestfallen that she wouldn't be coming along.

"Yep. It'll be good for you guys. Male bonding and all that. They really like you," she said as she walked towards the door of the apartment.

Steve thought for a moment. He did miss going to baseball games and he could hardly imagine asking Natasha, Bruce or Tony to go with him. "I bet we'll have a great time."

"I know you will. I'll give Michael your number so you guys can make plans."

"Sounds great," Steve said as they descended the stairs to the lobby.

As the spring turned into summer, Steve went to several baseball games with Josh and Michael, eating hot dog after hot dog, arguing about the calls the umpire made. It felt great to go to the games again and Steve really enjoyed getting to know Josh and Michael better. Josh confessed his
worries about his firm being bought out, certain that as a recent hire, he would be one of the first 
let go. Michael told them all about their cancer research and how hopeful he and Erica were about 
some of the new results.

Steve had asked Bruce if he had wanted to come along, but he was holed up in the lab again, only 
leaving once a day when Steve insisted that they go to lunch together. He knew that when he was 
on assignment Bruce even slept in the lab, not bothering to descend the few floors to his own 
apartment. He had done his best to urge his friend to let up, but Bruce was so determined to 
pinpoint the Hydra leak and find their weapons cache that he wasn't interested in listening to 
reason.

One Wednesday night in June, Steve was at a game with Josh and Michael, eating his fifth hot dog 
of the night. It was between innings and he was trying to discuss the merits of the last play with 
Josh when Michael turned to them and interrupted them excitedly, "Guys, guys. So, I've got really, 
really big news."

"More good results?" Steve asked encouragingly. He was so impressed by both Michael and Erica 
and their ability to forge ahead in their research.

"Even better than that," Michael said, his grin widening as he took a small, polished box out of his 
pocket.

"No, really? You're going to ask Erica?" Josh said, a smile on his face.

"Yeah. I mean we've been dating for over a year and I've known her for almost seven years, since 
freshman year in college. I know that people say to wait until we're done with the research, but this 
kinds of research never really ends. I just want to start my life with her."

"Congratulations, buddy," Steve said as he shook Michael's hand. "She's a great gal. I know you'll 
be happy together."

"Thanks, Steve. Now, I need you guys to keep it a secret. Steve, that means no telling Stacy," 
Michael said seriously.

"I won't," Steve promised solemnly.

"So, Stacy and Monica don't know? How are they going to take losing a roommate? They can 
barely make rent as it is," Josh said.

Steve winced at Josh's words. He knew that money was tight for Stacy, but he didn't have any idea 
that it was quite that bad. Both she and Monica were working as nannies during the summer break 
to earn extra cash.

"I know. I know. We probably won't get married until December or even January, so hopefully 
there'll be plenty of time for them to find someone new," Michael said.

Steve nodded and smiled blandly as Joss and Michael started to discuss how Michael planned to 
pop the question. For a brief, blinding second he was overcome by an unnerving emotion. It took 
him a moment to place it.

It was envy.
Chapter 9

The next evening, Steve's promise to Michael was put to the test. He and Stacy were enjoying a post-workout coffee when she asked him, "So, Michael's taking Erica out to a big, fancy dinner tomorrow night. Did he mention anything about that to you?"

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He hated lying to anyone, but he especially hated lying to her, "Ummm, no. He didn't."

Stacy looked over at him with a bemused look on her face. "Please, please, tell me you don't do any undercover ops for your job. You are the worst liar ever."

Steve was about to protest when Stacy waved him off. "It's okay. I understand the need to keep a secret. I won't push it."

Steve visibly relaxed, glad that she wasn't going to pursue it.

"So, she began, "do you have any big plans for the Fourth of July?"

"Stark's got a big televised event set up for the roof of the Tower. You know, speeches, singers performing, fireworks, the whole thing. I didn't want to do it, but they'll be doing something called a telethon at the time, having people call in and give pledges to help with the rebuilding and with the medical bills for the survivors of the . . . invasion." His voice trailed off at the end and, after a few seconds, he looked back up at her. "It's amazing the amount of destruction that happened, how many people were killed and injured in a battle that lasted less than an hour. If we hadn't had stopped them . . ." Steve shook his head, "So, yeah, I'll be stuck at the Tower on the Fourth."

"Sounds like an incredibly cool show, though. You are so lucky. I never get to go to things like that," Stacy said enviously.

Steve's eyes widened. "Would you guys like to come? It runs from six to ten."

"Oh, yes! That would be so amazing. Are you sure it's okay?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Steve said quickly, excitement seeping into each word. "Just come in through the lobby security. I'll put all of your names on the list. Meet me here, at the apartment at, let's say, three o'clock."

"Oh my goodness. This is so unbelievably cool. You are the best," Stacy exclaimed, a gleeful look on her face.

Steve grinned. A social obligation that he dreaded just turned into something he was looking forward to.

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The following Saturday morning, Stacy greeted him with a big smile when he opened the door."They're getting married! I can't believe it!"
Steve chuckled, "I guess Erica told you the good news."

"Well, it is a bit bittersweet. We'll miss having Erica as a roommate. I don't know where we'll find another one like her. Also, every time one of our friends gets married, I don't know; it's hard. Little by little, things change. You don't see them as often, then they have kids and you hardly ever see them. But, I'm happy for them. Erica's been head over heels for Michael since she met him."

"But, they've only been dating for the last couple of years?" Steve asked, feeling a bit confused.

"Well, sometimes it takes guys a while to see what's right in front of them," Stacy said, looking down briefly. "Well, we should get started working out. I'm meeting Erica and Monica to go look at bridesmaid dresses in a little bit."

On the third of July, Steve got a frantic voicemail from Stacy. "Please, please call me back."

Steve dialed her number. "Hi, Stacy, it's Steve. Is everything okay?"

"Yes . . . well, no actually. I have a big favor to ask."

"Yeah, sure. What is it?" Steve asked.

"Well, we're supposed to bake a few dozen cupcakes for a school fundraiser and our oven just died on us. Is there any way we can come over early tomorrow, like one o'clock, and use your oven? I hate to ask, but we already promised we'd bake them and we bought all of the ingredients."

"Of course. That's fine. Yes, come over at one," Steve reassured her.

Steve could hear her breathe out a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much. You are my hero."

Steve smiled at that. "Any time. See you tomorrow."

At one the next afternoon, Steve answered the knock at his door to see all five of them there, carrying backpacks and loads of bags. He beamed when he saw that they were all wearing their Captain America T-shirts, even Stacy. The sight of her in the tight T-shirt made his day.

They all oohed and awed at the at the size of his apartment and he felt a bit chagrined that this was the first time he had ever invited them over. His mother would have been ashamed at his lack of hospitality.

"Okay, I'm calling it. Next movie night is at Steve's place," Monica said as she pointed to the immense flatscreen on the wall.

"Yeah, sure. That'd be great. I'd love to have you guys over again," Steve said goodnaturedly.

Once the baking supplies had been set out and the mixing had begun, Stacy pulled him aside.

"Um, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. I think they've got this well under control. Maybe we could go that café down the street and talk for a bit."

Steve hated leaving his guests behind, but they all waved him off. Before he knew it, he and Stacy
were walking the few blocks to the café.

"Thanks so much for coming to talk with me. I really appreciate it."

Steve had to admit, he was flattered and intrigued. Of all her friends, she chose him to talk to.

Once they had ordered their coffees and sat down, she gave him a huge grin. "You know, you're one of my best friends. This has been such a rough summer, what with the nannying and now the whole Erica thing."

Steve nodded. She had complained more than once about her summer job. The rich, socialite parents she worked for were beyond demanding and she returned home every evening exhausted and drained. He was incensed by their demeaning, dismissive attitude towards Stacy.

"You know, I almost got fired for taking this day off. I mean, I told them before I even took the job that I wasn't going to work on the Fourth of July. They knew. And still, when I reminded them earlier this week, they raised such a big stink. I keep telling myself it's only for another few months, that the money is really good, but there's only so much you can put up with."

"Is there anything I can do? Anything at all to help?" he asked, feeling adrift.

"Just listening is wonderful. Poor Erica and Monica have heard all this a thousand different times, poor guys. I feel like I'm burdening them by repeating myself again and again."

"Well, please, let me know if there's anything I can do," he insisted.

"I just need to hold on until school starts in September. It's only two more months. Next summer, I really need to find a different job."

"So, how's everything with Erica?" Steve asked neutrally.

"Well, she's great, a bit preoccupied with planning a wedding and doing cancer research at the same time. But, Monica and I are still scrambling to find a new roommate for January. It's not like we live in the nicest apartment or in the nicest neighborhood," Stacy sighed. "I'm sure we'll find someone. Erica's been such a wonderful roommate. I'm going to miss her," she added wistfully.

After chatting a few more minutes, she looked at her phone. "It's two fifteen. We should probably get back. Thanks so much for coming and listening to all of my problems."

"Anytime," he said and he took out his wallet to pay for their coffees.

When Steve opened his apartment door, it was pitch black inside. When he flicked on the lights, he heard a huge "Surprise!" and all of his friends jumped up as they yelled.

His entire apartment had been decorated in red, white and blue. There were streamers, balloons and banners. The dining room table was covered with a red, white and blue tablecloth with matching place setting. There were freshly baked cupcakes that spelled out, "Happy Birthday Steve" in the center, flickering with candles that Erica had just lit.

"Happy Birthday, Steve," Stacy shouted, tackling him with hug and holding him tight. He held onto her longer than he probably should have, drinking in the moment. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.
"How . . . how did you know? he asked in disbelief, finally letting her go and hugging the rest of his friends one by one.

"I told you, I Googled you. Steven Grant Rogers AKA Captain America, born July 4th, 1918. We only have 28 candles though. We didn't count the time you were asleep," Stacy said.

Steve realized with a start that if they had, there would have been 95 candles instead. "Thanks. So, when you asked what I was doing on the Fourth of July and when you wanted to go to the café . . . ."

"Well, I told you I was sneaky," she said. "Now, blow out your candles and make a wish."

He walked over to the red, white and blue cupcakes and dutifully blew the candles out, making a wish as he looked over at Stacy.

"What did you wish for?" Erica asked.

"You know he can't tell you, honey, or then it won't come true. And I bet he'll want this one to come true," Michael said, giving Steve a knowing look.

"Okay, presents!" Monica exclaimed, clapping her hands in excitement.

"Here you go; it's from all of us. We all chipped in," Josh said, handing him a small wrapped present.

Steve wiped the frosting off of his hands before accepting the gift. "An Ipod?" he asked as he unwrapped it.

"We've loaded it up with all the 1940s music you know, as well as some modern singers who you'll like, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Michael Bublé, Harry Connick Jr," Michael said.

"Gosh, thank you so much," Steve replied.

"There's one more gift. From me," Stacy said shyly as she handed him a large box.

He immediately ripped off the wrapping paper. "Cookware. Wow. Thanks."

"You're supposed to open the card first," Stacy chided gently.

He opened the card that had been attached to the present and read it to himself. Words cannot express how blessed I feel to have met you. Happy Birthday, Steve. He blinked a bit and took a deep breath as he read the words. P.S. In addition to the cookware, I'm going to teach you to cook.

Steve smiled and looked up. "Cooking lessons?"

"Well, you deserve some home cooked meals. You can't live just on takeout and frozen foods. I thought, if you didn't mind, I could offer maybe around 5:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I could teach you a few quick meals to make for dinner before we work out. Sounds good?"

A home cooked meal. With Stacy. Twice a week. It sounded like paradise.

"Yeah, yeah. That would be wonderful. Thanks so much," Steve said, crossing the room to hug her.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry to interrupt, but your presence is requested on the roof. They need you to perform a sound check and final run-through before the live broadcast," JARVIS informed him as Steve stopped in his tracks.
"What was that?" Josh asked.

"JARVIS. He's the AI that runs this building. I need to go. Thank you guys so much, for everything. Make yourselves at home and I'll see you on the roof at about 5:45, okay?"

"We'll be there. I heard Jay-Z and Beyoncé are performing. I can't wait," Monica said, bouncing on her heels a bit. 00000

Fifteen minutes before the telethon was scheduled to start, Steve began to crane his neck as he searched the roof for his friends. After a minute or two, he spotted Michael, his tall frame standing out in the crowd. He was waving at Steve and standing with the rest of their group at the far corner of the roof.

The roof of Stark Tower had been redesigned to accommodate the helipad, and it now served as a staging area for the Fourth of July broadcast. There was an elaborate stage and lighting to one side and a small area for a standing audience.

"Hi," he said as he walked over towards the group.

"This is so amazing. I just saw Maroon 5," Erica said breathlessly.

Steve nodded, the name sounding vaguely familiar from the line-up that the production assistant had talked him through. He felt more nervous than he should have, really. He had done countless shows with the showgirls while touring around America in the 1940s. All he had to do for the telethon was give a short speech and lead the national anthem.

The only problem he had experienced in rehearsal had been arguing with the producer over his outfit. He wanted Steve on stage without his helmet so that people would recognize him. But Steve craved his anonymity; he loved the fact that he could walk around New York without being preyed on by persistent photographers.

It had been a problem, briefly, right after the invasion, when Steve first moved to the Tower. However, a series of increasingly distressful things began to happen to the paparazzi's cameras and cars until Stark Towers was declared off limits by the photographers since a shot of Tony or Bruce rushing along the sidewalk was hardly worth having your car completely filled with shaving cream. Steve suspected that Tony was behind the bizarre tactics and he had thanked him for it. to which Tony replied, straight faced, "I have no idea what you are talking about, Cap."

Although, in the end, Steve had won the helmet battle. He had threatened to quit the show altogether rather than appear without it. Steve stood with his friends as the last sound checks were done. Stark would go on first, and then it was Steve's turn.

Fifteen minutes later, Pepper Potts took the stage, clad in jeans and a flag T-shirt. "Happy Fourth of July from Stark Tower. I'm Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and I'd like to start tonight's event with our host, Mr. Iron Man himself, Tony Stark."

She gestured towards the sky and, all of a sudden, Iron Mac came zooming in, making a lazy arc in the sky. He's all about style, Steve thought as he shook his head. Tony slowly descended to the middle of the stage as Pepper took to the wings. Several scantily clad dancers, wearing little more than red and gold bikinis, came from both sides of the stage to dance behind Tony. Steve colored when he saw the way the Ironettes were dancing to "Back in Black" from AC/DC. It was a bit more risqué than the showgirl routines from his past.
"Hello, New York!" Tony shouted after he flipped up his helmet and the rest of his armor came off automatically, piece by piece. "Hello, America," he said, as he stood wearing jeans and a black AC/DC T-shirt with the lettering resembling the American flag. He held his palms up to receive the adulation of the crowd.

"Alright, Happy Fourth of July! This night's event is to benefit the Stark Industry New York Restoration fund. Our goal is to raise two million dollars to help rebuild and to help survivors of the Battle of New York. So pull out your wallets and give generously. As an added bonus, the highest bidder will get a private tour of Stark Tower. So, call the number at the bottom of the screen. To kick off our event, here's our very own Captain America!"

As Stark exited, Steve walked to the middle of the stage to the chorus of Skillet's "Hero". There was a teleprompter, but he didn't need to look at it. Once the music died down, he began. "Hello, everyone. Happy Fourth of July. I'm Captain America."

A swell of enthusiastic applause from the small crowd on the roof hit him and he blinked a bit. "I've been asked to make a speech, but truth be told, I'm not really one to give speeches. But over the past few months, I've been asked how we did it. How we won . . . why we did what we did. And I tell them that the people of this city, of this country, of Earth were worth fighting for. That you all were worth dying for. I've been told that all real love requires sacrifice. Our love for this nation, for this entire world, demanded nothing less than all we had to give. There was simply no other option."

Steve paused and saw how quiet the crowd had become. He felt a bit uneasy and he wondered if what he said had been off-putting or struck the wrong note. Then, once again, the audience erupted. Steve stood there uncertainly, waiting for the applause to die down, but after a few minutes or so, he dove in. "And now, for the national anthem."

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After the last firework had gone off, Steve turned to Stacy. "So, how'd you like it?"

"Are you kidding me? It was seriously the best night of my life. Oh, I can't thank you enough for inviting us! I had no idea you could sing so well."

Steve blushed a bit at the compliment.

"Hey, let's all go to karaoke on Saturday!" Erica suggested eagerly.


"Oh, you go to a bar and sing to pre-recorded music," Stacy said grimly.

"And you don't like it?" Steve asked.

"You know how well I bowl?" Stacy asked.

Steve winced and then nodded.

"Well, I bowl better than I sing," Stacy confessed, a rueful grin on her face.

"That bad?"

"Worse," she said.
"We all had to go to laser tag; you are coming to karaoke," Michael said firmly.

"Fine, fine. I give up. Karaoke on Saturday night. Bring earplugs," Stacy said as she began to walk with the crowd towards the exit. "I know it's only ten, but I've got to get back home. I have to be at work at seven in the morning."

The rest of the group nodded in agreement as they headed towards the door.

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Steve's last thought before he fell asleep that night was, She said it was the best night of her life.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note- There's a great video on Youtube that uses the Avengers footage and Skillet's Hero.
Chapter 10

Ch. 10

Author's Note- Before we begin, this story up till now has been G-rated. This is where it jumps up to T for some rather unpleasant violence. I just wanted to warn you ahead of time.

Steve went up to Bruce's lab at noon the next day. He had seen Bruce briefly the night before, but he knew he had left the fundraiser before it was even half-way through. Steve was shocked at how driven Bruce had become. He knew that the lunches that he dragged Bruce to were often the only meals he ate everyday.

As he entered Bruce's lab, he saw Tony leaning over a laptop with Bruce. "Hi, guys," Steve said as way of greeting.

He was getting along a lot better with Tony lately. Considering how Steve was spending his Sundays, he figured if he could love his enemy, he could at the very least tolerate his allies. And, if he could turn the other cheek, he could deal with Tony's verbal jabs.

He noticed that Tony looked a bit bedraggled, wearing the clothes from the night before. At first, Steve assumed he had indulged in an alcohol-soaked bender, but as he drew closer, he detected no hint of inebriation or a hangover. He realized, with a start, that he and Bruce had been there all night working.

"How did the fundraiser go? Did you raise two million dollars?" Steve asked.

"Thirty," Bruce replied, with a weary grin. "It should go a long way towards helping the people of New York."

"And we sprung our trap," Tony said with a cocky smile.

"Trap?" Steve asked, perplexed.

"See, I told you it wasn't too obvious. If Mr. Tactical Genius here didn't see it coming, Hydra won't either," Tony said to Bruce.

"I'm a bit lost," Steve confessed.

"The person who donated the most amount of money to the fundraiser gets a private tour of Stark Tower," Bruce explained.

"Which Hydra would love," Steve said as realization slowly dawned on him.

"Which Hydra would love," Tony repeated with a smug grin on his face. "Someone pledged five million dollars. We've traced the donation to a shell company that we know has ties to Hydra."

"So when they come for their private tour . . . ," Steve began.

"We nab them," Bruce replied.
"And we make sure we find out where exactly the leak is in New York," Tony said.

Steve smiled. "It's a great plan, Tony. I think it'll work."

"Oh, Pepper wanted to invite you over for dinner on Saturday night. She makes a mean shrimp scampi."

"Actually, I've got plans on Saturday night," Steve said proudly.

"You, our resident hermit, have plans on a Saturday night? Do tell," Tony said, jovially.

"I'm meeting some friends and doing something called "carry" something? You know, where you sing?"

"Captain America is going to do karaoke? Oh, that's priceless," Tony said, not bothering to stifle his laughter.

"What's so funny?" Steve asked.

"Nothing really. Some people think it's a bit embarrassing, but, you know, good for you. I think you'll have fun," Bruce reassured him.

"So, give Pepper my regrets," Steve said. He thought for a moment and then added, "But, I'd love to come over another time."

Tony's eyes widened at that. "Great, buddy. How about Friday instead?"

"You mean tonight? Sounds good."

"Today's Friday, yeah. I must have missed a day. I'll have to double-check with Pepper, but it should be fine. You're coming, too," Tony said firmly to Bruce.

"I've got a lot to do with all this," Bruce explained, motioning to the laptop.

"We'll both be there," Steve said, clapping Bruce on the back. "We wouldn't want to be rude to Pepper, now would we?" he said pointedly.

"Okay, okay," Bruce said, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I know when I've been beaten. What time?"

"Let's say seven? White tie, not necessary," Tony said irreverently.

Steve smiled briefly. Tony wasn't really that bad once you got used to him.

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Dinner that night went surprisingly well. He brought a bottle of wine that JARVIS assured him would go well with shrimp scampi and Tony had seemed impressed with it. Steve sipped a half a glass throughout dinner, but he couldn't tell if it was any good or not. The food, on the other hand, was amazing. Tony must have warned Pepper about Steve's appetite, which was good since he had three platefuls.

Pepper knew how to manage Tony expertly, smoothing out his rough edges, deftly maneuvering the conversation out of any troubled waters. She asked Steve about his new-found social life and he shared about how he had met Stacy and her friends.
"Well, it's good you're getting out there, meeting people," she said supportively as she served him a fourth helping of garlic bread.

"Yes, it's been great," Steve said. "Thank you again for the wonderful dinner. It's terrific."

"It's not over yet," she said as she stood and went over to the kitchen. When she returned, she was carrying an enormous chocolate cake.

She set it down in front of him. "I didn't approve of the design. It was Tony's doing," she said as a warning and Steve grimaced as he took a closer look. It had a mountain drawn on it with icing, the words "Over the Hill" and "Happy 95th Birthday" on it.

"We were going to put all the candles on it, but JARVIS pointed out it was a fire hazard," Tony said.

"Happy Birthday, Steve," Pepper said as she gave him a hug. "Don't let Tony spoil it," she whispered in his ear and gave him a wink as she pulled back.

"Happy Birthday, buddy," Bruce said.

"Thanks, guys. That's really sweet of you," Steve said.

"Alright, presents," Tony said and for a moment, Steve couldn't help but chuckle at his eagerness.

"Here's mine," Bruce said and handed him a gift card. Steve smiled when he saw that it was for the diner that they frequented for lunch.

"And here's ours," Pepper said. He opened the envelope she gave him and saw a phone number scrawled on a Stark business card inside. He looked up, bewildered.

"That's the phone number for our pilot. Whenever you want to, call him up and he'll fly you in our private jet anywhere in the world. When you want to come back, just call him back and he'll pick you up," she explained.

Steve was astonished. "Are you kidding me?" he asked, half-worried that it was one of Tony's "jokes".

"Absolutely not," Pepper reassured him. "You need a break. You haven't had a vacation since you moved in here."

"Thank you so much," he said, hugging Pepper in gratitude.

He walked over to shake Tony's hand, but he waved him off. "After that, you'd better hug me, Gramps."

Steve gave Tony a quick hug, trying not to laugh. If someone told him six months ago that he'd be getting along so well with Tony, he never would have believed it.

Steve arrived at the karaoke bar on Saturday to see Stacy and her friends already there, crowded around a small table in the back of the long narrow room. They were thumbing through a binder with laminated pages in it, pointing out one song after another.

"This one," Erica said as she circled a song with her fingers.
"Definitely," Michael agreed as he stood and walked with her to the front.

"Uh no, they choose 'Billionaire'. That's not good," Monica said.

"Why isn't that good?" Steve asked.

"They only sing it with they've had budget cuts. Michael told me that he was worried that all their funding was going to be cut for the fall. Looks like that's what happened," Josh explained.

"So what does that mean?" Steve asked, perplexed.

"Their research stops," Stacy said.

Steve winced, feeling bad for them. "Aren't there any other grants they could get?"

"It's too late. It's all been allocated for the fall. I swear, the funding for education sucks. Did Stacy ever tell you how we almost lost our jobs this spring?" Monica asked.

"No," Steve replied, concerned.

"It wasn't that bad," Stacy reassured him.

"Yes, it was. We all got pink slips. I was going to lose my work visa and get sent back to Spain if I couldn't get another job. I thought that they were going to have to close the school," Monica said.

"It all worked out," Stacy added.

"Yeah, they finally scrounged up enough money for another year. Thank goodness," Monica said. "I mean what would Stacy do here without me?"

Stacy grinned and gave her friend a one-armed hug. "Probably die of boredom, maja."

Erica and Michael began the song and Steve had to grin at the lyrics. He was sure that Tony was actually a billionaire and he was hardly living an idyllic life.

Once they had finished their song, Erica, Monica and Stacy sang the Lourde song, "Royals". Steve couldn't tear his eyes away from Stacy, even though he could tell she was just mouthing the lyrics while her friends actually sang. Next, they all got up together and sang "New York" by Alicia Keys which was wildly popular with the rest of the sparse crowd in the bar.

"Okay, big guy, it's your turn. What are you going to sing?" Michael asked as they were back at their table.

Steve leafed through the binder, not recognizing anything at first. He finally saw a song he knew and walked up to the front of the bar to sing it.

"So, the next song I'm going to sing is 'The Way You Look Tonight'."

It wasn't until he finished the song that he realized that he had been staring at Stacy the entire time.

On Monday, Steve dragged Bruce out the diner once again, insisting on treating him with the gift card Bruce had given him. As he tucked into his second burger, he asked Bruce, "Do you know anything about research scholarships or grants?"
"What kind?"
"Cancer research."

Bruce looked at him thoughtfully. "Is this for your friends, what were their names?"

"Erica and Michael. Their funding just got cut for the fall and they're scrambling to get enough money together. They're doing some amazing work."

"You know, Tony has a foundation that hands out tons of scholarships and grants, but I'm pretty sure that the deadlines have all passed. You usually have to apply in February or March."

Steve sighed. He had quite a bit of money saved up that he'd be more than willing to lend or even give them, but he had a strong suspicion that they wouldn't take that kind of money from him.

"Any good news on the leak?" Steve asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, looks like the 'donor' will be in some time next month."

"Why so long?"

"We need to set some things up first," Bruce said evasively since they were out in public. "This is our one shot. We don't want to blow it."

Steve nodded. It made sense. It was just that he was so eager to have all this behind him. It put him on edge to know that there was someone out there reporting on their every move.

"How about on your end? Any good news?" Bruce asked as he ate his last fry.

"Yeah, actually there is. The Night-Night guns passed all their field testing. They'll become standard issue in a few weeks. It'll be nice to have a more effective way to defend ourselves out in the field."

"Regular guns aren't effective?" Bruce asked.

"You shoot someone in the arm with a regular gun and they can still run away. You hit someone in the leg and they can still shoot you. Also, there's a psychological aspect to it. People, even trained agents, often subconsciously don't want to actually hit the other person with a real bullet. Their aim is off. But, with a night-night gun, all that goes away. Hit someone anywhere on their body and they fall instantly. And, our operatives won't be holding back since all you're doing is rendering the subject unconscious."

"Sounds like you've really thought this through," Bruce observed.

"Well, you know, I woke up seventy years in the future and this is the kind of change I'm excited to see," Steve admitted.

"Still sore about the toaster?" Bruce asked.

"A little," Steve said, grinning.

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On Tuesday afternoon, Steve met Stacy at a nearby grocery store. She offered to buy the food herself, but knowing how stretched thin her budget was, Steve insisted on meeting her at the store and buying all the groceries.
"So, do you like pasta?" Stacy asked as they walked around the store.

"Yeah. That sounds great. I'm not picky at all," Steve said, eager to have a home-cooked meal and not caring what it was, really.

"Okay, I can make a mean chicken and pesto pasta dish. We could have it with some fresh bread and salad. How does that sound?"

Steve's mouth began to water. "Absolutely amazing."

"Okay; let's go get the ingredients," she said with a smile.

They walked around the store and Stacy commented on each ingredient, telling Steve how to tell if they were fresh, which ones you could buy prepared and which ones you couldn't. He was impressed about how serious she was as she scrutinized one package of fresh basil after another, looking for any type of blemish or imperfection on the leaves.

"You're not kidding around about this recipe," he commented.

"Oh, I never kid about food," she said, then playfully stuck out her tongue. "It'll be nice to cook with someone else. Monica's always out and Erica's either at the research lab with Michael or going over wedding plans with him. Plus, I love your kitchen."

"Thank you, again, for teaching me. I really appreciate it," he said as he stopped the cart and looked at her.

She turned and gave him a smile. "It's the least I could do."


An hour and a half later, Steve pushed himself away from the table, completely stuffed. The chicken, pasta and homemade pesto sauce had been phenomenal. He had to restrain himself from licking the plate. They had gotten enough for at least six servings, so that Steve could have leftovers, but he couldn't stop himself and he ended up eating nearly everything.

"I take it that you liked it?" Stacy asked wryly.

"I loved it. I want to eat it everyday," Steve said.

"Well, I'm glad. I wrote down the recipe for you. Why don't you try making it again on your own? I can't wait to see how you do by yourself."

"Okay, I'll try."

"Are you free this Saturday?" Stacy asked.

"Always."

"Great. We're all going to Coney island. Have you ever ridden the Cyclone? It's from the 20s."

Steve sucked his breath. He last had gone with his friend, Bucky. He remembered Bucky referencing it right before he died. "Um. Yeah. I have."

"Are you okay?" Stacy asked, concern written on her face.

"I'm fine," he said, pushing back the memories that seemed to almost overwhelm him at times.
The next few months passed by quickly for Steve. There were weekends at the Jersey Shore with his new friends where he truly learned about how swimwear had changed since the 40s. He decided that the bikini should be ranked up there with one of the best innovations of the 20th century. They all went to Coney Island three times, riding the Cyclone until Josh got sick to his stomach. They visited Central Park and watched movies at night there while having a huge picnic together.

Sometimes, he'd have to go on one mission or another for a few days at a time, but he was no longer anxious, worried that somehow he'd lose a hold of these friendships, that they'd go on without him. Stacy was more than understanding when he'd call at the last minute and cancel out on making dinner together because he was halfway around the globe tracking down an arms dealer or a weapons lab.

It was the last Saturday of summer and Steve was standing outside an obnoxious club, waiting in line. He was supposed to meet Stacy, Monica, Josh, and Josh's new girlfriend, Cheryl. Cheryl had suggested the club and the rest of the group had reluctantly agreed with Erica and Michael bowing out since they were planning on working at the lab until late.

Steve shifted nervously. He hated this type of club. The music was deafening even outside and everyone in the line with him reeked of a mixture of desperation and pretentiousness. He could tell that the bouncers weren't letting people in just to maintain a long line in front of the club to advertise its exclusiveness.

Steve didn't hear Stacy approach and he didn't even notice her until he felt her arms around him in a bear hug. She had been doing that more lately, tackling him with an enthusiastic hug, telling him repeatedly how he was one of her closest friends. He had been tempted, more than once to just go ahead and ask her out, but Josh's words rang in his head. If it went sour, he'd lose the whole group and he'd be back to the way things were before.

And so, he kept his feelings to himself. He tried to satisfy himself with stolen glances when he was sure that she wasn't looking, with obsessively drawing her from memory in his sketchbook. However, whenever he vaguely thought of his future, she was always there, smiling at him, probably holding a cup of coffee.

"Have you been waiting long?" she shouted over the din. Josh, Cheryl and Monica waved at him.

He shook his head.

"Has the line moved at all?"

He shook his head again.

They waited for thirty minutes. Steve wanted to just leave, but he was worried it would hurt Cheryl's feelings, since it was her idea. He had only meet her once before, at a movie night they had had at his place. Josh had brought her over to introduce her to the group. She was a tall, willowy blonde with vivacious personality. They seemed quite opposite, both in personality and appearance, but they got along well. They had met at Josh's firm and had known each other for months before going out.
Finally, Monica could not handle waiting any longer. "I have an idea," she said. "I need to borrow tu novio," she said to Stacy before snagging Steve's arm.

"Steve, we need a favor," Monica asked him.

"Okay," he said. "Come with me," she said, gently tugging on his arm as she walked to the front of the line.

"Hi," she said, grinning at the bouncer in front of them.

"Sorry, lady. No cutting. You'll have to get back to your place in line," said the giant of the man.

"Come here," she said, and motioned for him to lean down. When he did, she whispered loudly in his ear.

The bouncer looked at Steve through narrowed eyes. "No, really?"

"Really," Monica affirmed.

He took out his phone and a few seconds later, he grinned at Monica, "Wow. You're right."

"So, we all can get in?" Monica asked.

"It would be my pleasure," said the bouncer and he unhooked the velvet rope.

Monica motioned Stacy, Josh and Cheryl to follow them inside.

"How did you convince them to let us inside?" Steve asked, shouting over the music.

"I told them who you are," Monica replied, sheepishly. "Sorry, but if I hadn't have, we would have spent the whole night out there."

Steve shrugged his shoulders. "It's okay." It's not like he used his supposed fame often to get favors; he guessed once wasn't a big deal.

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Twenty minutes later, Steve was sitting at a booth guarding three purses and nursing a six dollar Coke that was mainly ice. He was miserable. The music was horrible; its relentless beat was giving him a headache and the lyrics, when he could make them out, vacillated between being inane or obscene. The majority of the dancers were so enmeshed in one another it was hard to know where one began and the other one ended. He was trying to figure out exactly how long he had to wait before he could make his apologies and just go home.

All of a sudden, Stacy emerged from the sea of writhing bodies, heading straight for him. She looked a bit flushed and unsteady on her feet.

"Scooch over," she said shakily and he obliged.

She sat close to him, nearly on his lap. "Put your arm around me. Pretend you like me. I just spent the last fifteen minutes dealing with the most disgusting guys ever. I need a fake boyfriend to ward off the creeps," she whispered loudly in his ear, her hot breath tickling his neck.

He put his arm around her and she rest her head lightly on his shoulder. For a split second, he wanted to tell her that it didn't have to be fake, that he wanted to be with her.
She smiled up at him. "That's better. I'm telling you, I'm waiting five more minutes and then seriously, I'm bailing. I'm in desperate need of a twenty-four diner and a plate of fries."

Steve grinned, in spite of himself. "And coffee."

"You know me so well," she said.

Steve was about to reply when Monica appeared in front of them. "I hate this place. I just had to step on the feet of five different guys just to get them to back off. I nearly broke a heel. Let's bail. I already told Josh and Cheryl we were leaving."

Steve nodded and escorted them outside, handing Cheryl her purse before they left. He supposed it was for the best he hadn't said anything to Stacy.

The next Monday, Steve was in position at the Tower, gripping his new Night-Night gun, ready to spring their trap for the visiting Hydra agent. The agent was posing as some type of Midwestern businessman, full of good will and generosity, however JARVIS had run him through the facial recognition database the second he entered the Tower and had come back with a list of aliases and crimes he was wanted for.

They were planning on this agent contacting the Hydra leak while in the Tower and JARVIS was ready to trace any communication from his phone. Tony was in the process of showing the agent a general Stark Industries research lab on the nintieth floor, when JARVIS interrupted Steve's train of thought.

"Sir, the agent has made contact. I am beginning the trace."

A few seconds later, JARVIS had finished the search. "Sir, the phone has been found. It's in the lobby, sir. The security guard station."

The blood drained from Steve's face. Of course, the security guards. They were in the perfect position to notice who came and went from Stark Tower with their access to the video monitors.

He raced downstairs and arrived at the station too late. There were two guards on the floor already. Another guard, Todd, was holding a third guard, Benny, at gunpoint. Todd had positioned Benny so that his body was covering Todd's.

"Todd, just put the gun down," Steve said reassuringly as he aimed at him. "Let's talk about this."

"There will be no talking. We are Hydra. We are everywhere. Cut off one head and two more will take its place. You think I'm the only agent informing on you? We are in every facet of your lives. You are not safe. You will never be safe."

"Well, then," Steve began and shot Benny, the hostage, with the Night-Night gun. As soon as Benny fell, he shot Todd, his surprised face Steve's only satisfaction that day.

Steve raced to the two downed guards and choked back a sob when he saw one of them was Sam, the guard he had given the Captain America toys to. He screamed at JARVIS to call 911 as he frantically began CPR.

Sam and Henry, the two guards that Todd shot, eventually died. Sam died in the ambulance on the
way hospital. Steve had performed CPR on both of them as best he could until Tony and Bruce came down to the lobby to help him after incapacitating the Hydra agent.

Henry died two days later in the hospital. They were both married with kids, Sam with his two boys and Henry had just had his first, a baby girl. Tony paid for all the hospital bills, set up generous scholarship funds for the kids and handed over huge checks to the widows as death benefits. He still racked his brain for something else he could do, another way he could help.

Things were tense between Tony and Steve. Tony felt guilty that the informant had evaded his background checks. Steve expected that he would be angrier at Tony, but he just felt hollow and empty inside, battling his own grief and guilt. He had known Todd for almost a year, joked with him, even signing a promotional Captain America photo for a cousin of his. He couldn't believed how easily he had been tricked, how gullible he had been.

Natasha came up with a dead end with the interrogations. The agent and the informant had been contacted and instructed via text through a series of burner cells and every number that S.H.I.E.L.D. had uncovered had turned out to be inactive. Everyone in the Tower was on edge, jumping at shadows. Every single room in the Tower had been swept for bugs, twice, and still everyone felt twitchy.

Steve attended the funerals a few days later, along with Tony and Bruce and a huge contingent of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Even Director Fury was there, solemn and subdued. Steve looked over at the two widows, hugging each other over the graves of their husbands, as they both dissolved into a mass of tears and he felt something inside of him break. No matter what it cost him, no matter what it took, he wasn't going to let Hydra get away with what they did. He owed the devastated families in front of him that much.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note - For those of you who are just dying for Steve and Stacy to finally start going out together, you're going to love the next chapter!

Rough Spanish translations-

maja-pretty woman (can be a term of endearment)

Tu novio- your boyfriend (yes, Monica is giving Stacy a hard time about her and Steve)
A few weeks later, Steve received a voicemail from Stacy. He had left his phone in his apartment as he went downstairs to get the Saturday morning newspaper. In her message, Stacy said that she had gotten a nasty cold from one of the new kindergarteners in her class and she was spending the rest of the day in bed, missing their Saturday morning workout session and the movie night planned at Steve's house.

Steve replayed the message three times that morning, wincing at the raspy sound of her voice. He tried calling back, but her phone went straight to voicemail. He debated what to do. He hated barging over there, but from the message, it sounded like she was all alone. He remembered all the times his mother took care of him when he was sick, how loved he felt to have someone do everything she could to make him feel better.

"JARVIS, where's the nearest pharmacy?"

An hour and a half later, he was knocking on Stacy's apartment door. After a minute, he heard a hoarse voice, "I'm coming. I'm coming."

Stacy opened the door wearing fuzzy pink slippers, red stained sweatpants, and an over-sized, rumpled black T-shirt. Her hair was a frizzy, tangled mess that had been quickly pulled into a lopsided, loose ponytail. Her eyes were bloodshot and her nose was red. She looked surprised to see him.

Steve smiled and held up the bags he had with him. "Hi, I brought over some medicine. You sounded pretty bad on the phone. I tried to call to let you know I was coming over, but your phone went straight to voicemail."

"Oh, you didn't need to come over. I don't want to get you sick," she said weakly. She looked embarrassed as she tried to pull her hair back into a tidier ponytail.

"No need to worry. One of the side benefits of the serum. Super-charged immune system. Can I come in?" he asked as he shifted awkwardly holding the bags in his hand.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Sorry. I'm kind of out of it. Come in," she said as she let him pass. She rubbed her eyes and then began to shuffle slowly around the tiny apartment, picking up dirty dishes and clothes that were strewn about the place.

"Sorry; the place is a mess," she said self-consciously, grabbing a tissue from her pocket to wipe her nose and then dropping it into the wastebasket.

"Why don't you lie down and rest? I can clean up," he said, trying to reassure her.

"Really?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, really. Lie down and rest. Those little kids need you at full strength on Monday. You don't
Steve's tone was kind, but firm.

Stacy nodded weakly and lay down as Steve tidied up the rest of the studio apartment. He could understand why she preferred to visit his place. On one end of the small room were two sets of bunkbeds, the bottom of one of which had been converted into a long table, leaving 3 beds and a makeshift desk big enough for two people. There was small card table to one side with 4 folding chairs that Steve guessed served as kitchen table.

He could barely squeeze into the yellow and white kitchen and he noticed that you couldn't have the refrigerator and the oven doors open at the same time or they'd hit each other. There was a smallish microwave and a two burner stove.

"You don't have a T.V.," he observed as he finished cleaning and began unpacking the bags he brought.

Stacy smiled wanly from the one lower bunk, fiddling with the multi-colored quilt she had snuggled under. "No, we just use our laptops. Sorry about the place. It's not very fancy," she said sheepishly.

"You know, when I lived in Brooklyn with my mom, our place wasn't much bigger than this. It was fine. I was sick a lot as a kid, so I just stayed indoors a lot and listened to the radio."

"What did you listen to?" Stacy asked.

"There were musical programs, comedy skits, drama and mystery shows."

"Did you ever listen to The Shadow? You know, with the line, 'Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men'?"

"Yeah," Steve said excitedly. "How did you know about that show?"

"When I was a kid, I used to get CDs of old radio programs from the library. I would just sit and listen to them in my room with my eyes closed, letting my imagination run wild. I guess now they're probably all on-line," she explained.

Steve smiled and decided to look it up once he got home.

"So, let's see what I bought," he said as he lifted up the bottles and packages one by one. He had spent nearly an hour at the pharmacy trying to find what to buy. He had no experience with modern over the counter medicines and finally had to ask a clerk for help. "I have cold medicine for daytime, cold medicine for nighttime, cough medicine, sore throat lozenges, some orange juice and chicken noodle soup."

"Oh, I'll take some of that daytime medicine. We ran out yesterday," she croaked as she sat up in bed.

"Lie back down. You're sick. Don't exert yourself," he said sternly. "I'll bring it over."

She obeyed, resting her head on her pillow and briefly closing her eyes.

"Here you go," he said, handing her two orange tablets and a glass of cool tap water.

She dutifully swallowed the pills and took a sip of water to wash them down.

"Have you had lunch? I could make you some soup," he suggested.
"No, I haven't really eaten today. Soup would be nice. But I can make it," she offered, struggling to sit up as she pushed aside her quilt.

"I said, lie down, Stacy. I'll make it," Steve said as he went to the cramped kitchen and began to look for a pot to heat up the kitchen. "Where are your roommates? Did they just leave you alone when you were this sick? You look miserable." He opened the flip top lid of the red and white can of soup and dropped its contents into the pot that he had found. He squinted at the tiny directions on the side of the label and realized he needed to add a can full of water to dilute it. Once he had finished, he turned on the burner on low and began to stir it slowly.

"I sent them away. I didn't want them to catch it. Monica's like me; she can't afford to miss work and Erica's neck deep in their research, spending every spare moment at the lab."

"So, they finally got their funding?" Steve asked hopefully as he continued to stir.

"Sort of. They were able to cobble together a whole bunch of small grants and scholarships, but it's not enough; the money only going to last another four or five weeks at most."

"Soup's ready," Steve said a few minutes later, clicking off the burner and ladling some soup into a large bowl. "I forgot crackers. Do you have any saltines?"

"Yep, in the pantry."

Steve rummaged through the overstuffed pantry and finally found an open package of crackers in the back. He set it all, along with a spoon, on a large wooden tray he found in one of the cupboards and brought it over to her bed.

"Here you go," he said, setting the tray down carefully on her lap as she sat up in bed.

Stacy smiled up at him. "I'll have to get sick more often. A girl could get used to getting fussed over like this."

Steve grinned. "You need to focus on getting better. Eat up," he said and he brought a folding chair over so that her could sit by her bedside.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked as he made himself as comfortable as he could on the hard metal chair.

"I already ate before I came over. I made that pesto chicken last night and had the leftovers for lunch." He had to admit that he was proud of his culinary accomplishment.

"How'd it turn out?" she asked as she slowly ate the soup.

"Pretty good. Not as good as when we made it together, but I feel like I got the hang of it."

"Good," she said softly, her eyes fluttering closed. Steve noticed that she had already pushed the tray away even though she'd only finished half of the soup.

"Do you want to take a nap?" he asked gently. He remembered how exhausted he always felt when he was ill.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I'm not very good company right now," she said as way of apology.

"Don't worry. Believe me; I know what it's like to be sick. Why don't I put this and the rest of the soup in the fridge? You could have it for dinner."
"Thanks so much," she mumbled as she sank down in her bed, her head hitting the pillow.

"I was thinking of coming over tomorrow, after church, to check up on you," Steve suggested tentatively.

"You don't have to. I mean, I should be at least a little better by then," she protested.

"I know I don't have to. I want to," he said as he placed the leftovers and the orange juice in the fridge.

She nodded slowly as she closed her eyes once again. "That'd be nice. I really missed coming over and seeing you this morning."

Steve smiled. "I missed you, too."

"I'll leave the medicine right here for you," he said as he crouched down at eye level to her, putting the various packages next to her bed along with a glass of water. "You focus on getting better."

She caught his hand as he stood to go and squeezed it. "Thank you so much. You are the best."

He squeezed her hand and hesitated for a moment, not wanting to let go. "So are you." He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand, indulging himself for a moment. "Now, sleep." He reluctantly let go and walked out the door.

The next afternoon, Steve was surprised by a knock on his door. He'd just gotten back from Stacy's apartment to check up on her, so he knew it wasn't her. She was feeling a bit better and was hopeful that she'd make it to work the next day. They had eaten lunch together and played a few rounds of Monopoly before she decided to take a nap. He noticed that she seemed to light up when she saw him, although he admitted to himself it could just be wishful thinking.

He opened the door and his eyes widened when he saw Tony there at his doorstep, dressed in yet another AC/DC t-shirt and jeans. "Uh, hi, Tony."

"Can I come in?"

Steve let out a small sigh. Things had been tense for a few weeks between them, their new-found friendship strained by the revelation that someone under Tony's employ had been informing on them, despite Tony's previous assurances otherwise. Steve was trying to move past it, but the memory of people who had died because of the informant was too raw, too painful. He knew he shouldn't hold Tony responsible, but he couldn't stop the feelings of resentment that seemed to bubble up whenever Tony was around.

"Sure," Steve said reluctantly, stepping aside to let Tony in.

Tony walked to the living room and sat in the easy chair."I was talking to Bruce. He said that you had asked him about some of the Stark Industry scholarships for some friends of yours."

"Yeah, their funding got cut." Steve sat on the couch, facing him.

"I looked them up. Their cancer research is actually fascinating. And coming from me, that's a huge compliment."

Steve let out a short bark of a laugh. Tony would never have a problem with false modesty.
"However, you understand I can't hand out scholarships based on friendships. Nepotism and all that. Makes the whole process corrupt," Tony said airily.

Steve's shoulders slumped, but he nodded. So much for being able to help Erica and Michael.

"On the other hand, I can give whatever I'd like out of my personal funds. A couple hundred thousand is nothing to me. I find that kind of money between the seat cushions of my sofa."

Steve reared his head back in surprise. "You're really going to fund them?" he asked incredulously.

"Don't think I'm being all altruistic," Tony protested. "When they cure cancer, there will be my name, up in lights, right along with them," he said, gesturing to an imaginary marquee. "More adoration for me. See, it's a win-win."

Steve saw right through his mocking protest. He saw, maybe for the first time, exactly what a good man Tony really was.

"Thanks, Tony. I mean it."

"You're welcome. To return the favor, I want you to satisfy my curiosity before I go," Tony said as he stood.

"Okay," Steve agreed dubiously.

"So, I've heard that you've been making time with a luscious strawberry blonde. At first, I thought Pepper was stepping out on me, but then I thought, I'm fabulous, she'd never do that. I've seen the security footage, by the way, and as they said back in your day, va-va-voom! Good for you, Metamucil."

Steve rolled his eyes at Tony's little dig. "Thanks . . . but it's not like that; we're just friends," said Steve as he shook his head.

"Really? If I were you, I'd snap her up quick. Girl like that won't stay single for long. Invite her to the Tower Halloween party. It'll impress her."

"How do you know that?"

"'Cause I'll be there," Stark said with a cocky grin, arms out as he walked backward towards the door.

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A few weeks later, once Stacy had fully recovered from her cold, Steve decided to take the plunge. It was a Thursday night in early October. They had eaten together, a pot roast with potatoes and carrots that Steve had made in the crockpot. Stacy had walked him through the recipe the previous Tuesday. The meat was fork tender and mouthwateringly delicious. Steve couldn't help but beam when Stacy had seconds.

They were now enjoying their post-workout decaf coffee. Stacy was sighing in enjoyment as she sipped her brew. She was curled up in the easy chair, grinning at him, and he decided it was now or never.

"So, Halloween's coming up," he began.

"Yeah, I know. I've got tons of stuff I've got to get ready for the kids at school. You can't believe
all the tiny little ghosts I have to cut out and put around the room."

"So," he said plunging ahead, gripping his mug tighter than he intended to. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to a party with me?"

"Oh. Yeah, sure; that'd be fun. I could call everyone and we can all go together," she said excitedly.

"Well, actually, I was thinking just you could come . . . as my date?"

"Like a real date?" she asked, skeptically.

"Just like one," he said with a nervous grin.

"Oh, crap . . . ." she said, sucking the air in noisily through her teeth.

"Oh, I understand," Steve felt like a fool. "You don't feel that way. It's okay. I understand."

"No, no, no. I totally feel that way . . . truth be told, there may be several notebooks lying around my apartment filled with hearts with your name inside. I mean, you're like the most amazing person I've ever met and you're gorgeous, and sweet and kind and generous. And now I'm just babbling." Her words came out in a rush and she began to blush.

Steve looked up with a smile. "No, go on. It's great," he chuckled, feeling the tension leave his body.

"Wow. I thought you'd never get around to asking me out." She beamed playfully at him.

"Wait. How long have you been wanting me to ask you out?"

She colored. "Remember the Big Bad Voodoo Daddy concert?" she asked with an impish grin.

"That long?"

She nodded. "Oh, yeah. After a while, I just thought you wanted to be friends," she confessed.

"No, it wasn't that. I guess, I . . . . It doesn't matter. So, what are you doing tomorrow night?" he asked, leaning in a bit.

"It's just me, a frozen pizza and some Netflix. Why? You got a better offer?" she asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"Well, we could go out. On a real date. I could pick you up. We could go out to a nice restaurant, maybe a movie?"

"Yes, definitely. How nice a restaurant? I can't see wearing a dress with your motorcycle."

"Tony's got a fleet of cars in the garage downstairs. He's said that I could borrow one whenever I like. I'll pick you up in one. Let's say six o'clock."

"I don't want to make you borrow a car just to take me out. I mean, you know me, I would be seriously okay with McDonalds and a DVD."

"No, I want to take you out on a special first date," Steve insisted earnestly.

"Okay, alright. I just don't want you to make a fuss," she said as she stood and walked towards the
sink to wash out her cup.

Steve followed her and stood behind her as she finished up. When she turned, she bumped into him. She looked down for a moment, self-conscious from his intent gaze. He slowly traced the contour of her cheek with the back of one finger. When she looked up at him, he smiled. "You are completely, utterly worth making a fuss over," he said as his hand cupped her cheek and he lowered his head to hers, lips brushing hers ever so delicately.

She let out a shuddering breath and he took a step back. "Now, let's get you home."

She nodded mutely and turned to go grab her backpack. Steve grinned. In his admittedly limited experience with women, he was used to the woman being the one to initiate anything romantic. He was usually too shy or too much of a gentleman, not wanting to push. But, as he saw Stacy's cheeks redden and saw her fumble a bit with her backpack, he had to admit, it was nice knowing that he was the cause of her feeling so flustered.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she smiled over at him. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note- Yes, dear readers, you can listen to episodes of "The Shadow" on-line.

I hope you all enjoyed their first kiss!
Steve drove Stacy home on his motorcycle and he was certain that she held on just a little bit tighter than before, sat just a little bit closer than before. He walked her to the door of her apartment, just as he always did, but instead of just giving her the usual quick wave good-bye and leaving, he stopped in front of her, looking down at her with a grin.

"I can't wait till tomorrow night."

"Me, either." She blushed a bit when she said it.

Then, she stood on her tiptoes to reach him, her breath catching as he had traced her jaw with his thumb, slowly moving his hand to the back of her head as he leaned down to kiss her. He didn't want the moment to end, but after a few seconds, they were interrupted by Monica opening the door to the apartment.

"Ohhh, **mira, mira**! I knew it. I knew it," she crowed triumphantly as Steve and Stacy sprang apart.

"It's . . . . um, Steve and I are going to go on a date tomorrow night."

"Oh, finally. We've all been waiting for you guys to finally wise up." Stacy shot her a poisonous look. "Okay, okay, I'll leave you be," Monica said and with that, she closed the door once again to the apartment.

"I'm so sorry about that. I'll see you tomorrow," Stacy said, a huge smile gracing her face.

"I can't wait," he said with a wink and then turned to go.

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When Steve woke up the next morning, he couldn't help but grin when he thought of the night before. He couldn't believe it had taken him so long to ask Stacy out, that he had allowed his fear of losing her as well as her friends to hold him back for so many months. He felt ridiculous when he thought of how much time he had wasted because of his doubts.

He found himself singing along with the radio in the shower, eager to start a new day. He whistled while he got dressed. He hummed while he made himself a huge breakfast of four scrambled eggs, three pieces of toast and two bowls of cereal. He grinned when he made the coffee, making sure to make it extra strong since that was the way she liked it, adding her favorite creamer to it. He was so ready to begin his day, so ready to see Stacy again that night.

That eagerness soon dwindled when he checked the morning's emails while drinking his second cup of coffee of the day. When he reviewed the morning's work schedule, he grimaced. He had a full day of going through endless reports and several teleconferenced meetings he was required to attend.

Despite his busy schedule, Steve spent the majority of Friday focused on his upcoming date, his
mind buzzing. Whenever he had a break, he researched restaurants, looked for nearby florists or ran out and picked up his suit at the dry cleaners.

Right before going up to meet Bruce at lunch, Steve took a deep breath and called Tony out in Malibu. He waited nervously for Tony to answer as his cell phone rang.

Finally, on the tenth ring, someone answered the phone. "You have reached the live model decoy of Tony Stark. Please leave a message after the beep. BEEEEEP."

"Uh, Tony?" Steve asked in confusion.

"Give it to me. Give it to me," a female voice said crossly. "Hi, Steve. It's Pepper."

"Oh, hi, Pepper, is Tony there?"

"Yeah, he is. He was just trying to be funny. Emphasis on the word trying. Here, Tony, take it. C'mon, take it. Take it!"

Steve heard giggling and someone fumbling for the phone.

"What's up, Ice Capades?"

Steve scowled briefly at the dig, but decided to let Tony's attempt at humor just roll off his back.

"Hi, Tony. I was wondering if I could borrow one of your cars for tonight."

"Sure, of course, mi casa es su casa, as they say. Where are you going?"

Steve braced himself for the inevitable teasing that would follow. "Out on a date. You know, the girl from the security footage."

"Oh, you sly old dog. Just friends, yeah, right. I knew it." Tony gloated. "Did you hear that, Pepper? Cap's got himself a girl . . . . So, where are you taking her?" Tony asked.

"Out to dinner . . . still trying to find a restaurant." Steve fidgeted a bit, embarrassed to be discussing it with Tony.

"Well, here's what you're going to do. What time are you picking her up?"

Steve blinked and his heart sank a bit. He wasn't looking forward to having Tony plan his date for him. "Six o'clock."

"Great. Perfect. I'll call over to Luigi's and have them get you the best table in the house for let's say around six-thirty. Go crazy, champagne, hors d'oeuvres, wine, dessert; it's all on the house. We've got some amazing violinists I'll make sure to visit the table. And don't worry about the car. We'll set you up with my limo and driver."

Steve shook his head, a bit overwhelmed. "Are you sure?"

"This girl. She's someone special, right?"

Steve paused for a moment. "Very special."

"Then, you guys deserve a nice night out."

Steve wanted to protest, but he couldn't think of anything to say. "Thanks."
"You're welcome. You will, of course, have to name your first kid after me. You can use Antonia if it's a girl."

Steve couldn't help but chuckle. "Thanks, Tony."

"No problem."

Steve stared at his phone for a moment. If someone told him a year ago that he would go on a date courtesy of Tony Stark, he wouldn't have believed them. He was surprised at how well they were getting along.

"Are you taking her to the Tower party?" Tony asked.

"Yes."

"See, I told you it'd impress her. Seriously, you need to name the first two kids after me," Tony quipped.

"Wow; how many kids am I having?" Steve decided to join in on the joke.

"At least a dozen. A delayed baby boom, so to speak. Since you missed out on the 50s."

"I tell you what Tony, if I end up having twelve kids, I promise to name at least one after you."

"See that you do. Now, from Pepper's frantic waving and pointing at the clock, it seems as though I'm about to miss either an important conference call or the first few minutes of 'Good Morning America'. Good luck, buddy."

"Thanks. See you at the party."

After hanging up the phone, he left the apartment, riding the elevator up to Bruce's lab. He found his friend, hard at work, frowning at few simulations running on various laptops.

"How's it going?"

Bruce looked up and smiled. "Good, actually really good."

"Really?" Steve was excited for his friend. Things seemed to seesaw for Bruce. At first, he'd think he'd have a breakthrough in tracing the Hydra weapons, but then, he'd get to the simulation stage of testing his theory and it would all break all the concerns about possible leaks and Hydra infiltrating the Tower, Bruce had not help in the labs, no assistants to make the work go faster.

"Yeah, I mean we're still a few weeks away from any viable field testing, but I'm hopeful."

"Ready for lunch?" Steve asked as his stomach growled loudly.

Bruce smiled as he shut down his laptop. "Not as ready as you are."

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They ended up at their usual diner. Steve ordered two cheeseburgers with fries and a chocolate malted milkshake, while Bruce got a club sandwich with a salad. Since they were in public, they had to avoid any specific talk of any work for S.H.I.E.L.D., instead chatting about the weather or other small talk. Once their food had arrived, Steve decided to tell Bruce the big news.

"So, my friend, Stacy . . . we're going out tonight. First date." Steve tried to keep the excitement out
of his voice as he told him and utterly failed.

"Good for you, good for you," Bruce repeated as he started on his salad. "It's good to see you finally moving on with your life."

"Did you have anyone special... before?" Steve asked tentatively. He'd been careful not to pry about Bruce's past after he had once admitted how despondent he was about his unwilling transformations.

Bruce winced and Steve immediately regretted bringing it up. "Betty. Her name was Betty. I decided it wasn't fair to her. To have her tied to 'the other guy'."

"But you can control it now. You haven't transformed in nearly a year," Steve pressed. He briefly thought about Peggy and how they had been separated by decades of time. It killed him to see Bruce give up so easily on a chance to be happy.

"Yeah. Funny thing is, that doesn't mean he's gone. He's always there, lurking under the surface, scratching at the door. I do my best to ignore him, pretend he's gone for good. But all it would take is one slip-up, one moment of inattention and he would come roaring back, destroying everything in his path."

"And you don't want to hurt her."

Bruce looked at Steve, bitterness leaking into every word he talked. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to be a blunt instrument, a bomb that wrecks havoc, decimates whole cities. I don't want any of it. You chose this life. Heck, you volunteered. I didn't. I would do anything to go back to before."

"We wouldn't have won the Battle of New York without you; Tony might have died if not for you. You saved the planet from being ruled by ruthless dictator. You probably saved thousands of lives," Steve said earnestly.

"Don't get me wrong. It's not that I don't want to help. It's just that... I never had a choice. I never had a chance at a normal life." Bruce seemed resigned, tired as he shook his head slowly.

"I... I'm sorry," Steve said for lack of anything else to say. He hadn't seen Bruce this melancholy since before the Battle of New York and he felt guilty for having triggered his friend's sour mood.

"It's... it's fine. I didn't mean to rain on your parade; I am happy for you Steve. I really am. Stacy sounds like a great girl."

"She is."

"So, when am I going to meet her?" Bruce asked as he picked up his sandwich again, clearly ready to change the subject.

"Are you going to the Tower Halloween party?"

Bruce nodded, swallowing a bite of sandwich. "Yeah, yeah. Tony roped me into it."

"Well, we'll be there, too. I'll introduce you then."

"Matching costumes?"

"I guess so. We haven't really discussed it," Steve answered.
Bruce wiped some mustard off his chin and smiled at Steve. "Believe me; you'll end up wearing matching costumes."

Steve really tried to pay attention during the afternoon video-conference meetings, tried to listen to one dry technical analysis after another, but, in the end, he just doodled endless pictures of Stacy while saying "Uh-huh" from time to time. He did his best to be inconspicuous, moving the paper off to the side so the laptop camera wouldn't catch what he was doing. He kept looking at the time on his laptop, hoping that it would be five o'clock soon.

"Are we bothering you, Agent Rogers?" Director Fury finally snarled out of the blue during an afternoon meeting.

Steve snapped immediately to attention, pushing his pictures even further to the side. He realized that he had no idea what anyone had said during the past fifteen minutes. "Uh, no, sir. Not at all." He colored slightly at being caught out.

"Only I've noticed that you haven't paid attention to anything that's been said during the last three meetings. Is there somewhere else you'd rather be?" Fury said harshly.

Steve swallowed hard. He wasn't used to getting chewed out by Fury. "No, sir. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't. You don't get paid to draw, Rogers."

Steve nodded quickly, embarrassed that Fury had called him out in front of the rest of the team attending the video-conference. "Yes, sir."

Steve made sure he focused on the rest of the meetings so that Fury didn't take him to task again. Steve had always prided himself on being an exemplary soldier, but it was hard when so much of his work consisted of listening to techs going over repeated Powerpoint presentations full of specialized jargon and obscure acronyms or analysts who seemed to be paid by the word. When the last meeting ended at ten minutes till five, Steve gave a sigh of relief, quickly shut off his laptop, and jogged over to his room to get ready.

After a quick shower, Steve donned his black suit and matching tie he just got back from the dry cleaners, pairing it with a white long sleeve button-down shirt. He realized with a start that he hadn't worn the suit since the funerals for the security guards.

For a moment, his mood soured as he remembered his vow to track down the last informant in Hydra's network that had been coordinating with the turncoat security guard that caused their deaths. Perhaps Bruce's work on finding the cache of Hydra weapons would flush out the informant that surely lived in their midst. From the texts from the various burner cells, it seemed at the second informant was in close proximity to the Tower, trading information with the traitor and monitoring their every move. Whenever Steve or Tony left on a mission, the pair of informants would text each other, speculating as to which weapons factory they were headed for. That was why Hydra always knew to pack up and move their bases of operation before the S.H.I.E.L.D. forces would arrive.

Steve pushed thoughts of Hydra and informants away as he focused on his date. He wondered briefly if taking a limo was a bit over the top. He had only been in one once before. A young up-
and-coming Hollywood starlet had asked him out last winter. They had met at a charity function and she had pressed him to take her out on a date. He had hesitated and only accepted when she began to pout and accuse him of being cruel.

The date with the actress had been an unmitigated failure. It was clear that she was only out with him for the P.R. and there was paparazzi at every location they went to, obviously having been informed by her publicist. She was rude and condescending to the waiter at dinner. She only talked about herself and she was snide when referring to her co-stars. She was pushy and aggressive, in every sense of the word. He guessed that was why he went out with Beth, the waitress from the café. She seemed to be such a change from the obnoxious star with her sweet, adoring personality.

And now, there was Stacy.

Unlike the starlet or Beth, Stacy didn't seem enamoured with Captain America. She had, of course, thanked him for what he had done during the Battle of New York. She asked questions from time to time about what life was like for him now that the serum had changed him so radically. However, she seemed much more interested in Steve as a person. She wanted to know what music he liked, what his favorite flavor of ice cream was, all the minutia that goes into learning about another person.

Stacy was a bundle of contradictions. On the one hand, sometimes she was so full of bravado and cocky, teasing self-assurance that she reminded Steve a bit too much of Tony. And yet, there was an underlying kindness, an open friendliness that was so appealing. It was what pushed Steve to go to that first concert, it was what seemed to cement her relationships with her friends. She could also be shy and hesitant at times, concerned that she had pushed too hard, overstepped the bounds of their friendship.

And she was, Steve realized, his best friend. He enjoyed having lunches with Bruce. He had even finally learned to get along with Tony. And he definitely enjoyed spending time with the rest of Stacy's friends. But, when he came home from work, it was Stacy he wanted to see. It was Stacy he wanted to talk over his day with. It was Stacy he wanted to tell the funny joke that he heard at work that day.

And it wasn't just the fact that Stacy was an attractive woman. Steve had learned the hard way, in his dealings with other women, that looks only went so far in covering a horrible personality. The interesting thing was the more he knew Stacy, the more that he cared for her, the more attracted he was to her. When he first met her, he had thought she was merely pretty. But, the more he knew her, having seen her sweaty and disheveled from working out, all dolled up to go out dancing, sick with a red nose and blotchy skin, he no longer thought of her as pretty. She was, quite simply, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

And he had a date with her in less than an hour.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note- Coming up in the next chapter- The date!

Spanish-Rough translations-
mira, mira - Look, look

Mi casa es su casa - My house is your house
Chapter 13

Steve took the stairs, two at a time, to reach the underground parking lot of the Tower. He opened the door leading into the subterranean garage and looked for the limo that was supposed to be waiting there for him. After a moment he spotted the sleek black car parked near the elevator doors. He jogged over and knocked on the driver's side window.

The middle-aged man in a dark suit opened his door and got out of the vehicle. "Sorry, Mr. Rogers. I'm sorry. I was watching the elevator doors. I didn't see you there. Let me get that door for you."

Steve waved him off and opened the back door himself. "That's okay. We've met before, right? I think you took us to lunch a few months back. Al, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Rogers," Al replied as he sat back down in his seat and rolled down the glass partition.

"You can just call me Steve."

"Okay . . . Steve." The driver sounded hesitant, worried that he was being too familiar.

Steve smiled as he settled into his seat and fastened his seatbelt. Tony used to have his bodyguard/chauffeur, Happy, fly out with him whenever he came to New York, but Happy complained that he missed his family too much to leave Malibu so often. Tony ended up hiring a second driver in New York. As Steve thought more about it, it was yet another example of Tony's generosity, to employ two different people for the same job.

"Where to, Mr. . . . uh, Steve?"

Steve gave him the addresses to the florist shop and to Stacy's apartment. As he sank into the rich, leather seats of the limo, his mind replayed his last conversation with Fury. He wanted Dr. Fitz and Dr. Simmons to fly out to New York and update the New York based S.H.I.E.L.D. agents on the further improvements they had done with the Night-Night guns, making them both lighter and with more stopping power. For some reason, Director Fury was cagey and evasive, clearly not wanting Steve to have any contact with the two scientists. Ultimately, he had dropped the line of inquiry, still smarting from having been rebuked by Fury earlier.

As Steve walked into the florist shop, he was unsure of what he was going to get at first. He knew roses were a standard token of affection, but the more he thought about it, it seemed a bit much for a first date. Then, he remembered Stacy saying how much she liked Gerber daisies and that her favorite student had brought her one to school once and she had been overjoyed at the sweetness of the gesture. As he perused the store, he found a large bouquet of Gerber daisies in a riot of autumnal colors. He grinned as he paid for it, looking forward to the look on her face.

After he settled back in the limo, he heard his phone ring from his jacket pocket. He fished it out and tensed when he saw the name on the caller id.

"What do you want, Natasha?" Steve's tone was harsher than he meant it to be, but he couldn't imagine his bad luck to be called away by S.H.I.E.L.D. just as he was finally able to work up
enough courage to have his first date with Stacy.

"Well, it's good to hear from you, too." Her voice was thick with sarcasm.

Steve felt immediately chagrined by his display of bad manners. He had always done his best to be courteous and he winced at what he had just said to her. "Sorry, Natasha. I'm sorry. That was rude. It's just it's not a good time."

"It's never a good time for what we have to do," she observed wryly.

Steve's heart sank even further. "An assignment?"

"Yes, but good news. I won't be picking you up until tomorrow morning around seven."

Relief flooded his body. He'd at least be able to go out with Stacy. "Good, good; that's great."

"Just don't stay out too late on your hot date," she teased.

"Wait. How did you know?"

"You told Stark. You might as well have put a billboard up in Times Square."

Steve chuckled. "He's not the most discreet person in the world, is he?"

"He doesn't know the meaning of the word. Anyhow, I'll email you all the mission specs. You're going to need to pack. We'll probably be gone two or three weeks on this one."

"Alright." Steve hadn't been out on assignment in a while, so he knew something like this was probably coming up. He just hated to be out of town just when he had started to finally date Stacy. "So, when should we be back?"

Steve could almost hear Natasha smile on the other line. "Don't worry, Cap. I'll have you home in time for the Halloween party."

"You know about that, too?"

"I have my ways. You have a good time tonight. I'll see you in the morning."

"See you then," he said as he hung up the phone.

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Moments later, the limo pulled up to Stacy's apartment building.

"We'll be back down in a few minutes and then we'll be going to Luigi's. Do you know how to get there?" Steve asked the chauffeur as he opened his door.

"Sure do. Mr. Stark eats there at least once a week when he's in town."

Steve clutched the bouquet nervously as he took the steps up to Stacy's door. He felt foolish for being so anxious. They were already so close, it wasn't like it was a normal first date. But Steve wasn't naïve. He knew that this was going to permanently change their friendship, an emotional crossing of the Rubicon. He took a deep breath as he knocked on the door.

It opened almost immediately and Monica and Erica were standing there. They were beaming at him and both wearing their Captain America T-shirts.
"Come in; Stacy's just finishing up getting ready," Erica said, waving him in.

"Yes, she's been getting ready ever since we got home from work," Monica told him, giving him a wink.

"Wow! Those flowers are beautiful. Stacy's going to love them," Erica gestured towards the bouquet.

"You think?" Steve asked.

"Gerber daisies are her absolute favorite. You did good, Steve," Monica reassured him.

Stacy cracked the bathroom door. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay," Steve called back. "So, matching outfits," he said as he turned back to his friends.

"These T-shirts cost us twenty bucks each. We're going to wear them every chance we get. Heck, we're going to wear them to your wedding," Monica declared.

"So, where are you going?" Erica asked eagerly, trying to change the subject.

"Um, a friend's restaurant and then to a movie."

"Classic first date. I approve," Monica said and Steve saw Erica roll her eyes at her friend.

The bathroom door opened and Stacy emerged. It wasn't the first time Steve had seen her all dressed up, but the fact that she had done so for him was what caused him to swallow hard and set his pulse racing. Her hair was half up and half down in a cascade of strawberry blond ringlets. She wore an emerald green dress that accented her eyes, intensifying their color. It was short-sleeved with a fitted, V-neck top, flaring out to a full skirt that hit her right above the knee.

"You like?" she asked with an impish grin as she spun around.

"I like," Steve replied huskily as his eyes travelled her form.

"Yes, yes. You're both gorgeous. Did you see the flowers he got you?" Monica asked impatiently.

"Oh, Steve. They're my favorites. You remembered."

Steve had forgotten he was even holding them. He handed them over and she beamed.

"Here, I'll put them in a vase for you," Erica offered.

Stacy reluctantly gave them to her. "Thank you so much. That was so sweet of you. You didn't have to."

"I wanted to," Steve said.

"Okay, photos," Monica said as she whipped out her phone.

"Photos?" Steve asked.

"You'll need to show your kids and your grandkids the photo of your first date," Monica insisted.

"Monica," Stacy said sharply as a warning, her face coloring.

"It's okay. I'd love to have a picture of this," Steve said as he put his arm around Stacy and faced
"Sorry about that. Monica can get a little . . . overly excited at times." Stacy was blushing as they descended the stairs.

"She was fine. You're going to email me that photo, right?"

"Already did. How is your work for cool spy organization and you own a flip phone that's ten years out of date?"

"Long story," Steve chuckled as he opened the door to the building and ushered Stacy to the waiting car.

"Wow," Stacy said as they settled in. "This is only the second time I've ever been in a limo."

"Really?" Steve briefly wondered if Josh had taken Stacy out in a limo, on some special date. He tensed at the thought. He did his best to tamp down the surge of jealousy that reared up at the thought of them together.

"Yeah, I was a bridesmaid in a wedding. We had to wear the worst, most hideous dresses. They were lemon yellow and chiffon. I looked horrible. Everyone I met at the wedding asked me if I was sick. The bride swore to me when I bought it that I could wear the monstrosity again."

"And did you?" Steve asked, his eyes twinkling. It was always entertaining to hear Stacy get so dramatic while telling one of her stories.

"Yes, I actually did. The following Halloween I ripped it all up, poured fake blood all over it and went as a zombie bridesmaid. I won first place in a costume contest."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Here, let me find the photo." She spent a minute or so playing with her phone and then proudly showed him an image of her in the ruined dress, holding aloft a small trophy. He laughed at the picture of her made up as a zombie, her grotesque appearance so at odds with the Stacy he was used to.

"I'm just glad that Erica's bridesmaid's dresses are reasonable. Navy blue, I can handle."

"I'm sure you'll look lovely," he said.

She grinned at the compliment. "So, are you guys all renting tuxes or do you already have one?"

"Renting tuxes?"

"You know, for the wedding." She paused a bit and then reddened at his confused look. "Crap. I spoiled the surprise. I am so sorry. I thought he already asked you."

"Asked me what?"

"I shouldn't say."

"C'mon, tell me," he pressed.

"Well, Michael's going to ask you and Josh to be groomsmen. I thought he already did. I guess it's a
guy thing to wait to the last minute."

Steve blinked, feeling bit overwhelmed. It was the first time he'd ever been asked to be in someone's wedding. He realized that it was an indicator of just how much he'd been accepted into their group.

"Wow. I'm honored," he said.

"Just please, act surprised when Michael asks you. I just assumed that he already did. I mean, Erica asked me and Monica to be bridesmaids on the night she got engaged. She's been spending every spare minute going over wedding plans."

"How is she doing?"

"Great." She looked at him, cocking her head to the side. "By the way, did you happen to have anything to do with their funding being restored?"

"Why do you ask?" He looked away for a moment to avoid giving away his involvement.

"So you did." She sighed. "Thank you so much. I thought it was too much of a coincidence that they got the funding from Tony Stark."

"It was his idea," Steve said quickly.

"Thank you so much. For whatever you did. I can't tell you how over the moon she and Michael are to be able to continue their research. You literally changed the course of their lives."

Steve blushed. "I just asked a few questions. Tony was the one to pony up the money."

"Still, thank you." She reached over and squeezed his hand. She began to let go, but he caught her hand, lacing his fingers in hers.

"Well, I'm glad I was able to help in some small way."

"So, where are we going?" Stacy asked.

"We have a six-thirty reservation at Luigi's."

"Wait, I thought you didn't like that place."

Steve grinned. "I changed my mind."

At Luigi's, Steve gave his name to the hostess at the front and they were immediately ushered to a private booth in the back. With its high back and the way the booth was angled, Steve couldn't even see any of the other patrons. It felt intimate, as though they had the whole restaurant to themselves. He smiled when he recalled the fact that Tony had called it the best table in the house.

Stacy's eyes widened as she perused the menu. "You weren't kidding about taking me out on a special date. Some of these prices are higher than my student loan repayments."

"To be honest, this is Tony's restaurant. He's footing the bill." Steve hated admitting that Tony was bankrolling his date, but it seemed dishonest not to.

"Wow. I didn't know that you guys were that close," she said.
Steve thought for a moment. "Actually, we've gotten along a lot better lately. For a while there, things were tense, but he really is a good guy."

"So, what's good here?" she asked.

"Let's see, the garlic bread is great. So's the house salad and minestrone soup. I really liked the porcini mushroom ravioli and the chicken piccata. For dessert, the tiramisu and the cannoli are amazing."

She chuckled. "How many times have you eaten here?"

"Just the once," he confessed sheepishly. "I was hungry."

A few minutes later, the waiter came by to refill their drinks. "Are you ready to order?"

Steve looked expectantly at Stacy, who nodded. "I'll have the minestrone soup and the chicken piccata," she replied as she gave her menu to the waiter.

"I'll have the salad, minestrone soup, the mushroom ravioli and the piccata," Steve told the waiter.

The waiter nodded thoughtfully, not reacting to the large order. "What type of dressing would you like with your salad?"

"I'll take the balsamic vinaigrette."

"Very good. I'll put those orders right in."

"Thank you," Steve said politely as he handed his menu over to the waiter.

Stacy sipped her water. "You know, this is the part of a first date where we're supposed to get to know each other, but I feel like I know you pretty well."

"Do you?" Steve asked.

"Well, mostly. You still won't tell me what you do when you disappear for weeks on end."

Steve grimaced. "I'm sorry. I really can't tell you anything. All my missions for S.H.I.E.L.D. are top secret."

"See, you know everything about me, but you can't tell me how you spend your days full of super-spy glory," she needled him.

He gave her a pained expression. "I'd tell you if I could."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "It's okay. I was just giving you a hard time."

He gave a sigh of relief. "So how are your students doing? Better than last month?"

"Yeah, the first few weeks are always rough. Some students barely know their alphabet and some can already read. Some kids have already been in a few years of preschool and for others, it was the first time they weren't with family. But, all in all, it's going pretty well."

"Good."

The waiter came over with their salad and soups. Once Stacy had said a quick grace, she took a deep breath. "I was wondering if you might be able to do me a favor."
"Sure."

She beamed. "Great. Um, we usually have guest speakers that come in and talk to the classes for Veteran's Day. I'm in charge of the program. I had veterans lined up from the Korean War, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. So, you know how on Wednesday evenings, Monica and I volunteer at the senior citizen's center?"

Steve nodded. It was one of the many reasons he admired her. She hadn't told him about it for months, just letting it slip one afternoon when he asked if they could meet on a Wednesday instead of a Tuesday.

"Well, I got to know this wonderful man, Gerald. He was in World War II. He came to speak at our school last year and the kids just adored him. He was wonderful." Her voice broke. "He . . . . he passed away last month." She gave him a small smile. "I was wondering, maybe you could come and talk? The kids would love it."

Steve thought it over for a moment. His first instinct was to refuse. He definitely didn't want take the attention away from the other veterans. But, one look at her pleading face and he knew what his answer had to be.

"Of course I'll do it."

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After they had finished their entrées, their waiter cleared their plates. "Would you like any dessert or coffee?"

"I'll have the tiramisu and a decaf cappuccino," Stacy said.

"I'll have the same."

Once the waiter had left, Stacy asked Steve about what he had planned for them next.

"There's an 8:30 movie that I thought we could watch."

"Sounds good. Not horror, I hope. I'm a total wimp when it comes to those kinds of movies."

"No, I think it's a romantic comedy. JARVIS suggested it," Steve said.

"Well, if JARVIS thinks I'll like it, I'm all in," she said playfully.

A few minutes later, the waiter returned with their desserts and cappuccinos.

"Mmmm," she purred as she ate the first forkful of tiramisu. "Whoever thought of blending espresso and cake was a genius."

"I have to agree."

Stacy sipped her cappuccino. "You know, you never really talk about what life was like before . . . before you had the serum," she began tentatively.

Steve stopped eating for a moment, putting his fork down. "I guess I don't like to talk about it. It was rough. My dad died when I was a baby and my mom had to raise me. I was really, really sickly, weak, you know. A target for all the bullies. If it hadn't have been for my friend, Bucky . . . . ," he paused, his voice thick with emotion. "Well, let's just say that things would have been a lot harder for me."
"Remember that first day we met?" she asked.

Steve nodded. That day was burned in his memory. It was the day that his life first began to pull out of the nosedive it had been in.

"I was reading a book by C.S. Lewis. He's one of my favorite authors. I devoured his Narnia books as a kid."

Steve smiled to see the enthusiasm in her eyes.

"Anyhow, he's got a great quote. 'Hardship often prepares an ordinary person for an extraordinary destiny.' What you went through as a kid formed you. You learned empathy, compassion. You want to protect people from the bullies of the world. What you went through made you the man you are today. And you are a pretty amazing man." She blushed and slid out of the booth. "I'm just going to go 'powder my nose'," she said with a wink. "I can meet you out front."

Steve nodded and watched her as she walked away. And you are a pretty amazing woman, yourself, he thought.

The waiter reappeared shortly. "Was everything to your liking, sir? Mr. Stark has covered your bill."

"Yes, everything was wonderful. Thank you so much." Steve took out his wallet and handed the waiter a sizable tip.

"But, sir, the gratuity has already been paid," the waiter protested.

"I appreciated everything you did to make it a special night for us. Thank you so much for all that you did."

The waiter beamed as he pocketed the money. "It was my pleasure. I hope to see you again soon."

"Hopefully," Steve replied as he got out of the booth and walked towards the entrance to wait for Stacy.

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If you held a gun to Steve's head and asked him anything about the plot or the characters in the movie that they watched together, he wouldn't have been able to tell you anything in particular. It was a bland, typical romantic comedy about absurdly attractive people who don't think that they're attractive. They started off hating each other, yet through a series of bumbling mishaps managed to fall madly in love.

What Steve could remember from the movie was the way Stacy smiled at him when he first put his arm around her. He could remember the weight of her head on his shoulder, the warm, sweet scent of her perfume. He remembered the feeling his fingertips as they swirled and made patterns on her bare arm causing her to giggle and cuddle closer.

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As they exited the theater, Steve saw Stacy stifle a yawn. "What time did you wake up this morning?" he asked.

"Five thirty. I had the early recess duty this week."
"Well, I am actually on assignment starting tomorrow morning, so I'd better take you home," Steve said reluctantly.

Once they had gotten into the limo, Stacy turned to Steve. "So, how long will you be gone?"

"Um . . . I really can't say."

"See, there you go with your super-secret spy stuff again. Well, how about Skype? Can you Skype me?"

Steve thought for a moment. He'd seen other operatives on his team keep in contact with their loved ones that way. He'd just never had anyone back home to call.

"Actually, yes. They are pretty good about patching through a secure line."

"And you'll have your phone? And e-mail access?" she pressed.

"Intermittently, yes, I should."

"Good. I've always really missed you when you've gone on assignment," she said.

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

"Like crazy."

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When the limo stopped in front of Stacy's building, Steve hopped out and quickly walked around the side to open her door. He reached in and helped her out, not letting go as she emerged. They walked hand in hand up the stairs to her apartment door, his thumb caressing the back of her hand as they went.

They stopped in front of her door. Stacy turned to face him, still holding his hand, fingers interlocked. "Thank you. This was the best date I've ever had."

"Me, too," he said as he smiled down at her.

"I'm going to miss you, when you're gone," she said, looking down, a faint blush gracing her freckled cheeks.

He lifted her chin up with one finger. "Me, too," he said as he leaned down and kissed her. Time stood still as he smelled the vanilla on her skin, felt her free hand press against his back. Too soon, he forced himself to step back, his breath ragged, his eyes unfocused.

He swallowed hard. "Good night," he said.

She gave his hand one final squeeze and reluctantly let go. "Good night."

He turned and left quickly as she opened her apartment to the squealing Erica and Monica. He didn't think he could handle the post-date debriefing, so he practically flew down the steps and out the building.

"Where to?" Al asked as Steve re-entered the limo.

"Back to the Tower," he replied.
"She seemed like a very nice girl," the driver observed.

"She's the best," Steve said, grinning so hard that it actually hurt. And she's mine, he thought.
Chapter 14

The second Steve walked into his apartment, he went straight over to his laptop and fired it up. He logged onto his email and grinned when he found a slew of messages waiting for him from Stacy. There was one with the subject heading "First Date" and as he clicked on it, the message read simply, "The Happy Couple". Attached to the email were the photos of him and Stacy, as well as a few of Monica and Erica in their Captain America T-shirts. All three women were posing oddly in one photo that was named "Charlie's Angels", which Steve didn't quite get, but he was sure he could ask Stacy about it later.

His smile got wider as he opened up the other emails and attached photos that she had sent. First was one at the Big Bad Voodoo Daddy concert. The more he looked at the photo of her, the more she really did seem like an incarnation of Rita Hayworth with green eyes. He remembered how he almost didn't go to that concert and a shiver of fear went through him. What would his life be like now if he hadn't taken that leap?

He looked through the rest of the photos, ignoring the fact that he really should go to bed. He saw the babysitting ones and he grinned at seeing Stacy cradling the tiny infant. He opened the photos from Michael's bowling birthday and his own surprise party. He thought back at how overwhelmed he had felt when he came back that afternoon and had seen his entire apartment decorated by his friends.

He clicked through a few more of the summer photos, his smile growing with each one. One afternoon, he had gone with Monica and Stacy and the kids they were nannying to the Central Park Zoo. He remembered fielding questions the entire afternoon from the children who were fascinated with the Avengers. His favorite photo of that day was of him and Stacy in front of the sea lions, his arm draped over her shoulder, hers slipped around his waist, leaning into him. However, if he were honest with himself, he spent the most time staring at the beach photos of Stacy, mesmerized by his own private pin-up girl.

It was the first time he'd seen most of the photos. One thing he'd been warned about time and time again by S.H.I.E.L.D. command was the problems inherent in modern social media for their line of work. One slip-up and the enemy could have information to use against you. Steve had no Facebook account. His only email address was from work. He was very careful to ask his friends not to post pictures of him. Luckily, given that he insisted on wearing his helmet on mission and whenever he had public appearances, he rarely had to worry about the general public recognizing him and hounding him for photos.

As he scrolled through the pictures once again, he chastised himself for waiting so long to ask Stacy out. He'd been so consumed with the fear that she'd either reject him outright or that they'd break up and he'd go back to living like a hermit. He could see now that those fears were baseless and he couldn't believe he'd been so overly cautious.

He stretched and yawned and saw that it was past midnight. He really needed to get to bed soon. He had to pack and be ready by seven.
"How'd the big date go?" Natasha asked him as he hopped into the helicopter the next morning, slinging his duffel bag in with him.

"Actually, it was wonderful." Steve grinned as he remembered the date.

She nodded coolly and didn't comment. He couldn't help but notice that of all his friends, Natasha had been the least enthusiastic about him and Stacy. He knew it wasn't jealousy. It was an open secret around S.H.I.E.L.D. that she and Clint were together.

Agent Barton was on an extended sabbatical after The Battle of New York. After what Loki did to him, Clint had a hard time recuperating. He was able marshal himself enough to fight the Chitauri in New York, but afterwards, he spun out of control. S.H.I.E.L.D. had pulled him from active duty and sent him on a long vacation to an undisclosed location. Steve knew that Natasha visited him whenever she wasn't on an assignment.

It bothered Steve that Natasha was so skeptical of Stacy. He noticed that she'd make off-hand comments about her from time to time that, while disguised as casual conversation, had a biting undertone. He hadn't wanted to say anything about it since he valued their working relationship so much. Natasha was a superb agent and one of the few people he relied on without question in the field. He didn't want to do anything to jeopardize their work together.

So, he kept his mouth shut and just went over the mission specs Natasha had emailed him as she piloted the helicopter. Once again, S.H.I.E.L.D. had a lead on some Hydra facilities and they seemed rather hopeful. He looked over the team that she had assembled and nodded at the choices. Natasha had an innate ability to know which team members would work well in each situation. Most of the names were familiar to Steve and he felt like they would be effective together.

Later on that day, after a myriad of meetings aboard the hellcarrier, Steve and his team were assigned a plane and began the long flight down to Chile. There were some indications that the Hydra was in the region, so there was a big push to send a team down there to investigate. There was a time that Steve would have leapt at the chance to go on a mission, but he had to admit, he almost resented being called away from New York.

Once they had landed in Santiago, Chile, the real mission planning would begin. Natasha had a few local assets she could contact and pump for information. Steve had no experience with undercover work and contented himself with reviewing the files of his teammates and organizing the most effective strike force for when they found the facility. Their plane served as their base of operations as well as their transport.

When he finally got a few moments to himself, Steve sat down in the middle of lounge area of the plane at large conference table used for debriefing. He opened his laptop and started it up. He knew he'd have more privacy in his bunk, but the wifi was acting up, constantly cutting out. There were a few other agents there on their laptops, obviously having the same problems with their internet connection. He had to grin. Here he was in the future, but there were still glitches here and there.

He noticed another operative, Agent Montero, a few seats down on his side of the table, obviously talking to her family on Skype.

"Te amo, mi amor. Cuídate," she said.

"Tú también, mi vida," came the reply. Steve assumed it was from her husband.
She sighed and tapped the touchpad to hang up. She closed her laptop and began to stand.

"Um, excuse me, Agent Montero?" Steve began.

"Yes, Agent Rogers?," she replied with a smile. They had been assigned a few missions before and Steve had the opportunity to get to know her a little bit.

"I was wondering if you might be able to help me."

"Of course," she said.

"I'm trying to set up Skype with someone back home, but I'm not quite sure how to go about it." 

"Oh, it's easy." She grinned and walked over to where he was sitting. "I can walk you through it."

"Thanks; I appreciate it."

She showed him how to download and install the program as well as how to set up his account and find Stacy's username. Steve was surprised at how simple it was, but he was relieved that he had asked for help. Even the easiest of tasks sometimes went pear-shaped when it came to technology.

"Thank you," Steve said as they finished. "Um . . . Just one more thing. I have a question." 

"Sure. Fire away."

"How do you do it? Have a family and be an agent?"

She stiffened and the tension was palpable in her voice. "Are you asking that because I'm a woman?"

Steve's eyes widened, feeling chagrined that he had offended her. "No, no. I'm asking since you seem to really make it work. I just started dating someone and it could get serious. Actually, truth be told, I hope it gets serious. It's just . . . I know a lot of agents who don't believe that our line of work mixes with family life."

She smiled in relief at his reassurance. "Well, the truth is, it doesn't work for everyone. However, S.H.I.E.L.D. is actually one of the better agencies when it comes to family leave and sabbaticals. They understand that they can only push their operatives so far. When my kids were little, I worked fewer assignments or did analysis from home. My husband and I have worked out a way that I can do what I do best, but still be there for my family. It's a compromise, but it's better than the alternative."

"The alternative?" Steve asked.

"Some people marry themselves to the job. Everything else, be it family, friends, love, a social life, is secondary. Then, they wake up at age 60 or 65 and realize, quite frankly, that the job doesn't love them back."

Steve nodded, glad that he had talked to her. "Thanks. For everything."

"You're welcome. Any time," she said with a smile as she stood and walked over to collect her laptop.

Steve peered at his laptop and noticed that Stacy was on-line at the moment. He clicked the icon with her smiling face and tapped his fingers as he waited for her to pick up.
"Steve!" she nearly shouted, a wide grin on her face. "I'm so excited to see you. How are you?"

She was sitting up in her bed, hair up in a ponytail, wearing an oversized blue sweatshirt. Steve realized that with the time difference it was almost 11 p.m. where she was and she must have been getting ready for bed.

"Good. And you?"

"Fine. I missed you this morning. I hate having to work out by myself."

"I . . . . I've missed you, too," Steve admitted.

"So, how's work?"

Steve frowned. "I really can't say."

"Okay, okay. I get it, Mr. Secret Agent; what can you talk about?" she asked impishly.

"I really liked those photos you sent. Thanks," he replied.

"You're welcome. I'm glad you liked them. So, when are you coming back?" she pouted.

"Stacy . . . I wish I could tell you, but I can't." Steve felt self-conscious having the conversation out in the open, but he knew the connection would be severed if he tried to relocate to his room.

"It's fine. Um, anyhow. What about the Halloween party?"

"What about it?" Steve asked.

"Well, what time does it start? Is it a costume party? What are we going to wear?"

"We?" he repeated.

"Well, we're going to have matching costumes, right?"

Steve stifled a laugh. Bruce was right, once again. "Sure, if you'd like."

"So, what do you want to go as?"

Steve thought back to something she had said a while back. "Don't you have that nurse's uniform?"

"Yeah, it's vintage, from the 1940s. I've been dying to wear it."

*And I'm dying to see you in it*, Steve thought.

"So, what are you going to wear? One of your old dress uniforms?" she asked.

"Um, I don't think so. It doesn't feel right to wear them to a costume party."

"Yeah, I can understand that. What about that suit you wore to the Big Bad Voodoo Daddy concert? That would work."

Steve nodded. "There's something I should tell you." He was a bit nervous about his upcoming confession.

"Okay."
"When he invited me to the party, Tony told me that the party is going to be full of celebrities. The entrance fee will go towards the New York City rebuilding fund."

"Oh, wow."

Steve took a deep breath and forged ahead. "So, there's a silent auction. For the fund. A while back, Tony asked me if there was anything I could contribute. At first, I couldn't think of anything."

He paused for a while, trying to choose his words.

"Go on," she said supportively.

"Um, well. I like to draw and I had some sketches. He saw them when he came over once and suggested I donate them. You know, to help charity."

"Steve . . . . what were they sketches of?" she asked in mock sternness.

Steve looked down, not wanting to meet her eyes. "You."

"Me? Why me? Why would you sketch me?"

He looked up and stared at her through the screen. "Because you're beautiful."

Stacy began to blush, the color spreading across her cheeks as she looked down, obviously a bit overwhelmed. "Oh, that's so sweet."

He saw Natasha out of the corner of his eye. She was waving to him from across the room. "Sorry, but it looks like I've got to go."

"That's okay. Call me anytime."

"I will. I promise. Good-bye."

"Take care of yourself. Bye," she said, blowing him a kiss before hanging up.

Steve's wallpaper came up on his laptop after he closed the program, the beach photo of Stacy. A junior level one agent walked by, spied the photo, and let out a long wolf whistle. "Son, if I were you, I'd seriously re-evaluate the end of that sentence," Steve interrupted, his fury barely contained as he turned and stared daggers at the operative.

"Son, if I were you, I'd seriously re-evaluate the end of that sentence," Steve interrupted, his fury barely contained as he turned and stared daggers at the operative.

"Yes. . . yes, sir," the agent replied shakily before scurrying away.

Steve shook his head as he closed his laptop and walked over to Natasha for yet another planning meeting.

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The next few weeks were frustrating beyond belief. Once again, Hydra seemed to be one step ahead of them, vacating their facilities throughout both Central and South America just as Steve and his team were about to sweep in. Luckily, by using advanced bomb detection, his team avoided any casualties, but Steve was beyond exhausted. He knew he was pushing everyone too hard, but the fruitless searching was driving the entire team to the edge.

His only relief came in the form of his Skype calls to Stacy. She would tell him funny stories about
her day or their friends and he could almost forget the worries he had over his continually failing mission. At night, in his bunk, he'd listen to his IPOD, blaring Harry Connick Jr. or Michael Bublé, with his eyes closed, imagining her swaying to the music with him.

One afternoon, Steve walked into the lounge to see Natasha and an operative from the tech team sweeping the rest of the agents with an advanced version of a hand-held security wand.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I finally got some good intel. It looks like Hydra may have coated one of our operatives, without their knowledge, with a tracing compound. That's how they've been able to track us and evacuate before we get there. The tech team modified this security wand to detect the chemical," Natasha explained.

"Any sign of it so far?" Steve asked.

"No, we're just finishing up. We'll need to test you as well."

Steve nodded and assumed the standard position for a security check, feet shoulder width apart and hands out. Agent Tran traced the outlines of his body and stopped when the machine beeped near his right hand.

"What does that mean?" he asked her.

She gave him a tight smile as she checked his other hand and the machine didn't go off. "It looks as though someone swabbed a surface that they knew that you would touch. The chemical won't come off with soap and water. You'll need a chemical solvent to remove it."

Steve looked down at his hand, horrified that he was in some way responsible for the failure of their mission. "I . . . I didn't know."

"Look, it's fine, Steve. Hydra's been playing us for months. But, we can use this to our advantage," Natasha said.

"How so?"

"Our next lead is for Guatemala."

"And?"

"We're going to send you away on a wild goose chase. Hydra will follow you and we'll be able to catch them with their pants down. So to speak," Natasha smirked.

Steve hated the idea of leaving his team behind, but he couldn't argue with her logic.

"So, how long will Hydra be able to trace me?"

Natasha gave him a small smile. "A week, maybe less? We should finish up before the end of the month. When we get back to New York, I'll send a tech team to your apartment with the solvent to remove the chemical."

Steve nodded. "Okay, I'll pack up."
For the next few days, Steve crisscrossed the globe, crammed in economy seating on questionable airlines, surviving mostly on peanuts and pretzels handed out mid-flight. He lost count of how many time zones he crossed and sleep was just a dim memory. He'd only stay for a day or two in any one country, then he'd receive an encrypted email from Natasha and dutifully jump on yet another jet bound for who knows where.

He didn't even bother trying to Skype Stacy, having a hard enough time checking his emails in one foreign country after another. Instead he'd call and leave voicemail messages in the middle of the night. Stacy would return his calls, but his phone would usually be off since he was on yet another flight. She called it "playing phone tag" and he grinned at the phrase.

He couldn't stay in any of the usual S.H.I.E.L.D. safe houses, since their locations would then be exposed to Hydra. He ended up staying in a baffling range of hotels set up through S.H.I.E.L.D. Some were five-star accommodations with turndown service and mints on the pillow. Others were rat-infested dives with beds that had actual springs poking through the mattress.

Finally, he got the okay from Natasha that he could return to New York. Their team had successfully raided a Hydra weapons plant outside of Guatemala City. Thanks to the Night-Night guns, they were able to capture the majority of the scientists alive and they could be assured of finally getting some quality intel from the upcoming interrogations.

Steve finally arrived at his apartment the day before the Halloween party. He was beyond exhausted. Every muscle ached from the cramped airline seats and shoddy beds. He dropped his duffel bag on his bed and contemplated sleeping for the next 24 hours straight.

He looked up at the clock and realized that if Stacy were following her usual schedule, she would have just entered the gym. He grinned and walked the bathroom, splashing cold water on his face to wake himself up. He quickly changed his shirt and left his apartment.

He saw her on the elliptical, earbuds in her ears, singing along to some song as she bounced along. He just stood there a minute, drinking the sight, not realizing until that moment how much he had really missed her.

He came up and touched her lightly on her arm and she faltered, nearly falling off the machine from the surprise. She ripped off her earbuds and smiled at him, yelling "Steve!" happily, before hopping off the machine. She launched herself into his arms, hugging him tightly.

He stood there a while, enjoying the feeling of her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, the feeling of her cheek against chest. He held her loosely in his arms, running his hands up and down her back, drinking in the sweet scent of her perfume.

"I missed you so much!" she declared when she finally looked up at him.

"I missed you, too," he said before bending down and kissing her lightly.

"You looked so tired. Are you alright?" she asked, concern filling her voice.

Steve took a deep breath, trying to stave off a yawn. "Just a lot of travel."

"You don't look like you're up to working out. Maybe we could just have a quick cup of coffee at your place?"

"Yes, definitely."
"So, did you bring me back any souvenirs?" she teased as she settled on the couch next to him, a cup of decaf coffee in her hands.

"No, sorry. I didn't have much time for shopping," he said ruefully.

"And no postcards, either, I take it?"

"Sorry." He shook his head once again and managed to look remorseful. He understood how frustrating it must be for her to not know where he was or what he was doing for weeks on end.

"You look all sore and achy. Are you okay?" she asked.

"Like I said, just a lot of travel."

"Okay, you're in luck because giving excellent backrubs is one of my many skills." She leaned over and took the cup from his hands and placed it on a coaster on the end table next to the couch. "Go ahead and sit down on the ground in front of me."

"What?"

"I promise you, you'll thank me for it afterwards."

Steve shrugged and went over and sat on the ground in front of her, knees bent, arms wrapped around them. She leaned over from her position sitting on the couch and began massaging his shoulders through the thin material of his T-shirt, her thumbs stroking away at the tense muscles.

After a few moments of heaven, she said, "Lean over a bit," and he quickly complied. Her hands traveled down the length of his back, focusing on the areas on either side of his spine. The pressure was perfect, not too strong and not too light. She slowly worked her way back up to his shoulders.

"Lean back again," she instructed and after he did, her hands kneaded down the length of both arms, before returning once more to his shoulders. Her thumbs slowly rubbed the muscles on the back of his neck, applying just right amount of force. She ran her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp, her short nails sending shivers down his spine. Then, she leaned over and kissed the top of his head. "See, I told you that you'd thank me," she breathed into his ear.

Before he could reply, she stood up and grabbed her coffee cup. She headed over to the sink to wash out her cup.

It took a moment before Steve could form words. "Thanks... um... Where did you learn to do that?"

"I told you I had mad skills. Would you believe church youth group?"

"Church sure has changed over the years," he replied as he leaned back against the couch.

"Well, look, you get a bunch of fifteen year olds together, all drowning in hormones. It was a G-rated way to paw at each other. We'd have these long trains of people sitting on the floor, giving a back rub to the person in front of them. Then, someone would yell 'switch' and you'd turn around and give a backrub to the person behind you."

"At church?" Steve asked as he stood up.

"Well, I mean, not during service, but during the mid-week youth group meeting. Like I said, we
were teenagers. The trick was sitting in front of your crush," she confessed.

"And did you?"

"Oh, yeah. I totally did," she admitted.

"Who was he?" Steve tried to keep the jealousy out of his voice.

"My crush when I was fifteen? His name was Ricky." She smiled in remembrance and then shook her head to clear her thoughts. "You know, I should probably get going. I've got early morning recess duty. You look exhausted. If you want, I can just take the subway home."

"No. I want to give you a ride home."

A half hour later, they stood in front of her apartment door. "So," Steve started, trying to act casually as he faced her, holding her hand, "Do you . . . do you see him now? You know, Ricky?"

"Are you jealous, sweetie?" she asked gleefully, as she swung their hands back and forth.

"No . . . maybe a little," he confessed.

"Well, not to worry. He's married with a kid, living in Oregon. I haven't seen him in over five years. Don't worry, babe. I'm all yours."

He leaned down slowly and kissed her fiercely, possessively, both hands tangled in her hair. "All mine," he murmured in her ear.

"All yours," she repeated with a wink after a moment and then turned and opened the door to her apartment. Erica and Monica were there and he couldn't escape the inevitable catching up session that followed. After a few minutes, Stacy politely suggested he go home after he had stifled yet another yawn as his sleepiness returned. He made his good-byes, told Stacy he'd see her the next day for the Tower Halloween party, and left the apartment as quickly as he could.

As he descended the stairs toward the front door of the building, the same thought went through his head again and again, *She said it. She's mine.*

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

1. Rough Spanish translation-

   I love you, my love. Take care.

   You, too, my life. (can also be translated, my love).

2. I hope you are enjoying the story! If you are, I'd love to know!
Chapter 15

True to her word, Natasha sent a tech team over the very next morning. It was eight thirty when Steve first heard a persistent knocking on his door. He peered over at his alarm clock, irrationally angry that someone had woken him up. For a moment he just sat there, disorientated to finally be in his own bed. He'd slept over ten hours, but he probably could have slept for another three.

The knocking stopped for a moment, then began again with renewed vigor. Steve got out of bed and stretched. "I'm coming! I'm coming!" he shouted before dashing to the bathroom.

He quickly put on a pair of khaki pants and a blue plaid button-down shirt. He went to the living room and sat on the couch, lacing up his brown leather boots as he heard someone yelling "Agent Rogers!" from outside his apartment door.

He went over and opened the door. Agent Tran was standing there with Agent Montero. While they were dressed nearly the same with a blazer over jeans, Steve couldn't help but notice a shoulder holster peeking out from under Agent Montero's jacket. Agent Tran was holding a black leather briefcase.

"Good morning, Agent Rogers," Agent Tran said as she entered.

"Good morning Agent Tran, Agent Montero" Steve said, nodding to the pair. "I was going to make myself some coffee. Would you like some?" Steve offered as politely as he could in his exhausted state.

"That'd be great," Agent Montero replied as Steve walked over to the kitchen and began fixing a pot of coffee.

"So, I take it this isn't a social call," he said carefully as he ground the coffee beans and got three mugs and saucers down from the cupboard. He took an unopened hazelnut creamer out of the refrigerator. It was one of the few items in the fridge that wasn't out of date. He put it along with some powdered creamer and the sugar bowl next to the coffee pot on the kitchen island and then got out three spoons.

"I'm here to take off the tracing compound. Agent Montero and I are going to sweep your apartment to try to find any signs of it," Agent Tran explained.

"You think someone broke into my apartment and planted that compound on a surface that they knew I would touch?" Steve asked incredulously, stopping in his tracks and staring at the agent.

"Agent Rogers, we just don't know. It's disturbing that this Tower and you, especially, have been targeted," Agent Montero replied.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked before he poured the coffee and handed it to the two agents.

"There's some speculation that it might be personal. If Hydra wanted to trace one our agents, there are dozens that are easier to get to than you. Also, it may be some type of retribution, given what you did to their organization in the 40s," Agent Montero said. She added the powdered creamer and
sugar to her coffee and smiled briefly as she took the first sip.

Steve nodded, a sense of unease growing in him. He knew his job was dangerous, but the fact that there may be a vendetta against him unnerved him.

"Seventy years seems like a long time to hold onto a grudge," he countered.

"Again, it's only a theory," Agent Montero said with a shrug.

"Why don't we start our analysis and then you can get on with your day?" Agent Tran suggested, purposefully changing the subject.

"Sounds good."

Agent Tran opened her briefcase and took out two of the modified security wands, handing one to the other agent. The agents tested every conceivable surface of his apartment, even rifling through his sock drawer. Steve was a bit embarrassed to have the two female agents paw through his underwear, but, he reasoned, it could always be worse. They also checked the hand scanner at the front door and it came up clean.

When they had finished, almost an hour later, Agent Tran shook her slowly. "No trace. Well, either you picked up the compound outside this apartment or . . . ."

"Or?" Steve asked.

"Or they snuck back in and wiped the place clean. You were gone for three weeks." Agent Montero pointed out.

Steve sighed. More speculation. He wanted hard answers for once. "Can I just get this off me?"

"Sure," Agent Tran said as she took a small clear plastic bottle out of the briefcase and put on a pair of thick plastic protective gloves. "Just to warn you, this will burn a little bit."

"It's okay," Steve said as he stuck out the palm of his right hand.

She shook the bottle and then awkwardly unscrewed the plastic cap. She poured a small amount of the clear liquid on his palm and then massaged it in. Steve hissed slightly, since burning "a little" was a gross understatement. After a minute or so, Agent Tran nodded and led Steve over to the kitchen sink. He sighed in relief as she ran the cool water over his hand.

She ran the security wand once again over his hand and gave him a smile when it didn't beep.

"Looks like you're all clear."

"Thanks," he said as he flexed his fingers, his hand still a bit tender from the solvent.

"Agent Romanoff said she'd email you the mission report," Agent Montero said to Steve as she handed her security wand to Agent Tran who placed it in the briefcase along with the other wand, the bottle and the plastic gloves.

"Thanks. I'll review it some time today."

"Well, we should get going. Thanks for the coffee," said Agent Montero briskly as she placed the empty cup in the sink.

"Yes, thank you very much," Agent Tran said as she put her cup next to the other one.
"You're welcome. Happy Halloween," Steve said as he opened the door for the agents.

"Happy Halloween," both agents replied, nearly in unison, as they walked out the door.

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Steve was ravenous, so he decided to make a quick breakfast. Stacy had helped him to revamp the contents of his pantry, since it was a given that he would be away for weeks at a time. He found what he was looking for, pancake mix. All he had to do is add water, something even he could do with his meager cooking skills.

Several minutes later, a stack of eight golden brown pancakes sat on his plate. He poured what was left of the maple syrup on top and dug in. He shoveled the food in, too hungry to even taste it. He knew he should have just eaten when the agents were analyzing his apartment, but his obligatory politeness prevented him. He ended up paying the price, literally shaking due to hunger and low blood sugar. He shook his head, promising himself that he would just eat next time, despite social convention.

After eating and washing his dishes, he briefly debated going back to sleep, but decided to finish up a few chores and just nap in the afternoon. Stacy couldn't come over until the Tower party started at eight. She was helping out at a Halloween festival at her school.

First, Steve started on his laundry; he was surprised how much he had accumulated over three weeks time. Next, he opened his fridge and saw that it was nearly bare. Once he threw away everything that was out of date, the only things there were left were some butter, creamer, jam, steak sauce, mustard and ketchup. He made a quick list of a few necessary grocery items to pick up, grabbed a few clothes that needed to go to the dry cleaners and put on his leather motorcycle jacket. He made his way down the stairs to the underground parking garage, ready to get his errands over with.

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An hour later, Steve returned home, his plastic-encased dry cleaning flung over one shoulder, awkwardly holding three bags of groceries. Stacy teased him about the amount of time he went back and forth to the dry cleaners, proudly declaring that she hadn't gone to one in years. He had just shrugged, telling her that he had grown up with freshly pressed shirts and pants and he couldn't imagine it any other way.

Once his groceries and clothes had been put away, Steve sat down at his dining room table and turned on his laptop. He slogged through one useless email after another, desperate to find the one sent by Natasha. After a few minutes, he finally found the right one. He clicked on the attached report, reading the summary of the mission he missed as he crisscrossed the globe, acting as a distraction.

He was glad that his team's use of the Night-Night guns meant that the great majority of the scientists were captured alive, having gotten knocked out before they could use the standard-issue Hydra cyanide pills. As always, Natasha executed the raid flawlessly and Steve could almost visualize it from the written report. Hundreds of weapons had been confiscated as well as dozens of computers. The interrogations of the captured Hydra members were planned for next weekend.

He powered down his laptop and closed it. He made himself a late lunch of a few turkey sandwiches and some vegetable soup. After washing his dishes, he finally succumbed to his exhaustion, lying down for a nap.
At eight o'clock that night, there was a knock on Steve's door. He straightened his tie and walked over to open the door. Stacy was waiting there, her long black overcoat in her hands. The sight of Stacy, standing there in her costume, caused his heart to race.

"You look great," she said as she entered the room. "I love that suit."

Steve stared at her as she walked past him. "You . . . you, too."

"Hey, sweetie, can you do me a favor? Can you check my seams? I've never worn stockings like this before." She turned around to show off her hose.

He swallowed hard as his eyes traveled up her shapely legs. "They . . . they seem pretty straight to me."

"Thanks. Do you like it? It's just like nurse's uniform in the photo on your wall, 'V-J Day in Times Square', right?" she asked as she spun around.

"I don't know. We should test it out," and, with that, he grabbed Stacy and spun her, dipping her low and kissing her.

When they finally broke apart, she smiled up at him, letting out a shaky breath. "Wow. Pretty darn close, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah," he chuckled, pulling her closer, his hands running up and down her back. "But we should double-check just make sure."

He leaned down to kiss her again. She caressed the back of his neck, running her fingers up to play with his hair as the kiss deepened. After a moment or two, they separated reluctantly and Steve reached down to take her hand. "I guess we should go to that party," he said as he laced his fingers in hers.

Stacy gave him a wink, squeezing his hand. "Probably."

They arrived at the party, hand in hand. The room was already filled with people in various elaborate costumes. Steve was glad Stacy had chosen something a bit more subdued, as some of the outlandish clothes were definitely not his style.

Steve felt a bit nervous. He hadn't been in that particular room of the Tower since they had retrieved Loki, bruised and battered from his run-in with the Hulk. Tony had repaired all the damage, although he had placed a framed photo of the Avengers pointing their weapons at the fallen demigod on the wall in memory of their victory. The picture quality wasn't that great; it had obviously come from security footage. Steve couldn't help but shake his head and give a short bark of a laugh when he saw it. It was a very Tony thing to do.

He spotted Natasha in the mob of party-goers. She was across the room, next to the bar, talking to Tony. "There are some people I want you to meet," he said to Stacy, tugging gently on her hand, guiding her through the crowd to the bar.

Once they reached Tony and Natasha, Steve noticed that she was wearing her usual Black Widow suit. The only difference was she was sporting a black headband with two black felt triangles glued to either side of it.
"Hi, Natasha. Who are you supposed to be?" Steve asked.

"I'm Catwoman. Meow," she said in a dry monotone.

"Natasha, I said you had to dress up," Tony insisted.

"Give it a rest, Tony," she snapped.

Steve decided to step in. "Tony, Natasha, I want to introduce you guys to my . . ." he paused for a moment, then made a quick decision, "girlfriend, Stacy."

"Well, hello, nurse," Tony leered at Stacy, eyes roaming her form. "Aren't you a tasty morsel?"

Steve tensed at Tony's lewd appraisal of Stacy. "I swear, if you say one more inappropriate thing to her . . . I'll . . . I'll . . . throw you out that window."

"Like it'd be the first time that ever happened to me," Tony scoffed. "So you're the famous woman from all the sketches. I can see why he chose you."

"All the sketches?" Stacy asked. "Exactly how many are up for auction?"

Tony shrugged. "I don't know. What? Fifteen? Twenty?"

Stacy turned to Steve, eyes wide. "Sweetie, you did twenty sketches of me?"

"Oh, no. He did a lot more than that. I saw dozens at his apartment," Tony smirked.

Stacy shook her head. "I don't understand. I never sat for any sketches for you. How were you able to draw so many?"

"I . . ." Steve looked down, embarrassed. "I did them from memory."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Stacy," Natasha said pointedly, stepping in and saving Steve from further embarrassment. "I've heard so much about you."

Stacy shook her hand. "Sorry, Steve never talks about his work. You have me at a loss."

"Not to worry," Tony said smoothly. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Water would be great. It's a bit hot in here." She gave him a small smile.

"And you, big guy?" Tony asked.

"Same for me."

"Let me guess, vodka for you, Natasha?" Tony ventured.

"Just because I'm from Russia doesn't mean I only drink vodka, Tony," she replied testily.

"Okay, then, what would you like?" Tony sighed.


"Woman after my own heart," he said as he began to prepare the drinks.

"Where is Pepper?" Steve asked.
"She's drowning in meetings back in L.A. She couldn't make it out. So glad I shifted all the C.E.O. duties to her," Tony said with a grin. "Although I would have loved to see her in a matching outfit. I really could have used a Bunny."

"A what?" Steve asked. Tony was wearing a short red satin robe over black satin pajamas.

"He's dressed like Hugh Hefner, the owner of a men's magazine called Playboy. The women who pose in the magazine are called Playboy Bunnies," Stacy explained, coloring slightly.

"Oh . . . oh," Steve said, realization dawning on him.

"You missed a lot of good stuff over the years. Sorry for teasing you earlier. I was just getting into character," Tony said as he handed out the drinks.

Steve gave Tony a wan smile. "Have you seen Bruce?"

"Not yet. He said he'd come. He's probably still holed up in the lab."

Steve looked over at Stacy and saw that she was nervously tapping her fingernails on the bar, the anxiety coming off her in waves. "You guys will have to excuse us. I'm going to take my best girl out for a dance."

"Nice to meet you both," Stacy said politely as they left.

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"So, how'd you like her?" Tony asked Natasha as he took a sip of his Scotch, watching Steve lead Stacy to the dance floor.

Natasha narrowed her eyes. "There's a problem; she's too clean. She's his match in too many ways."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at you and Pepper, different tastes in music, different work ethics. We don't usually fall in love with our clone."

Tony rolled his eyes, clearly exasperated. "Are you saying the problem with her is that she is too good a match for Steve? That makes no sense."

"Look, if they had met on a dating website, I could believe it. But just randomly, on the street, no way. I'm telling you; something's up."

"And I say you're making a big deal out of nothing. Let the poor guy have some fun. I take it S.H.I.E.L.D did a background check on her."

Natasha nodded. "Of course. Her worst criminal offense was a parking ticket."

"And I'm sure that you have someone watching her."

Natasha nodded again.

"Does Steve know that S.H.I.E.L.D. is monitoring his girlfriend?" Tony asked.

"No. He has a hard time dealing with the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. has a file on him. If he knew we were watching his friends . . . ."
"His friends . . . Wait. Just how many people are you guys monitoring?"

Natasha smirked. "An easier question is who aren't we watching."

"And you wonder why a straight arrow like Steve has a hard time trusting S.H.I.E.L.D.?" Tony shook his head. "Well, I've got to go . . . mingle. This is my party after all. Try to smile, guests are here to meet the Avengers; rub shoulders with some heroes. And try not to shoot anyone."

Natasha plastered on a big, fake smile. "I'll do my best."

"Thanks," Stacy said, squeezing Steve's hand as they walked towards the dance floor.

"You looked a little overwhelmed."

"I guess it just hit me. I mean, there I was, talking to Iron Man and Black Widow. The Avengers, you know."

Steve looked at her in amusement. "But you're dating Captain America."

"I know. I know. I guess I just think of you as Steve. Does that bother you?" She looked up at him.

"Not at all." Steve smiled, taking Stacy in his arms and leaning down to kiss her.

Before their lips could meet, Steve heard an acerbic comment to his left. "So, this is why you never called me back."

Stacy stepped back quickly and Steve turned to face the person. At first, he didn't recognize her. Her costume was a garish mixture of a stereotypical Cleopatra outfit and a Vegas showgirl. Then, he grimaced as he placed her. It was the starlet he went out with that one time.

"Oh, hi. Let me introduce you to my girlfriend, Stacy. Stacy, this is . . ."

"I've seen all your movies," Stacy gushed, rushing in to shake the starlet's outstretched hand.

"See, a fan. At least someone likes my work."

Steve blushed. "I . . . I just haven't watched many modern movies."

"Excuses, excuses," the starlet said tartly. She turned to Stacy, giving her a coquettish wink. "Would you like a photo?"

"Oh, yes, please." Stacy took out her phone.

The starlet snatched it from Stacy's hands and gave it to him. "Why don't you make yourself useful?" she sniped.

Steve dutifully snapped the photo of the women hugging each other and handed the phone back to Stacy.

"Well, I must be off. People to see and all. Happy Halloween," the starlet purred as she left.

"We only went on the one date," Steve explained as soon as the starlet was out of earshot.

"Well that make sense. She doesn't seem like your type," Stacy said.
"And what's my type?"

"Kindergarten teachers with a fondness for caffeine." She grinned at him.

"A fondness for caffeine? My biggest hope is that someday that you will look at me with the same love and devotion that you look at a café latte."

"Well, play your cards right and you just might," she retorted, waggling her eyebrows for comic effect.

They spent the next few minutes walking around the party. Stacy pointed out all the celebrities she recognized, a mixture of actors, reality show stars and professional athletes. Steve nodded, knowing he'd never be able to remember even half of the names. They walked over to the display for the silent auction items and he was surprised that the bidding had already ended. Each of his sketches sold for $15,000 to $30,000 each, earning well over $500,000 for charity. The chance to go target shooting with Black Widow went for $50,000 and the "date" with Iron Man to Luigi's went for $100,000. Steve wondered cynically if Tony was just using it as an opportunity to promote his restaurant.

He scanned the crowd and still couldn't find Bruce. He really wanted him to meet Stacy.

"Hey, I think I might step outside for a bit. It's a bit warm in here," Stacy said, fanning herself.

He nodded, sweating a bit himself. Between the heat being on full blast and the crush of people, even he was a bit overheated.

"If you don't mind, I'll go check on Bruce in his lab. It's in a restricted area," he said apologetically.

"Why don't you take my suit jacket in case you get cold outside?"

"Ever the gentleman," she said, taking the jacket he offered and squeezing his hand before making her way outside.

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A few minutes later, Steve walked into Bruce's lab. He couldn't help but laugh when he saw him. He was wearing jeans, a Black Sabbath T-shirt, heeled boots and a fake goatee.

"You're going as Tony?"

"Serves him right for bullying me into going. I hate these types of events," Bruce said.

"You and me both, buddy. You and me both. C'mon, I want you to meet Stacy."

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As he entered the room with Bruce, he looked around a bit, finally spotting Stacy through the enormous glass windows. She was outside on the landing talking to one of the reality "stars" that she had mentioned earlier. Steve pointed to her and Bruce nodded. They both began to make their way through the thick crowd.

Then, all of the sudden, the man that Stacy was talking to grabbed her left forearm, and began to pull at her, obviously yelling angrily at her. Steve began to push aggressively through the crowd to get to her, shoving people out of the way. Bruce trailed him, hand on his shoulder. The man leaned in, trying to kiss Stacy and then, Steve saw one of the most beautiful sights in his life. Stacy reared back her right fist and downed the cretin with a perfect right cross, just like Steve had taught her.
When they reached her, the man was on the ground clutching his nose, dripping blood. "You little . . .," he began, but trailed off when he saw Steve and Bruce.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked her, concern coloring every word.

"My hand hurts. It's not the same without the glove," she said with a small smile.

"Her hand? She broke my nose. I'm gonna sue," the man snarled.

"Actually, you are going to jail," Tony said as he and Natasha joined them. "JARVIS did you get that on tape?"

"Yes, sir. The authorities are already in route."

"Jail?" The man staggered to his feet, obviously inebriated.

"Assault. You can't just grab women," Natasha said coldly. "She hit you in self-defense."

"I'd plead guilty if I were you. Imagine how much time a jury will give you if the Avengers testify against you," Tony bit out.

Steve started towards the man, hands clenched in anger. Stacy pulled him back with her left hand. "He's not worth it, sweetie."

He nodded, turning back to her, arm around her waist.

A contingent of Tower security guards arrived at the party. Tony waved them over and they escorted the man downstairs to wait for the police. "I'll go downstairs and talk to the cops," he said before leaving.

"You did good," Natasha said, giving Stacy a genuine smile.

"We should take you to the hospital; check out your hand," Steve said.

"No, I don't want to spend hours in the ER on Halloween night," she insisted.

"Let me see," Bruce said and began to examine her right hand.

She grimaced as he probed it. "You need an X-ray, just to make sure you didn't fracture it," Bruce said.

"No hospitals," she repeated.

"I have a X-ray machine in my lab," he offered.

"That's a restricted area," Natasha warned severely.

"Have a heart, Nat," Steve pleaded.

"Fine," she huffed, "as long as we're there with her."

Natasha insisted that Stacy be blindfolded while in the lab. Steve railed against it until Natasha pointed out it was for Stacy's safety as well as theirs. It wouldn't be good for her to possess information that could put her in jeopardy.
Stacy had just shrugged her shoulders. "I'm just happy I'm not going to the ER."

Steve guided the blindfolded Stacy through the lab. "Sorry about all this," he said.

"It's okay, hon, really it is."

"Alright, let's get started," Bruce said, taking Stacy's hand and placing it under the machine. He draped the heavy lead apron over her. "Um . . . before I begin, um . . .," he blushed a bit, "there's no possibility you could be pregnant, is there?"

"No," she answered quickly.

"Are you absolutely sure? It's just that X-rays can be dangerous to the baby if you are," Bruce said gently.

Stacy giggled. "Short of a divine miracle, there is absolutely no way I could possibly be pregnant."

"Okay, um . . . Natasha?" Bruce asked, looking over at her.

She shook her head, rolling her eyes.

"Alright . . . alright . . . just checking," he said sheepishly.

Bruce waved Natasha and Steve to stand behind a wall with an observation window. "Okay, don't move," he told her before joining the others.

A few minutes later, the X-rays had been taken and Bruce had reviewed them. "Good news. No sign of any type of a fracture. Your hand should be sore and tender for a few days, but I'd suggest just taking ibuprofen for the pain."

"Do you want to go back to the party?" Steve asked tentatively as they left the lab and he took off her blindfold.

"Maybe we can just have a decaf coffee at your place?" she asked.

Steve sighed in contentment. "That sounds great."

Fifteen minutes later, Stacy was sitting on his couch, sipping her coffee. She had picked up a photo album on the coffee table, leafing through it.

"Are these your old photos? Is that what you looked like before?"

Steve walked over to the couch and peered at the album. "Yep."

He winced when he saw the photo she was pointing to. It was a few weeks before his best friend had shipped out. He was standing next to Bucky in the picture and the height difference alone was significant.

"You were adorable," she said as she took a sip.

"I was a 5'4" asthmatic with a bad heart and slew of health problems. It wasn't like I had girls lined up for me." He sat down next to her.

"Well, I would have dated you."
"Really?"

"I dated Josh. He's a couple of inches shorter than I am, probably only only 5'4" or so, and he's just as skinny you were."

"I guess so," Steve said skeptically. He thought about being able to date a girl like Stacy before he had the serum and he just couldn't imagine it.

"Look, it's not like I don't know what it's like to be unpopular with the opposite sex," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Steve looked her over, the sight of her, even after all these months, still causing his pulse to race. "You, unpopular? I highly doubt it."

Stacy grimaced slightly to herself and each word that came out was full of pain. "You have no idea. I can't tell you how many first dates I had that never progressed to second dates. Not many guys want to go out with a girl who tells them to keep their hands to themselves until they get married."

"Hey . . . .hey . . . ." he said gently, brushing away the tear falling down her cheek. "Well, this guy does," he said as he pulled her in for a kiss.

After a moment, they paused and she looked up at him, placing her injured hand over his heart. "And that's why I would have dated you. You didn't have a bad heart. I mean, you may have had some medical problems, but you have always had an amazing heart."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note- I hope you liked the chapter!
Chapter 16

Ch. 16

The fact that Stacy actually enjoyed watching old movies instead of merely tolerating them, was one of the many, many reasons Steve loved spending time with her. She was enamoured with Cary Grant and made him watch "I Was a Male War Bride" and "The Philadelphia Story" twice. She loved Jimmy Stewart, too and they had watched "Rear Window" and "The Shop Around the Corner". Despite not liking most modern horror movies, Stacy had showed him a few classic Hitchcock movies that she did enjoy like "The 39 Steps" and "Dial M for Murder". Steve had even caught her mouthing some of the lines she had memorized from some of her favorite movies. When he suggested that they watch all the Bing Crosby & Bob Hope "Road" movies in order, she had jumped at the chance.

The following Tuesday evening after Halloween, Steve and Stacy were drinking decaf coffee and snuggling on the couch, watching the second "Road" movie, "The Road to Zanzibar". They had finished their workout early that night, since Stacy was taking a few weeks off of boxing to let her hand heal up. She had actually wanted to start lessons up after a few days but Steve insisted that she rest up a bit more, conscious of the fact that she didn't have his super-healing abilities. Steve still felt guilty that she had gotten hurt, despite the fact that she had done a marvelous job defending herself. They had found out that the cretin had pled guilty to all charges over the weekend, so Stacy wouldn't have to be dragged through a trial. Steve had entertained a few dark thoughts about making the jerk pay for accosting his girl, but Stacy had begged him to leave it alone and he'd promised to let the matter drop.

After the movie finished, Stacy looked up at him. She had rested her head on his shoulder while watching the movie, his arm around her. He was glad that he had already seen the movie, because he had been more than a little distracted by the sweet almond-vanilla smell of her perfume, the feeling of her smooth, bare arm under his rough fingertips as he ran his hand up and down her arm. She was so close that he could hear the soft whisper every breath that she took, feel the rise and fall of each breath. There were times he'd look up at the movie and realize he hadn't paid attention to the last half hour of the show.

"Um . . . Steve," Stacy said hesitantly as she leaned back on the couch, "I know we spend a lot of time together as it is. I mean I see you nearly every day except for Mondays and Wednesdays, so I completely understand if you need some time to yourself, but . . ."

"But . . ." Steve prompted. He didn't want to admit that he dreaded Mondays and Wednesdays. They always seemed to drag on forever and he often found himself irritable and grouchy for no discernible reason.

Stacy bit her lower lip and began to fidget a bit. "I was wondering if you wanted to come with me to the retirement center on Wednesday afternoons. Monica and I are usually only there from four to six p.m. It would be really great if you could come with us. It's just that the majority of people there are widows and they'd love to have a handsome young man come and visit them." She gave him a flirtatious wink.

Steve grinned at the strategic compliment. He could tell when he was being played. "Of course, I'll come. I might not always be able to make it if there's a videoconferenced meeting I have to attend,
but generally I should be able to go."

"Oh, you're the best," she said, diving in to enthusiastically hug him.

His grin got even wider as she squeezed him, laying her head against his chest. He held her tight and asked, "So, how did you and Monica start visiting the center?"

She pulled back a little and looked up at him. "There was an older lady at our church, Eleanor. She was a wonder. She helped out with the children's ministry, coordinated the greeting team, ran one of the Bible studies. Monica and I adored her. We called her our New York Grandma. But then . . ."

Stacy paused, swallowing hard. "She had a heart attack. She recovered somewhat, but her health wasn't what it used to be. All of her family lived out in Minnesota. They wanted to take care of her, but she was so very stubborn. She didn't want to move back there, so her family eventually paid for her to go to the senior citizen's center. Monica and I started visiting her every Wednesday afternoon. We got to know some of the other residents there, too. And when Eleanor passed away last year, Monica and I just decided to keep on going."

Stacy smiled up at him. "It's hard, at the end of your life, to be alone like that. Some of the residents have family who visit every day. Others come once a year. I don't know. I suppose, at least for me, it's a tangible way to show people that they aren't forgotten, that God loves them. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," he said as he brushed an errant curl from her forehead. "I'm looking forward to it."

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The first thing that hit him upon entering the senior center was the smell, an unpleasant mixture of ammonia and something he couldn't quite place. He wrinkled his nose in disgust without even thinking about it.

"The smell, right?" Stacy asked apologetically. He had met her and Monica at the entrance. They had to sign in and show I.D. each time they came.

When he nodded, she shrugged. "All these facilities seem to smell like that. I don't know why."

"It's okay," he said.

"Let's go to the Activity Center. It's where most of the residents congregate before dinner," Monica suggested.

Stacy and Steve nodded. Steve had to admit, he admired the fact that Monica was just as committed as Stacy to coming and helping out the residents at the center. As popular and spontaneous as Monica was, Steve knew that she was also a loyal and focused person, often being the first person to go home whenever they went out on Saturday nights, just so that she could cover the first church nursery shift on Sunday morning.

As they walked down the halls, Steve noticed as that the center seemed very similar to a modern hospital with white linoleum and handrails along white walls. Most of the resident room doors were open.

Steve couldn't help peeking in as they walked past. Some people had their own rooms, while others shared. Some rooms looked identical to hospital rooms with an adjustable bed, a TV on top of a tall dresser and a swivel table-tray so that bedridden patients could eat or read in bed. Other rooms
looked like a mini-apartment with a normal twin bed, night-stand, an easy chair and even a table with a few chairs.

They arrived to two double doors that were propped open. There was a large room, painted a cheery yellow. On one wall was a large bulletin board that held an oversized November calendar and displayed the various activities for the week. Steve grimaced when he say the word shuffleboard on it, remembering one of Tony's many jabs about his age.

There were about forty residents in the room, along with about five nurses in brightly colored scrubs. Some of the residents were playing board games or chess, some were huddled around a large screen TV showing a daytime talk show and a few were knitting or doing some other kind of craft. One or two residents seemed to just stare off into space, their eyes unfocused. Steve noticed that Stacy was right; three-fourths of the residents were women, mostly widows from the rings on their fingers.

"Oh, I want to introduce you to Mrs. Velázquez," Stacy said, gently tugging on Steve's hand. Monica gave them a quick wave and went to join in a game of chess.

Steve followed Stacy over to a corner where a woman in a long green cotton dress was knitting a large red, white and blue afghan. She was hunched over, working intently. Her hair was long and white, tied in a neat braid. Steve placed her age between seventy and eighty years old, although he was never very good judge of age. She wore glasses on a brightly colored chain as she peered intently at her work.

"Hola, Señora Velázquez," Stacy said gently as they approached.

The woman looked up, a beatific smile gracing her face. "Hola, mijita."

Stacy leaned down, kissing the elderly woman on her cheek. "Le presento a mi novio, Steve Rogers."

"Captain America?" the woman asked, looking expectantly at him.

"Um . . . yes, ma'am," Steve replied.

"Qué bien . . . sit . . sit," she gestured to the seats next to her.

Steve and Stacy both sat down. "Now, Stacy . . . . she talks of nothing else but her handsome boyfriend every time I see her and I tell her, you need to bring him around. I need to see him with my own eyes."

Stacy blushed. "That's not all we talk about."

"Mentirosa," Mrs. Velázquez countered with a wink. "Anyhow, what Stacy doesn't know, is I had another reason for wanting her to bring you around."

"And what was that?" Steve asked with a grin.

"To give you this," she said as she lifted up the lovely blanket she had been working on. "I just finished it. I've been working on it for months. Ever since Stacy first mentioned meeting you. I wanted to make it for you."

"I . . . I couldn't accept it." Steve looked over at Stacy, feeling a bit helpless.

"No, you must. Now, listen to me," Mrs. Velázquez said firmly, grasping his hand. "Last year, my
granddaughter and my great-grandson, they were in Manhattan during the attack. Those... those... things had corralled them all into a bank. You saved them. My great-grandson, he told me that you saved them all. I made this for you. I know it is a little thing, but I wanted you to know that what you did mattered to me. It mattered to my family. You saved the whole world. The whole world," she finished, her voice thick with emotion.

Steve's eyes began to water. He looked the woman in the eye, taking the blanket gently from her outstretched hands. "Thank you very much. I'm honored."

The woman leaned over, placing a shaky kiss on his cheek. "No, thank you. Thank you so very much."

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Two hours later, Steve, Stacy and Monica emerged from the center. Steve felt humbled by what he had seen. The two girls were tireless, greeting every resident by name, playing cards or trading gossip with one after another. Every woman that Stacy had introduced him to had mentioned the fact that Stacy constantly talked about Steve on her visits. He could tell how much having the girls visit brightened everyone's day. Even the attending nurses seemed more animated and cheerful.

Most of the few men in the room were fellow veterans, although more from the Korean War than WWII. Steve traded war stories with them as they bonded. He was more than a little uneasy when he realized that he was born before the majority of the residents in the hall.

"Thanks so much for coming," Monica said earnestly. "You really made their week."

"It was my pleasure," Steve said. "I was really impressed by you two in there. They really love having you there."

"Did you know that Mrs. Velázquez was going to surprise me?" he asked Stacy, as he hefted the large blanket. He wasn't entirely sure how he was going to get it back to his place on the motorcycle.

"I had a suspicion. She kept asking about you and working on that blanket. The color scheme was a dead giveaway."

"I like it," he grinned.

"Me, too. See you tomorrow night?"

"Definitely," he said, leaning down to give her a quick kiss, mindful of Monica rolling her eyes behind them.

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The next night, the minute the third "Road" movie started, Steve plopped down in front of her, sitting at her feet. He looked back up at her with his favorite pleading expression, the one she called his "puppy dog eyes", the one he knew she couldn't resist.

"Another backrub?" she sighed, but gave him a mischievous grin. "You're like a stray cat. Feed them once and they keep coming back."

"Work has been rough," he complained, pointedly rubbing the back of his neck for emphasis.

"Haven't you just been pulling desk duty the last few days?" she asked as she slowly began to
massage his shoulders.

"Mm-hmm," he murmured, not really listening to a word she was saying.

The backrub had ended far too soon. Stacy had complained that her hand was starting to hurt and Steve felt more than a little guilty. He had sat next to her on the couch, his arm once again wrapped around her, marveling in how right, how natural it felt to hold her in his arms.

"So," Stacy began, "I know it's a few weeks off, but I was wondering what you were doing for Thanksgiving."

Steve thought for a moment. Usually, he made sure to work all the major holidays to give the agents with families the time off. However, this year, he wasn't quite so eager to go on assignment.

"No plans at the moment," he answered cautiously, his body tensing at the question.

"I know plane tickets are hard to get at the moment, but I wanted to invite you to come home with me, to Michigan." She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, not meeting his eyes.

"Home?"

"Well, my parents' house. My sister, her husband, my niece and nephew, my grandparents, my aunt and uncle, some cousins, they all come over."

"You want me to meet your parents?" Steve asked.

"Uh . . . . yeah. If it's okay," she said nervously.

Steve broke out in a huge grin. "I'd love to." The idea of spending Thanksgiving with Stacy and her family sounded like a huge improvement over his last Thanksgiving of getting shot at while on mission and choking down tasteless cold turkey and gravy MREs while shivering in a tent.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh thank goodness. Now, it may be hard to get tickets for the same flight."

"Actually, I have an idea about that. Let me check it out and I'll get back to you."

"Okay . . . . What are you doing Saturday after we work out?"

"Just some errands. Why?" he asked.

"We need to go clothes shopping," Stacy said, wincing slightly.

"Clothes shopping?"

"Sweetie, you are hands-down the most attractive man I have ever seen, but I cannot, in all good conscience, as your girlfriend, let you walk around any more wearing those plaid shirts," she said delicately shuddering.

"What's wrong with my shirts?"

"Honey, we don't have enough time in the world to go over what is wrong with those shirts. Let's say, I was attracted to you despite them. I mean, plaid, really?"
Steve chuckled. He knew his plaid shirts weren't very fashionable, but he didn't really care much about how he looked. "Fine, but I don't really like baggy clothes."

"Believe me, honey, I adore the way you look in your tight shirts," she said, cocking an eyebrow saucily. "But, let's just find some that aren't plaid." Stacy stood, stretched, and took her coffee cup over to the sink.

Steve got off the couch and followed her over to the kitchen. "Okay, alright. I was thinking we could go out Saturday night. I missed you all the time I was away. We could go out somewhere nice."

"No, we are supposed to get together with everyone else and go bowling. We promised Josh and Monica," Stacy insisted as she turned to look at him.

"I'd really like to take you out. Just you and me." He smiled down at her, his hands resting lightly on her hips.

She ran her hands up and down his arms. "I know. I know. I just don't want us to end up like Erica and Michael. They fall in love and then no one ever sees them again."

"Fall in love?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Oh . . . crap. I said it first." She scrunched up her nose and sighed. "I kept on waiting for you to say it first. Yes, I love you." She blushed.

He swept her up in his arms and spun her around. "I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note-

Rough Spanish translation-
Hello, Mrs. Velazquez
Hello, my dear (literally - my daughter)
Let me introduce my boyfriend
How nice
Liar

MRE- meals ready to eat- military rations

If you like classic movies, the ones mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter are some of my favorites and I highly recommend them.
Chapter 17

The next morning, Steve was on a video-conference call with Director Fury and a few technicians who had retro-engineered the Centipede "Night-Night" grenades. They were discussing the feasibility of mass-producing the weapon for general S.H.I.E.L.D. use. Steve was nominally for the idea, although he was a bit concerned about any possible side effects. Depending on the blast radius, a civilian could easily get hit with the grenade and Steve was worried about any collateral damage.

The technicians signed off, promising to study the problem more in depth and submit a report by the following week. Steve smiled wanly, as the last thing he felt like doing was read yet another incomprehensible report full of gibberish and jargon.

He did, however, need to talk to Director Fury a bit more. "Sir, I know you're busy, what with the Hydra interrogations, but I need to talk with you a moment before you disconnect."

Director Fury tensed. "This whole Hydra problem has been a train wreck from start to finish. I'm so damn tired of jumping at shadows. You know, I nearly arrested my own secretary as a Hydra agent? Scared the poor woman nearly to death. She broke down so badly I had to give her the rest of the week off. It's the not knowing that's the worst. That's how the terrorists get us. We attack our own. We do the job for them." Director Fury shook his head. "I'll be so happy when these interviews are over. Do you have any idea how long it takes to process seventy-five hostile prisoners? The background checks alone are a nightmare. They're from all over the globe. For a few of them, we still haven't nailed down their true identity. The interrogations have been a mess. A third of them don't speak English and trying to interrogate someone through an interpreter is like trying to slice bread with a brick."

"Is Natasha running all the interrogations? She must be exhausted," Steve said sympathetically.

"Agent Romanoff's been running herself ragged. I had to threaten her with the brig if she wouldn't take a night off. She's been working fifteen, sixteen hour days, barely sleeping. Friggin* Hydra," Director Fury said, clearly disgusted. "Ten of the prisoners are on a hunger strike and I'm inclined to let 'em starve."

"Has she found the identity of the second mole yet?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Hell, no. They keep all their information so damn compartmentalized that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. We've still got no idea who it could be. The only intel we've got is that the mole is most likely based in New York City."

"Um, " Steve began. "I . . . I know it's a bad time, sir, but I was going to request some time off."

"Time off? Rogers, you never ask for time off. When?"

"November 27th to the 29th." Steve took a deep breath and decided to go for broke. "And, December 23rd through the 27th."

"Thanksgiving and Christmas? This wouldn't have anything to do with that kindergarten teacher,
now would it?" Director Fury pressed.

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "How do you know about her, sir?"

Fury broke out in his typical grin, the one that always made Steve feel nervous. "We're S.H.I.E.L.D., Captain Rogers; you can't hope to keep any secrets from us."

"It's my private life, sir," Steve said stiffly.

"As long as you work for S.H.I.E.L.D., you don't have a private life, soldier. You think I don't know everything about everyone associated with the Avengers? I know where Pepper Potts has her hair done. I know what brand of cereal Jane Foster eats. I know what songs are on Darcy Lewis's Ipod. Hell, I even know what medications Eric Selvig is on in the psych ward. And if you're so keen on keeping a relationship private, you probably shouldn't use your work email for photos of your girlfriend in a bathing suit."

Steve swallowed hard, tamping down the brief surge of anger that he felt. "So, can I have the time off?"

"Sure." Director Fury shrugged. "Fill out the paperwork and I'll approve it. It'll be good for you. Give you something to fight for. Eat a little apple pie. Sing a couple carols."

"Thanks, sir; I appreciate it," Steve ground out between clenched teeth, trying to keep his temper in check.

"You're welcome, Captain. Keep your eyes peeled, though. I won't feel safe until we nail that second mole."

"Me neither, sir," Steve said as he disconnected, breathing a sigh of relief. He knew that he had quite a bit of "seniority" just by virtue of being an Avenger, but he'd been careful not to take advantage of it. Getting the time off was a luxury and he was determined to enjoy it.

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A few hours later, Steve was waiting anxiously behind a stage at the auditorium at Stacy's school. He was wearing his Captain America outfit, helmet firmly in place. He had rearranged all of his videoconferenced meetings for the morning and gotten up extra early to answer email and read through reports just so he could take a half-day off to attend the event to celebrate the upcoming Veteran's Day. Steve felt justified in taking some time off after his three week stint a few weeks earlier.

He shifted nervously, regretting that he promised Stacy that he'd speak at the event. He was used to public speaking, but he never really looked forward to it. Also, it was one thing to memorize a script and do it over and over again. It was quite another to have to write his own speech. Luckily, Stacy said that he could keep it short. Still, he was glad that he was going last.

"And now, Captain America," he heard Stacy say, his cue to climb the steps of the stage and take his place behind the podium.

"Hello, everyone," he said, waving to the cheering schoolchildren and teachers. He spotted Stacy and Monica standing next to their respective classes. Everyone was standing and yelling and Steve couldn't help but blush.

"Thank you. Thank you," he said as he held up his hands and the din of the crowd finally died down.
As they took their seats, he began. "As the speakers before me have pointed out, Veteran's Day is the day we honor those who have served in our military. During World War II, millions of brave soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder, against all odds, to fight for freedom."

"But, I wanted to talk a little about those people left at home. Before I had my super-serum, I was too weak and sickly to serve in the armed forces. But, I did my part, just as millions of others did, at the homefront to support the war effort. We bought war bonds. We lived with having certain goods rationed like meat, clothing and even gasoline. Kids your age had scrap metal drives or planted victory gardens at their schools."

As he spoke, he quickly clicked through a Powerpoint presentation that was projected on the large screen hanging down from the ceiling to his side. Even though he had always mocked the endless presentations he had to sit through for work, he had to admit that it was nice to have images to back up the speech he was giving.

"We all pitched in together to help out. There was something for every single American to do to help win the war. Everyone working together was a key component of our victory. So, whether or not your great-grandparents were in the armed forces, they most likely still played a pivotal role in winning the war. So, the next time you see them, please thank them, from me."

The children and teachers stood once more and again the applause was deafening. Steve smiled and waved. He walked off the stage to wait in the wings. He shook the hands of the other presenters waiting there and signed a few autographs for them. Then, Stacy snuck up behind him. "Hi, sorry, I just need to steal him for few minutes."

The other presenters nodded and waved good-bye, most of them having to get back to work.

"Thanks so much," Stacy said to him. "If you don't mind, some of the kids would love to get some photos with you. Is that alright?"

"Sure, of course." Steve could never turn down a kid.

She led him around to the central auditorium area and he saw that the entire school was waiting for him there.

"Some?" he asked Stacy, cocking an eyebrow.

"Sorry, I fibbed." She had the good nature to wince.

"It's okay," he said ruefully and began snapping photos and signing autographs.

An hour later, his hand was finally beginning to cramp from signing his name so much and the muscles in his face were sore from smiling for snapshots. He didn't mind it though, since he saw Stacy staring at him in wide-eyed devotion the entire time. She was always so bashful about asking for favors and he knew it meant a lot to her to have him come to the school, especially dressed as "Captain America".

Once everyone had finally left, Stacy came up to him, giving him a wink. "Thank you. I really appreciated it."

"Anything for you."

She grinned. "Do you want to see my classroom?" she asked eagerly.
"Yeah, I would. Let me get changed first."

He ducked into a staff bathroom to put on his "civilian" clothes, a pair of khakis and a light brown plaid button up shirt. Stacy grimaced when she saw the shirt as he emerged from the bathroom.

"I know. I know," he said. "We're going shopping tomorrow. I'll let you pick out some better shirts then."

"Good," she said, slipping her hand in his grasp and giving him a peck on the cheek.

He followed her down a long corridor with bulletin boards filled with colorful children's artwork, each one dedicated to a particular class. They came to a red door that had the words "Miss O'Sullivan's Class" written on it with white paint and blue trim.

"Nice color scheme," he observed.

She colored, her cheeks turning pink. "I may have repainted it at the beginning of the school year."

She opened the door and he noticed that rest of the room was dominated by the same three colors. There were cubbies along on wall with the children's names on them and several short, curved tables with six small chairs each. Another wall had a long short bookcase full of colorful picture books. The back wall was covered with students art projects dedicated to fall and the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. A back area had a small reading nook with red, white and blue bean bag chairs and tiny science section with different types of leaves and plants.

Steve grinned as he explored the room. It was one thing to know that Stacy was a kindergarten teacher, it was another to see her standing with her students or showing him her classroom.

"Did you always want to be a teacher?" he asked he walked over to face her.

She smiled. "For as long as I can remember. When other kids were out playing in their backyards, I was in my room, playing school with my sister. She ended up a professor; I'm a kindergarten teacher."

"Your room is wonderful. I would have loved to have you as a teacher when I was a kid."

"I bet you were the best behaved student in class," she said.

"I was pretty good, I guess," he replied.

"Well, aren't you the modest one? Now, I'm off work for the next 65 hours and I know a killer coffee shop across the street. Care to indulge my caffeine addiction and get this weekend started?"

"I'd love to," he said as he leaned down to kiss her.

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"I can't believe that we're on a private jet," Stacy said excitedly a few weeks later, bouncing up and down a little in her seat, peering out the window.

Steve leaned back in his seat opposite hers and smiled at her enthusiasm. When she had been concerned about him finding a ticket around Thanksgiving, he remembered his birthday gift from Tony and Pepper, the phone number to their private pilot. He had to coordinate a bit with Pepper as she and Tony were flying out to see her family for the holidays. It ended up that Steve and Stacy could fly out on the Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving, but they had to fly back on
Saturday so that Pepper and Tony could use the jet on Sunday. Stacy had been fine with cutting her vacation short a day, saying that she was looking forward to having an extra day to get ready for work on Monday.

Steve had to admit that it was a much more luxurious ride from even the first class flights he had been on in the past. And, although some of the S.H.I.E.L.D. jets were comfy, they were also usually filled to the brim with operatives and the overcrowded conditions made even the most opulent transport feel uncomfortable.

The seats on Stark's jet felt like leather barcaloungers. You could swivel or recline them out to a sleeping position. And given that it was just the two of them and the flight was little over an hour, Steve couldn't have been happier.

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They arrived at a tiny municipal airport in Stacy's home town of Midland a little past two p.m. on Wednesday. Steve had wanted to just rent a car, but Stacy told him that her dad wanted to pick them up. Steve insisted on carrying both of their overnight bags as they walked along the tarmac, shivering with the fall chill. They entered the terminal through a set of automatic glass doors. They quickly walked through the tiny building and out the other side to the street. Stacy looked around briefly and then pointed to a navy SUV a half a block down.

As they approached the car, a man in his fifties emerged from the driver's side. He was about Steve's height, solidly built with reddish-blond hair shot with white. He beamed when he saw Stacy, scooping her up in a fierce hug. "How's my girl?" he asked.

"Good, dad. I'm great. I'd like to introduce to my boyfriend, Steve Rogers."

"Nice to meet you, sir," Steve said holding out his hand.

"Good to meet you, son," he smiled, clasping Steve's hand with both of his, shaking it quickly. "I've heard wonderful things about you. Now, is that all the luggage you brought?"

"Yes, sir. Short trip and all," Steve replied.

"Well, I guess you can just stow it in the back seat with you. If you don't mind, I'm going to steal Stacy and have her ride shotgun up with me. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"That's fine, sir," Steve said as he slid across the leather seat in the back and buckled up.

Steve only half-listened as Stacy regaled her father with funny stories from her time teaching. He had heard the majority of them before and a few he could recite by heart. If he were honest with himself, he was feeling a bit anxious, since it was the first time he had ever met a girl's parents before.

And, he hoped, the last.

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Within fifteen minutes, they had arrived at the home of Stacy's parents. It was on a tree-lined lane, reeking of suburbia. It was a white two-story house that was older, but obviously well kept-up. The trees on the property were all bare and the hedges that lined the front yard were all immaculately trimmed.

Stacy's dad opened the garage door with the automatic opener and they drove right into a tidy two-
car garage, parking next to a light blue sedan. Steve got out and opened Stacy's door for her before retrieving their bags. Stacy's dad caught the gesture and gave him an appreciative nod before turning and walking through the door that led to the kitchen.

Steve followed Stacy into the kitchen and saw an older woman with short blond hair busily mixing apple pie filling. She stopped with she saw them, a huge grin dominating her face as she wiped her hands on her apron and rushed towards Stacy.

"Hi, mom," Stacy said, enveloping her mother in a warm hug. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too, honey."

"Let me introduce you to my boyfriend, Steve."

"Hello, ma'am." Steve placed the bags on the floor and stuck out his hand, but Stacy's mom shook her head.

"Oh, sweetie. We don't shake hands," she said, embracing him.

He smiled, hugging her back, seeing where Stacy got her warm friendliness from.

"Now, Stacy's told me all about you."

"She has?" Steve asked.

"We talk nearly every day. You're all she's talked about for months."

"Mom!" Stacy said sharply.

"Oh, don't be embarrassed. I was young and in love once." She smiled over to Steve. "Now, we're a bit cramped, what with the grandkids coming in this evening and all. So, Steve, I've got you on the fold-out couch in the den downstairs. We've set everything up for the two grandkids in the guest bedroom upstairs already. I hope that's okay."

"That will be just fine, ma'am. I really appreciate your hospitality."

"Well, the more, the merrier. Stacy can you show Steve to the den? I need to finish up with this pie for tomorrow."

"Okay," Stacy said, grabbing Steve by the hand and leading him down the hall.

"Your mother's really friendly."

"She's the best. I really miss her."

"You two seem really close," he observed.

"Well, like she said, we talk almost every day. I try to Skype at least once a week with my parents and my sister and her family. Here we are," Stacy said, opening the door to a small den. A fold-out couch dominated the middle of the room, sheets and thick blankets already on it. There were a set of light blue towels neatly folded next to the pillow. Steve dropped his bag next to the couch and handed Stacy's to her.

"So, there are your towels. And across the hall is a bathroom with a shower. There are usually extra towels in the linen closet if you need them. I'm going to take my bag up to my old room. I'll be back down in a minute."
Steve nodded and watched her leave. He hesitated for a moment, not really knowing what to do. He looked around the room. It was done in neutral colors with a large bookcase next to a smallish TV set and entertainment center. On the other side of the entertainment center was a large wooden desk with a phone, calendar and a few organizational trays full of correspondence. Steve looked over the bookcase and saw several different books on modern American history and at least a dozen different books by C. S. Lewis. Steve smiled, remembering how fond Stacy was of the author. He began to take a volume out when he heard a voice behind him.

"No, you should really start with The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. Or I guess, The Magician's Nephew. It goes in order."

Steve abruptly put the book back and faced Stacy's father. "Sorry, sir. I just remembered that Stacy really liked his books."

"No, please read them. That's what they are there for. I read them to my girls when they were little. Books become alive when you read them. They die a little when they exist only on a shelf."

Steve smiled at his phrasing.

"You know, you're encroaching on my man cave by sleeping here," he said jovially to Steve.

"Sorry, sir."

"Naw, I'm just giving you a bad time. Now, I know you're a war hero and a superhero and all, but I'm not going to treat you any differently than any other of my girls' boyfriends."

"Yes, sir," Steve said.

"So, you're going to get the same speech that they did," her dad said, staring at Steve intently. "Break her heart and I will track you down and make you regret the day you were born. You understand me?"

It should have been comical. Steve had been threatened by some of the most notorious criminals and warlords in the world. However, the look of earnestness on his face made a shiver of fear run down Steve's spine. Love is a far stronger motivator than hate or power.

"Yes, sir. I love your daughter. I would never do anything to hurt her."

"See that you don't." Her dad gave him a brief grin. "Now, my son-in-law is a fine fellow; love him to death, but he wouldn't know a Glock from a Glockenspiel. Stacy says that in your line of work, you're quite handy with a gun. Maybe you and I can sneak down to the range before supper."

Steve nodded. He remembered that Stacy mentioned practicing with her father when she won at laser tag. "I'd like that, sir."

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Chapter End Notes

Author's Note-

1. Next up, the rest of Thanksgiving with Stacy's family!
2. *Now, Director Fury would probably say something stronger than friggin', but I'm not going to change my rating for the sake of a few curse words. You know Samuel L. Jackson. You can guess what he "really" said.

3. I really, really want to thank my reviewers. Getting such sweet reviews is seriously like receiving a gift. As you know, our only "payment" for writing fan fiction is the lovely reviews you leave the authors. It's what keeps me going, knowing that you are connecting with what I write. Thank you so very, very much.
Chapter 18

Ch. 18

Steve and Stacy's dad arrived back at the house around six from the gun range. It was already dark out and the house looked so cheery in the cold night with its lights on. There was already a fire in the fireplace and Steve could hear the crackling of the logs as he entered the house.

"You wouldn't believe it, Mary," Mr. O'Sullivan said eagerly to his wife as they entered the kitchen. "It was amazing. Every shot was perfect. It didn't matter what gun, what distance, Steve here hit dead center every single time. It was a thing of beauty. By the end, everyone else at the range had crowded around us, cheering him on. I'm going to tell this story until the day I die."

Stacy smiled over at Steve and he blushed a bit. He really didn't want to be the center of attention like that, but he knew it made Stacy's dad happy and he wanted to oblige him. He felt like chuckling at the praise though. Hitting a stationary target was easy. Ones that moved and shot back at you? That was a whole different story.

"So, honey," her dad said, kissing his wife and looking around the kitchen, "what's for dinner?"

"Well, since we have to spend the majority of tomorrow cooking, Stacy suggested we make it easy on ourselves and order pizza. I got four larges, two comos, a veggie and a pepperoni. They should be here in about fifteen minutes. I think we'll just use paper plates. We'll have enough of washing dishes tomorrow."

"Four pizzas? That seems like a lot," her dad observed, shaking his head.

"Well, since we have to spend the majority of tomorrow cooking, Stacy suggested we make it easy on ourselves and order pizza. I got four larges, two comos, a veggie and a pepperoni. They should be here in about fifteen minutes. I think we'll just use paper plates. We'll have enough of washing dishes tomorrow."

"Four pizzas? That seems like a lot," her dad observed, shaking his head.

"Well, Stacy explained that Steve's got a bit of an appetite," her mom explained vaguely. "It'll be good if we have any leftovers, just in case Amanda and Luis are hungry when they come."

"I thought they would be here by now," her dad said, worry evident on his face.

"I got a call a few hours ago. They got delayed, poor things. I especially feel bad about Amanda. She sounded miserable," her mom said.

Steve looked at Stacy, perplexed, and she rushed to explain. "My sister, Amanda, is pregnant with her third. It's been a bit of a rough pregnancy."

"Not to mention that she and her husband are flying with our grandkids. Daniella just turned three and Mateo is six. It's a long way to fly in from Washington State. They had a layover in Denver, but then the weather turned bad. Once they get to Detroit, they still have to rent a car and drive two hours here," her mom explained.

Steve nodded sympathetically. It seemed like an awful journey. He felt a bit guilty at how easy his flight had been with Stacy.

Four hours later, Steve was watching TV in the front room with Stacy and her parents when the front doorbell rang. Stacy's mom went to the door and opened it. In walked a man and a woman, presumably Amanda and Luis, bundled in thick coats, each holding a sleeping child. They put their fingers to their mouths to shush anyone. Luis handed his car keys to Stacy's dad and then he and Amanda went upstairs with her mom to put the kids to bed. Steve followed Mr. O'Sullivan out to
the rental car to help him bring in the luggage. They took it up to Amanda's room, setting it gently on the queen-sized bed. Steve could hear the two parents getting the little ones ready for bed in the guest room across the hall.

Once the kids had been all settled, the couple came downstairs and did the round of hugs and introductions for Steve. "How are you? You look so exhausted," her mom asked Amanda.

"Mom, it ranked right up there with labor. It was beyond horrible. The kids are usually so good, but they were fussing and whining so badly that I thought we were going to get kicked off the plane. Our first flight was delayed leaving Seattle, so we missed our connection in Denver. Then, there was horrible weather in Denver and for a while, it looked like we might not get out of there. Everyone was sick on the plane and I am sure the kids are going to come down with a cold. Daniella had an accident in the middle of the flight and I am sure the kids are going to come down with a cold. Then, Mateo got airsick and nearly vomited." Amanda absentmindedly rubbed her swollen belly as she spoke.

"Oh, sweetie," her mom said, hugging her daughter. "I'm sorry it was so rough on you guys. I'm glad you're here though."

"What day are you flying back?" Steve asked Luis.

"Saturday. The flights were a lot cheaper," Luis replied, rubbing his blood-shot eyes.

"Excuse me; I need to make a phone call," Steve said, nodding briefly to the group as they settled on the living room couches and began to catch up.

He walked to the den and closed the door behind him. He looked at the time on the phone and figured it was only a little past seven on the west coast. According to Pepper, they were celebrating the holiday with her family in Oregon.

He tried her number first, but when she didn't pick up, he tried Tony's cell.

"Hi, Tony?"

"Hey, big guy, Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy Thanksgiving, Tony. I have a favor to ask."

"Go right ahead. Take your time," he said good-naturedly. "Pepper's family is about to rope me into yet another endless round of charades and I really don't mind missing it."

"Stacy's sister and husband just flew out from Seattle with their kids and it sounded like it was a bit hard on them. I thought maybe I could have the pilot fly them back on Saturday instead of me and Stacy? It's only a short flight for us, so it wouldn't be so bad if we had to fly commercial."

"Look at you, getting in good with the in-laws. Smart strategy. I like the way you think. Yeah, sure. It would actually work out better for us if the jet were in Seattle on Saturday instead of New York City. Shorter flight to Portland. Go ahead. Call the pilot and set it up," Tony said.

"Thanks, Tony. I really appreciate it."

"No worries. Have a good holiday. Eat a lot of turkey. Watch a game or two."

"You, too," Steve said before hanging up.
When he re-entered the room, Amanda was in the middle of reenacting the difficulty of changing a wet fussy preschooler in a miniscule airline bathroom, much to the amusement of Stacy's family. "Ugh. I swear, I couldn't imagine how that flight could have been worse."

"Wait till next year," Luis said. "Then, we'll have a baby to deal with on top of everything else."

"Did I tell you that it took me twenty minutes just to install Amanda's car seat in the rental car? In thirty degree weather?" Amanda told her parents as she flopped dramatically onto the couch.

"I . . . I do have some good news," Steve offered.

"You do? 'Cause we could sure use some," Amanda said.

"I have a friend who has a private jet. I called him and he can take you and your family back to Seattle on Saturday. You'd be able to leave from the municipal airport in town. I booked Stacy and I first-class tickets flying out of Detroit on the same day and we could return your rental car for you."

"Wait, you are giving up a flight on a private jet, buying plane tickets for you and Stacy and returning our rental car for us?" Amanda asked skeptically.

"Well, I mean, it seemed the least I could do."

Amanda stood up and rushed over, hugging him. "I can see why my sister is so crazy about you. Thanks."

"Thanks, man. I mean it," Luis said as he shook his hand, pumping it vigorously.

"Hey, anytime," Steve said with a smile.

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The next morning, Steve awoke to the sound of fresh coffee beans being ground in the kitchen down the hall. He squinted at the clock on the wall and saw that it was a little past seven in the morning. He got up, grabbing his towels and a change of clothes and went to the bathroom across the hall from the den.

After a shower and a quick shave, he got dressed and headed to the kitchen. He expected to see Stacy's mom, but it was Stacy, herself, sipping a cup of coffee and reading the morning paper at the kitchen table. She had already showered and dressed, wearing a royal blue cable knit sweater, jeans and dark brown leather boots.

"Good morning. Thanks for making coffee," he said as he got a mug down from the cupboard and poured himself a cup.

"There's no greater act of love than making coffee for someone," she sighed. "Not really, but I used to love waking up at my parents' house and having coffee already made for me. Now, if I wake up early, I make it for them. How's your back doing with the fold-out couch?" she asked him.

"Fine", he lied. The kinks in his back were working themselves out fairly quickly, but Steve thought that the couch should be registered as a torture device.

"Well, I'd offer to give you a backrub, but if my dad catches me within five feet of you, we'll be having a shotgun wedding," she giggled.
Steve sat down across from her and looked down at his coffee, not willing to look up at her, fearful that she'd discover the earnestness hidden in his teasing. "That wouldn't be such a bad thing."

He looked up and Stacy shook her head. "You're not getting off that easy, Captain Rogers. I'm going out in style, big fluffy white dress, dozens of bridesmaids. Heck, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy's going to play at my wedding. Then, two, no three, weeks touring Europe."

"You really miss it," he observed.

"Well, I just got the one semester in Salamanca in college. I got to see some of Spain and Portugal and a bit of southern France, but I'd love to see more."

"Paris is really beautiful," he offered.

"See, I'd love to visit there," she said wistfully.

Stacy's mom bustled into the kitchen, wearing a long, fuzzy pink robe over her pajamas, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "You made coffee, bless your heart. What were you two talking about?"

"Our hypothetical honeymoon," Stacy teased.

"Well, well," Stacy's mom yawned, absentmindedly covering her mouth. "Now, Steve, I was making plans with Amanda and her husband last night, and I just wanted to double-check, but you are coming for Christmas, right?"

Steve looked over at Stacy, who was nodding her head with a big smile on her face.

"Yes, ma'am, if that's alright. Thank you so much for your invitation."

Stacy's mom waved him off, sipping her coffee, a huge grin spreading over her face at the first taste of it. "We'd love to have you."

Stacy's dad came in the kitchen with a blue terrycloth robe over blue plaid flannel pajamas. He scratched the back of his head and yawned. "You two are up early," he observed.

Stacy shrugged. "Big day and all. So, Mom, do you need any help for breakfast?"

Her mother shook her head. "No, I've got one of those breakfast casserole dishes in the fridge. I'll just pop it in the oven while I take a shower. I also baked a few dozen muffins to go with it and there's a big fruit salad in the fridge, too. That should be more than enough. Maybe you and Steve could set the table. I'm going to let Luis and Amanda sleep in. What with coming in so late last night and the time change, they are going to be exhausted."

"Sounds good. What about the turkey?" Stacy asked.

"Well, your grandparents and your aunt's family will be here around four and we're planning on eating around 4:30 or 5 p.m. We've got two twenty-pound turkeys. We'll roasting the first one around 11 a.m. or so. It says it only takes about four hours or so, but I never fully trust those guidelines," her mom told her as she turned on the oven for the breakfast casserole. "Seems like every year we're waiting around for the turkey to finish."

"Two turkeys?" Stacy asked.

"Well, we've got ten adults, your two teenaged cousins and two grandkids. And, well, your boyfriend does put away the food. Anyhow, your father's really excited because he got himself an
extra large deep fryer and he's going to fry the second turkey in the garage. It's only supposed to take less than an hour and a half."

"It's going to be amazing," Stacy's father boasted.

"As long as you don't burn down the garage," Stacy's mom pointed out tartly. "The Johnsons down the street nearly burned their house down last year trying to deep fry a turkey in the garage."

"You're exaggerating, honey," Stacy's dad countered. "It was just a small grease fire. They put it out themselves with a fire extinguisher. It's nothing to worry about."

"You would say that," she harrumphed, before putting the casserole in the oven and setting the timer. "I'll be back down after my shower. Stacy, keep an eye out on that casserole, would ya?"

Forty-five minutes later, the rest of the family began to filter into the kitchen. Little Daniella, still in her pink and purple princess pajamas, was so excited to see her aunt that she launched herself at Stacy once she'd entered the kitchen, nearly knocking her over.

"Aunt 'Tacy, Aunt 'Tacy," she said as she tackled one of Stacy's legs, holding on with all her might.

"Good morning, munchkin. I've missed you," Stacy said as she reached down and picked the little girl up, holding her on one hip.

"I missed you, too. Who's dat?" the little girl asked, pointing at Steve.

"That's my boyfriend, Steve. Steve, this is Daniella," Stacy explained.

"Hi, Uncle 'Teve," she said shyly, burying herself in the crook of Stacy's neck.

"Hello, Daniella," Steve said with a grin. He had to admit, he liked being referred to as "uncle".

"Hi, Aunt Stacy," a little dark-haired boy said as he came into the kitchen. He was wearing Captain America pajamas and Steve nearly spit out his coffee when he saw them.

"I got them for him for his birthday," Stacy said with a wink. "Good morning, Mateo," she said, hugging him awkwardly with her free hand, trying not to drop his sister in the process. "I want to introduce you to my boyfriend, Steve Rogers."

Mateo's eyes got wide and he began to hop up and down. "Captain America! Captain America! He's really here! He's really here!"

Steve knelt down to put himself eye to eye with Stacy's nephew. "Nice to meet you, Mateo," he said, giving the boy a hug. Mateo squeezed him so hard, Steve was a bit scared he'd black out from lack of oxygen, but the little boy finally stopped.

"I have all of your toys and the coloring books. I want to get the really big playset where you destroy all the Hydra bases, but my mom says I have to wait 'till Christmas," Mateo said, petulantly.

Steve winced when he heard the description of the toy. It made him a bit sick to his stomach to think that children across America were playing with it, oblivious to the men and women dying every day in an attempt to stop Hydra. However, Steve gave Mateo a big smile and tried to hide his discomfort.
"Let's get you guys set up with breakfast. Do you want some apple juice or orange juice or milk?" Stacy said.

"Apple juice!" both children called out in glee.

A few minutes later, they were all sitting at the dining room table that Steve and Stacy had set. After Mr. O'Sullivan said grace, Steve helped himself to several of the blueberry muffins as well as a few pumpkin ones, the ham and egg dish that Stacy's mother had baked and a large bowl of the fruit salad. He noticed that he had at least twice as much food as anyone else at the table, but Stacy just squeezed his hand and gave him a wink.

"So, what's the plan for the day?" Amanda asked her mother as she sipped her orange juice.

"Well, I thought you and Stacy could help me in the kitchen after lunch. We've only got the mashed potatoes and gravy to do besides the turkey. I baked the two apple pies yesterday. Your aunt is bringing over the green bean casserole, the dinner rolls, and the yams. She's also made two pumpkin pies. Your grandmother made fresh cranberry sauce and she's bringing over a mincemeat pie and a pecan pie."

"We can watch the Thanksgiving Day parade on T.V. with the kids at nine. Then, maybe we could take them to the playground before lunch. I know it's cold out, but they can't stay cooped up in the house all day. We'll be back at lunch and then maybe Luis and Steve could watch them in the basement while we finish up dinner," Amanda suggested.

"Anything I can do to help," Steve said with a smile.

"Well, if that's your attitude, I have a whole cord of wood out in the backyard that needs splitting."

"Dad!" Stacy exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

"What? He's a big, strapping young man. Shouldn't take him more than an hour, hour and a half to do it," he said.

"It'd be my pleasure, sir," Steve assured him.

Luis smiled next to Steve and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I had to do it last year. Took me over two hours. So glad that you're here to do it this year."

Steve shrugged. Splitting a cord of wood was nothing compared to keeping a hellcarrier up in the air.
Once breakfast had been eaten and everyone stacked their dirty dishes in the sink, Luis and Amanda shooed the kids upstairs to help them get dressed. Stacy's mom started to put on a pair of thick, yellow dish-washing gloves, but Stacy snatched them away from her.

"No, no, no. You're going to kill yourself trying to get this dinner ready for everyone. Steve and I can wash the breakfast dishes."

"You should do them by hand. We'll need the room in the dishwasher for after dinner," her mom observed.

"I know. I know, Mom. Go, relax a bit."

"Well, I might go call your uncle. He and your aunt weren't up to making the drive up here from Indianapolis this year. I feel so bad that they're both in such poor health. His back went out on him and she's got these horrible dizzy spells," she said, clucking her tongue in sympathy.

"Okay, go. Call them. Try to relax. Tell them hi from me," Stacy said.

Stacy's mom nodded her head and left the kitchen. Stacy turned to Steve, "Do you want to wash or dry?"

"Dry?" The last thing he wanted was to drop or break one of her mother's dishes.

"Smart man," she said with a grin, putting on the gloves. "Here's a towel."

For a few minutes, they washed and dried the dishes in companionable silence. It reminded Steve of all the times they cleaned up his own kitchen after yet another of Stacy's cooking lessons. Steve actually felt quite proud of himself on that front, having mastered at least four or five dishes so well that he no longer felt the need to use a recipe.

All of a sudden there was a rush of footfalls down the stairs, and Amanda screeching at her youngest. "Come back here. Come back here right now. And get your brother's underwear off your head."

Daniella burst into the kitchen, barefoot and dressed in jeans and a bright pink sweater. She had a red cape around her neck and a pair of boy's Avengers underwear on her head.

"Look at me. I'm a 'Venger; I'm a 'Venger. Just like Uncle 'Teve," she declared, twirling around on her tiptoes.

"Okay, those I did not buy him," Stacy said dryly, pointing to the pair of undies.

Steve couldn't help himself and burst out laughing.

"Sorry, sorry," Amanda apologized as she entered the kitchen, taking Daniella by the hand. "Sweetie, those are your brother's underwear. Take them off, now."
"Okay . . . but can I still be a 'Venger?" she asked with a sniffle, reluctantly taking the undies off her head and handing them to her mother.

"Yes, you can be an Avenger. At least you wore the clean ones this time," Amanda said with a sigh as she marched Daniella back upstairs to comb her hair and put on her socks and shoes.

Stacy turned back to Steve. "Not a word. Not a word."

Steve solemnly nodded as he desperately tried to hold in his laughter.

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After washing and drying the dishes, Steve and Stacy migrated to the living room where everyone was gathered around the large screen T.V. to watch the Detroit Thanksgiving Day parade. Steve, Stacy and the kids all sat on the floor with cushions while her parents, sister and brother-in-law sat on the couch and easy chair.

Steve enjoyed seeing all of the floats go by. A lot of them were Christmas-themed. Some had six-feet tall gingerbread men or walking penguins. There was a man dressed as Santa Claus in a sleigh throwing candy out to the children. There were huge balloons with Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy. They must have been fifty or sixty feet long.

And then at the end of the parade, Steve groaned when the last batch of balloons floated by. It was the Avengers. There were balloons with cartoonish versions of Thor, Iron Man, the Hulk, Black Widow, Hawkeye and, of course, Captain America. The worst part was that people along the parade route stood and saluted, obviously overcome still by the aftermath of the Battle of New York and what the Avengers had done. The announcer for the parade even choked up a bit as he described the heroism of the group.

"Uncle Steve! Uncle Steve!" Mateo yelled excitedly as he sat next to him, pulling on Steve's sleeve with one hand and pointing to the screen with the other. "It's the Avengers!"

"Yes . . . I see," Steve said neutrally, not wanting to crush his spirits.

Luis looked over at him. "How does that work? All the merchandising?"

"It goes through my employer. They just send me the royalty checks," Steve said vaguely.

"Wait, who gets the money for Thor? Didn't he go back to his planet or something?" Amanda asked as she clicked off the TV.

"I think . . . I remember something about them using his checks to fund Dr. Foster's research. Dr. Foster is . . ." Steve began.

"Thor's girlfriend!" Mateo said triumphantly as he stood up in front of the T.V. "I know all about the Avengers!I told everyone at school my aunt was dating Captain America, but nobody believed me." His face fell.

"I have an idea. Why don't we take a photo and you can show your friends? You, me and Steve?" Stacy suggested.

"Yeah, can we?" Mateo asked excitedly.

"Sure," Steve said. He was always so careful about keep his identity private, but he couldn't refuse the little boy.
They quickly posed on either side of Mateo and Amanda took several photos of them on her phone.

"But . . . but they aren't gonna believe you're really Captain America," Mateo said, sadly. "I mean, you aren't wearing your suit or anything."

"I have an idea," Steve said. "You and your Aunt Stacy and your dad all go sit on the couch."

They all looked at each other and shrugged before sitting down. "Be ready to snap a few photos," he instructed Amanda.

She nodded and held her phone out.

Steve came up behind the couch and crouched down. "Now, hold on tight and duck your heads."

Slowly, he hefted the unwieldy sofa until it was above his head. He smiled for the photo. "Say cheese," he said.

Amanda stared at them wide-eyed as she took several photos and then Steve gently lowered the couch, settling it gingerly on the ground.

"That was the coolest thing ever!" nephew declared, jumping off the couch and racing over to his mother to check out the photos. "Thanks, Uncle Steve. You're the best."

Steve grinned at being called uncle once again. He admitted to himself that it didn't feel half bad.

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Even though it was in the mid-thirties, Luis and Amanda decided to take the kids over to a nearby playground to play for an hour or so before lunch. Steve and Stacy elected to go too, but chose to just walk since it wasn't that far away.

Steve put on the black leather gloves and the black wool pea coat that Stacy had hectored him into buying. Even though he thought his brown leather motorcycle jacket was plenty warm, Stacy promised him that a pea coat would never go out of style. As he wound a thick black scarf around his neck, he had to admit that he did feel rather dapper.

"Ready to go, guapo?" Stacy asked, peeking her head into the den, wearing a long charcoal grey wool coat.

"Yep," he said, taking her by the arm and waving good-bye to her parents in the kitchen as they passed it.

"Thanks for letting Amanda and her family use the jet. And all the other travel arrangements," Stacy said as they walked the few blocks to the neighborhood playground.

"You aren't sore? I probably should have asked you first."

"No, it was wonderful of you. You always think of others first. It's one of the reasons I love you," Stacy said, leaning a bit on his arm as they walked.

"I love you, too, doll," he said, stopping abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk and turning to face her. He leaned down and kissed her, both hands on either side of her face, frustrated that he couldn't feel the soft warmth of her cheeks through his gloves. They stood there for a long moment, pressed together. Her arms were tight around his waist, clinging to him, until finally she shyly tugged away.
"So that's why you wanted to go for a 'walk',' she wryly surmised as they resumed walking.

"Well . . . yeah," he admitted.

"Smart move. There's not a lot of privacy at the house."

When the playground came into view, Stacy saw her niece and nephew playing on the equipment with their mother standing nearby. She walked over to them while Steve stood next to Luis at the edge of the playground.

"Hey, thanks again for the jet. You really saved our bacon," Luis said.

"It was my pleasure. I'm just glad I could help," Steve said.

"How you getting on with Stacy's dad? I know how hard it can be to come in to a new family and all."

"He's been great," Steve said.

"Let's see. Did he tell you the Glock and Glockenspiel joke yet?" Luis asked.

"Yep."

"Did he warn you about not breaking Stacy's heart or you'll regret the day you were born?" Luis asked.

"Yep."

"Well, you're in like Flynn, brother. That means the old man likes you. Gave me the same speech. You know, you're the first guy Stacy's brought home for the holidays. She must think you're someone special," Luis observed.

"I think she's someone special."

"How's your back holding up on that fold-out couch?" Luis teased.

"Let's just say, I'm glad that super-healing is one of the benefits of the serum," Steve confessed.

"Well, I did my time on that couch back when Amanda and I were dating and I'd come and visit. One of the many benefits of being married is getting upgraded to the upstairs bedrooms."

Steve colored a bit. "So, how did you and Amanda meet?"

"I came to the U.S. for college, got a student visa. I'm from Guatemala. You ever been there?"

Steve shook his head, realizing he narrowly missed his chance to visit a month ago during the Hydra raid.

"Amanda and I had an econ class together sophomore year. Love at first sight. We were together all through college and got married the summer after graduation. Mateo came along two years later."

"Your kids are great." Steve said enthusiastically.

Luis chuckled. "Yeah, most of the time. I love being a dad, but man, it's hard work. And now with number three on the way, let's just say we're glad Mateo's already in school."
"And Amanda's an economics professor?"

"Part-time at the moment. She teaches one night class while I watch the little ones. During the day, she watches them while I'm at work. I work at a financial firm, crunching numbers all day," Luis explained. "Not the most exciting life."

"It sounds like a wonderful life," Steve insisted, a bit wistfully.

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After an hour at the playground, everyone headed back home for a light lunch. Both Amanda and Daniella went down for a nap after they ate; the preschooler was exhausted from playing on the equipment and her mom had gotten used to taking a short cat nap in the afternoons throughout her pregnancy. Luis took Mateo down to the finished basement that had been set up like a playroom for the grandkids. Stacy and her mom started on the rest of the Thanksgiving preparations.

Stacy's dad took Steve outside and showed him exactly how he wanted the wood logs split and stacked. He was looking forward to having a roaring fire in the fireplace for when the relatives come over that evening. Steve nodded at the instructions, eager to be helpful.

Less than twenty minutes later, Steve came back in the house finding Stacy's dad in the kitchen looking over the instruction for the deep fryer. Mr. O'Sullivan shook his head when he saw him, sure that Steve had run into some trouble. "Axe giving you problems, son? The handle's a bit loose."

"No, not at all. I just finished up. Here are your work gloves. Thanks for letting me borrow them," Steve said politely.

"Done? That should have taken you at least an hour, hour and a half easy. Let me see," Stacy's dad said in disbelief.

He stepped outside and there he saw the most neatly stacked cord of split wood he had ever seen in his life. He came back in, a shocked expression on his face. "That was amazing. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't have seen it with my own eyes. Well, that settles it. You're coming to all the family get-togethers."

Steve grinned as Mr. O'Sullivan clapped him on his back.

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Stacy's grandparents and aunt and her family came over a bit late, closer to four thirty, rather than four, but that was fine with her mom as the turkeys were once again taking longer than expected to cook. Stacy's dad was happy that he didn't start any fires with his deep fryer in the garage and Steve had to admit that the bird looked amazing. The roasted one was done a few minutes later and Stacy's dad carved them both after they had sat for a few minutes.

Shortly afterwards, the relatives sat around the dining room table. Amanda and Mateo had set the table with a fresh white tablecloth and beautiful white plates with green trim. Steve was between Stacy and her male teen-aged cousin. Neither of Stacy's younger cousins talked much, preferring to spend almost all their time staring down at their phones and chuckling occasionally at something they read. Steve was glad that he was seated next to him since he was built like a linebacker and would most likely eat just as much as Steve.

After saying grace, Stacy's dad smiled at the group. "Now, let's go around the table and say what we are thankful for this year."
Each person said a quick word or two. One of Stacy's cousins was happy she had gotten a new phone for her birthday. The other was glad that he had made the football team this year. Then it was Steve's turn.

"I'm thankful that I met Stacy."

Stacy blushed and then took her turn. "And I'm thankful I met Steve," she said, covering his hand with hers.

Luis was next. "I am thankful for my family, my new little one on the way, and to be honest, that Steve and Stacy met each other, if only because I might actually survive the trip home."

Stacy's family laughed at that with Amanda nodding vigorously.

In addition to the two turkeys, there were mounds of mashed potatoes with gravy, green bean casserole, yams, homemade cranberry sauce, and dinner rolls. Steve ate and ate, feeling full for the first time on the trip. He had to admit, he was glad that there was at least one social event that didn't call attention to his voracious appetite. He noticed that most of the family was at least having seconds, so he didn't feel so out of place for once.

As he looked around the table, he was struck by how Stacy's aunt could almost pass for her mother's twin. They had similar haircuts and they obviously dyed their hair identical shades of blond. While the sisters looked similar, their personalities couldn't have been more different. Stacy's mom was open and friendly, always striving to make everyone feel at ease. Stacy's aunt was sharp-tongued and direct. Steve felt a bit uneasy around her, but he supposed it was natural in every family to have someone you didn't get along with quite as well.

"So, how did you two meet?" Stacy's aunt inquired, pointing at Stacy and Steve with her fork between bites.

"We were scrambling for the last available outside table at a cafe," Stacy said.

"Which one?" Amanda asked.

"The Cafe Mystère, a few blocks from Stark Tower," Steve replied.

"Wait, Manhattan? What were you doing getting a coffee all the way in Manhattan? Isn't that like really far from where you live?" Amanda asked Stacy.

Stacy's hands began to tremble slightly and she folded them quickly in her lap. "Well, you know me, I'll go to the ends of the earth for a good coffee," she said glibly and her family chuckled.

"Yeah, but you hate that part of Manhattan. I mean, really hate it. All the rich posers," Amanda pressed, her eyes narrowed.

"What can I say? My love of coffee is a strong motivator," Stacy retorted, clutching her hands tightly in her lap.

"If you say so," Amanda relented, shaking her head.

"So, my sister tells me that you are in the military," Stacy's aunt said to Steve, purposefully changing the subject.
Steve hesitated. Although he was fine with Stacy's immediate family knowing his identity, he thought it best to not tell the rest of the relatives just yet. Stacy's family agreed and everyone was in on it; even little Mateo had promised not to tell.

"Yes, ma'am."

Unfortunately, no one had explained the plan to little Daniella.

"Uncle 'Teve's a 'Venger. He's a 'Venger," Daniella began to sing, bouncing up and down in her booster seat, using her fork as a microphone.

"A binger? What is that child saying? I swear, I never understand a word coming out of her mouth," Stacy's grandmother complained.

"I was just giving Steve a hard time, calling him a binger since he always seems to be binge eating," Stacy lied smoothly. "I mean look at his plate and he's already on his third helping."

"Oh, well. He's growing young man; it's to be expected," Stacy's grandmother harrumphed.

"Thanks, ma'am," Steve said earnestly, trying to hide the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"So, are you all going out on Black Friday this year?" Stacy's mom asked her sister.

"No, not after nearly getting trampled last year. I'd rather still be alive and kicking than spend my holiday in the E.R.," Stacy's aunt said, shaking her head.

"Black Friday?" Steve asked.

"Where have you been living, under a rock?" Stacy's aunt asked sharply.

"My work assignments mean that I spend a lot of time abroad, especially during the holidays," Steve said uncomfortably.

"Oh, yes, military. Sorry," Stacy's aunt said softly and she had the good grace to look a bit chagrined at her bad manners.

"On Black Friday, retailers open early with discounts on certain popular gift items for Christmas. It can be a real mob scene. It used to be that they'd open around six in the morning, but in the last few years it's been earlier and earlier. Now, some are even open Thanksgiving night," Stacy explained.

"What a waste of time," Stacy's cousin said, rolling her eyes. "I can get all the same deals on-line with my phone without even leaving my bed."

Amanda nodded. "Remember, Stacy, that one year we got up early and waited for two hours in the cold? We nearly got mowed down by a phalanx of shoppers and, in the end, by the time we got up to the display for the Ipods we wanted, they were all out."

"Oh, yeah. I nearly lost a finger when that one guy smashed his cart into me," Stacy reminisced. Steve grimaced. "Doesn't seem like much fun."

"I agree. Back in my day, we wouldn't put up with such behavior. Careening into a young girl like that. Disgraceful," Stacy's grandfather said in disgust.

"I agree, sir," Steve said.
"See, I knew you were a sensible one," Stacy's grandfather said with a wink.

Stacy's dad, Luis and Steve made short work of the dinner dishes, stacking as many they could in the empty dishwasher and just washing and drying the rest by hand. Amanda and Stacy carefully wrapped up all the leftovers, although there weren't very many, thanks to Steve. Then, Stacy's mom and aunt put out the various pies, along with some small plates and fresh forks. There was vanilla ice cream for the apple pies and whipped cream for the pumpkin pies. Steve ended up eating four large slices, one of apple with ice cream, one of pumpkin pie with a leaning tower of fresh whipped cream, one pecan and one mincemeat.

After the pies, Steve drifted into the living room where Stacy's dad, uncle and cousins were watching a football game. He stayed for a few minutes, but he wasn't that invested in the game and he found it distracting that the program constantly went to commercials. He went to the den, thinking of grabbing a book from the shelf when he was surprised to see Stacy's grandfather perched on the edge of the fold-out couch, watching a program on World War II on the History Channel.

"Sorry to steal your bedroom. I can't abide those football games. All those interruptions drive me batty," her grandfather complained.

Steve nodded, sitting down on the bed to watch the program. He thought about the fact that Stacy's grandfather was born after him and what an amazing family he had. Would he have had that if he hadn't have plunged into the icy waters?

He sighed a bit. He had just turned twenty-eight years old. And, while that seemed relatively young by modern standards, back in the 40s, most guys his age would already be married with a kid or two. He had spent so much time just spinning his wheels after he woke up, drifting, not really living his life.

"That's quite a family you have for yourself, sir," Steve observed.

"Sir? If what Stacy tells me is true, you were born before I was."

Steve smiled. She had warned him that she had told her grandparents about him a few months ago. She was particularly close to her grandfather. "I guess that's right. So, how long have you been married?"

"Let's see . . . it'll be sixty-two years this next month."

"Wow . . . that's amazing."

Stacy's grandfather laughed. "Not to mention unusual these days."

"So, how did you know?" Steve asked.

"Know what?"

"That she was the one."

Stacy's grandfather pointed the remote at the T.V. and turned it off. He moved slightly to face Steve. "To tell you the truth, my dad set me straight. I was about to be shipped off to Korea. I went back and forth about it. I think most young men do. Ruthie and I had been dating a couple of months, but I could tell she was different from the other girls I had known. Still, getting married
was a big step. So, one day, my dad took me aside and gave me the best advice of my life."

"And what was that?" Steve asked, leaning forward slightly without even realizing it.

"He told me, son, take a second and imagine your future two different ways. One, if you marry that girl and one, if you never see her again."

"And?" Steve prompted.

"And I asked her to marry me the very next day. Best decision of my life. Now, we argue and fuss just like everyone does. My Ruthie, she may not be perfect, but I'll tell you a secret."

"What's that?"

"Neither am I," he said with a chuckle, slapping Steve on his back. "Nobody's perfect; most of us aren't even close. And that's okay. But, you got to ask yourself, is this the person I want across the breakfast table for the next fifty, sixty years?"

"Thanks," Steve said, not knowing what else to say.

"You're welcome. The advice is free. Now, I'm going to grab myself another piece of pie before those great-grandkids eat us out of house and home."

Stacy's grandfather rose slowly and shuffled to kitchen. Steve went downstairs to the finished basement. He found Stacy sitting cross-legged on the ground, her niece and nephew on either side of her while she read a Dr. Seuss book. Her face was animated, giggling and laughing along with the two children. He felt overwhelmed as she looked up at him and beamed.

"I'm gonna marry that girl."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note-

1. Next up, a ring!

2. Rough Spanish translation- guapo- Handsome guy

3. I haven't gotten very many comments on this story, but I hope you are enjoying it. Happy Holidays!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ch. 20

A ring. He needed a ring. He had no idea what to do. He was so desperate that he almost asked JARVIS for help. He knew absolutely nothing about jewelry. He'd never bought so much as a watch, preferring to wear his dad's, his only link to a man he never really knew.

Bruce didn't seem like a good option. He'd never ask Tony and Pepper was back in Malibu. Then, a few days after they returned from Thanksgiving, Natasha stopped by the Tower. She need to coordinate with Banner over the portable frequency detectors that he had come up with in an effort to track the Hydra weapons.

Steve smiled when he saw her leaving Bruce's lab. He had come up to invite Bruce to lunch, but he didn't want to miss a chance to ask for her help.

"Hi, Natasha," he said with a friendly grin.

"Hi, Steve," she replied warily. He could tell that she was anticipating that he was going to ask her for something.

"I was wondering . . . are you going to be in town for a while?" he asked expectantly.

"Yeah . . . " she said slowly, brows knit in puzzlement.

"I was thinking . . . maybe you could help me with something?"

"What kind of help do you need?" she asked.

"I need to buy a ring and I need a girl's opinion."

"Well, let me rustle up an eleven year old and you can ask her," Natasha said dryly.

"What?" Then Steve colored. "I need a woman's opinion."

"Much better," she said with a wink. "What kind of ring?"


"For Stacy?"

"Yes," he said with smile.

"Did she talk you into this?" Natasha asked sharply.

"No, not at all. She doesn't even know," Steve replied quickly.

"So, where is this coming from? You haven't been dating that long."

"I want to start living my life, Natasha. I'm tired of just spinning my wheels. I love her. I want to be with her the rest of my life," Steve said earnestly.
"So, you're sure she's the one?" Natasha asked, doubt written all over her face.

"Yes, absolutely."

Natasha shook her head. "Okay, I'll help you. Make sure to bring your credit card. If you think a latte is overpriced, wait until you have to pay for diamond jewelry."

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Steve spent the next few hours going from one jewelry store to another trying to find just the right ring. Natasha had suggested that he just order one on-line, but he wanted to touch it. To feel it. She shrugged and agreed to come along.

One of the benefits of having a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent along when ring shopping was that Natasha had an extensive knowledge of gems and diamonds in particular, as they were often used as untraceable currency for shady operations. She knew the value of every ring that Steve picked up and could tell at a glance whether or not he was getting a good deal. He made a mental note to make sure to get her advice on wedding bands as well.

At the third store, he finally found the perfect ring. It was a solitaire, gold with a large diamond. Steve blanched a bit at the price, realizing that he could have bought at least four houses for the same amount of money in 1940. He looked over at Natasha and she nodded, giving it her seal of approval.

He was about to take out his wallet when she stayed his hand. "I need to ask you one more time. Are you sure, Steve? Absolutely sure about this girl?"

He nodded. "I'm positive."

"Alright," she said with a small sigh.

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Later that night, Stacy was over at his apartment cooking a special meal for him. She had found a new recipe and spent the better part of the afternoon shopping and cooking. It was a baked chicken dish with feta cheese, kalamata olives and sun-dried tomatoes. His mouth watered as he smelled it baking in the oven. She made roasted rosemary potatoes along with it, his favorite dish.

It meant so much to him that she had gone to so much trouble in finding and buying all the ingredients and spices for the dish. When it finally came out of the oven, the entire apartment was filled with the most heavenly smell.

They quickly said grace and Steve immediately dug into the chicken dish. He nearly choked. It was hands down, one of the most vile things he had ever eaten and that included Army food. He looked over at Stacy and saw that she was happily munching on the potatoes, not having tried the chicken yet.

He couldn't bear to hurt her feelings by not eating something that she had put so much time and effort into. He took another horrid bite, immediately washing it down with a swig of water. He bolted down half his portion in the same manner, swallowing it before he could taste it.

Stacy gave him an odd look and then cut a piece of chicken and took a bite.

Which she promptly spit into her napkin.
"Honey, that is the nastiest thing ever. Don't eat any more of it. It's so gross. I'm never going to trust that website again."

He breathed a sigh of relief, his shoulders dropping. "I didn't want to say anything. I thought you might be mad."

Stacy giggled. "Well, I love you for trying to spare my feelings, but honey, what if I had cooked that for you for the next forty years? Imagine that."

Steve smiled, as he always did when she vaguely talked about their future together. It was reassuring that she envisioned them being together for decades.

"Let's toss this in the trash and call for a couple of pizzas," she suggested.

"Great idea."

After pizza, they decided to watch a little T.V. before Stacy had to go home. Steve sat at the far end of the couch and Stacy took a pillow and dropped it on his lap. She lied down on the couch, her head cradled by the pillow on his lap. He absentmindedly stroked her hair as she flipped through the channels, eventually settling on an entertainment news program.

After a few minutes, "The Daily Grind", a tabloid segment, began. Steve tensed as he saw what looked like surveillance footage of him and Natasha during their shopping trip earlier that day.

"And this just in . . . Looks like the Cold War is heating up. Our very own Captain America, Steve Rogers, was spotted out with none other than the very seductive Black Widow, Natasha Romanoff. They ducked into several different jewelry stores, looking rather chummy. Looks like Hawkeye better keep an eye out or his little ladybird might fly the coop."

Steve scrambled for the remote and clicked the television off. Stacy raised her head from the pillow. She was shaking and looking away from him.

"You . . . you went out with her? Bought jewelry for her. I can't believe it." She paused. "H . . . How long has this been going on?" she asked, her tone sharp and her face in her hands.

Steve panicked. His stomach churned. He groped for the right words to say.

"Stacy . . . I promise that it was nothing."

Then, she turned towards him and he saw that she was smiling and that her shaking was coming from holding back laughter.

Stacy giggled. "Oh my goodness, what if I were really one of those girls? Honey, you would be so out of luck," as she took the pillow and threw it at his head.

Steve caught it easily, relief flooding his body. "You really had me there."

"I need to keep you on your toes. Don't want you to take me for granted."

"Never," he said as he tugged her towards him and kissed her soundly.

Tomorrow. He would ask her tomorrow. Take her out to a nice dinner. Slip the ring in her champagne. He'd do the whole nine yards. He had thought to do it as a special Christmas present, but he didn't want to wait any longer.
It was a typical Saturday morning for Steve, but he knew that it wasn't going to be a typical Saturday night. He had arranged everything with Tony to repeat their first date together, the limo ride, dinner out at Luigi's. At first, he had planned to drop the ring in some champagne, but Tony had talked him out of it. Instead, he would send the violinists over to play "At Last" by Etta James and Steve would kneel down and pop the question.

A more cynical part of Steve wondered if Tony just wanted to publicity for his restaurant. He could imagine the headlines the next day. "Captain America proposes at Iron Man's Restaurant".

Still, Steve tried to shake off his nerves. His life was going to change today. He really couldn't imagine his life without Stacy. More and more of every waking moment was devoted to her. He couldn't get her out of his mind. All he wanted to do is make her a permanent part of his life, spend the rest of his days with her.

A few hours later, Steve was waiting on the couch in the living room for Stacy to finish her post-workout shower. He had the ringbox in his pocket, unconsciously rubbing it with one hand as he drummed the fingers of his other hand nervously on the coffee table. They had lunch plans with Monica and Josh and then they were all going to an art museum.

He heard a slight buzz and looked down, spying Stacy's cell phone on the coffee table. He picked up the sleek black device and saw that there was a text from Monica.

Running late, subway a mess, pls text back ASAP

Steve hesitated. He knew that Stacy's phone had a private code, but he was a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent after all and he'd seen her enter it a hundred times.

The phone buzzed again.

R U there? pls text back

He sighed. He really didn't want to keep Monica hanging. Stacy could be another ten or fifteen minutes in the shower at least. He took a deep breath and quickly punched in the code and did his best to text back as quickly as possible.

Hi. It's Steve. We got your text. It's okay.

He hit send and then tried to get back to the main screen, but instead hit the wrong icon. He found himself scrolling past all of Stacy's old messages. He tried to get back to the main page but something caught his eye. It was dated from the first time that he met Stacy and came from a number he didn't recognize.

The target is leaving the Tower. He should arrive at Cafe Mystere in 7 minutes.

There was a reply from Stacy. Okay. I'll be there.
Author's note-

Next up, everything is going to hit the fan!
Steve's stomach clenched as he re-read the exchange again, his hands beginning to shake slightly.

- *The target is leaving the Tower. He should arrive at the Cafe Mystere in 7 minutes.*
- *Okay.*

He scrolled down and found more for the same date.

- *Make sure to invite him to the concert.*
- *Fine.*

- *Has the target taken the bait?*
- *Yes.*

He found an exchange for the night of their first Big Bad Voodoo Daddy concert together.

- *The target is leaving the Tower for the concert.*
- *Has the target arrived?*
- *Yes.*

Then a week later - *The target is out of town. He will not attend the second concert.*

- *What am I supposed to do?*

- *Await further instructions.*

A week after that- *The target has returned. He has begun to search for you online. Proceed to the Cafe Mystere and await further instructions.*

The exchanges went on for a few more weeks and then abruptly stopped.

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Steve's mind began to race.

He then remembered the words of the security guard that informed on them for Hydra. "We are Hydra. We are everywhere. Cut off one head and two more will take its place. You think I'm the only agent informing on you? We are in every facet of your lives. You are not safe. You will never be safe."

At first he shook his head, but as he re-read the texts again and again it all fell into place. Stacy had completely wormed her way into every facet of his life, asked about his missions abroad on more than one occasion. He had given her unlimited access to the Tower when he was gone. She had
been in his apartment, used his S.H.I.E.L.D. work laptop. He had even pushed to have her go into Bruce's top-secret lab to get an X-ray done at the Halloween party.

He looked down at his right hand. The tracing compound. How easy would it have been for her to put it on him?

No wonder Natasha didn't fully trust her.

It was all a lie. The warm friendliness. The caring tenderness. The teasing. The possibility of a future together. Just more manipulation. Just more deception.

It was quite clever of them, actually. If Hydra had sent a slinky, aggressive blonde over to him at a bar to hit on him, he would have run the other way. He would have known it was a trap, a set-up.

So, they sent a kindergarten teacher instead.

He felt his entire world crumble under his feet. It was a disturbingly familiar feeling. He felt it when his mom died, when Bucky died. He felt it when he woke up seventy years in the future and he realized all that he had lost.

He sat there, his mind a blur. The bedroom door opened and Stacy walked out. She smiled as she saw him, looking just as sweet and innocent as ever. His heart broke again at the sight of her.

He looked at her through narrowed eyes as a wave of bitterness overcame him. How stupid had he been, how naïve and trusting?

"It was brilliant how your handlers came up with this fake church girl persona. It's a genius way to seduce the geriatric idiot without actually doing anything. Hell, I barely made it to first base with you," he snarled at her.

"Fake church girl? What are you even talking about?"

He saw the look of shock and dismay on her face and faltered for a moment. Perhaps he was wrong.

Then, he remembered the times he'd seen Natasha play men. Used their emotions and expectations of her against them. Stacy was only using the same type of deceit that Natasha excelled at. He was just another dupe. Another pawn in the game.

He closed his eyes for a moment and saw the vision of the security guards' widows sobbing at the funeral. Just more lives ruined by Hydra's quest for power.

He got angry, furious. He clenched his fist so hard that his fingernails drew blood on the palm of his hand.

He stood up, slipping her phone in his pocket, and advanced on her, backing her into a corner, looming over her. "So, how long was this little charade supposed to go on? Another month? Another year? Until we got married? Did you all laugh at the prospect of dangling the perfect girl in front of me? Laugh at me for being so gullible?" Pain dripped from every word. Everything was crashing down on him. Every plan for the future. Every hope. Every dream. It was all turning to ash in front of his eyes.

"Sweetie, I'm confused. I don't know why you're so angry. What's the matter? Just tell me. Please, please just tell me." She tentatively reached for his arm, but he pulled away and sneered down at her.
"You work for Hydra. That's why you've been reporting my every movement. I can't believe I was going to ask you to . . . " Steve gripped the ring box in his pocket. He felt like such a fool.

"Hydra? You think I work for Hydra, the organization the Nazis thought was too crazy and evil to deal with? You think I'm some sort of secret agent, some type of kind of spy?" Stacy asked harshly, her voice rising with each question.

"Don't bother lying. I saw the texts," Steve snapped.

Stacy rolled her eyes. "Oh my goodness, just let me explain."

He didn't trust himself to be around her any longer. He turned away and began to walk towards the door. "You can explain it to Director Fury from inside a cell. I'm tired of listening to your lies."

"You're making a big mistake, Steve," she called plaintively after him.

"It won't be my first," he said as he reached the door, turning and looking at her coldly, clutching the ring box in his pocket again.

"Fine, but you're going to regret this." Her voice broke and he could see the tears welling in her eyes.

"JARVIS, once I've left, seal the door. Don't allow Miss O'Sullivan to leave."

"Steve!" she yelled, starting towards him, but he just let the door close behind him.

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Stacy was trembling, desperately trying to catch her breath, her thoughts a jumble. "JARVIS?"

"Yes, Miss O'Sullivan?"

"I need you to make a phone call for me."

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Steve took out his phone and called Director Fury's office. It went straight to voicemail.

"Director Fury, this is Captain Rogers. I know the identity of the second Hydra agent. Call me back."

He walked down the hall, towards the stairwell. He called Natasha next and got her voicemail, too, and left a similar message.

He took the stairs down two at a time while making his calls. Finally, he tried Tony and he picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, Ice Capades, what's up? I just got a call that you locked your girlfriend up in your apartment. Which is kind of a felony, Capsicle. I know the laws haven't changed that much in the past seventy years."

"Stacy, she's not what she seems to be." Steve felt so ashamed to admit it to Tony, so horrified that he was the one who had brought a spy into their midst.

"Yeah. You found out?"
"Found out? You knew she was a Hydra spy?" Steve stopped at a stairwell landing between floors.

"A Hydra spy? What have you been drinking? And can I have some?" asked Tony glibly.

"I read her phone. She's got texts tracking my every movement. Us meeting was not an accident."

"No, it sure as hell wasn't," Tony replied.

"See, she's a plant, a spy," Steve said, nearly shouting.

"No, buddy, at least not in the way you mean."

"What aren't you telling me, Tony?"

There was a short pause before Tony started, as though he were planning his words out carefully.

"Now, before I begin, you remember how you were before you met her? You were a sad sack of depression. You were moping around the Tower all the time. You never left your apartment except to go on missions. You were kind of bumming me out. I mean, man, it had been nearly two years since you got defrosted and you were still wallowing in self-pity. So, I decided to give you a little push."

"A push?" Steve swallowed.

"Yeah, I had JARVIS troll all the on-line dating sites to find you the perfect girl. You know, cute, church-going, swing music loving, kindergarten teacher. Heck, she even liked old movies. I contacted her and suggested she 'meet' you and get you out of your funk."

"And?" Steve pressed, his hand gripping the phone.

"Well, she wasn't interested; she said that she'd be too embarrassed. So, I sweetened the deal."

"What did you do, Stark?" Steve demanded coldly.

"I dug around a bit and found out that her school was failing, on the brink of bankruptcy. I offered to donate enough money so that it would stay in business for the next two decades. It saved her job and the jobs of her friends. I mean, her best friend, that Monica, was about to lose her work visa and be sent back home. Poor girl really didn't have much of a choice."

Steve realized it was Stark who had suggested that Steve take her to the Tower Halloween party in the first place. It was Stark who paid for their first date. And it was Stark who had set everything up for their engagement that night.

"You paid some girl to pretend to fall in love with me?" Steve asked, his voice breaking.

"Pretend to fall in love with you? Hell, no! All I wanted was for her to get you out of your room. I had JARVIS text her to make sure that she was getting you out of your apartment on a regular basis. She'd check in to let JARVIS know she'd made contact with you, the target. And JARVIS would let her know where you were. After the first three times, her obligation was met. She kept coming back because she liked you."

All of a sudden, Steve felt his stomach sink. "So, she isn't . . . she isn't a spy?"

"No, no, not at all. As sneaky as she thinks she is, I totally thought she was going to give it all away at the Halloween party. She was so nervous around me I was sure that she was going to lose her lunch."
"So, she really loved me?" Steve asked softly, not realizing he had said it out loud.

"Loved? Why are you using the past tense? What did you do?" Stark asked. "You know, the poor thing just called me, sobbing, and I had to authorize JARVIS to open your door remotely. What the hell happened?"

"I've made a horrible mistake," Steve said and tore up the stairs and then down the hall to get back to his apartment.

He slammed his palm on the device to open the door, nearly breaking it in the process, and ran into his apartment.

But Stacy was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note-

1. Don't worry, we've still got a few more chapters to go!

2. So, I'm dying to know. How'd you like the little plot twist?
Chapter Notes

Author's Note- In this chapter there are minor spoilers to the end of Thor: The Dark World.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ch. 22

She wasn't there. Her bag and backpack were gone.

His phone rang and Steve immediately answered, not even bothering to look at the number.

"Stacy?" he asked, his heart in his throat.

"No, it's Natasha. Grab a bag and your suit and meet me on the roof in five minutes."

Steve groaned. An assignment was the last thing he needed at the moment.

"Natasha, I can't. Stacy and I had a . . . . ." Steve stopped when he realized he couldn't call it an argument. He hadn't even given her a chance to say anything.

"We all have our own issues that we have to set aside for the mission. I'm now four minutes out," Natasha said firmly.

"I just can't. I've got to go after Stacy."

"Steve, there are lives at stake here. You need to stow whatever personal crap you're going through, focus on the mission, and meet me on that roof!" she snarled.

"Fine," Steve ground out through clenched teeth.

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"What the hell, Steve?" Natasha glared at him as he jumped onto the helicopter, flinging his duffel bag in the back. "It's not like you to disobey direct orders like that. Fury'd pop a gasket if he ever found out that you tried to refuse a mission."

"I . . . . whatever," Steve said, not willing to go into it with Natasha in such a foul mood.

Natasha was silent a moment, wisely letting the tension between them dissipate. "I got your message. How'd you figure out who the second informant was?"

"I . . . I didn't. I was wrong." The only bright spot in the whole debacle was the fact he hadn't actually given Stacy's name to Fury or Natasha. He shuddered to think what would have happened if he had. "You found out who it was?"

Natasha nodded, a big grin on her face.
"Who?" Steve asked.

"Well, we were right in thinking it was a personal vendetta against you," she said as focused on turning the helicopter in a wide arc as they headed to the hellcarrier in port.

"Why?"

"Well, Stark and Banner re-did the background checks, seeing if there were any ties to the World War II Hydra operatives. The theory was that there may be some kind of link back to your work against Hydra in the 40s," Natasha explained.

"And?"

"One name popped up. Albert Richter."

"Why is that name so familiar?" he asked.

"His grandson has the same name. Albert Richter the Third. He was Stark's New York driver. When I had Agent Tran check the limo, it was covered in that tracing compound."

Steve's heart sank. "I got your phone call about the mission when I was in the limo. He must have overheard the call."

Natasha nodded her head. "No one ever thinks about the driver. He's just an extension of the car. Stark could have blabbed about any number of missions or deals for S.H.I.E.L.D. while riding around."

"But, what could he possibly have against me?"

"His grandfather, the first Albert Richter, was Hydra. He died in one of the raids you led in Europe during the 40s. Guess his grandson grew up hearing about how his grandfather met his untimely end at the hands of no other than the infamous Captain America. It seems as though the grandson isn't even all that interested in Hydra; he was just using the organization as a means of getting back at you. He really can't stand you."

Steve shivered when he realized how close he had been to the informant, never even suspecting it was him.

"Anyhow, I hauled him in for questioning and he folded like a cheap suit. It was embarrassing, really."

"Good," Steve said, nodding.

"Anyhow, with his intel, and the detectors from Banner, we should have the rest of their weapon facilities shut down by the end of next week."

Before long, Natasha set down on the hellcarrier and they were walking to the conference room for a debriefing by Fury.

"Did you know about Stacy?" Steve asked Natasha as they went down the corridor.

"What about Stacy?"

Steve sighed. "That Stark set us up? Found her on-line and convinced her to . . . . get me out of my apartment?"
"No, but now it makes sense," she said with a slight grin.

"What makes sense?"

"Well, you two have so much in common. Something seemed wrong about you two just meeting on the street like that. Put me on edge."

"So, you never thought she was . . . an informant?"

Natasha stopped and gave Steve an amused look. "Stacy? Are you kidding me? No. She's so clean, she squeaks."

Steve couldn't help but chuckle at Natasha's assessment of Stacy, but his mood went sour as he began his confession. "I . . . I found some texts Stark, well, actually JARVIS, sent her when we first met and I thought she was Hydra. I got really angry and I said some pretty horrible things to her. I even locked her in my apartment," Steve admitted.

"And?"

"When I came back, she was gone. I was going to go after her when I got your call. I don't know what I'm going to do. I need to call her and tell her I'm sorry."

"Look, Steve. You just can't. We are this close to shutting it all down, taking down the rest of their weapons facilities, wiping them off the planet. With the intel we've gotten from the informant, we can finally finish this. But, you can't make any contact with anyone. We've got to keep to radio silence until this mission is over. This is our last, best chance to end this. We're bringing in Stark, Banner, and even Clint's coming in from his . . . . vacation." She let out a shaky breath and looked down for a moment.

"Natasha, I was going to ask her to marry me tonight. You should have seen the look on her face when I confronted her. She was so . . . . scared of me."

She looked up at him and gave him a brief smile. "Steve, Clint was going to kill me the first time I met him. Those were his orders from S.H.I.E.L.D. He overlooked my past and we made a future together. I've seen you and Stacy together. You're good together. You guys are in it for the long haul."

Steve sighed. "I hope you're right."

"I know I am. Now, aren't you all big on forgiveness nowadays? Isn't that in every sermon you keep going on about? You need to forgive yourself, Steve. And have faith that she'll forgive you, too."

Steve nodded and took a deep breath. "I guess we'd better get in there," he said, as he gestured towards the conference room door a few feet away.

He stepped forward and opened the door for her and she smirked and shook her head at the gesture.

"Nice to have you two finally join us," Director Fury said acidly when they entered.

The conference room was already full of over a dozen high level operatives. He saw Stark talking to Bruce in a corner, showing him something on his phone, laughing, and Agent Barton off to the side, arms crossed and fidgeting.

Natasha took the empty seat next to Clint, placing a hand on his knee that was bouncing up and
down with nervous energy. He quieted at her touch and gave her a brief smile. He uncrossed his arms and visibly relaxed.

Steve took the only other free seat near the head of the table where Fury sitting and using a laser pointer to highlight a schematic of a weapons plant that was projected on the wall.

"Agent Rogers, it looks as though we will be taking down the last nine Hydra weapons facilities. You'll lead one raid, but I want you to form all teams and coordinate with the other eight operatives who will act as the team leaders. We need to plan this down to the second. When we hit the first one, the others are going to be notified."

"So, we are organizing nine simultaneous raids around the globe?" Steve winced. It sounded like a logistical nightmare.

"That's right. You, Romanoff, Barton and Stark will lead four different teams. I'll leave it up to you to choose the other five team leaders and to staff all the teams," Fury said.

Stark raised his hand in the back. "Shouldn't my team have a different leader? I don't know all your super-secret codes," he said snidely.

"Stark, you know we need your help to shut down these facilities. Are you willing to stow that attitude of yours for a few days so that we can actually get rid of these guys?" Fury bit out.

Stark rolled his eyes dramatically. "Fine, fine."

After a few more minutes of going over the mission parameters, Fury stood, "Alright, we've got a lot of work to do. I want to point out that Dr. Banner is here on an advisory position only. He will not leave the hellcarrier. You're dismissed."

The operatives slowly left the meeting room, talking amongst themselves. Natasha and Clint stayed in the corner of the room, whispering together. Steve was still in the room going over the mission details on the tablet Fury handed him. He tensed when Stark and Bruce walked up to him.

"Sorry about not be able to tell you about being on the hellcarrier already when you called before. Fury was breathing down my neck for even taking the call in the first place. How'd everything work out with Stacy?" Stark asked.

Steve's eyes flicked over to Bruce.

"I filled him in," Stark said and Bruce nodded sympathetically.

Steve clenched his jaw, turning back to stare at the tablet. "She was gone when I went back to my apartment."

"Oh. . . . that's rough, man," Stark said, clapping him on his back.

"What gave you the right. . . . the right to interfere in my life like that," Steve hissed, his words low.

"Look, man. I was just trying to help you out. I didn't mean anything by it," Stark said.

"I didn't ask for your help, Stark," Steve scowled as he turned to look at him.

"Stark . . . you're back to calling me Stark? Look, I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner. But, I don't regret doing it. You can't tell me that meeting her wasn't the best thing that happened to you
in the last two years."

Steve bit back the insult that was dancing on his lips and took a deep, steadying breath. "You're right. Not that it matters, now."

"What happened?" Tony said, leaning in.

"I saw those texts tracking my movements and accused her of being a Hydra spy. I told her I was going to hand her over to Director Fury for interrogation. I left her in tears," Steve confessed, the shame welling up in him again.

"Well, crap. Sorry. I'm really sorry. I just never thought that you'd . . ."

"Betray my own girlfriend like that?" Steve asked bitterly.

"Look, once this thing's over with I'll help you out. I can't tell you how many times I've been in the doghouse with Pepper and she always takes me back. Stacy's a good kid. She loves you. It'll work out," Tony reassured him.

Steve sniffed. "People keep saying that. I wish I could believe it." He smiled wanly over at Bruce, ready to change the subject. "So, we finally got you out of the Tower."

"Yeah, I just wish it were under different circumstances. The last time I was on one of these things, it didn't end so well," Bruce said ruefully.

"You, Steve, Nat, Clint, all together again. I feel like we're getting the band back together," Tony said cheerfully.

"And Thor?" Steve asked carefully. It was an open secret around S.H.I.E.L.D. that he was living in England at the moment.

"Fury didn't want to bring him in unless it was an emergency. He thinks we'll be able to handle this without any extraterrestrial help," Bruce said.

"I kinda miss the big guy. His brother, not so much," Tony smirked.

"How is Clint doing?" Steve asked, looking over to him and Natasha whispering together across the room.

"Twitchy. But that's to be expected when a lunatic plays with your noggin. Doing a lot better than that poor Dr. Selvig. Natasha says he's solid, so here he is," Tony explained.

Steve nodded. He read the reports about how badly Dr. Selvig was doing after Loki tampered with his will. He had been in and out of mental institutions during the past year.

He walked over to Clint, tucking the tablet under his arm with Tony and Bruce trailing behind. He stuck out his hand. "It's good to have you back."

Clint looked up at Steve with haunted eyes. They were clearly eyes that only saw nightmares when he slept. Steve gulped when he saw him up close. He had aged at least ten years since the last time Steve saw him, grey flecking his temples.

"Good to be back," Clint said, shaking Steve's hand with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Steve was about to say something, perhaps suggest that Clint sit this mission out, but Natasha gave him a warning look and Steve just plastered a false smile on his lips.
"I should review the mission specs and then maybe we can meet back here and go over the team formation in about two hours?" Steve suggested.

Everyone nodded. "Clint, do you mind if I steal Natasha for a second? I want to go over some personal stuff with her."


"Well, things are a bit dicey right now and I just need a woman's advice," Steve explained good-naturedly.

"Go right ahead," Clint said, turning to speak to Tony and Bruce.

Steve made his way outside and Natasha followed him. Once they'd walked a few feet down the corridor, Steve stopped and turned to talk to Natasha.

She looked at him intently, head cocked to the side."I know this isn't about Stacy. You are a horrible liar."

"What were you thinking, Natasha? Clint's nowhere near ready to lead a raid. He's a mess. I've seen that look before. He's a few minutes away from losing it," Steve said firmly.


"He's a high level operative. He knows how to beat any psych test out there. You are putting lives at risk by having him lead a raid," he hissed.

"He needs this, Steve. He needs to get back to work. He can't just sit around. It isn't healthy for him. He needs to get back to his life," Natasha insisted.

"Are you vouching for him? Are you sure that your opinion isn't clouded by your personal feelings for him?"

"I know him better than anyone in the world. He can do this," she said adamantly.

"Fine, but I want you on his team. I'm not splitting you two up. You need to keep an eye out for him."

Natasha looked like she was about to argue, but she ended up just shrugging her shoulders. "Okay. Thanks, Steve."

"Thank me when it's all over and we're back home safe."

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That night, Steve went to his bunk on the hellcarrier, exhausted and bleary-eyed. The logistics of the nine raids were mind-numbing and he was so overwhelmed he didn't have a spare moment to himself the whole day.

He was emptying his pockets when it hit him again. He took out the ringbox and her cellphone. He placed them on the tiny table next to the bed. The solo room was a luxury on a craft like that and he was glad of the solitude as he sat on the edge of the bed and cried for the first time over what had happened, over what he had done. He held his face in his hands and allowed himself to finally feel all the sorrow and frustration that he had spent the whole day pushing away, ignoring the heavy ache in his chest.
For a moment, he was tempted to try calling Monica in an attempt to reach Stacy, beg her forgiveness. But, even as he stared at the phone, he knew he couldn't. Too many lives were at stake. And so, he took off his shoes and lay in the tiny bed, curled up, his angry words from that morning replaying themselves in his head.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. Having Natasha and Clint on the same team meant that Steve had to come up with six different team leaders in addition to choosing the operatives for all nine teams. It was a difficult balance between choosing the best people for the job and who could conceivably be pulled from their current assignments to join the mission. On top of all that, they also needed to move into position without Hydra getting tipped off that a massive amount of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were flying across the globe.

At night, Steve prayed. It was awkward at first. It wasn't his first time, not by a long shot. He'd done it plenty of times before a mission. Lord, just watch over my team members. Keep them safe. Please, please protect them when I can't. He'd done it when someone was sick or injured. He'd done it before meals or at church, along with the pastor.

But this was different. This wasn't born out of duty or hope; it was a manifestation of his complete desperation and fear. It felt selfish to pray about something for himself. And yet, every night, the same refrain went through his head again and again as he fell asleep. Please, Lord, just let her forgive me. Let us be together again, please, Lord.

It was early Thursday morning and Steve sat crouched behind a wall. All the teams were coordinated around the globe and were ready to infiltrate the weapons compounds on his command.

"On my mark, we go in on three. One, two, three."

His team began to lob the Night-Night grenades at the guards outside the facility. Once they were taken out, he signaled the second wave of operatives who poured into the facilities, sweeping each level. The fighting was brief, but intense and the facility was secure in under ten minutes.

"Team leaders, report," Steve ordered, as he listened through his comm systems for the teams positioned around the world.

"Alpha team here, facility secure, no casualties, two wounded," Clint reported.

Steve breathed a silent sigh of relief. It seemed as though Natasha had been right about Clint.

"I guess, I'm the beta team. Although, I really should be called the alpha," Tony snarked.

"Anywho, we got all the bad guys; we've got one of ours wounded, but that might have been my bad when I came through the skylight. Lots of falling glass. No one's dead, though," Tony added hopefully.

Steve shook his head and tried to suppress a laugh.

As the rest of the teams around the globe checked in via the comm system, Steve was happy to hear that there were no S.H.I.E.L.D. casualties and only a handful of serious wounds. It was unheard of to have so many people involved in separate raids and so little damage. "Alright, let's rendezvous at the helicarrier in New York. Friday afternoon debriefing. One o'clock."
He grinned as he heard the collective moans of the other team leaders over the comms. Now came the worst part of any raid.

Paperwork.

The next afternoon, Steve got to the conference room on the New York hellcarrier early, and began pacing back and forth. Even though the raids were over, Fury still had them maintaining radio silence with the outside world. From past raids, Steve knew that they would have at least four or five days of debriefings to go through.

He was antsy, his mind racing as he thought about Stacy. He had done his best to solely focus on the mission, but now that it was over and all that was left was the analysis, he couldn't think about anything but her. His every thought was directed towards her and he didn't know how he'd make it through the next few days without seeing her.

He heard someone talking outside of the conference room doors, loud voices raised in an argument. He shook his head, hoping that Tony hadn't manage to tick off yet another S.H.I.E.L.D. official.

He opened the door to see Natasha red-faced, gesturing angrily at Director Fury in the corridor. She didn't notice him and he was about to say something when he caught what she was saying.

"Sir, you've got to tell Rogers," she insisted.

"There's no way I'm telling Rogers that the mole told Hydra about his girlfriend. He'll jump ship to run to her side. We need him here," Fury replied sternly.

"If he finds out you're keeping this from him . . .," she began.

"You are under direct orders to keep that to yourself, Agent Romanoff," Fury commanded.

"And if something happens to her while he's stuck here shuffling paperwork?" she asked pointedly. "I'm not going to keep this from him. I don't care what my orders are."

"I've had two agents on her for months now. I'm sure she'll be fine," Fury said dismissively. "Don't you dare breathe a word of this."

Steve gripped the door handle so tightly that it broke off in his hand. Fury and Natasha spun around and stared at him.

"For months? You've had her followed? And Hydra knows about her and you weren't going to tell me?" Steve shouted at Fury.

"Calm down, son. Just calm down. Look, I'll send a few more agents to watch out for her and once we finish all of the debriefings, you can check on her yourself," Fury said, trying to placate him.

"I'm leaving now. Don't try to stop me," Steve said coldly.

Fury grabbed his arm. "No, you're staying here. That's a direct order," Fury barked.

Steve shrugged him off. "Well, I guess I'm going AWOL, sir," Steve snapped and started running down the corridor.
Steve walked up and down the halls of the school and couldn't find the red, white, and blue door that led to Stacy's classroom. He was disoriented as all the bulletin boards along the corridors had changed to winter scenes and he wasn't quite sure where her room was. Finally, he stood in front of a mud brown door. As he peered closely at it, he saw that it had been hastily painted, with smears and missed spots here and there. And, in one missed spot there was a bit of red with blue trim. Scrawled in small black lettering was Miss O'Sullivan's Class.

She had repainted her door.

Probably in a fit of anger from the mess she had made.

He could close his eyes and see her, wearing her paint-splattered jeans, furiously repainting her door the day after he abandoned her, her hands shaking as she smeared the paint across the frame.

He swallowed, his hand trembling slightly as he reached for the door knob and opened the classroom door.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note-

1. Next up, Steve and Stacy have a little talk.

2. AWOL- absent without leave

3. Thank you for all of your kind comments! It's wonderful to know that you are enjoying and connecting with this story!
Chapter 23

As Steve opened the door slowly, he saw Stacy at the front of the classroom sitting on a small child's chair. There were over a dozen children seated around her on the floor in a semi-circle on a large alphabet rug done in primary colors. The students were all sitting cross-legged and leaning forward a bit as Stacy read them a big picture book.

She was so involved with reading to the children that she didn't notice him enter the room. He just stared at her, realizing how very changed and haggard she looked. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. She was wearing a loose cowl-neck green sweater over slim black pants. She wore no make-up and there were dark circles under her eyes, evidence of her sleepless nights. The freckles that dotted her cheeks stood out in stark contrast to her unnaturally pale skin. Even though she was consciously projecting an air of bright cheerfulness to the children as she read the story, Steve could hear the weariness in her voice.

"Oh, look, a man," said a little girl in braided pigtails, pointing at him.

Stacy looked over at him and tensed, but recovered quickly.

"Alright, children," she began, her voice unusually high-pitched, "let's put on our thinking caps and try to figure out what's going to happen next in the story." She laid down the book and mimicked putting an invisible cap on her head and the children followed suit.

She rose and motioned Steve to a far corner of the room.

She stood in front of him, glancing to the side at the children, giggling and whispering on the rug. "Why are you here?" she asked in a low voice.

"I need to talk to you," Steve answered urgently.

"You aren't going to . . . take me away?" she asked hesitantly.

Steve swallowed when he realized what she was really asking. She thought he was there to arrest her.

"No. Nothing like that," he said emphatically. "I just need to talk to you."

"School's out in five minutes. I need to walk the children to the playground area for the afternoon pickup. Can I meet you back here after that?" she asked in an even tone, but her hands were trembling.

"Sure," Steve replied.

"Okay, um, would you mind just sitting in the chair next to the door while I finish up?"

He nodded and walked over to the low grey plastic and metal chair. He lowered himself gingerly onto it, not wanting to break the children's chair.

Stacy walked slowly back to her students, clasping her hands tightly together in front of her.
Alright, what do you think will happen next in the story? she asked the children as she picked up the book once again.

As the children lined up to leave the room a few minutes later, the line leader for the day, a small boy with dark curly hair wearing a red Iron Man sweatshirt leaned over to talk to Steve. Mister, you must be in big trouble. She made you sit in the naughty chair, he whispered.

Steve bit his lip to keep from laughing. He stood to follow them out, but Stacy just glared at him and shook her head. He shrugged, figuring that she should be alright alone for a few minutes.

When she left with the children, Steve's phone rang and he looked down at it, wincing when he saw the caller id.

"Hello, Director Fury," he said.

"You know, I'd throw you in the brig, if I wasn't sure you'd just break out of it. Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again, Rogers, or you'll spend the rest of your days in a copy of Loki's old cell," Fury growled.

"Then don't put someone I love in jeopardy," Steve shot back. "I'm taking a leave of absence until after the Christmas holidays. I'll be watching over Stacy during the day, but I want another agent assigned to protection duty from midnight to eight a.m. Level five or above," Steve said firmly.

There was a long pause. "Fine, but come the new year, we're going to have a little talk about your future with S.H.I.E.L.D.," Fury said grimly.

"I expect we will," Steve said evenly.

"Merry Christmas," Fury said sarcastically.

"You, too, sir," Steve bit out before hanging up.

A few moments later, Stacy re-entered the room. She walked over to her desk and stood near it, arms crossed protectively in front of her as she turned to face him.

"So, what are you doing here?" she asked slowly.

"The informant, the real one, he told Hydra about you. I went AWOL to make sure you were safe." Stevens winced at having his words thrown back at him. "Stacy, I am so sorry about that. I'm sorry about everything. I should have listened to you. I saw those texts and I just got so angry. Men died because of the intel that informant leaked."

"And you thought it was me? You saw some shady texts and thought I was in league with a group of neo-Nazis?" she pressed.

"Dozens of people, people I knew, had been killed because of that informant," Steve tried to explain.

"So, you thought that I was capable of doing that to you? You locked me in your apartment to hand me over to your boss as a terrorist. Do you realize that, even after I got cleared, I would have gotten
fired from my job and I never would have worked in education again? Nobody wants a suspected terrorist teaching their kids." Her lips were trembling as she asked each question.

Steve sucked in his breath. He never even considered all the ramifications of his actions, that he could have destroyed her career. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me," he pled.

"I forgive you," she said slowly.

He began to rush towards her but she put up a hand. He stopped in his tracks. He saw something that he had never seen in her eyes before. Fear. Fear of him. Fear of his anger. Fear of his harsh words. It killed him to see it.

She swallowed hard. "I should have told you. About the agreement with Stark. About the texts. About coaxing you back into the world. You just seemed so happy. I was worried that it would ruin everything if you found out that Stark had set it all up. I guess, that's ironic now." She let out a short bark of laughter. "I'm sorry. Do you . . . do you forgive me?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes, of course," he reassured her and once again started towards her.

She held up her hand again and he halted, still a few feet away from her. "Just . . . just hear me out," she began.

"You didn't have faith in me, in us. I never would have thought that you would do something like that to me. But, I guess we were both wrong about each other. I thought I knew you. And, I thought you knew me." She looked down, not able to meet his eyes. "Sometimes, when things break, they shatter. And, even if you want to fix them, there are pieces missing. I want to trust you. You want to trust me. But things aren't the way they were before."

"What . . . what does that mean? For us?" Steve asked, his heart in his throat. He felt as though his life was balancing on a knife's edge.

She took a deep breath and looked up, tears streaming down her face. "I guess, we get to know each other again. We rebuild the trust. We learn from our mistakes."

"Together?" he asked hopefully.

"Together," she said with a small nod.

He wanted to close the gap between them, to hold her once again, but he saw her, shaking slightly, still scared of him and his insides twisted. He settled for giving her a reassuring smile.

"So, what is all this about Hydra knowing about me?" Stacy asked briskly as she wiped away her tears.

Steve took a deep breath, weighing what he should tell her. "The mole knew about you and told his superiors. There's a chance that Hydra might use you to get back at me."

"So, who was the mole?" she asked.

"I shouldn't say," Steve said regretfully.

Stacy shook her head. "More super-secret spy stuff? Hasn't that caused enough problems?" she asked sullenly.

"I know. I know. But, I just can't tell you."
"Fine," she said curtly, but he could tell it was anything but fine. "So now that Hydra knows about me, what happens?"

"Until Christmas, I'll be with you during the day and we have another operative assigned to watch you at night," he explained.

"So, you'll be with me all day, every day?"

"Yes."

"So, how long am I going to have bodyguards following my every move?" Stacy asked.

"I don't know." Steve debated for a moment and decided to tell the truth. "If... if you broke up with me, stopped seeing me, Hydra would probably leave you alone."

"Oh," she said in a soft voice. "Is that what you want?"

"No! No! I just wanted to be honest with you."

"Alright... you said until Christmas... oh crap, I totally forgot about Christmas." Her eyes went wide.

"Did you... did you tell your parents what happened?" Steve asked. He burned with shame when he remembered assuring Stacy's dad that he'd never do anything to hurt her.

"No... I didn't want to let them know that you...", she paused and looked away. She began to rub her palms together nervously.

"So, are we still on for Christmas at your parents' house?" he asked hopefully.

Stacy took a deep breath. "Yes, I guess so. You said before that you had gotten the airline tickets?"

Steve was eager to tell her about his plans. "Yes, first class to Detroit and then a rental car from there. I talked to Tony's pilot and arranged for Tony's jet to pick Amanda and her family up in Seattle. That way your sister and her family will have an easier time of it."

She flashed him a quick smile. "That was very kind of you."

"Seemed like the least I could do."

"I don't want them to know about... all this," she said.

Steve nodded. "What happened... after I left?"

She folded her arms around herself. "Um, you took my phone, so I had JARVIS call Stark to open your door. I grabbed my stuff and I went to meet Monica and Josh."

"So they know?" he asked, devastated that their friends knew what he had done. He always hated bullies and here he was, cast as one. How much bigger and stronger was he than Stacy? And he had left her, cowering in a corner, stinging from his cruel accusations, never giving her a chance to explain. It was a side of him he never knew existed.

Stacy nodded. "I was a wreck. I thought that you were coming to arrest me, throw me in a cell. I spent almost a week jumping at shadows."

Steve tensed. "The second you left, I got sent on a mission. I was under orders to have no contact
with the outside world. I didn't mean to leave you like that."

She gave him a brittle smile. "Well, I guess orders are orders."

"I really am sorry."

"I know you are," she sighed.

"Oh. Um. Here's your phone," he said, taking it out of his pocket and handing it to her.

"Such a little thing to cause so many problems," she said. He noticed that she was careful not to touch him as she took the phone from his hand.

He nodded. If only he hadn't have picked it up in the first place. "So, school's out. Do you want to get a cup of coffee?" he asked expectantly.

She shook her head. "I'm not really up for coffee right now."

Steve gulped, seeing the forlorn look on her face and realizing how very big the gulf was still between them.

The classroom door opened and Monica rushed into the room, looking down at her phone as she entered.

"C'mon on, maja. Time to start this winter break. Three glorious weeks of vacation. Let's get a couple pints of Häagen-Dazs ice cream and some . . ." she trailed off when she saw Steve.

She stalked over to them, positioning herself between them, placing her hands on her hips.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped, eyes narrowed.

Steve tensed. "I came to apologize. It was all a misunderstanding."

Monica looked at Stacy. "You alright?"

Stacy gave her a false smile. "Yeah. I'm fine. We talked things over. It's okay."

"Yeah, I'm not buying that." Monica turned to Steve and advanced on him, pointing an accusing finger at him, causing him to back up. "Look, I don't care who you are. You can't treat people like that," Monica snarled.

"I know. What I did was wrong. I'm sorry," he repeated, trying to calm her down.

"Really, it's okay, Monica," Stacy insisted weakly.

Monica rolled her eyes at her friend. "You are a crappy liar." She turned to Steve. "If you'll excuse us, we have plans," she said tartly.

"Actually, I need to stay with Stacy," Steve said.

"And why is that?" Monica asked.

"There's some bad guys out to get me and Steve has to watch over me," Stacy explained vaguely.

"Well, isn't that convenient," Monica said sharply.

The implication stung Steve. "Her life could be in danger," he insisted.
"And the only one who could be put on bodyguard duty is her ex-boyfriend?" Monica asked.

"I volunteered and we didn't actually break up," Steve pointed out.

"Where I'm from, accusing a person of terrorism, stealing their cell phone, and locking them up is a pretty clear sign of a break-up."

"Look, Steve says that he's going to protect me and that's it," Stacy interjected.

Monica rolled her eyes. "Fine, he can tag along. Let's go. There's a pint of mocha almond fudge ice cream with my name on it."

"What were your plans for tonight?" Steve asked as they headed out the classroom.

"Nothing much," Stacy said evasively.

"We were going to get ice cream and sit around and complain about what a horrible boyfriend you were," Monica snarked.

Steve tensed at that. "Oh," he said softly.

"Why don't we just go out for pizza and a movie?" Stacy suggested.

"Alright, whatever," Monica said.

They took the subway to a local pizza joint near the movie theater. Monica maneuvered in front of both of them and ordered and paid for a small veggie pizza for her and Stacy. Steve ordered two large meat-lovers pizzas and devoured them. He tried to engage Stacy in conversation, but Monica kept cutting in and redirecting the conversation back to topics she knew Steve had no clue about. They talked about school and the students and Steve could do nothing but sit back and smile blankly. Monica shut down any attempt on his part to move the conversation to more neutral grounds. Steve clenched his fists in frustration, hating the feelings of rejection and exclusion.

Monica pulled the same stunt at the movie theater. She bought two tickets for her and Stacy at an outdoor automated kiosk, while Steve was waiting in line for tickets. When they went to sit down, Stacy sat at the end and Monica sat right next to her, leaving Steve next to Monica.

He could barely keep his eyes open through the movie, which was nearly three hours long. It was about some sort of quest with dwarves and elves and a dragon.

"Wasn't that a great movie?" Stacy asked Steve as they left the movie theater.

Steve nodded briefly. He realized halfway through that it was a sequel and he hadn't seen the first one, so he was a bit lost, but the visuals were stunning.

"Yeah. That Benedict Cumberbatch is amazing. His voice is like honey," Monica purred.

Steve looked over at Stacy and noticed she was blushing. He rolled his eyes. First Khan, now this movie. He thought it was a bit ridiculous how over the top the girls were for him.

"I don't remember seeing him in the movie," Steve said.

"He was the dragon," Stacy explained.
The dragon.
He lost out to an animated dragon.

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When, they finally arrived back at Stacy and Monica's tiny studio apartment, it was nearly eleven at night. As they walked in, Steve saw Michael and Erica sitting together, peering at a laptop screen, both biting their lips.

They looked up and tensed when they saw Steve. He sighed, hating the looks of distrust on their face.

"Uh, hi, Steve's back. We worked everything out," Stacy said, unconvincingly.

Michael stood up and shook Steve's hand. "Good to hear it. Now, don't forget, we've got a tux fitting for tomorrow."

Steve nodded, not wanting to admit that he had totally forgotten about it. Michael wanted to get as many wedding details taken care of before the Christmas holidays since Josh was going back to spend three weeks with his extended family in the Philippines. Steve shot a look at Stacy, realizing he'd have to drag her along, but she gave him a brief nod.

"So, why were you guys looking so glum when we came home?" Stacy asked.

"The caterer cancelled on us. We're scrambling to find someone else," Erica explained.

"Um . . . I think that Tony uses the same caterer for all his events. Maybe he could help," Steve suggested.

"Of course, worm your way back in by playing the hero again," Monica sniped.

"We would appreciate any help," Erica said warmly, giving Steve a big smile.

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They made polite, stilted conversation for another half an hour or so and then Michael finally stood. "Well, I should get going. See you tomorrow at two?" he said to Steve.

"Definitely," Steve replied.

Michael leaned down and kissed Erica. "You get some rest. It's all going to work out."

She gave him a grin. "We'll figure it out."

Michael nodded and turned to leave.

"Well, I'm really tired. It's almost eleven thirty. I had the early morning recess duty," Monica said pointedly to Steve.

"Um . . . okay. My replacement should be here in a few minutes. I'll just wait outside for them," Steve said.

"Replacement?" Erica asked.

"Going out with Steve is putting Stacy in danger, so now she needs bodyguards," Monica said
"Are you sure you be alright outside?" Stacy asked Steve hesitantly.

"Yeah, you should get some sleep. I'll be back in the morning. Eight o'clock," Steve said.

"Well, good night," Stacy said stiffly.

"Good night," he said with a halfhearted smile as he got up and walked towards the door.

Steve waited outside the door of their apartment, trying to sort through the events of the past day. On the one hand, he was glad that Stacy had forgiven him and that they were still together. On the other, it was clear that things were not at all like they were before. She hadn't touched him once, staying an arm's length away the entire evening. He had forgotten how much comfort he had taken in simply holding her hand.

He checked his phone and squinted when he saw the time. It was already twelve-twenty. He sighed. He didn't want to get a fellow agent in trouble, but he was nervous that they hadn't shown up yet.

He quickly called the local S.H.I.E.L.D. office.

"Hello, this is Agent Rogers. I put a request in via Director Fury for a protection detail from midnight to eight a.m. for a Miss Stacy O'Sullivan. The agent hasn't arrived yet."

"Oh, yes," came a brusque male voice on the other end, "We received the request, but we weren't able to reassign an agent for tonight. We did text you about that. There should be an agent starting tomorrow night."

A text. Well, that was great.

"Fine. I'll cover the shift," Steve said curtly and hung up.

He slid down the wall in the hallway outside of their apartment, sitting cross-legged with his back against the wall. Eight hours of guard duty. He really wished he had brought a book.

The door of their apartment opened at little past seven the next morning and Erica was startled to see Steve sitting on the floor of their hallway.

"You're early," she said.

"Um . . .," he looked away.

"Have you been out there all night?" she asked, crouching down on her haunches to look at him face to face.

"The replacement couldn't make it," he explained.

"So, you waited here all night to watch over Stacy. That's amazingly sweet," Erica said.

"Don't tell them about it. Especially Monica," he grimaced.
"She gave you a bad time last night, didn't she?"

Steve nodded grimly.

"Well, don't think too badly of her. A while back, Monica had a really terrible boyfriend. He was just horrid to her. It was Stacy who pushed her to realize that she deserved better. Monica is just looking out for Stacy," Erica explained. "She doesn't want her to let herself get into a bad situation like Monica did."

"I love Stacy. I'm not that kind of guy," Steve insisted.

"I know."

"She's said she's forgiven me but . . . .," he trailed off.

"Forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things. You've taken the first steps, but it's going to take time," Erica reassured him.

"Thanks," Steve said.

"I'm going to be an old married woman in a month. Makes me wise beyond my years," she said with a wink. "Now, you're going to follow up on that catering company for us, right?" she gently reminded him.

"Yep. And get to the tux fitting at two."

"Good. Now, I was about to go meet Michael at the gym. Why don't you come in the apartment?"

"Are they still asleep?" he asked.

"No, they're up, having breakfast. I woke them up when my alarm went off," she said sheepishly.

He stood. "Okay. Thanks, Erica."

She straightened and gave him a quick hug. "Just be patient. Love, real love, is worth waiting for."

He gave her a brief smile. He had surely done his fair share of waiting, but he was willing to do what it took to make right what he did.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note- Thank you for all of your encouragement! I can't tell you how much I appreciate your kind words!

Rough Spanish translation

maja-pretty woman (can be a term of endearment)
Chapter 24

Ch. 24

Erica opened the apartment door for Steve, peeking her head in. "Everyone decent?" she asked and was greeted with a chorus of groans.

"They're a bit sore at me for waking them up," she said sheepishly to Steve as she ushered him in.

"Steve's here a bit early," Erica explained.

Stacy and Monica were sitting at the card table, eating cold cereal. They both looked exhausted. Stacy was wearing her red sweatpants and matching sweatshirt and Monica was wearing light blue flannel pajamas covered in tiny snowmen.

"If you're going to be over so often, the least you could do is offer to pay rent," Monica said with an acerbic smile.

Stacy shot her a warning look. "Hi, Steve," Stacy said quietly, giving him a slight smile.

"Hi," he replied softly.

"Steve, do you want a cup of coffee before I go? I've got to go meet Michael," Erica said.

"Yeah. That'd be great."

"How about some cereal?" Erica asked, getting down a box and filling up a bowl.

Steve's stomach growled. He was starving, but he hadn't wanted to mention it.

"I'd appreciate it," he said with a smile.

Erica filled up a large bowl of Cheerios and set the box down next to the bowl. She got some milk from the fridge and found a spoon from the drawer.

"You're welcome to finish off the box if you're still hungry," she said. All of his friends knew about his relentless appetite.

"Thanks," he said as he sat down next to Stacy and across from Monica. The card table was miniscule and the close quarters seemed to amp up the tension in the room.

"Here you go," Erica said, handing Steve a cup of coffee and the flavored creamer. "I'll make another pot before I go."

Steve munched on his cereal, feeling uncomfortably like an intruder. Both Monica and Stacy were silent as they ate. Erica quickly added fresh coffee grounds and water to the coffeemaker and started the machine.

"Well, I better be off. I'll see you guys tonight," Erica said briskly as she grabbed her backpack and headed out the door.
"Tonight?" Steve asked.

"There's a Big Bad Voodoo Daddy concert," Stacy explained.

"Oh, that'll be fun," Steve said hopefully.

Stacy shrugged. "I guess so." She took a deep breath. "Should I be worried about when school starts up again in January? I don't want to put anyone else at risk."

"No, not at all. If Hydra is going to snatch you, it'll be when you're in transit. On the subway, walking down the street. That's when you're most vulnerable. That's when I'd do it if I had to take someone," Steve assured her.

"Don't you find it unbearably creepy that your boyfriend knows the best way to kidnap someone?" Monica sneered.

"Just lay off it," Stacy said to her friend with a weary sigh. "I should go get changed. I suppose you want to work out?" she asked Steve unenthusiastically.

"Yeah, I would. Maybe we could go out to lunch afterwards," Steve suggested, acutely aware that there was no fresh food at his apartment.

"Great. Where should I meet you?" Monica asked sharply.

"Uh . . . I was just thinking that maybe just me and Stacy . . . but if you'd like to come along . . . ," Steve said, tripping over his words.

"I wouldn't ditch out on my best friend. We have lunch together every Saturday," Monica said fiercely.

"Of course . . . how about that deli down the street from your school?" Steve asked.

"Great. Noon?"

"Noon," Steve agreed.

"I'll go get my clothes together," Stacy said and stood up. She put her bowl in the sink and grabbed some clothes from the closet before she headed to the bathroom.

Steve turned back to look at Monica. "Look, I know there was a lot of tension between us yesterday . . . ," he began.

Monica sighed. "What Stacy did, she did for me. If she hadn't have done that favor for Stark, they would have closed the school and I would have been sent straight back to Spain, living with my parents until I was thirty-five. Not all of us are like your friend, Stark. We don't have unlimited money to throw at a problem. If we fall off the edge, that's it. No safety net."

She took a deep breath and crossed her arms in front of her. "Do you have any idea the months that girl mooned over you . . . pining for you . . . wondering if you would ever wake up . . . wondering if she was good enough for you? Do you have any idea of the number of late night sob sessions I had to go through where she despaired of you ever really seeing her, asking her out?" She massaged the bridge of her nose.

"And then, at the first sign of trouble, you berate and humiliate her. Leave her a mess for us to clean up," she spat out. "And you come swanning back here, asking about tension."
"I'm . . . I'm sorry, Monica. Really, I am," Steve said earnestly.

"I was your biggest cheerleader. For the longest time, I kept encouraging Stacy, reassuring her that it would all work out with you two. That you really cared about her. And now, I wonder if you've made me a liar," Monica said sadly.

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Stacy was quiet during most of the rest of the day, speaking only when spoken to. They worked out together at the Tower, but he couldn't help but notice that she flinched when he tried to correct her form during the boxing lesson. It killed him to be in this limbo, no longer arguing, but with the easy closeness that they once shared completely absent.

They went to lunch with Monica and once again, they spoke on topics that he had no clue about, the recent romantic endeavours of their favorite movie stars, a new pop song that Monica had heard on the radio, the standardized testing they had to administer in the spring. Once again, Steve smiled and nodded, having nothing to contribute to the conversation and not even wanting to try.

Throughout the rest of the day, Stacy was unfailingly polite, kind even. But she was hesitant with him, reminding him of those first few tentative meetings. There was no over-the-top bravado, no outlandish stories.

Worse than that, she was skittish around him, shying away from even the most innocent of touches. She avoided brushing against him, didn't take his hand when he offered it, ducked under his arm when he opened the door for him. He noticed it the most on the subway, on the way to the tuxedo fitting. The car they were in was crowded, and they were clinging to the same pole to stay upright. She edged away from him once the car began to move, backing into a stranger rather than touching him. She'd look up from time to time during the journey and flash him a quick smile, but it seemed more out of habit than any kind of genuine emotion.

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Stacy and Steve entered the tuxedo shop at a little past two to see Michael and Josh already there, having an animated conversation. They quieted as soon as they saw the couple.

"Hi, Josh," Steve said, hesitantly, unsure of his reception.

"Hello," Josh said, but his tone was anything but friendly.

"Hey, Stacy, do you mind waiting here? We've got to go to the back room to try on the tuxes," Michael said.

"It's fine. I can occupy myself," she said, taking her phone out of her purse along with a pair of earbuds. She settled into a white padded wicker chair and began to scroll through her phone.

Steve followed Michael and Josh to the back room of the shop where an elderly tailor waited for them. He tutted as he took their measurements, glaring briefly at Steve as he finished his.

"Young man, it's a good thing you came into this shop. You'll never be able to find a proper fit off the rack. Your shoulder to waist ratio is unheard of," he told Steve, shaking his head and muttering to himself as he wrote down the figures.

Steve shifted uncomfortably although he had to admit that the man was right. It was one of the reasons he preferred wearing the knit tops that Stacy had suggested he buy. Finding clothes that fit properly could be a challenge.
"Let me go in the next room and get some fabric samples," the shopkeeper said before leaving them.

"You know, I can't believe you had the audacity to show up here," Josh snapped at Steve once the tailor had gone.

"Stacy and I have talked it all over," Steve said, but he knew his voice lacked conviction.

"Really? Do you have any idea how frightened, how terrified Stacy was after your little stunt? Monica and I wanted her to call the police, get you arrested for false imprisonment, but she was too scared. She was sure that you were going to swoop in and make her spend the rest of her life in some horrible Guantanamo Bay cell," Josh said bitterly.

"Look, you, of all people, should understand the need for second chances, for forgiveness. I mean, you two-timed her," Michael said to Josh, looking him in the eyes.

Josh faltered and took a deep breath. "You're right. You're right. It's just . . . it was horrible to see her like that," he said.

"I know. We're working it out," Steve said.

There was an awkward silence that was broken by the tailor returning and handing three jackets out to them.

"I'm just so glad Erica gave in about letting me wear a white tux. You've got to admit it; I'm going to look just like Will Smith," Michael bragged, clearly trying to change the subject and lighten the mood.

Josh snorted. "Maybe when he was training to shoot that Ali movie."

Michael chuckled, his broad shoulders shaking. "I'll give you that."

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After the tuxedo fitting, Steve and Stacy went back to his apartment. They watched a John Wayne western from the 1950s on his T.V. while eating microwave popcorn. Steve sat on one end of the couch, looking expectantly up at her, but Stacy headed straight to the easy chair. She curled up and wrapped a throw blanket protectively around her. He swallowed, wanting to say something to smooth things over, but feeling at a loss for words.

At four in the afternoon, he changed into his 1940s suit to get ready for the concert, remembering the last time he wore it. He remembered how much he enjoyed being with Stacy at the Halloween party, how angry he had been at the jerk who had manhandled her.

"How do I look?" Steve asked as he emerged from his bedroom, buttoning the suit jacket.

"Very nice," Stacy said automatically, not even looking up from her phone. "I suppose we should head back to my apartment now. I'll need to get changed before the concert and then we're meeting everyone for pizza before it begins."

"Alright," Steve agreed, not really looking forward to the night ahead.

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They met everyone at the pizza parlor at half past five, ready to grab a couple of slices before the
doors opened for the concert. Steve ordered and paid for five pizzas for the group, finally slipping in front of the line before Monica could buy anything. She shrugged her shoulders and sat at the far end of the table, whispering to Stacy. It made him feel like he did pre-serum, completely invisible, unnoticed and unwanted. Erica and Michael made an effort to make him feel included, asking about their Christmas plans and even Josh talked to him, telling him about his upcoming flight to see his extended family in the Philippines. But Steve couldn't help but feel rejected to see Monica and Stacy chattering in the corner, ignoring him.

The concert turned out to be even worse. Stacy spent hours dancing with Michael and with Josh. Whenever Steve started to approach her, she'd quickly head to the bathroom or to the bar to get another soda. Finally, towards the end of night, he cornered her.

"I'd love to get a dance with my best girl," he said loudly over the music, holding out his hand to her.

"I'm really tired. The concert's nearly over anyhow. I might just sit the rest of the concert out," she said with a tight smile, sitting on a stool and folding her hands primly in her lap.

"Okay," he said, crestfallen, letting his hand drop.

"Mind if I have this dance?" Erica asked, coming up behind him.

"Sure," he agreed and took her over to the dance floor.

"It's going to take longer than a day or two for her to get over it," Erica said gently as Steve spun her on the dance floor, trying to remember the basic steps of swing dancing that Stacy had taught him.

"I know . . . It's just really hard. It's like she just looks straight through me," Steve said.

"Give it time. It took you guys months to build your relationship. It's going to take a while to rebuild it."

"More sage advice from the nearly married lady?" Steve asked, with his first genuine grin of the night.

"Like I said, wise beyond my years," she chuckled.

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When they arrived back at Stacy's apartment a few minutes before midnight, the S.H.I.E.L.D. protection agent was already there waiting next to their door. He was a burly man in his mid-thirties, with a shaved head and dark mustache, wearing navy fatigues. "Agent Rogers?" he asked.

"Yes, Agent . . . " Steve began, shaking his hand.

"Garcia. You'll be relieving me at eight tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. This is Miss O'Sullivan," Steve said, pointing to Stacy.

"Thank you. I appreciate you watching out for us," Stacy said kindly, shaking the agent's hand.

Steve tried to control the surge of jealousy that shot through him. She had shown more warmth and affection to this near-stranger than she had to Steve all day.

"Well, I'd better go. See you in the morning," Steve said curtly, the exhaustion of not sleeping the
night before and the tension of the entire day finally wearing away at his normal good humor.

"See you," Stacy said quietly, entering the apartment after Monica.

"Hey," Erica called as he began to stalk off down the hallway.

Steve stopped and turned around.

"It's going to get better," she reassured him.

"I hope you're right," he said simply, giving her a short nod before turning to go.

Although they had all arrived at church at the same time the next morning, Steve was once again separated from Stacy, only able to grab a spare seat between Erica and Monica. He smiled through the Christmas carols that the congregation sang. He knew them all and he didn't have to rely on the overhead projectors to follow along. He was surprised how ubiquitous Christmas carols were as he walked around the city. He'd hear them on the radio or in almost every shop.

After the singing, the head pastor took the stage, wearing a hideous red and green reindeer sweater.

"Before anyone says anything, I lost a bet with the youth pastor," he said as he pointed to his attire and the congregation began to laugh.

"Now, I know I'm going to date myself here, but my favorite show when I was younger was 'Quantum Leap'. Anyone here ever watched it?" he asked.

About a third of the hands went up.

"Ugh . . . you all make me feel so old sometimes," the pastor said and there was another nervous titter of laughter from the congregation.

"Well, anyhow, in the show, this brilliant scientist, Sam Beckett, would leap from life to life, as the show put it, 'putting things right that once went wrong'. So, he'd leap into your life and change its course. He would zig where you had zagged. He repaired strained relationships. He saved lives. It was an incredibly appealing show. I remember wishing he'd show up and nudge my life in a better direction at times."

"What is so compelling about that is that we are all aware of the hurt and brokenness that we see around us. The sickness, the death, the cruelty, the hardships. We all long for restoration in a world where things have gone wrong."

"When we think about Christmas, we think about why Jesus came. He came to bring about healing and reconciliation with our Father, but also with each other. What does it look like in your life to have shattered relationships made whole? What does it look like to truly forgive those as we have been forgiven?"

"Does that mean that you deny the pain that you have felt? Does that mean that all healing will be instantaneous? No, but Christ came to bring us back into relationship, into community with our Father and with each other."

"As we look forward to Christmas, as we look forward to celebrating this precious gift we have received in the form of a baby, let us also begin to receive the promise of renewal in our own lives. What does restoration look like? It doesn't have to be perfect. It can be messy and full of fits and
starts. God finds beauty even in our own clumsy attempts to become united together in relationship with one another."

As the pastor began to pray, Steve looked next to him and saw that Monica was weeping, silent tears streaming down her face. As soon as the pastor said "Amen", she turned to him and, to his surprise, hugged him tightly.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry," she repeated again and again between sobs.

He hugged her back. "It's okay. It's okay," he said, relieved that the tension between them had been alleviated.

As he patted Monica's back, he looked over at Stacy who gave him a wan smile, but made no attempt to approach him. He took a deep breath. Josh and Monica at least seemed to have truly forgiven him. Two down, one to go.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who like this story, you might want to check out "Information", my other Steve Rogers/OC story. It's already complete. I'd love to know how you like it!
Chapter 25

Since Steve originally hadn't asked for time off until the following week, his flight with Stacy to Michigan wasn't scheduled until the upcoming Saturday, December 21st. They had a whole week together before they headed back to Stacy's hometown of Midland. Stacy's school was closed for the winter break and Steve had arranged with Fury to be assigned to guarding her during every waking hour. The only time he left her side was midnight to eight in the morning, when Agent Garcia took over the protection duties.

During the next week, Steve and Stacy's life fell into a predictable pattern. Steve would relieve Agent Garcia in the morning and knock at Stacy's door, waking her up. She'd open the door with a sleepy half-grin and start making a pot of strong coffee for the both of them. They'd eat cereal or oatmeal together, usually not talking much, and Steve would tackle the dirty dishes while Stacy got her backpack together and went to the bathroom to change into her workout clothes.

They'd take the crowded subway back to his place and work out at the Tower gym. After Stacy's shower, they'd borrow one of Tony's cars and go out for the day, exploring the city a bit. One day, they hit a new art exhibition Steve had been longing to see, another day they went ice skating at Rockefeller Center since Stacy had never been. Their lunches out were simple, hot dogs, pizza or a deli sandwich. Time and again, Steve would try to cajole her into going to an expensive restaurant, but Stacy would insist that she just wanted something simple.

Every evening, Steve would make dinner for Stacy in his apartment showing off the fairly impressive cooking skills she had taught him. One night, he'd make her the now semi-famous pesto chicken dish, the next night he'd whip up a homemade version of Pappa Al Pomodoro (Italian tomato bread soup) with warm, crusty Italian bread and a large green salad. She was always appreciative of his efforts, often asking for seconds.

After dinner and the inevitable clean-up, they'd watch an old movie or a few episodes of T.V., him on the couch, her on the easy chair. Again, Steve tried to convince her to go out to the movie theater or even to see a Broadway play, but she constantly demurred. She insisted that she was just fine at home, that she didn't want to do anything else.

It was a week full of soaring victories and stunning defeats for Steve. On the one hand, after the sermon on Sunday about reconciliation, Stacy was definitely warmer towards him. By the end of the week, she had even begun to gently tease him again, a smile tugging at her lips after every silly jibe. She thanked him earnestly for protecting her every night before he left and Agent Garcia arrived to guard her. He enjoyed getting to spend so much time together, even doing the most mundane of chores like laundry or cleaning the bathroom together. He allowed himself to imagine, on more than one occasion, that it was a precursor to what their married life together might look like.

But, she no longer talked about their future together. There was no mention of flying out together to Washington State for the birth of her sister's third child. There was no talk of beach plans for the following summer. There were no more errant musings about whether their future children might have his blue eyes or her green ones.

Despite her warmth, Stacy was insistent that their time together resembled nothing more than two good friends casually hanging out. She avoided every suggestion to eat out somewhere nice or to go out dancing. Anything he proposed that seemed even slightly romantic was rejected out of hand.
And she still shied away from him. She made sure that she was always an arm's length away from him. She constantly backed up or moved away from him to maintain the distance between them.

Steve told himself again and again that it was okay, that she would get over it eventually. But, he keenly felt her constant rejection, bringing him back to those days, long ago, before he had the serum, when women went out of their way to avoid him. Once or twice, he tried to broach the subject with her, but her eyes would well with tears and he couldn't bring himself to continue. He'd sigh, give her a reassuring grin and deftly change the subject.

The day after Monica and Steve reconciled, she and Josh were both scheduled to fly out of JFK. Monica was going to spend her winter break in Spain with her family and Josh was going to see his extended family in the Philippines. In a gesture of goodwill, Steve borrowed one of Tony's cars and he and Stacy took them both to the airport.

"I can't wait to get home," Monica said excitedly to Stacy as Steve drove them there. "My mom said it was 15 degrees yesterday!"

"Celsius, right? That'd be about 60 degrees Fahrenheit... I do envy you. I miss southern Spain," Stacy said wistfully, looking at the gray clouds in the sky.

"You'll always have a place to stay at my house if you come to visit. You know my mom and dad would pamper you," Monica said reassuringly.

"After all your stories about your mom's cooking, you have no idea how tempted I am," Stacy said with a sigh.

"How are your relatives doing?" Steve asked Josh.

"Relatively good. They all live north of Manila, out of the path of the devastation. I wasn't planning to go back there so soon, but after what happened there, I had to go see them. Nothing is more important than family," Josh gave him a brief grin. "You know, Erica's cousin lost his shop in the typhoon. She and Michael just cancelled their honeymoon plans and sent him all the money they had saved up for it."

"Wow... that's amazing," Steve said, impressed by their generosity.

"Like I said, nothing's more important than family. By the way, thanks for the ride."

"It's the least I could do," Steve said as he finally parked at the curb near the departure gates.

He opened the trunk of the car and got all of their luggage out. "You know, I could go to the paid parking lot and help you all with getting your luggage checked in," he offered.

"We're fine," Monica said, coming over and giving him a quick hug. "Thanks for everything. You have a Merry Christmas. I'll bring you all home souvenirs from Sevilla."

Josh gave him a pat on the back, awkwardly balancing his luggage while Stacy and Monica hugged their goodbyes. "You have a great Christmas, Steve. See you soon."

"Take care," Steve said. "Merry Christmas."

"And, Steve," Josh said, leaning in so the others couldn't hear him. "It's going to work out. I know it will."
"Thanks, Josh. I appreciate it," Steve said with a wistful smile as his friends turned and walked towards their ticket counters.

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On Wednesday evening, Steve and Stacy went to the retirement center that she and Monica volunteered at. They were planning on singing Christmas carols to some of the residents in the Activity Center as well as going room to room for those too weak to leave their beds. Rick and Angelica joined them along with their twins. They had just turned a year old and Steve was shocked at the change.

"Wow. I can't believe they're the same babies," Steve said, as Rick bounced his fussy son in his arms.

"Yep. They grow up so quick. Don't worry. You'll find out about it soon enough," Rick said with a smile.

"Huh?" Steve asked.

"Well, aren't you and Stacy going out? I mean, I just naturally thought . . . you two seemed pretty serious," he mumbled, looking embarrassed by his faux pas.

"Oh, yeah . . . fairly serious," Steve said with a wan smile, before wandering off and saying hi to a few more friends who had come from their church.

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The residents were overjoyed at their warbling renditions of the various classic Christmas songs. They sang a half dozen songs for the assembled group, many of whom sang and clapped along. Stacy had organized the whole thing, gotten together around a dozen of their friends and acquaintances from church and had even printed out lyric sheets for those who didn't know all the verses.

They took a few requests and "Silent Night" was the most popular carol by far. Most of the senior citizens were touched by the kind gesture and thanked them profusely for coming. In addition, most of the elderly ladies cooed over the adorable babies who were in blessedly good spirits during the whole event

Mrs. Velázquez waved Steve over to where she was sitting once they had finished in front of the group. "It's so good to see you again."

Steve bent down and gave the elderly woman a fierce hug. "I'm glad to be back. Thank you again for the great blanket. It's been wonderful at warding off the chill of these winter nights."

Mrs. Velázquez gave him a beatific grin. "So, are you doing anything special for Christmas?"

"Stacy and I are flying out to her folks' house again," he said. "Getting to have a nice big Christmas with all of the relatives."

"And are you thinking of getting her anything special for the holidays? Those fingers of hers are looking pretty bare," she said with a sly smile.

Steve swallowed, schooling his expression to a bland smile, although the question tore him to pieces inside. The ringbox was still tucked inside one of his dresser drawers. He couldn't bear the thought of asking her now, when the answer would most likely be no.
Friday night, Steve and Stacy were both invited, along with Bruce, over to Tony and Pepper's apartment for a pre-Christmas get-together. Stacy was nervous about the dinner and tried more than once to get Steve to let her back out of it. However, Steve was insistent. He had been giving in to Stacy's every request during the week, but didn't want to hurt Pepper's feelings by bowing out of the festivities.

They arrived right on time, at six o'clock. Steve was amazed that they had made it on time, since Stacy had spent the better part of an hour getting ready at her apartment, trying on one dressy outfit after another. He assured her that every outfit she had chosen would be fine. It was going to just be a casual dinner.

"Stacy, you've already met them. It doesn't matter what you wear. Everything you've picked out will be just fine," he pled as she discarded yet another outfit onto her bed.

"You don't understand; that was before," she said, her voice breaking.

"Before?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"Before they knew that you . . . . that you thought I could be in league with murderers. Before they knew what you really thought of me," she began to tremble and she sank down to sit on her messy bed.

Understanding dawned on Steve. That was why she didn't want to go to this dinner, see his friends. "Stacy . . . that was all on me. They don't think any less of you. Please, don't worry about that. I promise that they don't think that."

She looked up at him and the wretchedness on her face broke his heart. "How can you be sure?"

Steve sat down on the bed, ducking his head so as not to hit it on the top bunk. He longed to hold her, but he could already see her tensing and edging away from him. "I've talked to them. They know. They know I jumped the gun. Tony, of all people, knows what a good person you are or he wouldn't have set us up in the first place," he reassured her.

She gave him a small smile. "Thanks. I really appreciate that." She stood and grabbed a pair of black pants and a red sweater that were on the bed before heading to the bathroom to change.

"C'mon in. C'mon in. Can I get you something to drink?" Tony said as he ushered them into the apartment, scotch glass already firmly in hand.

"Some egg nog?" Stacy asked hopefully, a tentative smile on her face.

"A traditionalist. I respect that. And for you, Capsicle?" Tony asked over his shoulder as he headed towards the open kitchen where Pepper was waving at them.

"The same," Steve replied.

"Capsicle?" Stacy whispered, a bemused look on her face.

"'Cause I spent so much time frozen, on ice," Steve explained.

Stacy began to laugh softly. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh, but . . . ," she began as she
dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Tony returned with their drinks. "Did I miss a joke?"

"Stacy liked your nickname," Steve said wryly.

"Oh, I've got a million of them. Let me introduce you to Pepper as I run through my top ten. Let's see . . . there's Capsicle, Ice Capades, Olaf from the new Frozen movie, although Queen Elsa's a bit funnier. . . ." Tony said as he ushered Stacy over to the kitchen to meet Pepper.

Steve followed them, heartened to see Stacy smiling and genuinely at ease with everyone. Pepper gave Stacy a warm hug as they met and they both began to talk animatedly about cooking. Pepper had made a prime rib roast with carrots and potatoes along with homemade rolls. Stacy had brought over frosted sugar cookies that they had baked together earlier that day in his apartment, although his contribution had been limited to sprinkling on green and red sugar over the white vanilla frosting.

"Where's Bruce?" Steve asked.

"He'll be here in a minute. He's had to finish up some last minute packing," Pepper replied.

"Packing?" Steve repeated.

"I'll let him tell you," Tony said with a wink.

There was a knock at the door and Tony went over to answer it. "Speak of the devil," he said, as Bruce walked in wearing a rumpled blue sweater with an enormous snowman on it.

"Gift from my mother," Bruce said as he walked on to ward off the inevitable teasing.

"You must really love your mother," Tony observed, handing Bruce a dirty martini he had just made.

"I do," Bruce said ruefully as he sipped his drink, wincing a bit when he tasted how strong it was.

"So, Tony said you had some news. You're going on a trip," Steve said as he walked over to him, leaving Pepper and Stacy chatting happily in the kitchen.

"Oh, yes. I . . . took your advice. I got ahold of Betty. We talked a lot of things through. Must have been on the phone for nearly two hours. I'm flying out tomorrow to spend the next two weeks with her in Colorado."

"Wow. That's great, buddy," Steve said, clapping him on his back.

"Well, you get the credit, buddy. You convinced me that love was worth fighting for," Bruce said.

Steve gulped, looking back at Stacy, his heart tugging a bit as he saw how happy and carefree she was. "It is, buddy. It really is."

The food was amazing and Steve ate more than his fill. He felt like he must have eaten his body weight in prime rib. The conversation was easy and boisterous and for the first time in two weeks, Steve felt completely at ease. Stacy was entertaining everyone with stories of her darling kindergarteners and she even had Tony in stitches because of their antics.
"Okay," Tony said as he poured coffee for everyone and placed the plate of cookies in front of them. "Present time!"

Steve smiled. Stacy had bought all the gifts for her family already for Christmas and had them all shipped to her parents' house in Michigan weeks ago. Steve had told her that he would take care of the gifts to Tony, Pepper and Bruce.

"Here you go. It's for the both of you," Steve said to Tony, handing him a large flat box wrapped in Santa paper.

Pepper deftly took the package with a wink. "You know how he doesn't like having things handed to him."

She unwrapped the package and opened up the box to reveal the framed art inside, a painting Steve had done of the both of them.

"Oh, Steve, it's beautiful," Pepper said in a hushed, almost reverent tone.

"Thanks, buddy. Makes me feel like a king, having a portrait done and all," Tony said.

"Does that make me your queen?" Pepper asked wryly.

"Always, babe," Tony said as he pulled her in for a kiss.

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"Thanks, for convincing me to go to dinner. You were right. I had a great time," Stacy said later on that night, when they had returned to her apartment.

Steve smiled at her kind words. There were moments that night were things felt back like they were before, the laughter, the gentle teasing, the inside jokes. He began to have real hope that things were going to turn around for them, that they could make it work.
Chapter 26

Ch. 26

The next morning, Steve arrived at Stacy's apartment a few minutes before eight to relieve Agent Garcia.

"Thank you, again, for watching out for her this week. It meant a lot to me, knowing you were protecting her," Steve said, shaking his fellow agent's hand.

"It's been my genuine pleasure, Agent Rogers. Truth be told, it's been one of the easiest assignments I've had. And Miss O'Sullivan's been great. She even gave me some frosted cookies for Christmas to thank me," he said, pointing to the red and green Christmas-themed plastic container stuffed with sugar cookies in his hands.

Steve grinned. Stacy had wanted to take some of the cookies that they had baked home last night. He had assumed that she was going to leave them for Erica, but her thoughtful gesture towards a person she barely knew didn't surprise him. Her kindness and consideration for others was one of the reasons he fell in love with her.

"Merry Christmas," Steve called out to the agent as he started down the stairs.

"Merry Christmas," the agent mumbled back, his mouth already stuffed with a cookie.

Steve knocked on her apartment door. Their flight was at noon, but he knew that she always liked to get to airports early.

"Morning," Stacy said sleepily, covering her mouth as she yawned, obviously having just woken up. She was wearing oversized green flannel pajamas with little Christmas trees on them and thick red socks with reindeer on them.

"Good morning," Steve said warmly as he walked inside the apartment. He had to admit, he loved seeing her first thing in the morning, her hair a wild riot of disheveled curls, a small grin always gracing her lips. He would indulge himself in thinking that this was what she'd be like when they were married, when he would see her every morning, get to embrace her every night.

He liked to see her when she was half-awake like this also, because it seemed, at least for the first few moments, that she had forgotten the pain between them, the gulf that still kept them apart. Once or twice, she even started towards him as though to hug him, but she'd stop short, shaking her head, her face clouding in heartache.

"Let me get us some coffee started. Erica's already out at the gym," she said as she filled the coffeepot with fresh water and ground up the beans.

"I can start some oatmeal," he offered, finding the oats out in the pantry.

"No. I'll do it," she insisted, taking a pot out of the cupboard.

He couldn't help but smile. The past few days, she'd been making him sit down and relax while she prepared a big breakfast for them both. He never had oatmeal much growing up, but the warm cereal along with raisins, walnuts, brown sugar, and a dash of milk was such a comforting way to start the day.
He sat down and let her fuss over him. She poured a glass of orange juice for him and got him a napkin. He knew that her good mood had more to do with seeing her family in a few hours instead of just wanting to be with him, but he ignored the errant thought.

"Erica made some amazing pumpkin and cream cheese muffins. Would you like one?" she asked tentatively.

Once again, he smiled, deciding that delicious food was truly a wonderful peace offering.

"I'd love one. Or three," he teased, earning him a genuine laugh from Stacy. "Are you all packed up?"

"Yeah, I just need to leave Erica a note. I can't believe it. Two weeks away," she smiled at him, but it quickly faded. "They still don't know. I didn't tell anyone in my family about . . . " she faltered and looked away.

"It's okay. Don't worry," Steve said, not knowing what to say to bring her smile back.

A few hours later, Stacy was seated next to him on the plane with her hands clasped together tightly on her lap. She hated take-offs and landings with a fiery passion and Steve knew she was panicking from the shaky way she breathed. On their flight for Thanksgiving, she held his hand tight and calmed right down. But now, she just looked wild-eyed around her in abject fear.

She finally relaxed a few minutes later, when the plane began to level off, a wan smile on her pale, ashen face. "Thanks again. For the first-class airline tickets. For the rental car. For setting everything up. I really appreciate it. It was really kind of you."

"You're welcome. It's going to be a great Christmas. You'll see," he said with a reassuring smile.

"Of course it will be," she said, looking out the window, but her words lacked conviction.

After landing in Detroit, they picked up the rental car. It was nearly two and they were both famished, so they drove around a bit before finding a small diner for lunch. Stacy just ordered some vegetable soup and a few slices of toast, but Steve ended up ordering two plates of cheeseburgers and fries along a massive chocolate shake with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

When Stacy finished her meager cup of soup, she looked wistfully over at the huge mounds of fries still left on both of Steve's plates.

"Do you want some fries? They're really good," Steve offered, noting the greedy look on her face.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," he said, sliding one of his plates towards her.

"Oh, honey, these aren't good. They're glorious," she said saucily as she began to gobble up the golden fries.

Steve couldn't help but grin at the endearment hidden inside of the off-handed comment. It felt good, natural to have her back to her normal, sweet, teasing self. It was the first time she called him anything other than Steve in weeks. He wondered if she noticed.
After lunch, Steve drove them to Stacy's parents' house. She fidgeted the entire ride, her smile growing wider and wider as they grew closer. She squealed in delight when they arrived, pointing to the tan mid-sized sedan in the driveway.

"That's got to be Amanda's rental car. They're already here," she said excitedly.

"Go ahead. Go in. I'll get all the luggage," he said with a smile.

"Really? Thanks," she said, flashing him a quick grin as she zipped up her bulky jacket and bounded out of the car.

Her parents' house was decorated with an inflatable life-sized Santa sitting in the snow of the front yard along with moving mechanical deer made up of wires and white lights. The house itself was trimmed in white icicle lights. He grinned at how cheery the scene was. He hadn't bothered to decorate his apartment in New York and he now regretted it. There was something about the lights and decorations that seemed to bring the holiday to life.

For the next day or so, Steve hardly saw Stacy except at meals. She spent the rest of Saturday focused on Amanda and the kids. They baked a gingerbread house together and the children shrieked in delight when they decorated it in frosting and gumdrops.

Steve bumped into Luis as he was bringing in the luggage. Luis was enthusiastic in his appreciation that Steve had sent Tony Stark's plane to pick them up for the flight out. Steve tried to downplay what he had done, but Luis would have none of it. "You don't understand, Steve. You made one of the worst trips of my life become one of the best. It was so easy flying with the kids like that. I'll never forget what you did."

That night, the entire extended family all decorated the Christmas tree together while holiday music played in the background. They sipped hot apple cider while putting on the lights and ornaments. Steve had the honor of putting the angel up on top, as he was the tallest. As he sat between Daniella and Mateo on the couch, looking at the beautiful tree, feeling the warmth of the crackling fire in the fireplace, he sighed in contentment, overwhelmed by the feelings of home and family.

On Sunday, Stacy volunteered to help out at her parents' church, taking care of the kids in Sunday school, while Steve was in the main sanctuary with the rest of her family. Later that day, she went shopping with her sister for last minute Christmas gifts while her mother watched Daniella and Mateo, did Christmas crafts with her niece and nephew when she returned, and then made fudge and divinity with her mother, filling the house with a heavenly smell.

Steve ended up spending quite a bit of time with Luis, helping around the house, doing chores that were hard for her parents to accomplish. They fixed a fence that had been leaning over, chopped and stacked yet more wood and shoveled the driveway and walk in front of their house. In a fit of nervous energy, Steve ended up shoveling the driveways and sidewalk of the entire neighborhood, earning a bemused grin from Luis.

"We get it. You're perfect. You're a superhero. You know, you're making me look bad," Luis said drolly.
On Monday morning, the 23rd, Steve walked into the kitchen to see Stacy happily making coffee and singing along to the radio that was tuned to a station playing Christmas music.

"Good morning," she said brightly, a huge grin on her face.

"You're in a great mood," he observed, as he took the mug full of strong coffee that she offered him. As his fingers brushed hers, an electric bolt went through him. It was the first time they had touched in over two weeks, and even though it had been an accident, he still treasured the stolen moment. He wanted to talk to her about it, but her back was already to him as she turned to make pancakes for the family.

"You know what today is?" she asked as she mixed the pancake batter.

"No, what?" he asked as he settled down at the kitchen table, taking his first sip of the delicious brew.

"Christmas Eve Eve," she informed him, turning around to give him a wink.

"Christmas Eve Eve?"

"Well, December 24th is Christmas Eve, the day before Christmas. So, the 23rd is Christmas Eve Eve. I love it. Everyone's here, all the decorations. Did you have fun last night?" she asked as she turned back to turn on the griddle.

"Yeah, I did," he admitted. They had all driven around the nearby neighborhoods and looked at all the Christmas lights. Mateo and Daniella had spent almost an hour afterwards excitedly telling Steve about their favorite houses. Steve had been amazed at the time and effort that had gone into the light displays. He briefly wondered how expensive the electric bills must be for the elaborate lighted displays.

"After breakfast, we're all going out for a bit. There's a place not far from here with a lake that always freezes over and it has a small hill nearby. The kids can go sledding and ice skating. We're supposed to meet my cousins there. It sounds like fun, right?" Stacy asked eagerly as she turned once again to smile at him.

Her enthusiasm was infectious and Steve couldn't resist grinning in response. "It sure does."

Steve smiled as he parked the car, and got out to see the idyllic forest setting that Stacy had taken him to. It reminded him of a Norman Rockwell painting. Several of Stacy's relatives were already there. There was a group by a small sloped hill, sledding down the incline one at a time on bright plastic saucers. Some people were building snowmen, some were throwing snowballs and one or two of them were ice skating.

Amanda walked over to them in the clearing near the lake, holding Mateo and Daniella by the hands.

"Do you guys mind watching Daniella? Mateo and Luis are going sledding over there on the hill, but Daniella wants to play here in the snow," Amanda explained.

"Sure," Steve and Stacy said at the same time. Stacy began to giggle, covering her face with her gloved hands.
Daniella tugged at Steve's sleeve. He knelt down to talk to her face to face. "How can I help you, sweetie?"

"Do you wanna build a snowman?" she asked, her eyes alight with joy.

"Sure, I'd love to," Steve said, touched by her enthusiasm.

"It's a line from that new Frozen movie. We took the kids three times already. They are completely obsessed with it; they already know all the songs. Daniella has been thinking of nothing but snowmen since she saw it," Amanda explained before she walked with Mateo to watch him go sledding with his father.

"I'm going to name him Olaf," Daniella said solemnly.

Just as they started on the snowman, Stacy's cousin came blazing up to them on a new snowmobile, his friend riding in back.

"Hi, guys. Make sure to keep away from the lake," Stacy warned her cousin. "Sometimes, there are patches where the ice isn't very thick."

"Yeah, Grandma," her cousin sniped sarcastically as he revved the engine and took off.

Stacy shook her head at her cousin's antics. She looked over at Daniella and Steve. "Let's build the best snowman, ever."

They spent the next fifteen minutes building a rather adorable snowman. Although Steve's talents as an artist were usually expressed through pen and paper, he had to admit that they did a fairly respectable job in creating a life-size representation of "Olaf", complete with a large carrot that Stacy had swiped from her mother's fridge. Of course, before long, it devolved into a fairly fierce snowball fight, which Steve totally let Daniella win, leaving the impish preschooler giggling and content in her stunning victory. Steve looked over at Stacy's joyful expression and he felt a wave of love for her that nearly broke his heart.

All of a sudden, Steve heard the horrifying sound of ice breaking. He looked over in time to see Stacy's cousin and his friend plunge into the water on their snowmobile, their combined weight being too much for the frozen lake to take, causing enormous, splintering cracks to appear throughout the large pond.

"Hold onto Daniella!" Steve shouted to Stacy as he ran, superhumanly fast, to the lake and dove headfirst into the frigid water.

The iciness of the water hit him like a blow and he felt his body go into shock. It only took a moment to locate the two teens, but he struggled to disentangle them from the heavy snowmobile. Finally, he came to the surface, one of them under each arm, kicking with all of his might to reach a part of the frozen lake still covered in ice. A small crowd had formed at the edge of where the ice broke and they helped get the boys out of the water once Steve arrived.

"I'm okay. I'm okay," he repeated, waving away the people that crowded around him. "Pull those boys to safety. Get them off this ice before it cracks even more."

The rescuers grabbed ahold of the two young teens, dragging them several feet until they were all back on solid ground. He saw everyone crowded around the two young men, frantically starting CPR.

Steve lay on his belly, half in and half out of the water, sucking in the frigid air, shivering from the
intense cold. He saw Stacy staring at him from across the lake, desperately holding onto Daniella's hand, tears streaming down her anguished face. He smiled to see how concerned she was for him; how much she really cared for him was evident on his face. Wearily, he began the slow process of hauling the rest of himself out of the water.

Steve heard a sickening crack as the ice sheet that he was holding onto broke underneath him. He scrambled for purchase, but found nothing to grab ahold of and quickly sank once again under the icy water, his weighty clothes dragging him down. "Steve!" he heard dimly as Stacy screamed after him.

He felt his strength quickly fading. He had been surprised that even he had lasted that long. The super serum pushed him to the brink of human abilities, but even he had his limits. He began to feel weaker and weaker, bringing him back to his failed attempts to swim when he was a child.

He flailed his heavy arms and kicked up, trying once again to break the surface, desperate panic finally beginning to seize hold of him. He used the last of his dwindling strength to push himself up towards the surface when his outstretched hand hit something hard.

His heart sank. He had somehow ended up trapped underneath the massive sheet of ice. He tried to punch through it, but his hand was cramping from the cold and he could barely make a fist.

As he pounded frantically on the thick ice, his vision began to blur. He felt his lungs burn from the lack of oxygen. His last thought was, "No, please, no."

And then, everything went black.
Chapter 27

Steve fell in and out of consciousness, his whole body aching, throbbing in pain, the cold seeping to his bones. He felt rough arms pull him out of the water, heard the blare of an ambulance's siren. He briefly saw the rush of passing fluorescent lights on the ceiling as he was being pushed down the corridor of a hospital, heard the urgent whispers of low, concerned voices.

Hours later, his gritty eyes fluttered open. He was in a private hospital room, lying in a bed, hooked up to monitors, an IV in his arm. He heard the soft hum and beeps of the monitors, smelled the sharp tang of hospital antiseptic hanging in the air.

Stacy was hunched over in a large chair that had been pushed over so close to him that her knees were up against his bedside. Her clothes were rumpled and stained. Her hair was disheveled mess. Her hands were folded together in prayer. Her eyes were scrunched closed and she kept repeating softly, "Please, God, please."

"Stacy," he began in a hoarse whisper.

She opened her bloodshot eyes and launched herself at him, peppering his face with fervent kisses. He tried to return her enthusiastic embrace as best he could, hampered by various leads and wires, trying not to pull out his IV in the process. As her soft lips finally met his, he was home once again.

As the kiss deepened, Steve was vaguely aware of an beeping alarm going off, but all he could focus on was her body pressed against his, the racing of his pulse, her nails massaging his scalp, sending shivering tingles down his spine.

All of a sudden, four nurses careened into the room in dark scrubs, shouting orders at one another. Stacy hopped back into her seat, her face red from embarrassment. Steve noticed, though, that she still clung tightly to his right hand, not breaking contact for a moment.

As they stopped at the foot of the hospital bed, one of the older nurses gave Steve a sly grin. "Your heart rate monitor went off. Although, we can guess why." She walked over to the monitor and nodded to herself after she checked it and tapped the alarm off.

"Sorry, sorry about that," Steve said sheepishly.

"Well, we'll let the doctor know you're awake . . . . and doing quite well," the nurse replied with a saucy wink.

As the group of nurses filed out of the room, shaking their heads at the wasted effort, Stacy burst into a fit of nervous giggles. "It's good to know that I still have that effect on you," she teased, massaging the palm of his hand firmly with her thumbs.

"You always have," Steve said huskily. "So, are we . . . are we good?" he asked, his heart in his throat.

"I . . . I saw you so still. I thought you were dead. I imagined my life without you," Stacy said with
a strangled sob, clutching his hand, almost desperately. "We're not good . . . we're amazing. I love you so much," she said, her voice breaking.

Slowly, gingerly, she moved to hug him, laying her head against his chest, listening to the rhythmic beating of his heart. He held her, stroking her hair, closing his eyes, drinking in the moment. "I love you, too. I . . . I missed holding you."

"I missed you holding me, too." She pushed up a little to look at him face to face, her expression solemn. "Erica told you about Monica's ex-boyfriend, right?"

Steve nodded.

"Monica doesn't like us to talk about it, but I want you to understand," Stacy said, choosing her words carefully. "When I first met him, he seemed like the nicest guy ever. He was generous, complimentary, flattering even, and before long, Monica and he started dating, whirlwind romance. He was so protective of her, possessive, wanting her only to spend time with him, wanting her all to himself, and Monica said it proved how much he really cared about her."

"And then, a couple months after they started dating, he overheard her on the phone with a friend. He misunderstood what they were talking about and he flew into a horrible rage, saying the most awful, cruel things to her, accusing her of being unfaithful, accusing her of lying. Well, that was that, I thought. No more boyfriend. But, he came back and he apologized profusely. He said all the right words. He overwhelmed her with every romantic cliché in the book, the gigantic bouquets of flowers, the gourmet candy, the expensive restaurants; everything was so over the top. And before long, they were back together."

"And everything was fine for a week or so . . . until something else set him off, causing him to scream at her, humiliate her . . . ," Stacy took a shuddering breath. "And she'd always tell me again and again, 'Stacy, I must have done something to make him so mad . . . and look at how sorry he is' . . . ," she trailed off. "She changed. She was no longer playful, no longer out-going. She walked on eggshells, never knowing what might set him off . . . always blaming herself for his vicious outbursts."

"I thought that you and I were getting really serious . . . that maybe someday we might even get married . . . spend the rest of our lives together . . . at least that's what I hoped . . . but when you got so very angry and you wouldn't listen to me . . . when you thought I was some sort of horrible traitor . . . you really scared me, Steve," she said.

She took a shaky breath. "After seeing how Monica would go back to her ex-boyfriend time and time again after he would rage and yell at her . . . . I was just afraid that maybe I didn't really know you as well as I thought I did. I wanted to make sure we had a good, solid friendship . . . . a strong foundation for our relationship. That's why I needed to take it slow, try to get to know you again."

Steve felt like he finally understood. The week of hot dogs and ice skating, the week of pizzas and T.V. on the couch, the week of deli sandwiches and museum exhibits. She had spent that whole week trying to do everything she possibly could to become his friend again. Trying to desperately to reconnect with him. Trying to rebuild the trust that had shattered. He winced to think at how impatient he'd been, how he had wanted to just rush back to the way things were before.

She began to blush. "And when you made that comment about only getting to 'first base', I thought, maybe . . . ," she took a deep breath, tears welling in her eyes as her soft voice began to falter, "maybe you'd rather be with another girl . . . someone who would . . . ."

The impact of her statement hit Steve like a Mack truck. He had almost forgotten the flippant,
hurtful comment he'd made out of anger and frustration, although she clearly hadn't, replaying it over and over again for weeks. It killed him that his hateful words had driven a wedge between them.

"Hey, hey," he said, holding her face in both hands, looking her in her eyes. "I only want to be with you. You are my best girl. There is no one else. There will be no one else. I love you just as you are. Exactly as you are in this very moment," he said earnestly.

"First base and all," he teased gently, as he lightly traced her cheek with one finger, wiping away an errant tear.

She laughed, looking down and then, leaned over to kiss him when they heard someone clearing her throat behind them.

Once again, Stacy jumped back into her chair, her cheeks coloring.

An older woman stood there with a kindly smile, her dark hair in a bun, wearing a white lab coat over a red sweater and navy slacks. "Hello, I'm Dr. Chen. I'm your attending physician. I heard that you were awake, Mr. Rogers."

"How is he?" Stacy said, anxiously.

"Well, in my expert medical opinion, disgustingly healthy." She turned to Steve. "I'd like to say that you're doing so well because of my excellent medical abilities, but the truth of the matter is, your body completely repaired itself. I just had to get out of its way. Your vital signs are textbook; really, I've never met someone as amazingly healthy as you are. I'd love to research you more; the effects of that super-serum are quite extraordinary, but a contingent of men in black suits swarmed in and collected all of your records," Dr. Chen explained with a trace of bitterness.

"S.H.I.E.L.D. When they processed your insurance card, it alerted them," Stacy explained. "Your boss flew in, even, to check up on you while you were asleep. He's very . . . intimidating."

"Fury came by?" Steve asked, surprised.

"Yes, he stayed for about an hour or so. He mainly talked to the doctors," Stacy said.

"Director Fury impressed upon us that we should take the very best of care of you," Dr. Chen said with a slight edge to her voice.

"And Tony, Pepper, Bruce, and Natasha sent flowers," Stacy said, waving to the enormous bouquets on a nearby table.

"Really?" Steve asked.

Stacy laughed. "Natasha's card said, 'I know you're faking it, buddy. This is no way to get out of paperwork.', Bruce's card said, 'Not again', and Tony and Pepper's card said, 'Can't you ever keep out of ice water?'"

Steve chuckled. It sounded like them. "When can I leave?" he asked the doctor expectantly.

"As soon as I can get the discharge nurse up here with your papers. It's Christmas Eve. I expect you'll want to be home with your family," the doctor explained with a grin.

"Christmas Eve?" Steve asked.
"You've been asleep for nearly twenty-four hours. Your body needed to focus on healing itself. You're a lucky man to have such a very devoted wife. She's been by your side the entire time," Dr. Chen said. "You take care now. I know you'll be in good hands," she said as she left.

"Wife?" Steve asked, looking over at Stacy, who gave him an impish grin.

"It's the only way that they'd let me ride in the ambulance with you and to stay past visiting hours. I couldn't bear to be apart from you, so I fibbed," she said with a blush. "I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," he said as he brought her close for another kiss.

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It was still another hour before Steve was disentangled from his monitors and officially released from the hospital. It was well past noon and he was beyond ravenous. Stacy insisted on driving him home to her parents' house over his protests that he was just fine.

"Let me take care of you," she teased as they entered the kitchen, arms around each other as they walked, balancing the bouquets of flowers as they went.

"Oh, thank goodness. We're so glad that you're back," Stacy's mom said, putting down her mug of coffee on the kitchen table and walking over to hug him as Stacy set down the flowers.

Then, her dad clapped him on his back. "Good to have you back, son." Steve noticed that his voice cracked on the last word, that he was trying to quickly wipe a tear from his eye so that the rest of the family wouldn't notice.

"Uncle 'Teve, Uncle 'Teve," cried Daniella, running into the kitchen, arms outstretched, tears streaming down her face. "Mommy said you were in the hospital. That you had a big, big boo-boo."

Steve picked Daniella up, swinging her around and then holding her close. "I am just fine, Daniella. All better," he grinned.

"I love you, Uncle 'Teve," she whispered into his ear.

"I love you too, Daniella," he said.

"Uncle Steve!" Mateo yelled, dashing into the kitchen and grabbing Steve to hug him around the waist. "I told them. I told them nothing could get you down. You're a superhero."

"Thanks, buddy," Steve said, hugging him tightly. He noticed that Mateo was wearing a Captain America sweatshirt and he couldn't help but smile.

"Now, Uncle Steve's probably really, really hungry. Why don't we get him something to eat?" Stacy asked the children in a bright voice.

"Lemme help. Lemme help," Daniella said as she tried to squirm out of Steve's arms and he placed her gently on the ground.

"Okay, why don't you help Mateo set the table?" Amanda suggested as she and Luis walked into the kitchen, taking turns hugging Steve hello. "Don't forget to set a place for your Aunt Stacy, too. I bet the hospital food wasn't that good."

Stacy colored and looked away.
"Stacy, you did go down to the cafeteria and eat, didn't you?" Stacy's mom asked, concern evident on her face as she faced her younger daughter.

"I . . . I had a couple granola bars in my purse," Stacy hedged as she looked down at her hands.

"Honey, you were at that hospital for almost twenty-four hours straight. When we came to visit, we offered to watch Steve while you went down to get something to eat," her mom pressed, her voice rising.

"I just couldn't leave him," Stacy said simply. "I didn't want him to wake up alone."

Her mother shook her head and harrumphed. "You need to take care of yourself."

"Well, we'll just have a big lunch now," Stacy said, deftly changing the subject. "I heard you guys had pot roast last night?"

While the family got lunch together for them, Steve took a shower. He briefly flashed back to hitting the icy water of the lake and shuddered. He didn't regret saving the two teens, not for a second, but the thought that he might have never felt Stacy in his arms again made him wince.

When he returned to the kitchen, Stacy was already there, her hair still damp from her own shower upstairs. She was wearing a fuzzy white sweater over a pair of black jeans, Daniella balanced on her lap, chattering away about her favorite toy. Stacy looked happy and at ease, like her old self again, the cares and worries of before having melted away.

After a large lunch full of leftover pot roast, potatoes, carrots and rolls, they finished the meal off with some chocolate peppermint cookies that the children had made the night before with their grandmother. Stacy's parents, Amanda, and Luis took the kids to the backyard to play in the snow to give Steve and Stacy some time alone.

"So, it's Christmas Eve?" Steve asked as he polished off his fifth cookie. He was glad that the kids had made so many cookies, as he felt a bit guilty about eating so many of them.

"I know. I'm so glad that you got discharged in time. I was worried you'd have to stay there for another few days, at least."

"So, what are the plans?"

She smiled. "We'll just have a family dinner tonight and then we've got Christmas Eve service and then we'll open presents tomorrow morning. I still need to wrap all of the gifts I got shipped here. My grandparents and my aunt's family will be over in the late afternoon and we'll all have a big dinner."

"Turkey again?" Steve asked, already anticipating another big meal.

"Yep. We usually do a ham, but my dad's dying to try out the deep fryer again. We may need your superhero skills again. My mom is certain that he's going to burn down the garage."

"I'm sorry . . . I forgot to ask," Steve began, "how are your cousin and his friend?"

"Great," Stacy said, finishing off yet another cookie. "They got taken to the E.R., but they didn't
even need to be admitted. They got to go home yesterday, spend the night in their own beds. Because of your quick action, you saved them."

"I just did what anyone would do," Steve said with a shrug.

"No. Don't do that. Don't minimize what you did. You saved their lives. You turned what would have been a tragedy into . . ." she took a deep breath. "You really are a hero. I mean, I knew, heck, I even saw the news footage during the invasion . . . but to see it in real life, to see what you can do, to see how you never hesitated to save someone else. You're amazing, Steve."

"I think you're pretty amazing, too," he said as he leaned over and kissed her, catching her hair with his hand, tugging her close, tasting the peppermint lingering on her lips.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

1. I know some readers were just dying for Steve and Stacy to get back together, but from the time that Steve came back from his mission to when he fell in the lake was less than ten days. Ten days. I've had arguments over condiments last way longer (never put mayo on my sandwich, just a hint). LOL.

2. There are tons of fluffy Christmas goodness coming up. We've deserved it, right?

3. Thank you for your comments! Every review is like a huge hug from all of you and I can't tell you how encouraging they are.

4. Poor Steve does have a problem with falling unconscious into water and nearly drowning. Any bets about how Captain America 3 will end?
Chapter 28

After they finished their lunch, Steve and Stacy stood to wash their dishes. Steve noticed that Stacy kept yawning, but that she was trying to hide her exhaustion from him, turning away or covering her mouth.

"Did you sleep any last night?" he asked, concern tingeing his voice.

She shook her head. "That chair wasn't very comfortable. And I was too anxious about you to sleep," she admitted.

Steve was touched by that. "Hey, I'm alright," he said, resting his hands lightly on her hips as they faced each other.

"I know. I know. But, I was so worried," she said, trembling slightly.

He pulled her in for a hug. "I love that you cared so much. But, your mom is right, though. You need to take of yourself, too. Why don't you take a nap till dinnertime?"

Steve could tell that she was about to protest, but her words were engulfed in yet another yawn. "Okay. I'll go get a little rest," she said, reaching up and giving him a quick kiss.

"That's my best girl," he said as she left.

Steve was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking yet another cup of coffee when Daniella and Mateo bounded into the kitchen.

"Uncle 'Teve, Uncle 'Teve," Daniella yelled as she raced into the kitchen, skidding to a halt right in front of him. "C'mon, c'mon," she said, tugging on his sleeve.

"Yeah, Uncle Steve, you've got to come outside. You've got to see what we did," Mateo said, panting from excitement.

"Alright, buddy, I'll come," Steve said, getting up and letting the kids drag him to the backyard where their parents and grandparents were waiting.

"Aw, kids, that's great!" he exclaimed when he got outside and saw what they had done.

There, in the middle of the backyard, was a life-size snowman made in the image of Captain America. The kids (along with their parents and grandparents, most likely) had used red and blue food dye to create their homage to Steve. He had a blue helmet and and his iconic red and blue shield. Under the snowman were written the words, "Uncle Steve, our hero!" in alternating red and blue.

"Photos!" Amanda called out, taking her phone out.

Steve posed next to the snowman, crouching down, his arms wrapped around both children as they posed for photo after photo. He couldn't believe the sweetness and thoughtfulness of the endearing gesture. As he looked at Amanda and Luis, as well as Stacy's parents, he knew that they must have
done most of the work to create such an elaborate display. It touched him to know how they had accepted them into the family, made him a part of their holidays. They barely knew him, but they treated him like one of their own.

A few hours later, Steve was helping Luis set the table for dinner. Stacy was still sleeping and both Amanda and Daniella were taking a late nap. Mateo was in the basement, playing a game on Luis's phone. Stacy's parents were hard at work making dinner. Her mom was finishing up the garlic bread while the homemade lasagna cooked and her dad was making a huge antipasto salad.

"So, baby number three?" Steve said to Luis.

"Yeah, I don't know if I'm quite ready to go on that roller coaster ride again. I mean, we just got Daniella out of diapers and now, we're back to changing them eight times a day."

"Eight times a day?" Steve asked.

"It feels like all you do at the beginning is feed them and change them. Do you have much experience with babies?" Luis asked.

"Can't say that I do," Steve admitted, his babysitting adventure with Stacy and the twins being his most recent foray into infant care.

"Neither did I. Mateo's was the first diaper I changed. Right there in the hospital. You get the hang of it pretty quick. Those first six weeks are rough, though."

"What happens after six weeks?"

"At six weeks, they begin to smile. When your child smiles at you for the first time, well, it just melts your heart. There is nothing more beautiful in the world. I was never much for kids, but something changes when they're your own kids. Something clicks inside of you," Luis said.

Steve grinned, briefly imagining a tiny infant smiling up at him with pale green eyes.

After dinner, they all attended the Christmas eve services at the church Stacy parents attended. Mateo sat between Stacy and Steve and Daniella bounced up and down on Stacy's lap. The church was a bit more traditional than the Steve's church back in New York, with an organist instead of an electric guitar and hymnals instead of PowerPoint lyrics up on a screen.

It hit Steve that he thought of the church back in New York as his church. And Monica, Erica, Michael, and Josh as his friends. For the longest time, he thought about attending Stacy's church, hanging out with Stacy's friends. But now, something had shifted inside of him. He no longer thought of his life in New York as temporarily, transitory. If he were honest with himself, for the longest time, he kept waiting and hoping that he'd wake up one day and he'd be back in 1944.

As he looked over at Daniella, warbling out the lyrics to "Silent Night" and as he felt Stacy's hand tightly holding his, he finally felt at home. Not that everything felt natural or easy, but everything felt right. He had found his place in this world.

Later on that night, after they got back home, Steve and Stacy sat on the couch, feeling the warmth
of the crackling fire, looking at the twinkling white lights of the Christmas tree. Everyone else was in bed, but they were still up.

Steve was sitting on one end of the couch, his arm around Stacy, his fingers trailing up and down her arm, her head resting on his shoulder. They had spent the last two hours talking since the rest of the family went to bed.

"Could you tell me . . . how you got mixed up with Tony?" Steve asked tentatively. He had heard Tony's version of it, but he was dying to hear hers.

She tensed for a moment, then sighed. "Well, it was several months after I broke up with Josh. I hadn't dated anyone since and so, Monica finally hectored me into doing an on-line dating profile."

Steve shook his head. "I can't imagine a girl like you having a hard time getting dates."

Stacy sighed. "Like I've said, a lot of guys aren't interested in a G-rated dating relationship."

"Wait, was Josh the last guy you dated before me?"

Stacy nodded.

The last guy she had dated had cheated on her. Steve let that sink in for a moment. And yet, when confronted with tabloid video of him and Natasha at a jewelry store together, Stacy had automatically dismissed any perception that he had been unfaithful. She had trusted him implicitly. She had faith in him.

"Anyhow, I got a phone call from your friend, Tony. At first, I thought it was a prank call, but he finally convinced me to call him back at the general phone line at Stark Tower. He said that you were lonely and depressed and he wanted me to get you out of your apartment," she said.

"What did you say?"

"I said no. Absolutely not. I was totally embarrassed. I couldn't even imagine trying to approach you."

"But then," Steve prompted.

"A week later, Tony showed up at my classroom, after school. He said that he knew the school was bankrupt, that we had all gotten pink slips. He . . .," she swallowed, looking as though she might cry, "he even knew that Monica was going to lose her work visa and get shipped home. He told me he could make all our problems go away. He promised that he would fully fund the school and that no one would lose their job. I just had get you out of your apartment three times. He set it up so that JARVIS would text me when Tony was gone; keep an eye on you."

"But . . . but you didn't just stop after three times?"

She smiled up at him. "Oh, honey, I had the biggest crush on you. I nearly swooned when I saw you at that first concert in that suit. And you were so sweet and nice and kind. I did everything I could to spend more time with you. I've worked out more this past year than I have in the previous decade."

He chuckled, but then his expression became serious. "You never told me . . . about Tony," he said carefully.

"Condition of the agreement. You weren't ever supposed to know. I almost told you at the
Halloween party. But, I guess I was worried that Tony might renege on the deal if you found out what he'd done. If I'm honest, I was also scared. You and I had just started dating. I didn't know how you'd react if you found out that Tony had set us up. I really wish I had told you, no matter the consequences," she said glumly, looking down.

He lifted her chin up with one finger, looking into her eyes. "Hey, hey. It's okay; it's okay. I understand. Tony can be very . . . persuasive."

For the next hour, they mainly talked about the future. They made birthday plans for Stacy at the end of January. Steve asked her what she wanted to do and she seemed a bit embarrassed.

"What is it?" Steve pressed. "Anything you want."

"I know it's silly . . . but I've always really wanted to see 'The Lion King' on Broadway. But the tickets are so expensive."

"Done," Steve said firmly.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"You and me, 'The Lion King'," he repeated.

She grinned up at him. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, squeezing her gently. "We'll have a great time."

"You know, Amanda's due around mid-February. I got leave to take off a week from school near the end of the month, so that she has some time to recuperate a bit. I wanted to go out and see the baby. Would you . . . would you like to come along?" she asked tentatively.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he answered. He took a deep breath trying to delicately approach his next question. "Do you have any plans for the summer?"

"I'll need to start looking for another summer job. I don't think I can handle nannying again. It was so brutal. The kids were fine, but the parents were such a nightmare. Maybe I can do some tutoring," she said offhandedly.

"Maybe we could do something else this summer?" he hedged. "When does the spring semester end?"

"Around mid-June," she replied. "Why?"

"Nothing really. Just checking," he said vaguely.

"You really are bad at lying. Out with it," she said, turning her head to look up at him.

"Well, you said yourself, we're pretty serious and I was thinking that, hypothetically, maybe summer would be a good time to . . ." his voice began to falter. He felt like he was going about this all the wrong way.

"Hypothetically?" she said with a sly grin.

"Uh, yeah."
"Summer's a great time of year. Does this mean that I should maybe put off looking for a summer job?" she asked carefully.

"Maybe . . . hypothetically," he chuckled.

Steve woke up Christmas morning to an incessant pounding on the door to the den. "Wake up, Uncle 'Teve. Wake up, Uncle 'Teve."

Steve and Stacy had been up talking and cuddling by the fire until well past one in the morning. As he looked over at the clock on the wall, he saw that it was just a little past six in the morning. He groaned as he got up, his back in agony from the horrid foldout couch. His only consolation was that hopefully next Christmas he would be upgraded to the upstairs bedroom.

"I'm coming," he mumbled and opened the door.

"Uncle 'Teve, Uncle 'Teve, you have to come. We can't open the presents until you come," Daniella insisted, her hair a riot of disheveled curls, clad in red footie pajamas that said "Santa's Little Helper" in green writing on them.

"Okay, okay. I just need to get dressed, then I can come."

"No, no. Uncle 'Teve, you need to come right now. We're all wearing our p.j.s. C'mon. C'mon. C'mon," she said as she reached up and tugged on his hand.

"Alright," Steve said reluctantly, letting her pull him out of the den. He was wearing a pair of grey sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt. He supposed it could be worse.

As he went into the living room, he saw that Daniella was right, the rest of the family was there, all still in their pajamas. Stacy walked over to him, handing him a cup of steaming coffee and going up on tiptoes to give him a peck on the cheek.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked sleepily.

"Fairly well, for only having five hours," he fibbed.

"I'm planning on taking a nap later on this afternoon. I'm still catching up from the night before," she confessed before sipping a bit more coffee from her own mug.

Mateo was in charge of distributing the stocking from "Santa" that decorated the mantelpiece. Everyone in the family had one. The children got various small toys while the adults got chocolates and candy canes. Next up were the presents. Steve was just as surprised as everyone else at what gifts were from "Steve and Stacy" since Stacy had bought and shipped all the gifts herself.

The children were beyond excited. Stacy had gotten Mateo the Hydra Base activity set he had wanted. When Steve winced when he saw it, Stacy leaned over, "I got all these gifts before . . ." when she trailed off. Steve realized that she meant before their falling out.

Daniella squealed when she saw what she got from "Uncle 'Teve and Aunt 'Tacy", a complete Black Widow outfit along with a matching red wig. It seemed that Amanda had told Stacy that Daniella had caught her brother's obsession with the Avengers, becoming completely fixated with Black Widow in particular. Daniella rushed to put the costume on over her pajamas and Steve couldn't wait to send the photos they took with her to Natasha.
Steve and Stacy had gotten Stacy's father a year-long pass to the gun range along with a few modern world history books he'd been wanting. They had gotten her mother a bottle of her favorite perfume and a red cashmere sweater. For Luis and Amanda, they got a voucher for fifteen hours of babysitting at a local nanny service to give them a chance to get a bit of a break and have a few date nights before baby #3 was born.

"You are the best sister ever," Amanda said, hugging her tightly.

"Thanks, man," Luis said warmly to Steve, hugging him.

Steve gave him a blank smile as he patted Luis's back, not wanting to admit that he had nothing to do with choosing the gift.

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"The next one is to Uncle Steve from Aunt Stacy," Mateo said, handing a small wrapped present to Steve.

He quickly unwrapped it and smirked when he saw the contents.

"A new phone," he said, showing it to the group.

"It's the newest iPhone," Stacy explained. "I couldn't handle you running around with that flip phone anymore."

"Thank you. I love it," he said, as he stared at its sleek black design.

"And this is for Aunt Stacy from Uncle Steve," Mateo announced, handing a small red and gold gift bag to Stacy.

Her eyes lit up and she took a small jewelry box out of the bag. She opened the box and saw the contents and her expression changed.

"It's lovely," she said quietly, as she took out a small golden locket from the box.

Steve felt something shift in the room. As he saw the looks of disappointment on the faces around him, it hit him. He had given Stacy a jewelry box. On Christmas. In front of her family. After spending hours last night talking about their future plans together. They were all expecting an engagement ring.

A ring that was still sitting tucked inside his dresser drawer in New York. A ring that he hadn't even thought to bring with him, since the tension at the beginning of their trip had been so strong.

He rushed to explain the necklace, hoping to smooth things over.

"It was my mother's. It was the only piece of jewelry that my dad every got her. The only piece of real jewelry she ever owned. She wore it every single day. He had it engraved here, on the back 'My Best Girl'. And it has the year, too, 1917, when she was pregnant with me. It was his Christmas gift to her before he got shipped off to war. . . . his last Christmas gift to her . . . he never came back. She told me that one day," Steve took a deep breath. " . . . one day I'd meet a special girl and that I should give it to her. And I have," he said simply.

"Oh, Steve. I love you," Stacy said, grabbing him and kissing him soundly, ignoring the nervous laughter of her family.

"It was my mother's. It was the only piece of jewelry that my dad every got her. The only piece of real jewelry she ever owned. She wore it every single day. He had it engraved here, on the back 'My Best Girl'. And it has the year, too, 1917, when she was pregnant with me. It was his Christmas gift to her before he got shipped off to war. . . . his last Christmas gift to her . . . he never came back. She told me that one day," Steve took a deep breath. " . . . one day I'd meet a special girl and that I should give it to her. And I have," he said simply.

"Oh, Steve. I love you," Stacy said, grabbing him and kissing him soundly, ignoring the nervous laughter of her family.
"Two little lovebirds sitting in a tree . . . . K-I-S-S-I-N-G . . . First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage . . . .," Daniella began in a singsong voice.

"Hush, now," Amanda said gently.

But to Steve, it was one of the most beautiful songs in the world.
Steve looked at himself in the full length mirror and fiddled with his black bow tie. He tried tying it one way and then another, his fingers fumbling to make a neat bow. When he'd finished, he sighed a bit. He was sure it was a bit lop-sided. Why did people even wear such ridiculous things? He felt like it was choking him.

He smoothed out his suit, ridding it of wrinkles, wiping away a bit of sweat from his fingertips on his black pants. He tried to tamp down the surge of nervousness that he felt.

Don't worry, buddy. It's all going to work out fine. You got this. No need to be anxious, he told himself, but his stomach kept doing backflips and his hands wouldn't stop shaking. He'd been on raids in hostile territory and been less apprehensive.

He looked in the mirror and grimaced. He combed his hair once again, not liking the way it was parted. He knew he'd be in dozens of photos that day and he didn't want his hair to stick out.

There was a rapid knock at the door to the small room he was in. He opened it, seeing Josh there, shifting his weight from foot to foot, wearing a tux just like his. He showed him his phone and Steve winced at the time. "C'mon, man. Big day. You don't want to be late," Josh said impatiently.

Steve nodded. It was one of the most important days of his life. He wanted everything to go perfectly.

"I'm coming."

He followed Josh quickly down the corridor to the side entrance of the church sanctuary, past the garlands of flowers and pew bows. Steve took his place up front and looked out at the assembled guests in their finery. He smiled at Pepper and Tony sitting with the rest of the guests and they gave him a quick wave. Tony was wearing a black Armani suit and Pepper was wearing a beautiful light beige cocktail dress. Tony gave him a big thumbs up and Steve did his best not to laugh at his friend's antics.

Soon the music began playing and before long, Stacy was walking down the aisle towards him, carrying a beautiful bouquet of dark blue delphiniums mixed with white roses. Her hair was carefully arranged in an elaborate up-do with a few curls framing her face. His breath caught as she beamed at him as she drew closer and he was struck, once again, at how very beautiful she was.

A few minutes later, the pastor smiled as he addressed the guests. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Erica and Michael in holy matrimony."

Steve would like to say that he paid attention during the ceremony, that he focused intently on the service when two of his dearest friends got married. But all he could see was Stacy, standing there, shifting a bit uncomfortably on the other side of the altar. She had complained for the last two weeks about having to wear high heels at the wedding and, as he stared at her, he realized that she was suffering a bit.
She gave him a wink when she caught him staring. "Love you," she mouthed and he responded in kind.

"Love you, too."

Steve walked over to Tony at the reception. He and Stacy were seated at the head table and he hadn't been able to talk to Tony much. He was glad that Tony and Pepper could make it to the wedding. When Steve had told them about the problems with Erica and Michael's caterer, Tony offered up his restaurant for the reception, all expenses paid. Erica and Michael had been overwhelmed by Tony's generosity and, of course, invited both Tony and Pepper to the wedding. Tony was more than excited by their newest findings and had visited them at their lab more than once to go over their work.

"Turned out pretty nice," Tony observed as he looked around the restaurant. There were dark blue delphiniums everywhere, interspersed with white roses. All the tables had been covered with white tablecloths and navy napkins.

"Thank you. Thank you for everything. You really didn't have to. I was just trying to find them a caterer," Steve said earnestly.

Tony waved him off. "It's no problem. It's actually my pleasure. They're a cute couple. And their work is amazing. Not as amazing as mine . . ."

Steve had to chuckle.

"But considering that it's in a completely different field, I'll give them a pass. No, really. They really took me to school when I went down to the lab that one day and they showed me around, let me see how they research was going. It's one thing to read their papers; it's another to have them walk you through it," Tony said with a grin.

"How far along are they?" Steve asked. He had tried to talk to them about it on numerous occasions about their work, but their explanations got very technical, very fast and he ended up just nodding and smiling at the end.

"Well, with anything medical, it takes such a long time for any type of widespread practical applications. There are all the clinical studies and human trials. Getting any kind of FDA approval is a nightmare. But, in the end, it wouldn't surprise me if we saw a huge reduction in the number of cancer cases in our lifetimes," Tony explained.

"Wow," Steve said as he looked over at Erica and Michael, dancing together.

"You know, people are heroes in all different ways. With the work that they're doing, those two are going to end up saving more lives than we'll ever," Tony said, raising his glass in tribute to the newly married couple.

"Congratulations," Steve said enthusiastically, giving Michael a bear hug when he saw him between dances.

"Thanks, man, thanks. There were times I thought we weren't going to pull it off," Michael said.

"Really?" Steve asked incredulously.
"Yeah, man, I know we come off like the perfect couple," he chuckled, "but we've had our struggles," Michael confessed.

"I had no idea," Steve said.

"Mostly at the beginning, things were tough. Little things, but sometimes that can almost derail you. I grew up in a small family, just me and my parents. Erica's got five brothers and sisters. Her grandparents only speak Tagalog, so family get-togethers were awkward for me at first. Her family is hyper-involved; they get together every Sunday evening for dinner and I only call my parents once a week, if that."

"Oh," Steve said. He thought briefly at the differences between him and Stacy. He had no real family and Stacy was devoted to hers.

"Now, they love me. I'm part of the family. And my parents love Erica. It just took some time," Michael said with a grin. "So, how are you and Stacy doing?"

"Good, amazing really. I mean, last month was rough. I thought maybe we'd . . . . . . but now things are great."

Steve couldn't believe the turnaround in their relationship. He and Stacy had spent the last couple of weeks up nearly every night talking until midnight. All pretense was gone. They had talked about their hopes and fears. They had both been honest and open about what they wanted in life. It felt as though they were finally getting to know all the messy, ugly parts about each other and Steve had never felt closer to Stacy.

His favorite talks were about the future. If they did get married, where would they live? How many kids would they want? Would Stacy be alright with Steve risking his life working for S.H.I.E.L.D. for the foreseeable future?

Once Steve came back from their Christmas trip, he had made an appointment with Director Fury. They had talked for an hour and made a series of compromises. Steve would continue to work for S.H.I.E.L.D., but he would be taking regular vacation and leave time. Fury would provide round the clock security for Stacy whenever Steve wasn't with her under such time as it was determined that Hydra was no longer a threat. Steve felt satisfied that he could continue working for S.H.I.E.L.D. and Director Fury had even apologized for not informing him earlier about Hydra's intel about his personal life.

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Later on that evening, Beyonce's "All the Single Ladies" began and Erica took the center of the dance floor.

"Okay, ladies, if you're eligible, come on down!"

Dozens of friends and family members crowded around Erica. She turned her back to the group, but peeked back and gave Stacy a wink. A few seconds later, the bouquet landed easily in Stacy's hand.

"Now, it's my turn," Michael said as he took the center stage, waving a garter over his head. "All the bachelors, gather round!"

Steve took his place near the front of the crowd of young men. He was determined to get that garter. He noticed Josh walking around and whispering in all the men's ears. Then, Michael tossed the garter and Steve noticed that all the men around him took five steps back, making Steve the
only possible person to catch the garter. When he turned around to see Josh, he gave Steve a thumbs up.

"It seems we've been set up," Stacy said as she walked over to dance with Steve.

"I guess we have. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Stacy said as she laid her head against his chest and they swayed to the music together.

Once the song ended, Steve took Stacy by the hand and led her off the dance floor. "Where are we going?" she asked, glancing at him inquisitively.

"You'll see," as they walked down a corridor and Steve opened the door to Tony's back office.

The small room was covered in dozens of bouquets of Gerber daisies, of every hue. There were a riot of colors and Stacy's eyes widened when she saw them.

"Steve . . ." she began, but couldn't continue, at a complete loss for words as she looked around the room.

Steve stood in front of Stacy, looking her in the eyes, both of her hands in his.

"For the longest time, after I woke up in the future, I could only focus on what I'd lost. The familiarity. The sense of understanding. The sense of knowing my place in the world. The people that I knew. For the longest time, I thought ditching that plane in the ice was the worst decision I'd ever made. I'd go back and forth, always wondering if I could have done something different, when I could have made a different call."

"When I first met you, I was completely and utterly lost and so alone. I felt like I couldn't breathe, like I was drowning. I was constantly on edge, constantly felt out of place."

"And then, there you were. And, for the first time, I didn't feel so lonely, so isolated. You were a friend when I felt like I had no one else. Before long, all I could think about was you. You were in every thought. You were the reason behind every action."

"I wanted to ask you to marry me, that day when our world fell apart. I had the ring; I had it all planned out. The reason I was so hurt and angry was because I let myself believe that what we had together was all an illusion. That it was all a deception. Because, maybe, deep down, I never thought I'd ever be with a girl as wonderful as you are. Maybe it was because I couldn't allow myself to believe that someone could love me that way that you do."

Steve took a shuddering breath. "But, it doesn't matter that Tony set us up. That he played matchmaker. 'Cause he was right. He was so very right. There is no more perfect girl for me. You are this incredible, unexpected blessing in my life that I never thought I would ever have. You are amazing in every single sense of the word. I love you in a way I didn't know I could love someone. I can't imagine my life without you. And, I don't ever want to again."

Steve sank down on one knee, taking the smooth, wooden ringbox out of his pocket and opening it up for her. "Stacy, will you make me the happiest man in the world and do me the very great honor of marrying me?"

Stacy had begun to shake throughout his speech. "Yes," she said firmly, as he slipped the ring on her finger.

"Yes, yes, yes!" she repeated fervently as she crouched down to kiss him.
Chapter End Notes

Still a few more chapters to go!
Chapter 30

Ch.30

Steve had planned dozens of major raids in his times. He had infiltrated weapons facilities. He had coordinated the counter-attack of the Avengers to bring down the Chitauri.

But, nothing, nothing prepared him for the amount of work and details that were required to plan a wedding.

Some decisions were easy. The cake? Chocolate truffle with white chocolate shavings. The flowers? Gerber daisies in every color of the rainbow. The venue? Their church. The reception? Hopefully, Tony's restaurant, since it worked out so well for Erica and Michael's wedding. The honeymoon? Three weeks touring Spain.

"Have you gotten the tickets for the honeymoon yet?" Stacy asked one evening as they were sitting on the couch, sipping a post-workout coffee.

"Actually, Tony's offered to let us use the jet," Steve said, glad to have one less detail to worry about.

"And you've booked the hotels?" Stacy asked, anxiety coming off of her in waves. Since she was dealing with most of the wedding planning, Steve took over plans for the honeymoon. However, she still seemed to constantly fret about one thing or another.

"Yes, sweetie, don't worry. I do this kind of thing for a living, you know," he whispered into her ear, holding her close.

She blushed. "It's just I've waited twenty-six years for this . . . honeymoon. I just want everything to go perfectly."

"Hon, I've waited nearly ninety-six years. Don't worry," he chuckled. "It'll be wonderful."

She snuggled closer to him. "Is it horrible that I just want to run up to the courthouse tomorrow and be done with it? Just hop a plane tomorrow and start our life together?"

"You have no idea how tempting that sounds . . . .," Steve started, letting his imagination run wild for a moment, "but your family would kill us. Think of your mom and dad."

Stacy nodded. "See, I knew you'd be the voice of reason."

"Believe me, there's nothing I want more than for you to be my wife. We've just got a few more months to go."

She looked up at him, smiling. "I love you."

"Right back at you."

The truth was the hardest part for Steve was figuring out his side of the wedding party. Josh and Michael were a given, especially since they were so close to both Steve and Stacy. But as for the
rest, well, that was a bit harder to figure out.

One night in early March, Steve invited Bruce, Natasha and Clint over for pesto chicken pasta. Tony and Pepper were both in California, dealing with some new federal regulations imposed on clean energy companies and they couldn't make it. Natasha told Steve that she was impressed that he was cooking and Bruce was just looking forward to a home cooked meal.

Clint arrived right at six with a firm knock on the door. "Hey, it's good to see you. Come in," Steve said, ushering him in. He was surprised at how much better Clint looked. In the last few months, color had returned to his cheeks and he looked much younger and happier. He and Natasha tried to spend as much time together as possible, although Steve knew that they were often tasked on dangerous missions to different parts of the globe.

"Good to be here. I brought some wine. I know you don't really drink, but Nat said it'd go good with the chicken," Clint said, handing Steve a chilled bottle of white wine.

"Thanks, I'm sure it'll be great. I'll put it in the fridge," Steve said.

Another knock on the door revealed Natasha and Bruce talking about his latest invention. "Is there any way to make it like an ounce or two lighter? It's a bit bulky," Natasha observed.

"Bulky? Bulky?" Bruce repeated in an exasperated tone. "Ten months of work and all I get is 'too bulky'?" he chuckled good-naturedly.

"Okay, guys, no talking shop," Steve said in mock sternness as he showed them in.

"So, I guess you are all wondering why I've asked you here," Steve began once they had finished their dinner.

"No, we know. The wedding," Bruce explained.

Steve smiled. "Yeah. I just wanted to ask you to be my groomsmen. You know, formally."

Clint and Bruce nodded, giving Steve a grin, while Natasha just regarded him with a neutral expression.

"Natasha, I know it's not traditional, but I'd be honored if you'd stand up with me," Steve said.

She gave him a huge smile. "As a groomsman?"

"Or groomslady or groomsperson . . . . I'm not really sure about the terminology," Steve said with a shrug.

"I'd love to! I look great in a tux," she said, giving him a quick hug.

Steve texted Tony with the phone Stacy got him for Christmas and asked him to stop by the next time he was in New York. A few days later, Tony was standing in his living room, ranting and raving about government regulations.

"So, you're getting married, big guy," Tony said after twenty minutes, finally changing the subject.

"Yep," Steve said with a grin.
"Any ideas where you're going to live afterwards?" Tony asked.

Steve stopped short for a moment. They had talked about having Stacy move into his apartment after the wedding, but Steve suddenly worried that perhaps that wouldn't be allowed, since she wasn't on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s payroll, given that Tony had an exclusive agreement with S.H.I.E.L.D. to provide housing for some of their employees.

"We were thinking . . . . that Stacy would move in here?" Steve said tentatively.

"Absolutely not," Tony said firmly. "Follow me."

Steve nodded as he followed Tony out of his apartment, his mind racing as he thought about how to break the news to Stacy. He wondered how hard it would be to find a decent-sized apartment in New York City. He shuddered at thought.

Tony walked out into the hallway and past the gym and opened the door of the apartment on the opposite side.

"Come in," Tony said.

Steve walked into the beautifully furnished apartment.

"It's got three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen with an island," Tony said proudly. "It nearly three times the size of the one you're in right now."

"It's very nice," Steve said blandly, still focused on his own housing predicament.

"It's yours. Wedding present. Yours as in no rent. You own it," Tony said with a huge grin, holding his hands wide.

"What?" Steve nearly shouted.

"You guys can't be living in your old apartment. What are you going to do about the baby?"

"The baby? What baby?" Steve repeated.

"Are you telling me that you two haven't talked about starting a family?" Tony asked

"Well, yeah, but . . . ." It was something they had discussed for two or three years down the line at most.

"When you have a kid, you'll want a nursery. Well, Stacy will, at least. Look, Capsicle, I just . . . . I just don't want you moving out . . . . looking for a bigger apartment elsewhere," Tony said, looking away.

"So, you're giving us this apartment so we'll stay at the Tower?" Steve asked incredulously.

"You know the saying, keep your friends close . . . ." Tony began.

"Wow, thanks, man. I don't know what to say."

"Hey, it's in my best interest. Any extraterrestrial baddies come by and you'll be my free security service. Protect my Tower," Tony said with a gregarious smile.

"No, don't do that. You always do that. Whenever you help someone out, you minimize, make it seem like it's less than it really is, make a joke out of it. This is really big. Thank you, Tony."
Tony looked like he was about to argue the point, but ended up just shaking his head.

"Tony," Steve began, after a moment. "I never thanked you for setting me up with Stacy."

"It was nothing, pal. It was for my sake as much as yours. You were such a bummer to be around."

"I'm still a bit sore about how you went about it, what with all the secrecy and all, but the truth is, I owe my future with Stacy to you. So, thanks," Steve said.

"No problem, man."

"And I wanted to ask you something," Steve said.

"Do you need me to give you the birds and the bees talk? Didn't you get that in the Army?" Tony snarked.

Steve blushed. "No, that's not it. I know we haven't always seen eye to eye . . . ."

"Now there's the understatement of the year."

"But," Steve pushed ahead. "I know how much you've done for me. For Stacy. For Erica and Michael. For the city."

"Now . . . ." Tony began.

"Just . . . . Just let me finish. What I'm trying to ask you is . . . . Will you be my best man? Steve asked earnestly.

"Uhh . . . " Tony said, opening and closing his mouth without forming words for a good minute.

"I've rendered the great Tony Stark speechless. It's a day for the record books," Steve said with a smile, slapping Tony on the back.

"It'd be my honor," Tony said. "I am definitely best man material. Have you given any thought to your bachelor party?"

Tony and Steve spent the next few months arguing back and forth over Steve's bachelor party. Tony kept suggesting exotic dancers, gentlemen's clubs or even a retro burlesque show, but Steve was adamant. No dancers.

Finally, to keep the peace, Steve agreed to a trip to a casino in Atlantic City that Tony owned. Steve wasn't really one for gambling, given that five dollars still felt like a lot of money to him, but he tried to be accommodating for Tony's sake. They were going to get together two days before the wedding, on Thursday, June 19th. That way, Tony had explained, they'd all have a day or two to get over their hangovers.

Clint, Natasha, and Bruce were invited along. Josh and Michael made their apologies as they both had to work. Steve had found out that Thor was back on Earth and had invited both him and Dr. Jane Foster to the wedding, but they weren't flying in until Friday.

Tony's casino was done in an over the top Roman theme. Large white columns gilded with gold dominated the main floor. The walls were covered in provocative frescoes and statues were placed
throughout the casino. The security guards were dressed as centurions, although their walkie-talkies ruined their outfits. The cocktail waitresses who kept plying them with free drinks wore short white togas.

Steve looked down at his father's watch. It was already going on four in the afternoon. They had been at the casino for only half an hour and Tony was already down a few thousand dollars, which Tony barely even acknowledged. It made Steve a little sick to even think of it. He couldn't imagine gambling for several more hours.

Stacy's bachelorette party was an all day spa visit for her and her friends, a bridal shower gift from Pepper. She'll be finishing up right about now, Steve thought.

Stacy had been so excited about the gift, talking about it for weeks. They were all getting massages and facials, as well as having a catered lunch and lounging around the sauna and hot tub for hours. Pepper couldn't make it, unfortunately, since she was wrapping up a merger in Los Angeles, but she planned to fly out Friday morning.

"Another hand?" Tony asked, sipping his Scotch and pointing to the table.

Steve shrugged. His strategy was to bet the table minimum and to sit out every other hand, feigning one excuse or another, in order to minimize his losses. He'd hate to wake up the next morning and realize he'd lost all the money they'd set aside for their honeymoon.

He looked over and saw Natasha give him a wink. She was a keen observer and he was sure that she had caught on to his little trick. He noticed that she would purposefully distract Tony every time Steve sat out a hand so that Tony wouldn't realize that Steve was hardly playing.

Steve's phone rang and he smiled when he saw the caller id. It was Monica. He wondered what last minute wedding detail she was going to ask about. Once they got engaged, Monica called him almost as often as she called Stacy to ask about the wedding preparations, even though Steve rarely knew the answer to her questions.

"Hi, Monica," he nearly shouted, sticking a finger in his other ear to hear her and walking to the edge of the main floor. The casino was absurdly loud and he was surprised that he could hear her at all over all of the ruckus.

"Hey, Steve. I need to speak to Stacy," Monica said impatiently.

"Stacy?"

"Yeah, I can't remember if we're getting together at ten thirty or eleven on Saturday to get our nails done. She kept going back and forth on the time," Monica replied.

"Why are you calling me? Why aren't you calling her cell phone?" Steve asked. He racked his brain, but he couldn't remember if Stacy had mentioned the exact time for their appointments.

"I tried calling and texting her. I got no answer. She should be there by now. Where are you guys having dinner?" Monica asked.

"Having dinner?" Steve asked, perplexed. He'd made plans to see Stacy for lunch tomorrow at one, but she knew he'd be out all night with his bachelor party.

"Yeah. You sent that limo. Nice move by the way. Ditching your own bachelor party to whisk her away for a romantic dinner after we finished up our spa day. You sly old dog."
"Limo?" Steve asked, looking over at Tony. It sounded like something that Tony would do. Tony waved over to him and gave Steve a thumbs up. Steve grinned, relieved that he was given a way out of spending the night gambling at a casino. It seemed like such a pointless activity.

"Yeah, sending the same driver and limo from your first date was a nice touch," Monica said.

Steve's blood ran cold and he dropped the phone.

The driver from their first date had been the Hydra informant.

Albert Richter had Stacy.

Hydra had Stacy.
Chapter 31

Ch. 31

Steve gave in to a moment of blind panic and fear. A wave of guilt hit him. Hydra had Stacy. And he could have prevented it.

He remembered standing in Stacy's classroom, the day he came back from his mission, and her asking him who the Hydra informant was.

And he refused to tell her. He chose to protect S.H.I.E.L.D.'s secrets over protecting her. If he had just told her, she never would have gotten in that limo. She would have been safe.

He leaned down, scooped up the phone, and ran over to the card table where the rest of the group was. "Hydra has Stacy," he informed them urgently, gripping the table so tightly that he nearly broke it in two.

Tony nodded, sobering in an instant, and immediately folded his cards. "Back office. We'll need to coordinate."

He got up, leaving thousands of dollars worth of chips on the table and strode to the back of the main floor, the rest of the group trailing behind them. He nodded to a pair of security guards as they passed. "Make sure we're not disturbed," he instructed them.

In contrast to the garish Roman decorations outside, the office was decorated in dark, somber colors with a large brown leather sofa to the side and matching office chairs. There was a computer connected to an enormous monitor perched on a huge mahogany desk that dominated the room.

"So, what happened?" Tony asked, once the door was closed behind them.

"Albert Richter, your old limo driver, the Hydra informant, showed up at the spa. He told her that I sent a limo to pick her up, take her out to dinner," Steve explained, clenching and unclenching his fists without even noticing what he was doing.

"Doesn't she have an agent assigned to watch her?" Bruce asked, looking at the group.

"I thought S.H.I.E.L.D. had Richter in custody," Tony said tightly, glaring at Clint and Natasha.

Steve nodded. "That's what I thought. Clint, can you get ahold of Director Fury? Inform him of our situation and ask about Stacy's protection detail and Richter."

"Will do," Clint said, taking his phone out walking to one side of the room to make the call.

"What about her phone?" Bruce asked hopefully. "We could use the GPS to find her."

Steve shook his head. "Monica tried to call and text her and she couldn't get ahold of her."

"Mostly likely her phone will be turned off or destroyed. Or worse . . . ." Natasha said.

"Worse?" asked Tony.
"Well, if they were clever, they would lead us on a wild goose chase. Have her phone on the opposite side of the world," she said.

"Well, how do you know it's Richter?" Tony asked Steve.

"Monica said it was the driver from our first date," Steve said. "He was there the entire time." Steve's skin crawled at the idea of his most treasured memory tainted by the fact a Hydra informant had been listening in, only a few feet away from the woman he loved.

"Wait . . . .", Natasha began to grin. "I know how to find her."

The group stared at her in anticipation.

"How?" Bruce asked.

"The tracing compound. The night of your first date was the night that Richter put the tracing compound in the limo so that it would get transferred to your hand. If Stacy was in the limo at the same time . . . .," Natasha explained, excitement coloring her words.

"She'd have some of it on her . . . . But Natasha, it's been months," Steve reasoned.

"Doesn't matter. It's soaked into her skin, several layers deep. That's why it stings so badly when the solvent is used," she said. "We can find her."

"And Tony and I have developed a device to detect the compound, long-range. We started working on it after the whole debacle with Richter," Bruce said.

Steve nodded, hope finally beginning to shine through.

Clint pocketed his phone and walked over to them. "Just got off the line with Director Fury."

"And?" Steve asked impatiently.

"Stacy's bodyguard was hit with a Night-Night gun. They found him passed out in the bushes next to the spa. He should be okay."

"And Richter? Tony asked tightly.

Clint's face was fixed in a grim smile. "Director Fury informed me that he was freed in exchange for intel on his Hydra superiors. It happened months ago. They had placed surveillance on him, but they were similarly knocked out."

A slow rage began to build in Steve. "A man who has a personal vendetta against me was released and Director Fury didn't bother to tell me? He put Stacy in danger again."

Clint gave him an apologetic smile. "For what it's worth, he sounded genuinely sorry. He offered you access to all of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s resources to help get her back."

Steve pushed his anger to the side, focusing on the problem. "Alright, where is your device?" he asked Tony and Bruce.

"Back at the Tower," Bruce said.

"Along with my shield and suit," Steve said. "That's almost a two and a half, three hour drive in traffic. We can't wait that long. Seconds matter."
"That's why we'll use my suit," Tony said with a grin.

"Your suit?" Steve asked.

"Yep. I'll need it anyways. I'll just contact JARVIS and have it pick up a few things on the way," Tony informed them smugly. "It should be here in fifteen, twenty minutes tops."

"And I've got a S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopter already scrambled to meet us in the back parking lot with my gear and Nat's, too. It should be there in about twenty," Clint said.

Steve took a deep breath. Twenty minutes. Could Stacy hold out that long? He had to have faith.

"Alright, make the call to JARVIS," he instructed.

The next twenty minutes were a blur of activity. He had planned raids before, plenty of them, but none of them meant what this one meant. Every few minutes, he felt like his heart was going to stop beating from the abject terror flowing through his veins. He didn't allow himself the luxury to wallow in it though, just pushing it down deep inside of him, promising himself that he'd fall apart afterwards.

The same thought kept going through his mind, *Please, Lord, watch out for her. Please, Lord, protect her.* He tried to hold on to hope, cling to faith, but he knew the depths to which Hydra could sink and he'd hate to imagine what they'd do to her. His mind briefly wandered back to finding Bucky in that Hydra facility, during the war, tortured and abused, and the thought of something similar happening to Stacy made him want to retch.

Somehow, though, he focused his mind on the task at hand. He coordinated with Natasha and Clint on what available agents they could use to help in the raid. Until they had a definitive location, they were working based on probabilities and best guesses, but Steve wasn't going to discount any type of help. For all he knew, there could be hundreds of Hydra operatives guarding Stacy and it was most likely a trap, but it didn't matter. He was going to get her back. There was no other option.

After a few minutes of planning, hunched over the office desktop computer, he noticed Bruce looking at him nervous from a corner, tapping his foot, wiping his sweaty hands on his slacks. Finally, Bruce strode over to him, put his hand on Steve's shoulder and spoke, "I want to help."

Steve gave him a tight smile, grateful for the offer. "And you will. That device to find Stacy is going to make all the difference."

"No. You don't understand. The other guy. He could be useful," Bruce said urgently.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Steve asked, turning to look fully at Bruce.

"If you need me . . . I mean, if you need the other guy, I'll do it."

The weight of what Bruce was offering floored Steve. He never expected, never thought in a million years that Bruce would say that. "It's been almost two years. Two years since you've transformed. Are you sure that . . . .?"

"For you. For Stacy. Yeah, I'd do it," Bruce said gravely.

"Thank you. That means a whole lot," Steve said.
"You'd do it for me. For my Betty," Bruce said simply.

Steve gave him a genuine smile. "I would. Without hesitation."

Bruce nodded. "Well, there you go."

Bolstered by the prospect of having the Hulk help them out, Steve spent the next few minutes reworking some of the possible scenarios that they would use. With the Hulk in the mix, their strategy needed to be reworked considerably. While having such overwhelming force on their side meant that they had a much higher chance of winning, the Hulk did tend to add a certain unpredictability to the mix. The last thing Steve wanted was to rescue Stacy, only to have her injured by falling debris.

He sighed. He hoped that Stacy was being held in an unpopulated area. Having the Hulk in the middle of downtown was going to make avoiding civilian casualties nearly impossible.

"It's here!" Tony shouted and Steve looked up. Obediently hovering in the middle of the office was one of Tony's suits, holding Steve's suit and shield as well as a bulky black machine that Steve assumed was the long range detector.

"And the helicopter just arrived," Nat said, looking down at her phone.

"Alright. Suit up. Let's go get her," Steve ordered, tamping down all trace of emotion, focusing on the mission at hand.

We're going to save Stacy from Richter, he thought.

Only, that's not exactly what happened.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

1. Thank you so very much for your up-lifting comments! I really appreciate the encouragement.

2. We still have a few more chapters to go. It's not over quite yet.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ch. 32

Once again, Steve was crouched down near the door of an abandoned warehouse. And, once again, the tech team had confirmed that this particular warehouse, out of the dozens in the neighborhood, had been heavily shielded. There could be a hundred Hydra agents inside or a thousand. They had taken the precaution of sweeping the area thoroughly to detect any explosive materials and it came up clean.

Natasha's idea had worked and the tracing compound had led them straight to this run-down, seedy neighborhood. Steve's skin crawled as he thought of Stacy in the dirty, dank building, surrounded by any number of depraved Hydra operatives. Please, just let her be safe, he prayed over and over again, as he gripped his night-night gun tightly in one hand and his shield in the other.

He scanned his side of the warehouse for the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents that they'd be able to scramble together on such short notice. They were only able to get a few dozen to the warehouse so far. There were more on their way, but Steve couldn't wait any longer. Natasha and Clint, both suited up and armed to the teeth, were beside him. He'd asked Bruce to hang back a bit, not wanting him to transform unless it was absolutely necessary. Tony was waiting to come in through an upper window on his command.

Steve took a deep breath, focusing himself solely on the mission at hand. "On my mark, we'll go in on three . . . . one . . . . two . . . . three," he said over the open comm system. He gave a brief smile as he heard the glass breaking after he said three, the first time Tony had ever waited for his command.

Steve and the rest of the operatives rushed into the building. Steve visually swept the warehouse for potential threats.

"Well . . . that was . . . anticlimactic," Natasha snarked next to him.

The warehouse was empty, save Stacy and Richter. Richter was on the ground twitching violently and Stacy was standing over him with a shocked look on her face. The Hydra informant was drooling and quivering and had obviously lost control of his bodily functions.

"Natasha, you gave my fiancé Widow's Bites?" Steve asked sharply as he jogged over to Stacy.

"What? It was a bridal shower. I had to get her something. It's not like I was going to give her a blender," she replied as she trotted after him.

Stacy looked up and ran to Steve as Natasha went to secure Richter with a pair of handcuffs.

"Oh, Steve," Stacy said, hugging him tightly.

"I . . . I came to rescue you. Looks like you did a pretty good job of it yourself," he said, holding her, smiling down at her.

"Thank goodness I had those Widow Bites from Natasha," Stacy said, trembling in his arms.
"I don't know what I would have done if . . . " Steve trailed off, pulling away slightly to look down at her intently. "Are you okay?"

"He didn't try to hurt me. He was more concerned with luring you here. Steve, he knew about some sort of tracing compound on my skin. He wanted you to come get me. It's a trap," Stacy said urgently.

"I figured as much. Let's head out before anything happens," Steve said, grabbing her hand.

"Too late!" Tony shouted as he bobbed up and down overhead, pointing to dozens of Hydra agents rushing in the warehouse, surrounding them and the S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives.

"Natasha, Clint, cover Stacy," Steve ordered, handing his shield to Natasha. "Don't let anything happen to her," he said sternly.

"Stacy, go with them," Steve said urgently and Stacy nodded as she turned to go.

"We'll protect her," Clint assured him as he ushered the two women to cover behind a stack of crates.

Steve turned to Bruce. "I hate to ask, but we really need the other guy right about now."

Bruce nodded, taking off his shirt. "That's why I wore the stretchy pants."

All of a sudden, Bruce grew, turning green, his skin stretching and his joints popping from the pressure. In a matter of seconds, the Hulk fully appeared, staring down at Steve, breathing heavily from the change.

"Hulk, protect them," Steve said, pointing to the corner that Clint and Natasha had taken Stacy.

"Protect," the Hulk replied in a booming, gravelly voice as he stomped over to them, his heavy footfalls causing the floor to vibrate.

Steve looked grimly around the mêlée in the warehouse. He estimated that they were easily outnumbered three to one.

It was time to get started.

"This is just like . . . ." Natasha began, as she start to pick off the nearest Hydra agents firing at them.

"I swear, if you say Budapest one more time, I'm shooting you," Clint ground out. He stood and shot an explosive arrow to his left, ducking as it hit its mark.


"Why does every firefight we're in remind you of our honeymoon?" Clint asked, clearly exasperated.

"Remember what the hotel room looked like after we were done?" she asked saucily.

Clint rolled his eyes, notching his bow and aiming once again. "It wasn't that bad."

"We had to pay eight hundred dollars in damages. It was pretty bad," Natasha replied, moving so
that they were back to back to cover one another and protect Stacy.

Clint grinned at the memory. "Alright, you have a point."

"Wait. You two are married?" Stacy asked, kneeling behind the shield, trying to tuck as much of herself as she could behind it.

"That's an affirmative," Clint confirmed.

"It's against S.H.I.E.L.D. regulations. Married operatives usually aren't allowed to work together," Natasha said.

"So, nobody knows?" Stacy asked.

"Nobody that's going to say anything," Natasha said pointedly, sparing a moment to glare down at her.

"Alright. My lips are sealed," Stacy said.

An explosion rocked the left side of the building. A new wave of hundreds of Hydra footsoldiers streamed in from the gap. Natasha narrowed her eyes as she saw the odds of winning shift even more out of their favor. She did a few mental calculations and then, took a deep breath, eyeing Stacy. "You're the one that beat Steve at lasertag, right?" Natasha asked her between shots.

"Um . . . yeah," Stacy replied.

"So, you're a good shot?" Natasha asked.

"Yes . . ."

Natasha crouched down and handed her a gun. "Alright, make yourself useful."

"I . . . I can't. I don't think I could shoot someone for real."

Natasha sighed as she straightened up and resumed firing. "It's a night-night gun. It just knocks them unconscious."

"Well, in that case," Stacy said. She popped up from behind the shield, sighting the weapon and took down three Hydra operatives within a few seconds, including one that was preparing to shoot Steve in the back.

Natasha grabbed her by the arm and roughly pulled her back down behind the shield. "They, however, are not using night-night guns."

"Oh," Stacy said, sheepishly. "Good to know."

"Impressive shooting, though. Have you ever given any thought to a career with S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

Stacy grinned as she took another shot, this time from safely behind Steve's shield. "Maybe if this whole kindergarten thing falls through."

"Think about it," Natasha said as she took down two Hydra operatives who had tried to sneak up behind them.

"Will do," Stacy said breathlessly as she aimed the night-night gun once again and hit a Hydra operative pointing an enormous weapon at The Hulk.
The Hulk turned to look at her. Stacy's eyes widened, fear clenching her heart, the strong desire to shrink away from his intense glare almost overwhelming her.

He gave a toothy grin and a short nod before turning back to pummel a half-dozen Hydra operatives that had swarmed in front of him.

00000

It took Steve a few moments to adjust to not having his shield to protect him. He knew the single biggest determiner to surviving a firefight was cover. He ducked behind some crates that had been piled to one side to pick off as many Hydra agents as possible. At least they were using conventional weapons instead of the ones that had been testing before.

His heart sank when he saw the explosion rip open a far wall and hundreds of more Hydra operatives swarmed in. He knew that the S.H.I.E.L.D. reinforcements were coming soon, but at this point, seconds mattered.

He heard a thud behind him and turned to see a Hydra agent lying on the ground unconscious. He looked up to see who had fired the shot that saved him and smiled when he saw Natasha pull Stacy down behind his shield, a night-night gun in Stacy's hand. That was his best girl, protecting him.

Steve scanned the fierce fighting around him. Although he and Tony were taking out their fair share of opponents, you didn't need to be much of a strategist to see that they were severely outmatched. They were further hampered by the fact that three of their best fighters were pinned in a corner, covering Stacy. Steve briefly considered pulling one or two of them to help even the odds, but he just couldn't do it. He couldn't risk anything happening to Stacy.

"We're not doing so well," Tony said testily over the open comm lines.

"I can see that," Steve snapped, as a jolt from one of the Hydra weapons caused at least a dozen crates to topple on him.

Steve sprang up, flinging the heavy crates to the side as he did, in a flurry of motion. "I'm open to suggestions," he bit out.

"I've got an idea, but we'll need your shield," Tony said. He briefly outlined his plan.

"No, absolutely not," Steve said.

"Steve, if those guys overrun us, there won't be anyone left to protect her."

Steve took a deep breath. "Alright," he said as he ran over to the corner where they were.

"I'm gonna need this for a second," Steve said, as he took the shield from Stacy and maneuvered her behind the stack of crates. "On my mark, corral as many of them as you can into the center of the warehouse."

"We're winning?" Stacy asked him doubtfully.

"We will," Steve said firmly, more out of habit than conviction.

Stacy grabbed the front of his suit and pulled him in for a kiss. She tasted of cherries and with his whole heart, he wished he could just stay in that one stolen moment of time.

"I know we will," she reassured as she let go and he straightened.
He nodded, clutching his shield. "I've got it," he informed Tony over the comms.

"Alright, here we go."

Tony swooped down and picked up the shield, holding it high above the center of the warehouse. Slowly, the Avengers and the remaining S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives maneuvered the rest of the Hydra agents to the middle of the giant building.

"On three . . . one . . . two . . . three," Steve counted down. When he said three, he and all the other S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives aimed their night-night guns at Steve's shield that Tony was holding high above the Hydra agents. The bullets burst upon impact with the shield, showering down a fine mist of dendrotoxin on the enemy agents and within seconds the vast majority of them were on the ground, unconscious.

The few Hydra operatives that remained quickly surrendered. Clint and Natasha helped the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents secure the prisoners, while the Hulk went over to a corner to transform back to Bruce. All in all, they had been lucky with relatively few casualties.

As soon as the prisoners were all restrained, Steve jogged over to Stacy and embraced her. He could see the first symptoms of shock setting in, the glassy-eyed stare, the tremors as he held her. She had held it together well during the firefight, only to fall apart now, when it was safe. "Is it always going to be like this? All this violence and peril?" she said in a small, shaky voice.

Steve swallowed hard. There was still time for her to back out. Time for her to live a normal life, not be under the constant threat of attack, not have a husband who risked his life like this every day. There was still time for her to call off the wedding. "Yes . . . probably."

She nodded slowly and looked up to him, giving him a smile that made his world. "Well, I guess that's why they call it for better or worse. We better get going. We've got the rehearsal tomorrow."

Steve grinned. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

1. Normally, I've just stuck to Steve's POV for this story, but I wanted you to see a little bit of what Natasha, Clint, Stacy, and the Hulk were going through during the fight.

2. Only a couple more chapters to go! It's going to be a lovely wedding.
Two days later, Steve was staring yet again at his reflection in the mirror in a small side room of the church, fiddling with his bow tie, making sure that everything looked right. The last forty-eight hours had been a roller coaster ride, to say the least. It took hours to transport the wounded to the hospital and to process all of the Hydra prisoners. It ran so long that Steve had nearly missed the rehearsal the next night, although everyone understood.

"You alright, buddy?" Tony asked as he stood beside him, checking out his own reflection in the mirror, brushing a hand through his hair and smoothing out his eyebrows.

"Couldn't be better," Steve said, a grin splitting his face.

"Now, are you sure you don't want me to give you the birds and bees talk? Might avoid a lot of embarrassment later on tonight. I've got a Powerpoint presentation set up and everything. It's got stick figure diagrams and it's narrated by JARVIS. Very informative," Tony snarked as he patted Steve on the back.

Steve chuckled. A year ago a crack like that would have sent him into an angry sulk, but now, he was just amused at Tony's antics.

"I'm sure Stacy and I will figure out everything just fine," he reassured Tony with a smile. "You don't need to worry about us."

"Alright, alright. I programmed my number as the first one on your speed dial, just in case," Tony quipped.

Steve was shaking his head at Tony's jibes when there was deafening knock on the door. Steve walked over and opened it, blinking when he saw Thor there in a dark suit and tie, his long hair tied back neatly.

"Thor! It's great to see you, buddy!" Steve said and gave him a hearty hug. He hadn't seen him since he left with Loki for Asgard and he was glad to see him under better circumstances.

"Thor! It's great to see you, buddy!" Steve said and gave him a hearty hug. He hadn't seen him since he left with Loki for Asgard and he was glad to see him under better circumstances.

Thor returned the hug, nearly lifting Steve up in the process. "I was most pleased to hear that you were to be wed, although I regret that I missed the opportunity to assist in the rescue of your bride," Thor said gravely and then gave Tony a hug so hard that the shorter man's eyes bulged out a little.

"Uff," Tony said as Thor set him down.

"Yeah, we really could have used your help. But, it all worked out for the best," Steve said.

They had actually been very blessed in the aftermath of Stacy's kidnapping and the attempted ambush. Although quite a few agents had to go to the hospital, there had been no fatalities. Stacy said that she was fine, but Steve still had some concerns. He noticed that she flinched a bit at the rehearsal dinner whenever she heard a loud noise or when one of the kids ran past her.

"I know that the ceremony is to begin shortly. I should go. I just wanted to tell you how happy I am
for the both of you. We shall feast and toast afterwards. There will be much rejoicing!" Thor exclaimed with a smile, clapping Steve so hard on the back that he stumbled a bit.

When Steve recovered, he gave Thor a short nod. "See you soon," he said as Thor left.

"Does Thor know you can't get drunk?" Tony asked as he finally got his bearings, standing woozily, his tie askew.

Steve shook his head. "I don't think so," he said warily.

"Oh . . . I've got to get him and you in on a drinking contest. It would be epic," Tony said, his eyes wide with delight, rubbing his hands together.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Just not at my wedding. The last thing I need is a drunk Asgardian at the reception. Think of what could happen to your restaurant."

Tony nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, you've got a point there . . . ." He looked down at his Rolex watch. "Well, Ice Capades, looks like we're up."

Steve took a deep breath, smoothing out his tux one more time. "I'm ready."

As Steve looked down the long line of groomsmen (well, groomspeople with Natasha there) standing up with him, he reflected on how much his life had changed in the past year and a half. He remembered the feeling of loneliness that had pervaded his life, the feeling that he didn't really know anyone and that no one knew him. But, as he looked out at Michael, Josh, Clint, Natasha, Bruce and Tony, he realized how much he cared about them, how far he'd come in being a part of this world.

However, as happy as he was, Steve couldn't stop thinking about Bucky. Of how happy he would have would have been for Steve. Of how proud he would have been for him. Of how much Steve would have liked Bucky and Stacy to have met at least once. As glad as he was to have Tony as his best man, a part of him knew that it should have been Bucky up there with him. Steve smiled, though, knowing that Bucky wouldn't have wanted this day to be bittersweet.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to celebrate the union of Steve and Stacy," the pastor began as the ceremony started.

Steve knew that he should be looking at the pastor, but he couldn't help stealing glances over at Stacy. Her hair was a riot of strawberry blond curls, half up and half down, secured with a pearl beaded clip. The two-tiered veil obscured her face a bit, but he could see her beaming excitedly, bouncing up and down a little in anticipation. Her dress was made of white satin, with a cowl neck bodice and low draped back. It fit her like a vintage 1940s evening gown, gliding over her body, the soft lines skimming over every curve, causing Steve's pulse to race and his heart to pound wildly.

The pastor began to speak again and Steve shook his head to clear his thoughts. "It is my very great pleasure to preside over this wedding, perhaps the most unusual one I've ever done. Certainly the one with the largest age difference," he said.

The guests laughed softly.
"Now, I've known Stacy for years, ever since she became a part of our college group. She's been tirelessly dedicated to welcoming everyone into our church, always making sure that people know that they are wanted, that they are loved. And Steve, well, I'll be honest, he was attending the church for at least three months before anyone outside of his group of friends even knew who he was. He has always shown humility and grace, always been the one to help out when needed and I have to admit, the teardown crew appreciate his help when it comes to heavy lifting."

There was another titter of laughter through the crowd.

"I've gotten to know these two better as they've gone through the church's pre-marital counseling and their love and devotion to one another has been a sight to behold. Not that they haven't had their ups and downs. Not that they haven't had their own set of obstacles. But they have shown perseverance and dedication to one another, holding on even when things got tough."

He took a deep breath.

"The Church is called the Bride of Christ. In marriage, we see living, breathing examples of sacrificial love. Of thinking of someone else before yourself. Of putting someone else's needs above your own. It isn't normal. It isn't natural. And it can be hard sometimes. Sometimes, it can even seem impossible. Marriage can be a testing ground, bringing out the worst and best in us. But with God's help, He can use you to show His love to your spouse. With Him, you can show a depth of love and grace that you didn't think you were capable of. I know that Steve and Stacy will rise to the challenges that they will face together and tangibly demonstrate God's ardent devotion and forgiveness to one another."

"Now, onto the vows," he said with twinkling eyes.

Steve and Stacy turned to face one another. Stacy handed off her bouquet to Monica, her maid of honor. She had planned to ask Amanda, but her sister had her hands full with a new baby.

The pastor began as they held hands. "Do you, Steven Grant Rogers, take Stacy Lynn O'Sullivan to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Steve looked at Stacy, her grin as wide as ever, her hands slightly trembling as they clutched his.

"And, do you, Stacy Lynn O'Sullivan, take Steven Grant Rogers to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," she said fiercely, with a conviction that caused Steve's eyes to widen a bit.

"The rings?"

Mateo, wearing a miniature version of a tux, walked over solemnly from his position next to Clint, raising the cushion bearing the two rings up to them, giving Steve a quick wink as he took them, sticking his tongue out at his sister who was the flower girl.

The pastor chuckled at Mateo's antics before proceeding, turning slightly to Steve. "Now, repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed."

"With this ring, I thee wed," Steve said, staring down at her finger, slowly slipping the ring on.

"And Stacy?"
She took the large gold band and slid it onto Steve's finger. "With this ring, I thee wed."

"With the power vested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

As Steve lifted the veil and leaned down to kiss Stacy, he could hear Tony let out a huge wolf whistle. He smiled as he lowered his mouth to hers and the world narrowed down to the two of them. As he felt her lips on his, they were the only people that existed.

"It is my very great pleasure to present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Steve and Stacy Rogers."

As they turned to face their guests, Steve nearly lost it at the thunderous applause he heard ring through the church. He was fairly sure that it was the first time he'd ever seen a standing ovation at a wedding, too.

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Steve smiled through the receiving line on the steps of the church. He didn't recognize half the people, but that was mainly due to the enormous size of Stacy's side of the family. He was actually surprised that a few of his distant cousins had attended. Tony had been the one to help Steve flesh out his family tree a bit and track down a few of his relations.

He had also invited a good amount of the S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives that he regularly worked with. He stiffly shook Director Fury's hand when he came to the head of the line, still more than a little agitated about not being told about Richter's release. "Hello, sir."

"Congratulations, Agent Rogers."

"Stacy, this is my boss, Director Fury," Steve said, trying to maintain a polite façade.

"Oh, we've met. Remember, he came to visit you when you were in the hospital at Christmastime? Director Fury," Stacy said, beaming, giving him an enthusiastic hug. "I wanted to thank you once again for your wedding gift. It was so generous."

"Wedding gift?" Steve asked, perplexed.

"Yes, I just found out yesterday that Director Fury is covering the entire cost of our honeymoon."

"It was the least I could do," Director Fury said with a warm smile.

"Uh... thanks, sir," Steve said, shocked at the gesture. They had been saving for months to pay for their three week vacation travelling throughout Europe.

"You need the break," Fury said, clapping him on his shoulder before moving down the line.

The next was Agent Hill. "Stacy, I want you to meet Agent Maria Hill. She's Director Fury's second in command."

Stacy smiled and gave her a hug. "Thank you for coordinating all of the bodyguards for me for so many months. I really appreciated your concern for my safety."

Agent Hill gave her a wan smile. "I wish the last one would have done his job."

Stacy shrugged. "Well, the important thing is that he's alright."

Agent Hill nodded briefly before going down the line.
Steve's eyes widened at the next guest in line.

"Agent Coulson?" he asked, the shock visible on his face. "I thought . . . . I thought you died."

"Yeah, I did. Didn't stick," he said wryly. "Stark tracked me down, invited me and my team to come to this shindig," he waved at a group of people behind him. "You're already familiar with FitzSimmons work."

"The Night-Night guns!" Steve exclaimed, enthusiastically shaking both their hands. "I can't tell you how honored I am to meet you both."

"The honor is all mine. Well, ours," Fitz said, a huge grin on his face.

"Yes, we were so pleased that you recommended their use throughout S.H.I.E.L.D.," Simmons said.

"I can't tell you how much of a difference it's made in the field, how many lives you've saved. Thank you both," Steve said. "Have you talked with Banner and Stark? I know that they'd love to talk shop with you."

The two young scientists looked at Steve with widened eyes, not able to say a word.

"They're going to be like that for a while. If Coulson allowed it, they'd have posters of Banner and Stark all over the Bus. Hi, I'm a part of Agent Coulson's team, too," said a young woman with long hair.

Coulson smiled, pointing to her and a handsome man about Steve's height. "Yes, sorry. This is Agent Ward and Agent Ward."

"Does that ever get confusing?" Steve said as he shook their hands.

"It was a lot easier before they got married," a beautiful dark-haired woman said in a stunning red dress.

"Married operatives? Working together on the same team? Isn't that against protocol?" Steve asked, confused.

"We tend to get a little leeway from Director Fury," Coulson said dryly. "This is Agent Melinda May."

Steve smiled as he shook her hand. "It's an honor, ma'am. I've read a lot about you, almost every mission report you've ever submitted. You're a living legend."

A smile tugged at her lips. "That's something, coming from you."

"Well, it's the truth," Steve said earnestly.

"We've held up the line long enough," Coulson said.

"Here," Steve said and took a card out of his wallet, scrawling something on the back. "Here's my cell number and email address. Keep in touch."

Coulson's eyes widened as he stared at the card. "Thank you. I will."

As Coulson walked down the receiving line, Steve turned to Stacy. "Are you ready for the reception?"
She gave him a wink. "I can't wait!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

1. The next chapter, the reception, will be the last chapter of this story! Do you like the idea of a sequel?

2. The Agents of Shield crossover is from my other story, "The Price". It takes place after Season 1, Ep. 13, so all the big plot reveals in the last part of the season aren't in the story.
"So, is that it?" Steve asked hopefully after the last guest shook his hand and walked down the rest of the receiving line. He was ready to ride over to the reception at Tony's restaurant. Shaking hands and taking candid photos with literally hundreds of guests was exhausting, reminding him of the countless photo ops he'd done as Captain America and despite the occasion being a happy one, he was still feeling a bit tired and overloaded.

Stacy shook her head, her curls bouncing up and down, giving him a small smile. "Not by a long shot, sweetie. Don't forget; we've got all the formal photos in the church."

Steve groaned. He hadn't eaten much that day and he was beyond ravenous. He was starting to feel a bit light-headed and disoriented from low blood sugar.

"Hungry?" Stacy asked.

"How did you know?" Steve asked, a bit surprised.

"Well, we've had all the wedding stuff for hours. I thought you might need something to eat," she waved over Mateo, who came bounding towards them. "Mateo," she said, "Could you bring Uncle Steve his snack?"

"You packed me a snack?" Steve asked as he saw Mateo walk over with a red medium-sized cooler bag.

"I did indeed."

Steve opened the bag to see a soda, a large bag of chips and a foot-long hoagie stuffed with meat and cheese. "I've only been married less than thirty minutes and you're already the best wife ever," he declared as he sank his teeth into the sandwich, relishing the first bite.

"Thanks. I'll make sure to keep that title," she said with a wink. She played with the gold locket around her neck, the one that Steve had given her for Christmas. When he had asked her about it, she had told him it was her "something old" for wedding ensemble.

He looked over at her, still amazed at how lucky he was. He caught her hand and kissed it. "Always."

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A half hour later, they were still posing for photos with the professional photographer. They had some with Steve's distant relations who came to visit and some with Stacy's extended family. Now it was down to the wedding party to take the last few photos. Everyone was eager to join the rest of the guests at the reception who were getting to mingle and partake in the hor d'oeuvres.

Daniella and Mateo had been impatient and cranky during the entire process. Luis took Mateo to the restroom, as soon as he loudly declared he was about to have an accident, while Amanda dealt with a whiny Daniella who was ready for some dinner and the new baby who was also ready to be
Daniella was tired of wearing her fancy light blue dress, for although she was certain that she did indeed look like a princess, just like her mother promised her, the white dress shoes she was forced to wear were no good for running. Daniella was sure that was why Mateo had won the last three games of tag they had played, chasing each other up and down the aisle, yelling and screaming, waiting for their turn to have their picture taken.

Daniella cocked her head to the side when she realized that someone in their group looked rather familiar. "Mama, mama, who's dat?" Daniella asked, pointing to Natasha up on the stage with the rest of the groom's side of the wedding party. She was trying to sit on her mother's lap and more than a little upset that her baby brother was dominating her attention.

Amanda was bouncing little Esteban (named after his new Uncle Steve) on one knee while holding onto Daniella with her other hand. She looked up to where Daniella gesturing and said distractedly, "Oh, that's one of Uncle Steve's friends. You have her action figure. That's the Black Widow."

Daniella's eyes grew wide. "Really?" she asked.

"Yes, sweetie," Amanda said and turned slightly to calm the crying baby.

Daniella jumped off her mother's lap and ran up the steps to where the photographer was trying to get a photo with Steve and his "groomspeople". She barrelled straight for Natasha, interrupting the photo shoot, causing the photographer to throw his hands up in despair. He'd had a hard enough time with Stark pulling rabbit ears on everyone and insisting on being on another step to avoid looking so short compared to Steve.

"You're the Black Widow? It's true? It's true?" Daniella asked, bouncing up and down a little in excitement when she stopped at Natasha's feet, her eyes full of adoration.

Amanda looked up from her seat, blanched, and started to stand, hefting the tiny infant on her shoulder, but Natasha waved her off. She grinned and crouched down to get at eye level with the three year old. "Yes, I am. My name is Natasha Romanoff."

Daniella squealed and grabbed Natasha, wrapping her little arms around her neck in an eager hug. "You're the best. I want to be you when I grow up. I'm gonna be a 'Venger just like you."

Natasha didn't hesitate for a second, returning the embrace with equal ferocity. "I bet you'll be an amazing Avenger," she told the little girl. "I bet you'll be the best one of them all."

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"And now, I'd like to present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Steve and Stacy Rogers," the lead singer of the wedding band announced.

After nearly an hour of taking photos, Steve and Stacy finally entered the restaurant amid cheers and applause. Steve led Stacy over to the head table, which had been already laid out with appetizers.

Waiters appeared from around the room to fill the champagne glasses and, once they'd finished, the lead singer made his next announcement.

"Honored guests, I'd like to direct your attention to the father of the bride, Mr. O'Sullivan, for the first toast."
Stacy's dad rose and all eyes were on him. He grinned at the crowd. "I'm not so good at toasts, even if this is my second time. I'll just say that God has blessed me with two wonderful daughters and now, He's given me two wonderful sons in Luis and Steve. One of the most joyous days of my life was when Steve called to ask for our blessing on their marriage. Stacy, I couldn't be prouder of the woman you've become. Steve, I couldn't be happier to welcome you into the family. Your mother and I love you both very dearly. To Stacy and Steve," he said as he lifted his glass.

There was a chorus of "Here, here" as the guests toasted at their tables.

"And now, the best man, Mr. Tony Stark," said the lead singer.

There was a round of applause as Tony stood that didn't die down until he raised his hands to calm the crowd. "So, when I first met Steve we fought Loki together. Then, we fought Thor together," he said, gesturing to Thor's table where the Asgardian raised a glass. "And then, we sniped at each other a bit," earning a chuckle from the crowd, "before saving the earth together from some rather unpleasant visitors. Of course, we had some help with that," he said, raising his glass to the Avengers around the room.

Tony took a deep breath. "Now, Steve and I have had our ups and downs. Sometimes, it's felt like there were a lot more downs than ups. Steve and I've butted heads more times than I can count. But, being around him makes you want to be a better person. It makes you want to be more compassionate, to defend those who can't defend themselves. To be honest, I can't think of a better quality to have in a friend. And for Stacy, I can't think of a better quality to have in a husband. So, let's all raise our glasses to Steve and Stacy."

After the clinking of glasses died down, Monica stood up, waving at the crowd. "Hi, I'm Monica. Stacy has been the best friend I've ever had, the sister I never knew I wanted. When my job was in jeopardy, when I thought I'd lose my work visa and get sent back home, Stacy did everything she could to help me out. I owe everything to her. And I couldn't be happier to be here today with all of you, celebrating the beginning of a new chapter in her life as she and Steve are married. I love you both!"

Steve looked over at Monica, raising his glass in tribute.

Next, it was the pastor's turn. "I've been asked to lead a short prayer before we eat what I've been promised is a truly spectacular dinner." He closed his eyes and bowed his head. "Dear Lord, We thank you for all of the friends and family gathered here today to celebrate the union of Steve and Stacy. Please bless this food to our bodies. Amen."

The food was served family-style as huge plates were placed in the middle of each table and the guests were encouraged to served themselves. First, large tureens of minestrone soup and giant bowls of mixed green salad were placed on the tables alongside plates piled high with garlic bread. Once the guests had finished the first course, the waiters whisked away the empty plates and bowls and deposited fresh ones of Steve's favorite dishes from the restaurant, the chicken piccata and the fresh porcini mushroom ravioli. The waiters made sure to have a few extra plates and dishes at the head table as Steve polished off at least three servings of each dish.

"Are you finally full?" Stacy asked with a mischievous grin on her face.

"Yes, finally," Steve confessed.

"Good, because we'll be spending the rest of the night dancing. I can't wait to see your moves," she
"Oh, you're going to love my moves," he said suggestively, squeezing her hand.

She stifled a giggle, shaking her head. "I love you," she said, squeezing his hand back.

"I love you, too," he said. "Looks like we're up." With that, he led Stacy to the dance floor for their first dance.

"So, I've been dying to know, how did you get Big Bad Voodoo Daddy to play at our wedding?" She asked him as they glided around the floor, all eyes on them.

"Tony set it up. I told him how much you liked the band and he contacted them. They don't normally play at weddings, but when they found out it was for Captain America, they offered to do it for free."

"Wow . . . . I can't wait to meet them afterwards."

Steve smiled. "So, is this the wedding of your dreams?"

Stacy returned the grin. "I have the man of my dreams. Everything else is just gravy. By the way, did you know that Bruce and Betty bought us a four hundred dollar toaster oven with a lifetime warranty?" Stacy said.

"Do they even make toaster ovens that expensive?" Steve asked, fighting the urge to laugh.

"I would have said no, but obviously I was wrong," Stacy replied. "Did you happen to mention to him your frustration with built-in obsolescence of modern appliances?"

"I might have," Steve said.

For a few moments, they swayed to the music and Steve just listened to the lyrics. Their song was "Save My Soul", one of Stacy's favorites from the band. It had taken weeks for them to finally settle on a song. When he heard the line about being lucky for having fallen in love, about being with the girl of his dreams, he knew that they had made the right choice.

Halfway through the father-daughter dance, Steve walked over to Stacy's mother and held out his hand. "May I have this dance?" he asked, sketching a small bow.

"Yes. I would love to," she said, taking his hand and following him out to the dance floor.

"Thanks," Steve said, his voice thick with emotion, once they had begun to dance the mother-son portion of the song. "This means a lot to me. I just wish my own mother could have seen all this."

"I know that she would have been so very proud of you. And you're welcome, although it's my pleasure. You're my son, now," she said fiercely. "You and Luis . . . I've been blessed with two terrific boys for my girls and I couldn't be more grateful."

During a break in dancing, Steve walked past Thor's table and he saw that Mjolnir was sticking out a bit from its position next to the table. He was worried that someone would trip on the the handle as they passed by. He leaned down and hefted up the weapon, taking a moment to appreciate the impressive runes that decorated it. He briefly wondered what they meant as he contemplated the
exquisite craftsmanship. He shrugged his shoulders and placed Mjolnir back under the table, making sure that it no longer posed a tripping hazard.

Just as he was about to leave, Thor returned to the table, holding Dr. Foster's hand. She was wearing a red sheath dress with cap sleeves. "Steve, I am so very pleased to see you again. I wanted to introduce you to my Jane."

Steve shook Jane's hand, a grin on his face. "It's good to finally meet you, ma'am. Thor's said nothing but wonderful things about you. And Tony and Bruce talk about the Foster Theory all the time."

The petite brunette blushed. "Thank you. Thor's told me how very brave you were in New York. He appreciated having you lead the team."

Then it was Steve's turn to color. "Well, it was definitely a group effort. I'd better go. Stacy's signalling that it's time to cut the cake." Steve nodded politely and turned to go.

He had only walked a few feet when he heard Thor bellow. "What dark magic is this?"

Steve turned his head to see Thor race towards him with Jane at his heels. "I have most urgent news. It seems as though we are under some sort of evil mystical attack."

Steve's heart sank. Really? Couldn't he have just one day without Hydra or some other evildoer trying to ruin everything? "Alright, what happened? What makes you think we're under attack?"

"Only the most skilled and depraved type of magic practitioner could have broken Mjolnir's enchantment. Even Father never possessed the power to undo its spell completely."

"What about Mjolnir?" Steve rubbed his temples, trying to stave off an oncoming headache. The last thing he needed was to deal with some sort of magical foe with a restaurant full of wedding guests looking on.

"It is gone. I returned to my table to find it missing. Only someone who is deemed worthy of the power of Thor can move it," Thor explained, his words becoming more rushed and urgent as he spoke.

"Oh, yeah," Steve breathed a sigh of relief. "I just moved Mjolnir to under the table. I didn't want anyone to trip on it. It was sticking out. The last thing we need is someone falling over it and breaking a leg. We've had enough excitement to last a while."

Thor strode over to his table and lifted the white table cloth to reveal Mjolnir resting underneath. Jane and Steve followed him to the table. "See, it's right there. No need to fret," Steve explained.

"You did that?" Thor asked, incredulous.

"Yeah," Steve said slowly. "I mean it's heavy . . . but I'm pretty strong."

"Do it again," Thor commanded. "I must bear witness to this historic event."

Steve shrugged and crouched underneath the table, snagging Mjolnir and straightening up while holding it in his hands.

"Has the enchantment been broken?" Thor asked, his voice small and strangely timid.

Jane placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, but even she was starting to look concerned.
"I don't know." Steve began to worry at Thor's stricken face. He really hoped that he was going to at least make it through his own reception before having to track down any more bad guys.

"Hand it to someone else," Thor commanded. "We must determine if the enchantment has been disrupted."

"Okay," Steve said, motioning over to one of the waiters standing nearby. "Could you please hold this for a second?"

The young man nodded and put down his tray on their table. He took Mjolnir from Steve's hands and the hefty weapon immediately fell to the ground, causing the floor to shake and the silverware and glasses on the nearby table to rattle. The waiter tried repeatedly to pick up the giant hammer, grunting and sweating, but to no avail.

"Thanks," Steve said. "We appreciate you trying your best," and he fished some money out of his wallet, pressing a very generous tip in the waiter's hand, earning him a wide smile of gratitude in return.

Steve turned to Thor as he picked Mjolnir up and carefully placed it underneath the table once again. "Well, I guess the mystery is solved."

"You do not understand the gravity of this, Steve. You have been deemed worthy," Thor said gravely, gripping the side of Steve's neck with his large hand, squeezing slightly. His stare was intense and Steve blinked at Thor's scrutiny. "This is an honor given to very few in this universe. It is predicted on self-sacrifice and humility. Very few warriors in any realm could possibly lift the hammer."

Steve tried to fight off the blush that was starting to creep up his cheeks from all of the unwanted praise. "Well, that's great and all, but I've got to go cut the cake. But, you know, the next time we're in battle, I'll keep it in mind. You can use my shield and I'll use your hammer. Now, if you'll excuse me," he said, deftly twisting out of Thor's grip. He patted the perplexed Asgardian on his back and walked over to his bride next to the cake table.

"What took you so long?" Stacy asked when he finally joined her next to the towering cake. It was an enormous dessert consisting of four different tiered cakes, coated in white chocolate frosting with white chocolate shavings on the outside and Gerber Daisies in a riot of colors decorating the base. Stacy had wanted to make the cake red, white and blue to match Steve's uniform, but he had nixed the idea, wanting to stick to something traditional. He had to stifle a laugh, though, when he noticed that instead of the traditional groom topper, there was a Captain America action figure paired with the bride.

"I just found out I'm worthy to lift Mjolnir," Steve said, smiling and waving at the onlookers as they began to cut the cake.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"I'm not quite sure. But it threw poor Thor for a loop," Steve said, gently placing a morsel of cake in Stacy's mouth.

"That's some good cake," she said, unable to resist dabbing a bit of frosting on Steve's cheek.

"Really?" Steve asked, wiping off the icing and shaking his head.
"It could have been worse," Stacy observed with a wink.

After the bouquet and garter toss, Tony led Monica out to the dance floor "I'm surprised you caught the garter," Monica remarked. The band played a slow song and they began to sway together to the music.

"Well, I may have promised Thor a drinking contest later on to have him block the other bachelors. You did pretty well yourself, snagging that bouquet."

"Oh, well, for once it helped to be taller than the rest of the female guests. So, Mr. Stark, are you and Miss Potts thinking of getting married soon?" Monica asked lightly.

Tony grinned up at her. She was probably nearly two inches taller than him in stocking feet. With the heels she was wearing, there was a nearly a half a foot distance between the two.

"Call me Tony," he said with a laugh as he expertly guided her around the dance floor. "We're practically related, now. As for getting hitched, you never know. I might just let her make an honest man out of me yet. What about you? Any special someone waiting in the wings?"

"No. It looks like Stacy got the last good one. Maybe you and Dr. Banner can invent a time machine. I could go back to the 40s and snag one of my own," she said.

"Wonderful girl like you, I'm sure there's a guy in this century for you. Let me know if you want JARVIS to play matchmaker. It worked out pretty well for Steve and Stacy," Tony offered.

"I might just take you up on that," Monica said, laughing as he dipped her.

As he danced with Stacy, Steve smiled as he looked over at Natasha holding Daniella on her lap. Ever since Daniella figured out that she was the real Black Widow, she followed Natasha everywhere. At first, Amanda tried to collect her wayward child, but Natasha just waved her off. They were inseparable during the last half of the photography session, when Natasha laughed at all of Daniella's knock-knock jokes. As soon as the reception started, Daniella ran away from her mother and father and spent the entire time with Natasha and Clint. They danced with her, had her eat at their table, and even let her use Natasha's phone to take dozens of silly photos together.

Steve spotted Thor's table and saw Dr. Foster talking animatedly with Tony, Bruce, and Betty. Fitz and Simmons were there, too, looking like they were having the time of their lives. He had to chuckle at how happy and excited they all seemed to be together. He wondered what theory or experiment they were going on about.

Steve was glad to have met Betty. He was overjoyed that Bruce was being brave in a completely new way, that he was giving love a chance. Steve knew that it wasn't easy, but he also knew it was worth it. Love was always worth it.

After the last song had been danced to, after the last photo had been taken, after the last hug to a guest had been given, Steve and Stacy finally found themselves in their limo, riding towards the Plaza Hotel to where they were planning on spending their wedding night.

"After all this time, all the planning, all the work, I can't believe it's all over," Stacy said as she laid
her head on his shoulder, stifling a yawn after the long day.

Steve turned slightly and tugged her even closer, his hands on either side of her face as he drew her nearer. Their lips met and it felt like the first time and the last time and every other time in between, all together in one perfect kiss.

"Oh, it's not over," he smiled as they parted. "Our life, our story, that's just beginning," Steve said as he bent down to kiss her once more.

It wasn't over by a long shot.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes-

Normally, I keep these short but after 100,000 words, I wanted to chat with you all.

1. First off, thank you so much for every single bookmark, kudo, and comment. Every single encouraging review from you has been a blessing. If you've liked this story, I have a favor to ask. Would you please write me a comment for this last chapter and let me know? I can't tell you what an immense gift it is to know that I've written something that other people have enjoyed. Even if you read this a year or a decade after it's posted, I'd love to know that you liked the story.

2. If you ever want to contact me and talk about fan fiction, the Marvel universe, etc. and you are on tumblr, my name on there is creativereadingfanfiction.

3. My big announcement-

The sequel!

So, I felt like I had two good options. I could either write a sequel of "The Captain's Bride" to get to see how those characters deal with married life, etc. or I could write an in-depth Bucky/OC story similar to "The Captain's Bride" and really explore his character.

And I went back and forth for weeks.

Until I decided to do both.

So, the next story is named "The Sergeant's Wife". It'll feature all the characters from "The Captain's Bride" plus Bucky.

Some caveats-

A. There will be spoilers for "Captain America: The Winter Soldier".

B. Some plot points from "CA:TWS" will be modified to fit into "The Captain's Bride" (i.e. Steve is married to Stacy).
C. This story will be a bit darker than "The Captain's Bride". You know me, I don't write very racy or excessively violent material, but Bucky's been through a lot of difficult things and I plan to address them in this story.

The first chapter of "The Sergeant's Wife" will be posted soon.

Here's a sneak peek of the first lines of "The Sergeant's Wife"-

This is the story of how Sergeant James "Bucky" Buchanan Barnes fell in love and got married.

Only not in that order.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!