Roots and Anchors

by kawherp

Summary

A new scientist at S.H.I.E.L.D. has lunch with Steve and a friendship results. Can a transplant from a small town and a man out of time help each other adjust to their new surroundings?

Notes

Author’s notes:
I have written fanfic for over 20 years but not in this fandom and never on a site not under my own control. However, after watching the Marvel Universe movies with my husband, a plot bunny invaded my head and insists on being recorded. I have hopes that it will not become the epic saga so many of my stories turn into. It is not complete, and I have no set schedule of when I’ll add updates, but I will do my best to update it regularly and finish it in a timely fashion.
This is set before Winter Soldier.
Megan took a deep breath as she tucked her wallet back into her purse and picked up her tray, scanning the cafeteria for a spot to sit down and eat lunch. Steeling herself, she headed towards the end of the farthest table and the lone figure that sat there. “Mind if I join you?” she asked shyly.

Blue eyes looked up at her in surprise and he shook his head once, gesturing to the seat across from him as he continued to chew his food.

“You’re braver than I am,” Megan said as she gestured at his plate. “I couldn’t tell what that was supposed to be. I figure they couldn’t mess up a salad even though I’ll be starving in an hour and raiding the vending machines shortly thereafter.” She eyed it cautiously, “So… what is it?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure, but it tastes better than it looks.”

“It wouldn’t be hard.” Stretching her hand out to him, she smiled and said, “I’m Megan.”

“Steve,” he answered shaking her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Steve.” Megan lowered her eyes and watched him with her peripheral vision while she focused on her food. “Some assembly required,” she muttered under her breath as she opened various packets and spread the contents on her salad. “I can’t believe S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t have a proper salad bar so we don’t have to wrestle with all these packages.”

“Nat’s theory is that the packets are a test of how patient we are.”

Megan smiled, glancing up at him. “Clearly, I have failed that test. I need to make time to go shopping tonight and go back to packing my lunches. Overpriced mystery glop and stress tests are not what I had in mind for lunch.”

“If you usually pack, that would explain why I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I’m new, and temporary at that. It’s only my second week here and yes, I’ve been eating my lunch elsewhere and reading at my desk until my hour is up. I’d rather just go back to work after I eat and leave earlier, but the boss insists we have to take the hour. I understand she doesn’t make the rules, but that doesn’t mean I have to like them.” Megan mentally slapped herself for rambling and put her attention back on her plate.

“Eating together can build camaraderie,” Steve offered.

“Says the man I found eating by himself,” Megan countered, looking pointedly at all the empty seats that were around them.

Steve ducked his head, blushing slightly as he took another bite of food.

“You’re right, you know,” Megan admitted. “But for a shy introvert, it’s also really hard to get to the point where you’re comfortable enough to build camaraderie.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re shy?”

Megan nodded. “On my way down here, I was sure I was going to throw up. But I set a goal of eating lunch with other people at least once a week. And I’ll probably use every strategy in my arsenal to survive it. Being the new kid in town is really hard for me. I don’t mind being alone. But
I’m alone too much these days and the only way I can change that is to force myself out of my comfort zone. Since I moved to D.C., I haven’t made any new friends and I know that’s not good. So with this new job, I figured I’d start with lunch once a week and go from there. It can’t get any harder with practice and I’m praying it gets easier.”

“You’ve cleaned every corner of your apartment and read to fill the hours between getting home and going to bed,” Steve said softly, his eyes confessing and asking at the same time.

“You turn on the TV just to hear someone talk and shut it off in disgust it’s so stupid. Music can help, but sometimes it feeds the bad mood. Weekends off are the worst...”

“...because you have two whole days to fill,” he finished for her.

“It’s pathetic.” She ate another bite then smiled at him. “I’m shy; what’s your excuse?”

Steve shook his head with a soft smile of his own, “Lunch isn’t long enough to list them all.”

“Challenge accepted,” Megan shot back. “Celebrity status, very inconvenient. You can’t know if they want your autograph or are waiting to ask for a picture. That’s just here. Out in public has to be worse since they didn’t get the “Avoid the Hero Worship” talk at orientation. Add in a huge helping of Everything’s Changed, and you end up deciding staying home is easier. Irregular work hours? Makes it hard to join any clubs or take any classes. How am I doing?”

“They talk about me at orientation?”

Megan nodded, noting his look of horror. “You get a whole slide in the unending PowerPoint presentation. But you take a good picture, so at least we had that to look at. Most of the other slides were full of words. And then they pretty much read the slides to us after giving us packets with them all preprinted. I hate that. I’ll shut up before I give you my 10-minute rant about how PowerPoint is abused by most presenters. But yes, they talk about you at orientation.” Megan gestured to the empty chairs. “Do you want me to suggest they add a second slide about not treating you like a pariah?”

Steve’s eyes widened in alarm, “No! Even one slide about me is too many. Still, it does explain some things I’ve noticed.” He studied her intently before taking another bite. “Why didn’t it keep you away?”

Megan pointed at herself, “Shy introvert. I told you I’m using every trick in my arsenal.” His gaze was still puzzled, so she continued, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but one way I cope is try to find someone who looks more miserable than I feel and go talk to them.”

Steven nodded thoughtfully, “I’ll have to try that sometime.”

“You’d be surprised how well it works. It doesn’t fix the nausea ahead of time, but at least I’m keeping food down.”

“You said you’re only here temporarily. What do you do?”

“I’m a molecular biologist. I can’t talk about the projects I’m working on, but basically, I tinker in the lab all day. My background is mainly with viruses, but I’ve also had some experience working with bacteria. I came in through a temp agency for an expansion in the biology division. With any luck, in 3 months they’ll decide they want to hire me full time and I decide I like working here. Until then, it pays the bills and gives me more experience to put on my resume. Beats doing the traditional postdoc.” She shrugged and took another bite.
“What’s a postdoc?”

“Generally, you work in an academic lab under the supervision of another professor to prove you can do independent work. You have a lot of pressure to get publish results and even get your own grants in a two to three year time frame. But the pay is lousy and the hours are insane. Universities are producing too many Ph.D. graduates, so often employers require at least one and sometimes two postdocs before they’ll hire you for a ‘real’ job. I refuse to play their game. I’m ready to have a bit of a life.”

“If there are too many graduates, why do the schools keep admitting students to their programs? That doesn’t make sense.” Steve shook his head. He rubbed his forehead, “Everything today is so complicated.”

“Not really. It all comes down to money. Universities rely on the money the professors bring in from grants. To get the grants, the professors have to get a lot of publications. That means you need a small army of researchers doing all the work. The least expensive researchers are graduate students.” Megan shrugged. “Money makes the world go round. Are you saying it didn’t used to be like that?”

“Money and power always go together. It’s just when I was growing up… maybe I just understood it better.”

“So, where did you grow up? City kid or country boy?”

“You haven’t read my biography? I thought it was required reading of all S.H.I.E.L.D employees,” Steve gave her a wry smile.

“Nope,” Megan laughed and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I have a stack of books by my bed but I don’t have a single book about you in it. I hope that doesn’t permanently damage your fragile ego.”

Steve pretended to think carefully for a moment before replying, “I’ll manage somehow.”

“Whew. For a minute there, I was afraid I was going to lose my job!”

“It won’t affect you, but I am going to find out why my life story isn’t required reading for all new hires. Someone hasn’t been doing their job.”

“Don’t give them any ideas! They’ll probably take the thickest book and turn it into another PowerPoint presentation. I can see it now.” She shuddered. “They’ll have to add a whole wing to the medical division to handle all the new concussion cases.”

“Concussions?”

“Everyone will either fall out of their chairs in a stupor or bang their heads on their desk to end the suffering. I was about five minutes from the latter as it is. Please, don’t pursue this. I’m begging you!”

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Megan’s step was light as she walked back to the lab section of S.H.I.E.L.D. The longer they had chatted over lunch, the more Steve had opened up and kidded around with her. They’d kept the conversation light, talking about favorite books, orientation by H.R., and the hazards of cafeteria food. When it had been time to put their trays away, Steve had taken hers and asked her if she’d
join him for lunch tomorrow. He’d then suggested they each bring a favorite book for the other to read. She’d immediately agreed and was actually looking forward to going home this evening so she could paw through her bookshelves and pick something to lend him.

“Dr. Buchwald?”

A deep voice pulled her to the present and she turned to find a man in military uniform striding towards her. “Yes?”

“Just what do you think you were doing back there in the cafeteria?” He scowled at her as he stopped in front of her, closer than most would find polite.

“Eating lunch.” Megan raised her eyebrow in her best Spock imitation. “Is there a problem? I’ll be back to my station well before my lunch hour is up and I’ve been told that the lunch break is mandatory.” Something about him set her on edge, but she refused to step backwards. If he thought crowding her a bit was going to intimidate her, he’d never gone to graduate school.

“You need to be very careful about the company you keep and the message it sends.”

“The company I keep? Mister… Ross,” Megan read his last name off of his uniform and avoided any mention of rank. She knew nothing about reading uniform insignia and didn’t want to insult him by using the wrong title. “I ate lunch in the at S.H.I.E.L.D cafeteria with another employee. The message it sends is that I am trying to build professional relationships outside of my department. In the civilian world, we call that networking and being cordial.”

His stern look became a sneer. “And you just happened to start with Captain America?”

“Correct.” She kept her gaze as neutral as possible, and mentally counted seconds. When she reached sixteen, he finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

“I’m watching you, Dr. Buchwald. Don’t forget it.”

“Noted,” Megan replied blandly. “Will you be joining me in the ladies room?” she added, pointing to the door they were standing beside as she moved to open it. She paused to allow him to answer but he just glared at her and took a step back. “Well then, good day.” Megan slipped inside and darted into the first available stall. Maybe she’d read too many spy novels, but after only seven work days at S.H.I.E.L.D., she was already uncomfortable in her new job for reasons she couldn’t always put her finger on. Mr. Ross’s veiled threat was just the latest incident. The only question was what, if anything, she was going to do about it.
Developing Friendship

The following Wednesday, Megan sank heavily into the seat across the lunch table from Steve. "Can you give me a crash course in reading uniform ranks?"

He smiled at her when he looked up and saw who had joined him, "Sure. But why?"

"Because the next time I get into it with Mystery Rank Ross, I want to use all the proper titles when I tell him to take a long walk off of a short plank," she explained as she opened up her thermos and unfolded the spoon that was packed into the lid. The smell of the soup filled her nostrils and she savored it for a long moment. She'd made it last night and it was hot and filling and good… the perfect meal for a blustery winter day.

"You mean General Ross? He's here?" Steve's eyes scanned the room surreptitiously though he didn't turn his head or otherwise indicate he was less than totally focused on his conversation with Megan.

"I don't know if he's a general or not," she said between bites. "Older guy, about your height, blue eyes, grey hair, mustache, bad attitude." She left out the adjectives of disturbing, overbearing, and arrogant.

"Give me second." Steve got out his phone, pulled up a photo from a recent newspaper article, and showed it to her with one hand before taking another bite of what was supposed to be spaghetti with the other.

"That's him." Megan shuddered a bit. "He gives me the creeps. I can't put my finger on it, but every time he talks to me, I feel like I need to go take a hot shower to get the grime off. I passed him in the corridor on the way down here and he gestured with this fingers that his eyes were on me."

"How often do you see him?" He was studying her with those worried blue eyes.

"This is the third time in less than 2 weeks. I'm still trying to figure out why he knew my name. I'm new. I'm temporary. So why all the interest in me and who I'm eating lunch with?"

"He pestered you about sitting with me?" Steve sighed and lowered his voice. "Stay away from him as much as you can. I'll see what I can do."

Megan shook her head. "You don't have to do anything. I've dealt with grumpy old men with ego issues before. He's just compensating for other deficiencies, which I may point to him next time he starts in on me." She smiled and took another bite of her soup.

"Megan, don't antagonize him. I can't tell you more than that. But for your own sake, try not to annoy him."

She looked at him and studied his furrowed brow and the concern he couldn't hide. He had a face like hers that showed every thought. It was a good thing he wasn't a spy. Given his background, if he was worried, he had reason to be. She chewed on her lower lip, and then nodded. "Okay. On one condition."

"What?"

"You come over Sunday afternoon for dinner. When I went grocery shopping last night, I splurged on a huge roast that was on sale. I could sure use some help eating it."
Seeing his surprise and hesitation, she added, "Look, I'm not hitting on you. I'm fresh out of a breakup and still getting my head on straight. But I get tired of eating alone. It's pot roast, not a marriage proposal. Besides, when's the last time you had homemade post roast?"

"Christmas Day, 1941," his gaze grew distant as he looked over her shoulder and into his past. "Bucky's mom wanted to have a fancy meal for Christmas just in case…" his voice trailed off before he focused back on her again. "In case he didn't come home from the war. She went all out. I hope that gave her comfort when we lost him."

Megan absorbed that for a moment. The pain Steve was feeling was palpable. Retracing the invitation wasn't going to help ease it, either. You didn't get over that sort of loss; you just learned to live with it. Steve was still learning how to do that. "Well, I can't promise I'm as good of a cook as Bucky's mom was. But I do know how to make a pie. What's your favorite kind?"

"You don't have to--"

"I want to. I can narrow it down if you want: apple, pumpkin, lemon meringue, or chocolate. Pick one."

"Just one?" he teased. The smile didn't reach his eyes, but he was trying. Megan rolled her eyes. "Pick two. But you have to promise to take some home with you."

"Pumpkin and apple. But you don't have to--"

"I'll have the food ready at 1 PM. Come earlier if you want." Megan dug in her purse for a pen and notepad and tore a page out. She quickly jotted her address and phone number on it and handed it to him. "Here's my address. If you get called out on some mission and have to cancel at the last minute, I totally understand. But I'm warning you that if that happens, I'll be forced to bring the extra pie to work and give it to you in public. Now only will that get the rumor mill working overtime, but it will probably give General Ross apoplexy."

Steve smiled as he put the paper in his wallet. "We can't have that. The rumor mill is busy enough as it is." He nodded at the book on the table beside his tray. "I finished it last night. Pretty good. You said there's a whole series?"

Megan nodded. "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe is the first book C.S. Lewis wrote in the series, but there is another book he wrote set earlier in the timeline. I have the others if you want to borrow them when you come over Sunday. I'm not done with The Art of War yet. It's easy reading, but pretty slow going since I'm taking the time to read all the annotations and examples. Without the history to go along with it, I don't think I'd find it as interesting. As it is, I may have to hit the library and see what some of the other translations look like. It has to be hard to translate something like that and still keep all of the flavor of the original. I wonder what the White Witch would have done with it."

Steve smiled at her comment and shook his head. "She never would have bothered reading it. She was too arrogant to take advice from anyone else. Aslan, on the other hand, would have studied it carefully. But my favorite character was Mr. Tumnus. He was very brave to help Lucy like he did."

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"I hate cell culture," Megan muttered to herself as she aspirated the last of the medium from the petri dish she was carefully holding at an angle. Gently, she scraped the cells that were left behind
from where they were adhered to the plate and deposited them into a waiting Eppendorf tube. She closed the lid before glancing at the protocol taped to the glass beside her and the timer by her elbow. She had two more minutes to wash and collect the remaining cells if she was going to stay on schedule. She removed the lid of the next petri dish and tipped the bottom plate onto its edge as she eased the tip of the pipette into the red medium being careful to avoid disturbing any of the cells.

"Dr. Buchwald?"

"Sheesh!" Megan bit back a curse word as she startled violently. "Don't sneak up on people doing cell culture! I almost aspirated my cells! Be with you in two minutes." The noise of the laminar flow hood and the house vacuum pump had masked the sound of footsteps behind her.

Megan finished what she was doing and turned her head towards the stern looking woman who was now standing beside her and looking very out of place in the laboratory. That explained the sneaking up on her; she probably didn't realize how much focus cell culture required. Megan didn't bother to take her gloved hands out of the hood as she asked, "What's up?"

"I apologize for startling you. Director Fury wants to speak with you in his office."

"Right now?"

"Correct."

Megan sighed. "Here's the deal. I go now, this work gets set back at least a week, maybe two. I'm taking time points here. And no, before you ask, it's not that easy for someone else to just take over mid-protocol. We all set our stuff up a bit differently and that system is important to avoiding mistakes. Option two is he waits until I'm done in about 45 minutes. Your call."

"He'll wait."

"Okay. Please let him know I've only got about 20 minutes to talk to him before I have to get back down here. Cells don't understand about meetings." She smiled a bit, trying to soften the intensity of her words. She really didn't want to come off as difficult, but time points were a pain and she didn't look forward to repeating the entire experiment just because she'd been stuck in conversation.

"I'll let him know. My name is Agent Hill. I'll see you upstairs; we can shake hands then."

Megan nodded, pleased by the slight twinkle in Agent Hill's eye. It didn't sound like she was in trouble for not jumping up to rush to Fury's office. But she'd heard enough about the Director to have a knot in her stomach at the prospect of meeting him. "I hate cell culture."
Megan rapped her knuckles on the open door of Director Fury’s office as she stepped inside. “Director? Agent Hill said you wanted to see me.” He was standing in front of the window, one hand behind his back, looking out at the city. It wasn’t cold enough in his office to justify the long leather coat. Maybe he just liked looking like a badass.

“You kept me waiting,” he said in a deep voice. Still, he didn’t turn to look at her. He just kept staring out the window.

“I apologize for the need, Director. I had hoped Agent Hill would explain why—”

“You kept me waiting, Doctor. Do you know how long it has been since anyone in this building told me to wait for a meeting I’d called? Congressmen make me wait. The Council makes me wait. But my own employees don’t make me wait!”

Megan swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to calm herself despite the sinking feeling that had her stomach somewhere in the room below her feet. She watched his jaw muscles work. She was being fired for sure, and that made her angry. “Then next time I’ll just go ahead and waste two weeks worth of reagents, cells, experimental progress, and my salary so you can avoid staring out the window.”

“Doctor Buchwald, why are you here?” Turning at last, he pinned her with his gaze.

“Because you told Agent Hill that you wanted to see me!” Megan waved the timer she had in one hand. “And I have to take the next time point in fifteen minutes, so you can either tell me what this is about now, fire me and have someone else take the damn time point, or wait around another hour so we can discuss—” She waved her hand at his room at nothing in particular “—whatever this is—when the experiment is done.”

“Do you know who I am, Doctor Buchwald?” He looked down at the file she finally noticed he had in his hand. He opened it and started to look through it.

Megan stepped forward, picked up the nameplate from desk, and turned it around to face him. “Says here you’re Nick Fury. Clearly it is spelled wrong and should say ‘Nick Furious’ but I didn’t order it and that error isn’t on me.”

He made a small noise in his throat but otherwise ignored her comment. “Post hole digger in biochemistry. Bullshit degree in biology. No spouse, no kids, no pets, no arrest record, no skeletons in the closet. Raised in a nowhere Pennsylvania by a schoolteacher. One adopted sister, whereabouts unknown, and one biological brother with severe learning disabilities. Three nephews.”

“I am flattered you have assembled my biography, but we’re down to thirteen minutes and that includes time to get back to the lab.”

He looked up at her for a long moment, then back at the file. “According to this, you are supposed to be smart and boring.”

“If that’s the case, you need better researchers.”

“According to this, you shouldn’t be causing me problems.”
“Aside from giving you more time to study the currents on the Potomac, what are the problems I’m supposedly causing you? Because last time I checked, I was down in the lab taking time points, which is about as boring as you can find anywhere.”

“Captain Rogers came to see me today. He said General Ross has been harassing you. And the Captain seems to think I’m now in charge of human resources on top of everything else.”

“First off, harassing is too strong of a word. Secondly, your H.R. department is even less effective than congress at the moment, so I’m not a bit surprised Steve came to you rather than wasting his time with them. But as I told Steve, I can deal with grumpy old men with ego issues. And before you ask, no, I have no idea why General Ross feels a need to point out that he’s watching me all the time. You have another window in your office that he can comes stare out of if he has nothing to do.” Megan gestured to the glass and glanced back at her timer again making no effort to hide the fact she was doing so.

“What are your intentions with regards to Captain Rogers?”

“What?” Megan stared at him. “Seriously? I’m sure a functioning H.R. department would love to know you just asked me that. But you don’t have that here, do you?” Megan put her timer on the desk between them so they could both see it, then straitened up and folded her arms. “Okay, as much fun as this has been, I’d like to get back to the lab sometime today. So as inappropriate as that question is, I’m going to answer you. One word: lunch.”

“Lunch?”

“Lunch. That meal I’ve been told I have to take an hour off for every day. Sometimes, I head up to the cafeteria to eat with other people. It’s called being collegial. Except I’ve found that Steve is always sitting by himself. You want to know why? Because your super inefficient H.R. department has turned him into a pariah in the name of protecting him from harassment.”

“Captain America is a national treasure and we want to make sure—”

“Steve Rogers is a citizen of the United States. He eats food just like the rest of us. And he shouldn’t have to eat alone in the name of protecting him. He fought the Nazis so I think he can handle a few autograph requests from adoring agents. So there you have it, my intentions are to eat lunch with an interesting person and talk about books we read. It helps pass the time before I can go back to tending the cells I’m characterizing.

“Speaking of which,” Megan pointed to the timer. “Are we done here or am I coming back for round two in an hour?”

Fury tossed her file onto his desk and met her gaze once more. “If General Ross so much as leers at you again I want to know about it.”

Megan waited, not sure if she was being dismissed or not.

“Go tend your cells, Doctor.”

Megan nodded once and picked her up timer.

She was almost out the door when he called to her, “What books?”

Megan looked over her shoulder and smiled for the first time. “Today we were deciding which character in Narnia would make the best use of The Art of War if they got their hands on it. Aslan, paws down.”
Nick smiled slightly and shook his head before waving her out of his office.
“I cannot believe I’m doing this,” Megan muttered to herself as she stood in front of her closet and looked through her shirts for the fifth time. Half a dozen of them were off their hangers and tossed over the back of nearby chair. She wished she’d told Steve the dress code was super casual. As it was, she was trying to walk the fine line between comfortably hanging out at home and dressing up for company without looking like she was being deliberate about it. Given the era he’d grown up in, she half expected him to come dressed in a suit and tie, so if she wore jeans and a t-shirt he’d feel overdressed. If she overdressed herself and he tried to be casual in keeping with the modern era, he’d feel awkwardly underdressed. Of course she wanted to look a bit better than she did on a typical Sunday where sweatpants and a ratty t-shirt were the norm. She’d settled on black slacks as a safe middle ground and gotten stuck.

The timer on the stove went off letting her know she was out of time. “This is ridiculous.” She finally grabbed a teal scoop neck top that had three quarter sleeves and stuffed the other shirts in the empty laundry basket to rehang later. Her DNA pendant necklace and matching earrings were the first thing she saw in her jewelry box, so she grabbed them to put on while she checked the roast again and added a bit of water so the pan didn’t go dry. The pumpkin pie she’d made last night was in the fridge and the apple pie would be done in another half hour. There was even a loaf of bread baking in the bread machine.

She’d make the gravy once he got here. The roast was done and the smell was seriously awesome but making her really hungry. She brushed her chin length brown hair out one last time and gave up any hope of taming the curls today. She didn’t consider herself to be especially pretty, but today’s standards of beauty were skewed. She had curves and would never be a size 2 model or movie star. That was okay given her love of food. Besides, she had good lab hands and that was far more important to career success than begin blown away by a gust of wind while nibbling on carrot sticks. Carrots! She’d forgotten to make the salad.

So much for not being rushed. Chewing on her lower lip, she put her apron back on and got to work.

She had the celery, carrots, and green peppers all chopped when she heard a knock at the door. Ignoring the butterflies in her stomach, she checked the peephole and saw Steve waiting patiently. “Hi! Did you have any trouble parking?” she asked as she opened the door and gestured for him to come in.

He was wearing slacks and a button down shirt under his leather jacket and held a motorcycle helmet under one arm. In his other hand, he held a bottle of wine. Stepping inside, he shook his head. “Bike’s easy to park and then I just followed my nose here. The food smells wonderful.” He handed her the wine. “I wasn’t sure if you liked wine or not but I wanted to bring something.”

“I don’t drink often, but it always tastes good with pot roast. Let me get the glasses down. There are hooks and hangers on the back of the door you can use for your jacket. Just find a spot to put your helmet and pull up a barstool. Once the salad is done, I’ll make the gravy and we can eat.”

“Nice place.” Steve toed of his shoes and put the helmet down on the floor beside them before following her to the kitchen. “Can I help?”

“There’s no need. I’m almost done. And this is really a one-person kitchen if you’re working at the counter. Actually, it’s a one person apartment,” she laughed a little as she started slicing tomatoes. “But I wanted something in walking distance to the metro, and that drives prices way up. I feel sick
every time I pay rent, but not having a car makes access to the subway a must. And I figure with only one room to live in, I’ll be highly motivated to keep everything picked up.”

While she talked, Steve sat down on a barstool and leaned on the bar that separated the sink side of the kitchen from the rest of the small living space. Looking around a bit, his brow furrowed. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but…” he paused, waiting for her nod before he continued, “... where’s your bed?”

Megan smiled, “The couch folds out into a double bed. It’s not that comfortable, I admit. But I didn’t pick it, either. Most of this furniture is included in the rental price. I just have to move the coffee table, open up the bed, and I’m set. During the week, I usually just leave it out since I’m whipped by the time I get home and eat dinner. I figure once I have a better job and savings built up, I’ll move to something a little bigger and buy myself a real bed. In the meantime, it works.” She shrugged. “My back sometimes likes to suggest otherwise.”

“I brought your book back,” Steve laid it on the counter beside the wine glasses she set down in front of him.

Megan figured he must have had it in his jacket. “The rest of the series is on my super-fancy bookshelf set over there. Go and pull them out so you can take them with you.”

Steve looked more closely at the shelves, “I like your shelves,” he said with a smile.

“Cinder blocks and 1 x 6 boards are standard college issue, just like two filing cabinets and a door make a pretty awesome desk. I’ll skimp and save all sorts of ways, but I have to have my books with me.”

“Your desk isn’t made of filing cabinets.”

“That’s my sewing machine. All closed up, it doubles as a desk. It’s my other must-have item no matter where I go.”

Steve went over to the shelves and quickly located the next two books in the Narnia series. He put *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* on the shelf where it belonged before returning to his seat. “I didn’t think most people sewed anymore.”

“They don’t, at least not for everyday clothes. Even I can’t buy fabric and a pattern for what I can pay for a basic shirt on sale. When I was growing up, my mom sewed all of our clothes to save money. Nowadays, sewing is more expensive than buying clothes, at least for a lot of the basics. But I learned to sew when I was in high school and I’m glad I did. I can fix things that have torn seams and even better, I can often make some basic alteration so what I buy fits me better. I also like making my own curtains and throw pillows, which actually does save money. But you’re right, most people don’t know how to sew. It’s more of a hobby than a necessity.”

“What is that?” Steve asked, nodding to the lidded bowl she was holding down on the counter while she pulled a cord in the lid.

“Salad spinner. Basically, it’s a kitchen centrifuge. Getting a lot of the water off keeps the lettuce fresh longer. Between this and the Tupperware, the salad leftovers will stay fresh for a few days.”

“I put the corkscrew out, go ahead and pour the wine while I get the gravy started.” Megan instructed as she added the lettuce to the big bowl she had the rest of the vegetables in. She mixed it all up and put the bowl on the drop-leaf table that was in the living room between Steve and the bookshelves.
Right then, the bread machine beeped. “Bread’s done.”

“You made bread, too?” Steve looked at her in wonder, while his fingers were busy removing the foil cap from the bottle.

“Don’t look too excited. I didn’t do it by hand. But there is nothing like homemade bread.” Megan used a potholder and removed the pan from the machine. She set it on the counter to cool and turned her attention back to the roast. She set the Dutch oven on the stovetop and removed the lid. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving. You have no idea how good that smells to me. Seriously, we can skip the gravy.”

“You don’t like gravy?”

“I love gravy. But you don’t have to—”

“Sit down and drink your wine,” Megan admonished him. “Gravy doesn’t take that long. Or, if you want, you can wrestle the bread out of the pan and start eating that.” She looked up from dishing up the meat and potatoes and carrots from the pan so she could collect the drippings. “I mean it. I’ll have a slice, too. There’s a cutting board beside the microwave and the knives are in the block.” She moved the drippings to a smaller pan, added the flour solution she’d prepared earlier, and then started to stir the mixture.

“I like the second suggestion.”

“Just save room for pie.”

“You really made two pies?” He looked like a kid on Christmas morning the way his eyes sparkled.

“The pumpkin pie is in the fridge and the apple pie is ready to be checked. You can do that before you cut the bread. I need to keep stirring this until it thickens.” Megan told him.

“How do you tell if it’s done?”

“Grab a table knife from the drawer beside the sink and pierce some of the apples through one of the holes in the crust. If the apples are yield and the crust is golden, it’s done. If they are still crunchy or hard to cut, it needs a bit more time in the oven.”

She moved out of his way so he could open the oven door. “It looks done,” she said, watching him test the filling with a knife.

“It is.”

She watched as he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply before setting the pie on a hot pad on the counter. It broke her heart to think of him missing these simple pleasures due to the depression, then the war. “I can teach you how to make pies, Steve. It’s not that hard and then you can make pie whenever you want to.”

He looked down and answered her softly, “I’d like that.”

“I don’t want to overstep here, but do you know how to cook? I know that when you were growing up, the kitchen was traditionally a woman’s domain.”

“It was, but my mom taught me a little so I’d have hot food even on the nights she had to work
late,” Steve explained quietly as he sliced the bread and handed her the first piece.

“We can expand that repertoire if you want. It kills me that you haven’t had pot roast since 1941.” She saw the wariness in his eyes, his guard going back up as he protected himself from what he perceived as pity. “It would be fun, actually, to dig through my recipe box and get back to cooking more. I’ve gotten into a bit of a culinary rut, I’m afraid.”

She sipped her wine and kept stirring with her other hand. “For the record, it’s not pity that’s motivating me.”

“Then what is?” His shoulders were still tense as he continued to slice the loaf of bread, his back towards her.

“Empathy. And a bit of anger on your behalf. I can’t believe how you’ve just been left to your own devices to figure out a world that has to be overwhelming at times. Instead, it seems to me that S.H.I.E.L.D. only cares that you’re able to go on their missions and as long as you’re good for that, they’re happy.”

“They offered me a tutor. It… didn’t work out,” He admitted quietly.

“Let me guess. They gave you some young, starry eyed recruit who was either caught up in hero worship or talking down to you like you didn’t know anything about readin’ and writin’ and indoor plumin’.”

He turned and looked at her shyly, his face a bit red, “Both, actually,” He chuckled a bit. “I knew it wasn’t going to work when he seemed surprised I had grown up with electric lights. So once I was acclimated enough to do my job, I told him we were done.”

“I knew you a smart guy,” She grinned and was happy to see his guard starting to come back down again. “Let’s eat and you can think about it. I’m not trying to pressure you and I’m by no means a gourmet chef. But I do know how to make pie and pot roast. Besides, just think of the women you’ll have swooning at your feet when they find out you know your way around the kitchen. If they find out you also wash windows and scrub floors, you’ll be beating them off with a stick.”

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“I had an interesting conversation with Nick Fury this week.” Megan said a bit later when the ravenous hunger was gone and they were both working on second helpings. “He really likes his grumble and gruff routine, doesn’t he?”

That got Steve’s attention. He eyed her warily. “What happened?”

Megan watched his expression morph into a mix of admiration and horror as she relayed the conversation as she remembered it. “When I left, he was almost smiling. Which I think for him was the equivalent of belly laughter.”

“I can’t believe he let you talk to him like that.” Steve shook his head. She couldn’t tell if she thought she’d been bold or stupid to have done so. In truth, he’d be right on both counts.

“Me, either. I was expecting him to fire me on the spot.”

“So why’d you do it if you thought it would get you fired?”

Megan blushed a little and looked down, embarrassed at her behavior. “I didn’t like his attitude. If there is one thing I can’t stand it’s people trying to act all-important just because of their title or
their rank. I pushed back. And when he started asking me why I was there for a meeting he summoned me to, I got really angry and I’m afraid that when I get angry or backed into a corner, I tend to speak my mind, minus the all-important filters of manners or tact. It gets me into trouble sometimes, so I try not to get myself into those situations in the first place. He hit all my buttons, but I learned something in the process. I think it’s a defense mechanism for him.”

“Defense against what?”

“Lots of things: racism, hurt feelings, getting too close,” Megan sighed, “To get to the top, he had to prove he was twice as good as any of the white guys who wanted his position. If he barks first, it puts people on the defensive. He’s got a tough job and I’m sure there is a lot of political crap going on behind the scenes that makes it an even tougher job. So he snarls and growls because for whatever reason, it works. But it keeps people from seeing him any other way.”

“That makes sense. But I don’t suggest trying that again if you want to keep your job.”

Megan laughed. “I’ll try to stay out of trouble.” She retrieved a tablet and pen from her sewing table/desk and quickly jotted a note. Do you think I have to worry about my apartment begin bugged? She felt stupid writing it and hoped she didn’t come across as paranoid. “This is good wine.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Steve took the pen from her, thought a moment, then wrote beneath her words. I wish I could say no.

“Are you ready for pie?”

Steve let out a soft moan, “Give me a few minutes. I’m enjoying this too much to rush.” On the pad, he continued their second conversation. What has you worried?

“I never thought to ask if you drank coffee. I don’t so I don’t have any here. But I can offer you tea.”

“I love coffee, but tea is fine.”

“I’ll put the kettle on.” She took back the pen. Hard to put my finger on. Lots of little things. Someone was in my apartment this week. May have been maintenance… but no note was left.

When Megan returned to the table, Steve handed her a folded paper he’d retrieved from his jacket. He wrote a bit more and pushed the notepad over to her. This was slipped inside my locker at S.H.I.E.L.D. on Friday.

Megan opened up the paper. It listed two books, followed by the message, “Mandatory book club reading, off-site only.”

Megan felt the color drain from her face. “I’m going to put the food away while the water heats,” she said in as normal a voice as she could manage. We need to talk. Cell phones track your location. Where is truly off the grid and private?

“Let me help,” Steve said, jumping up in alarm at her reaction.

Megan pulled Tupperware out of the cupboards and tried to find matching lids but her hands were shaking so badly she almost dropped the plastic ware. Steve reached around her and took them from her and laid them on the counter before turning her around and pulling her close in a hug. His lips brushed next to her ear. His breath was a faint whisper, “You’ve read those books?”
Megan nodded and held up one finger. She couldn’t stop shaking. If she was right, then she was going to have to make some tough choices.

Steve rubbed her back, holding her close. “We’ll figure this out,” he murmured to her. In a normal voice, he said, “I think I’d like for you to teach me to cook a few meals.”

Megan nodded robotically and took a deep breath. Cooking as a cover for spending more time with him? She could do that. “As soon as I finish putting this away, we can decide what to start with. Why don’t you sit down and make a list of favorite foods you miss having. I’ll get my recipe box out and pull out some of my favorites, and we can from there. Do you have a crock pot?”

“I don’t know what that is, so I assume the answer is no.”

“Then we need to get you one. Or two, actually, so you have different sizes for different meals. They’re not expensive. Do you trust me?”

He held her head in his hands when she pulled away to start putting away the leftovers, “Absolutely.” His eyes told her that he wasn’t talking about crock-pots.
At work the next day, Megan kept yawning as she tried to concentrate. She’d tossed and turned all night, waking from nightmares of being hunted and chased when she finally did fall asleep. But the way forward was clear, at least to her. Whatever work she was doing had to be slowed down, at least until she understood its purpose better. And nothing brought cell culture to a halt like contamination.

For the first time in her life, Megan was going to sabotage an experiment. It went against everything she believed in as a scientist. She tried to comfort herself with the knowledge that she wasn’t falsifying data, but she knew that was just a way of justifying her plans.

As she worked in the hood, she dribbled some cell culture medium on the hood surface as she was pipetting it from the bottle to her cells. When she went to clean it up, she dipped her gloved finger into the droplets, and then dragged the same finger across the tray she put the petri dishes on before sliding them, tray and all, into the incubator. It was sloppy technique on her part. But sloppy technique was how a lot of contamination started and was notoriously difficult to track down.

Megan shut the incubator door and returned to the hood with the next tray of cells to continue her experiments. The minute amounts of liquid on the tray inside the incubator were barely visible to the naked eye, but to a fungal spore they were an ocean. The habitat had been provided; it was up to the fungi to do the rest.

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“How many staples for cooking do you keep in your kitchen?” Megan sat across from Steve in the cafeteria and tapped her pen on her notepad. “I want to make a list of what we need to set you up with.”

He shrugged his too-broad shoulders at her. “Just the usual stuff.”

“Sugar, salt and pepper?”

He nodded.

“Corn starch, flour, cinnamon, basil, garlic power?”

“I have flour.”

Megan made some notes. “Dry pasta, canned goods like diced tomatoes and kidney beans?”

Steve shook his head, embarrassment making a faint blush creep up his cheeks.

Megan smiled at him gently, “Hey, it’s okay. I’m just trying to not spend your money on stuff you already keep on hand. You need to have a few things that you just always have in the pantry since you’ll use them so much. How about measuring cups and spoons, stuff like that?”

“I got cups and spoons, but nothing else in terms of tools. I went to a kitchen store once and it was overwhelming. I got some glass mixing bowls and left.

“Those places are dangerous! You can blow your life savings on gadgets that you don’t need. But if you find you need a specialty tool, those are a good place to start looking for it.” She studied him, lost for a second in those blue eyes that were too old and tired for the young face they looked
out from. Clearly, the things he’d seen in his life had aged him. War did that to people. “Okay, I need a budget. While I’m quite happy to help you spend your money, I don’t want to strain your finances. We can spread purchases out over a period of several weeks if that’s easier. In the end, cooking at home saves money but setting up a kitchen the first time can get pricey. Just let me know so I can prioritize what we should get first. Spices, for example, are really expensive considering the size of the container. We should rent a car for a day so we can shop around without messing with hauling your loot around in a bunch of cabs.”

“I have a car.” Steve smiled when he saw her look of surprise. He shrugged again. “I just prefer the bike most of the time.”

“When it’s sleetting sideways, cars are definitely better. Okay, that makes the logistics easier.”

“We can get everything at once,” he told her softly, like it was something to be embarrassed about.

“Noted. We can swing by the bookstore and get you a good cookbook, too. I suggest the newer edition of the one I have. The internet is nice, but a good cookbook is full of extra information that can really help when you’re trying something new. You also need a recipe box so you have all your favorites in one place.

“I have to ask you a personal question, Steve.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Have you ever been to Wal-Mart?”

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“I love the color of this car!” Megan told him as she slid into the passenger seat of his bright red sedan. “So many cars are black and beige and white. Manual shift, too. You have excellent taste.”

“I like bright colors,” Steve said, pulling out from the curb. “Clint said Subaru made cars that lasted. He’s kind of scary when negotiating though. I think the salesperson accepted the offer just to get us out of there, and that was even before Clint whipped out a non-disclosure agreement Tony’s lawyer gave me.”

“Give me a frame of reference, here. Who’s Clint?”

“The archer from the attack on New York. He’s with S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Got it.”

Steve glanced over at her. “You really don’t pay much attention to the news, do you?”

Megan shook her head. “Most of it depresses me and it’s about stuff I can’t control anyway. I read the newspaper, yes. But I tend to focus more on the local stuff.” She stretched out in her seat. “This is really comfortable. You made a good choice. Growing up, we had a Subaru that had over 100,000 miles on it and it started right up in the dead of winter when the brand new van next to it didn’t. Take care of this beauty and you’ll have it a long time. It could go to 200,000 miles easily. You owe Clint a beer.”

Steve smiled. “I’ll tell him you said that.” He was quiet a moment, and then added. “He’ll appreciate hearing it. Too many people still blame him for the agents lost when Loki was on the rampage.”

“What part of mind control don’t they understand? Even I remember reading about that part. I just didn’t remember his name. I’d like to see how they fare after being made into a puppet by a demi god. They don’t get to judge until they’ve walked this path. And you can tell him I said that, too.”
“I will.” Steve checked over his shoulder before he smoothly switched lanes after merging onto the highway. “Why are we going to Wal-Mart again?”

“Because we can get everything you need in one stop without having to sell this awesome car to pay for it. Taking shopping carts off the property is theft and it’s a long walk home. There are some things I won’t get there, but for what you need today, it’s the easiest way to get it all.”

They rode awhile in comfortable silence. Megan tried not to stare at him too much, but it was fun watching him drive. He made it look more like a dance than the exercise in frustration she found it to be. “What do you do for fun, besides read?”

“Well, I’m learning to cook.”

“So I’ve heard. What else? Surely you don’t sit up nights polishing your shield while you watch infomercials. If so, we need to get you a hobby because that is seriously pathetic.”

He chuckled a bit, “I promise I don’t spend my nights polishing my shield.”

“But you are watching infomercials? Just how many pillow pets did you buy? Do I need to stage an intervention?” Megan covered her mouth with her hand in mock horror. ‘Oh my gosh, you bought the Insanity fitness DVD set didn’t you? That explains how you stay so fit!’”

“Well, I had to do something. After I bought the vacuum sealed storage bags I didn’t have to wrestle my sweaters into boxes that kept popping the lids. There went my fitness program.”

Megan laughed out loud at that mental image. “Did you wear out your old vacuum with all the abuse? I’ve heard that the Dyson is the best vacuum on the market”

“No. After I all three of my sweaters into a bag and had Thor hammer it flat, I was done. No vacuum required.” He said it so seriously that Megan completely dissolved into stitches. He smiled a bit and glanced over at her, meeting her eyes for a split second before looking back at the road.

“I can’t remember when I last laughed that hard,” she said when she finally caught her breath. “You’re good medicine. But seriously, you need to have something creative to do, something that’s yours. If you have something and you don’t want to share it, that’s fine. But you need something; we all do.”

“I have something.”

“Good. I’d like to stop at the bookstore while we’re out and about, if you don’t mind. I haven’t indulged in browsing a bookstore for awhile.”

“That’s fine. I’d like to do that, too.”

A shared glance confirmed they were both thinking about their mysterious reading club assignment. Feeling serious again, Megan turned back to the passenger window and watched the scenery.

“I like to sketch,” he said quietly into the silence.

“Pencil or charcoal?” She turned back to him and watched as he smoothly downshifted to accommodate the slower traffic ahead of them. Every movement was relaxed and graceful, reflecting his innate athletic ability. It made her feel unusually safe in the multilane traffic they were currently ensnared in.
“Both. During the war graphite pencils were easier to come by. And they worked better on the small pad I carried with me.”

“You must have filled a lot of hours between fighting battles that way.

“I did.”

“What happened to your belongings after your plane went down?”

“I don’t know. I’ve tried to focus on moving forward.” Tension crept back into his shoulders. He really carried a heavy burden of pain and loss everywhere he went.

Megan tried to steer the conversation away from the war. “Have you tried soft pastels? My almost mother-in-law, Janice, loves those.”

“Not yet. Maybe I should.”

“We should stop at a craft store and browse around. And there’s a book I bought Janice, you absolutely have to have. I’ll remember it if I see it. I got it for her last Christmas because it talked all about the theory of how to create different effects with color and light. I’m not even an artist and I enjoyed reading it since he explained things so clearly then showed examples. It’s by the guy who wrote the Dinotopia® series of books. What’s his name?” she rubbed her temples. “Argh! I hate it when I can’t remember names like that. I’ll have them look it up if it’s not on the shelf.”

“I want to buy you a bike helmet today,” Steve said, changing the subject rather abruptly.

“Ooooh Kayyy. And you want to do this why?”

“So I can take you riding.” He glanced over at her again, smiling slightly.

“You do realize that if you ride a motorcycle long enough, you’re going to put it down. And while you may heal from just about everything short of a beheading, I don’t.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.” From anyone else, it was a comment. From him, it was an oath.

Megan knew that he didn’t make the promise lightly. Even so, he couldn’t control all the other drivers on the road.

“Please?”

“If we get pinned between two semis and a SUV and one of them moves the wrong way, there’s not a whole lot you are going to be able to do about it. While I trust you with my life, I don’t trust the other idiots out here on the highway who think you should steer with your knees so you can text with one hand and put on makeup with the other and that you get bonus points for tailgating while going twenty mph over the speed limit.”

“That does seem to describe a lot of the folks I see out here on the road. But my bike is a bit different than most. Howard Stark outfitted the bike I rode in the war with some extra features and I let his son Tony do the same thing to my new one. I promise you’ll be okay, even pinned between two semis and an SUV.”

Megan could tell this was important to him, though she couldn’t fathom why. “Okay,” she agreed reluctantly. “But the helmet has to be bright purple. And while I concede that a leather jacket and pants make sense, I am not getting a bunch of tattoos, sleeping with you, or bleaching my hair just
so you can have a stereotypical biker chick riding behind you.”

Steve blushed a deep red. “I never meant to imply—”

“Gotcha!” Megan chuckled. “You blondes blush so easily.”

“I’m glad I amuse you.” His tone was offended, but smile tugging at the corner of his mouth betrayed him.

“I’m glad you’re my friend. For the last several months, I’ve been waking up every morning wondering how this became my life—”

“I know the feeling.”

“I know you do. But the last few weeks have been different. You’ve helped me find my footing and I’m starting to think I can really be happy again in a life without Randy. I’m the one who walked away. I knew it wasn’t going to work. But it still hurts. You’ve made that easier. There’s something really comforting about knowing I have a friend to turn to when things get bad. Even if you want me to play biker chick.”

Steve reached over and squeezed her hand quickly before putting it back on the steering wheel. “You’ve helped me, too, you know. For some reason, you see me and not Captain America. You have no idea how nice that is.”

“I think I do, sort of.” Megan looked down at her hands and picked at a sharp corner of her thumbnail. “I broke my engagement with Randy because I realized he didn’t really know me. He knew what he wanted me to be and somehow expected me to live up to an image I had no input in designing. And even though he said the right things when I called him on it, he’d turn around and make assumptions that told me he didn’t really believe his own words.”

Megan looked out the window, seeing only into the past. “Some things he had right. I do talk too much, listen too little, and have strong opinions. I’m not perfect. Far from it. But I need my own career. As badly as I want a family someday, I can’t be a stay home mom. I’m not wired that way. I wish I could be satisfied with that because parenting is the most important job there is, but I can’t. And Randy couldn’t accept that I wasn’t going to turn into a Stepford wife after graduation.”

“So you left.”

“And broke both our hearts in the process.” She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. She was not going to cry.

“You did the right thing. It’s his loss.”

“Thanks.”

“Doing the right thing doesn’t keep it from hurting.”

“Voice of experience?”

Steve nodded. The set of his jaw told her that those experiences had caused him plenty of pain over the years. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an object, then handed it to her.

She opened it carefully, admiring the workmanship. “I always loved compasses. Aside from being practical, they’re a good reminder that there’s more to the universe than we can detect with our senses.” Turning her attention to the picture in the lid, she studied the face looking out at her.
“There is real strength in her gaze. Who was she?”

Steve looked a bit surprised by her question. “I thought everyone knew.”

Megan shook her head. “I have made it a point to avoid reading up on you. I’m sure there are Wikipedia pages galore, a few books, and who knows what else. But you’re my friend, not a research project. All I know is what you tell me plus a few tidbits I’ve heard and there, which I don’t trust anyways since those sources can be unreliable. Since her picture is in your compass, I know she was important to you. Since it’s from a newspaper clipping, I’m assuming she either didn’t give it to you or that wartime conditions made photo exchanges impossible.” Megan handed the compass back to him and watched as he handled the compass reverently, closing it gently before returning it to his pocket.

“Peggy Carter. She helped found S.H.I.E.L.D. after… after the war ended.” Steve took a deep breath. “She was sunshine. She was part of the S.S.R. initiative that made me…” he waved at his body, searching for words. “She was smart and strong and…” Steve took another deep breath. “We never had a chance.”

“Because she didn’t know you cared or because your plane went down?”

“I called her on the radio. I guess I hoped someone had a better idea for stopping the plane. At the very least, they’d know what had happened. Peggy answered. She promised to teach me to dance. I was to meet her at the Stork Club the following Saturday. Her last words to me were, ‘Just be there,’ and I wasn’t.”

“Did she marry, after the war?”

“I don’t know. I can’t decide if I really want to know or not. I hate the idea of her being alone for the rest of her life. But…”

“It’s okay.” Megan touched his hand. “You feel what you feel. There’s no right or wrong about that. You’ll find out when you’re ready. If she did marry, it doesn’t mean she cared less about you, even if you find yourself jealous of her new guy. If she’s even half the woman you think she was, I know she’d be really proud of you.”

*The book Megan is thinking about is Color and Light: A Guide for the Realist Painter by James Gurney*
The Battle of the Bill

“I feel like we bought the whole store,” Steve said as they unloaded the cart and moved the bags to his car.

“They need to go back inside and look around again. I’m pretty sure we left plenty on the shelves.” Megan teased. “Besides, half of what you bought was food. The food storage containers and appliances will last you for years.”

“True.” Steve looked around the parking lot, “To be honest, I thought it was going to be awful. People at work kept telling me to avoid big stores.”

“I think they confuse the challenges of adjusting to a new time with adjusting to being an adult. You fought on the front lines in a brutal war. How can Wal-Mart compare to that for sensory overload?”

“The war was a lot harder.” He shut the trunk lid and went around to open Megan’s door for her.

“Exactly. Granted, if you had no idea what you wanted or needed to get, it might be a bit overwhelming to wander into the small appliances aisle. But it’s quite possible to cook without any of those.” Megan rested her hand on top of the doorknob as she tossed her purse onto the floor of the car. She looked up at him with her most innocent expression. “From what I understand, when you were growing up, you had fire and a few stone tools. Spear a rabbit, hang it over the fire on a spit, dinner is done.”

Steve shook his head sadly. “Megan, fire wasn’t discovered until I was a teenager. We ate our rabbits raw before that.”

Megan laughed. “I stand corrected. Let’s hit Michael’s next. I saw one near the bookstore we passed about a quarter mile back. You can get some more sketch pads and look at their assortment of supplies. If you want to browse longer than I do, I’ll just meet you at the bookstore,” she said as she got in.

“Okay.” Steve said as he shut the door for her. She wasn’t really used to that, but knew it was just the way he’d been raised. He probably did it without even a conscious thought.

“How about you? What do you do for fun besides read and sew?” he asked as he guided the car out of the parking lot and back onto the main road.

“I like to go horseback riding. Now that I have a job, I’ve got to find a new stable to ride at. An hour at the barn is the best therapy in the world. I really miss riding and need to get back to going every week.”

“You like to ride horses and you’re afraid of a motorcycle? Bikes don’t spook and take off without you.”

Megan smiled at him. “You are so clearly a city kid. Yes, horses spook sometimes. But lessons with a good instructor minimize the risks. The more you learn about horses, the better you can tell what they’re thinking and feeling. As long as you respect them and stay aware of your surroundings, it’s not that dangerous. Besides, it’s about the only exercise I actually enjoy. Gym class was my least favorite class in school.”

Steve seemed surprised at that. “Really? Why?”
“I’m lousy at all of it. Look up ‘clumsy’ in the dictionary and you’ll find my picture there. Not to mention the misery of sweating. Given a choice of doing a half hour of treadmill torture or curling up in the air conditioning with a good book, the book wins every time. But I love being around the horses and as long as I have a horse patient enough to put up with my pathetic attempts to ride, I’ll keep trying to get better at it.”

“I’m sure you are better than you think,” he told her as they pulled into the plaza housing Michael’s and a Barnes and Noble.

“You haven’t seen me in action.” Her stomach rumbled. “Hey, after we hit the bookstore, do you want to stop at a restaurant and get a bite to eat? If you’re not hungry, I can just dash over to McDonald’s and get something.”

“I could use a meal, too. What do you suggest?”

Megan looked around at their choices. “With your appetite, Eat’n Park. They have a great buffet and salad bar to go with your meal. My treat.”

Megan’s stomach growled again, this time loudly enough for Steve to hear it, too. “Let’s eat first,” he said smiling at her. “But, I’m paying.”

Megan blushed and nodded her agreement. There was more than one way to win the battle of the bill.

Once they were seated and Steve was busy assembling a salad, she slipped from the booth to use the restroom. On her way, she located the cashier and handed over $40 in cash. “My chivalrous friend is insisting he’s going to pay for our meal. Please just have our server bring the change when he asks for the check. We’re sitting in a booth along the windows near the salad bar.”

“Got it,” the server smiled at her as she took the money. “You’re sneaky.”

Megan smiled back at her. “You have no idea.”

Over lunch, the conversation drifted from books, to history and then current events. It would be too easy to fall for Steve and get her heart broken in the process. He was so genuine, it was hard for her to believe he hadn’t been snatched up already, except for the way he was still grieving for his past life and keeping mostly to himself. Megan knew that as he adjusted better and started to open up more, he’d have his pick of partners. Hopefully, they’d stay friends. She knew she had plenty of her own healing to do before she started dating again, but dang if he wasn’t just too perfect when it came to potential boyfriend material.

“Megan?”

“Hmm?” She answered automatically, focusing on her food and her thoughts.

“You’re brooding.”

Megan looked up and saw his gorgeous blue eyes looking at her with worry. “What?”

“You’re so serious all of a sudden. What’s wrong?”

Megan blinked and shook her head slightly. “Sorry. Just got lost in my own thoughts there, thinking about past choices and the paths they lead to.” She scrambled to divert the conversation in a new direction. “Do you mind talking about your past? How you got involved in the war?”
“I don’t mind.” He shrugged, going along with the change in topic though she could still see concern in his gaze. “I wanted to enlist, I was too sick and weak to get in.” He looked down shyly, “I wouldn’t take no for an answer. Did you know I tried multiple times before Dr. Erskine got me in?”

“That can’t have been legal. What’d you do, move around from recruiting station to recruiting station and try to stay ahead of the record keepers?”

“Pretty much. The last time I tried was when Bucky headed out. Dr. Erskine came in and offered me a chance. The papers were signed and I headed off to a training camp.”

“What did your parents think about all this?”

“They were dead by then. Father was taken out by mustard gas in World War I serving in the 107th infantry the year I was born. Mother died when I was 22 and studying in art school. That was all before Pearl Harbor was attacked.”

“Your mother must have been incredibly resilient to raise you by herself in that era.”

“She was. Anyway, we trained at camp, I was picked for Project Rebirth, and the rest is history.”

“Not so fast. When did you find out what was involved with his experiments? Didn’t someone talk to you about the risks involved and give you a chance to decline? I know informed consent rules were not in force, but surely they told you what you were up against.”

“A little bit. It didn’t matter to me. It was the chance I’d been waiting for to serve my country.”

“Time out.” Megan sat back in her seat, reeling a bit from his matter of fact narration about a potentially lethal experience he’d subjected himself to. “This goes deeper than wanting to serve. There were plenty of ways to help the war effort stateside.”

“But men my age were enlisting, Megan. I had to try.”

“Okay.” There was no point arguing. “So how bad was the treatment? It couldn't have been easy on your body.”

Steve shook his head. “I tried not to scream, but at one point, I heard them calling for Dr. Esrkine to shut it down. I told them I could take it and to keep going. So they did. He was a good man. He lost his whole family to the Nazis and wanted nothing more than to stop the slaughter. He’s the first friend I lost to Hydra. I was still trying to walk in my new body and they shot him down in front of us.”

“What happened then?”

“They wanted to keep me for research since Dr. Esrkine took the serum formula with him to his grave. I didn’t sign up to be a lab rat. So they sent me off to sell war bonds.”

“That had to have been miserable being up on stage like that.” Megan couldn’t imagine this shy, introverted Steve performing on stage in a cheesy skit. She let the lab rat comment pass.

Steve nodded a little. “Probably as miserable as watching me. But sales went up in every city I performed in.” He shrugged one shoulder slightly. “At least I was helping.”

“What changed? What made you leave the U.S.O. stage behind?”
“Peggy.” He gave her a wry smile. “It always comes back to Peggy. I think she knew how frustrated I was. She found me in one of the camps in Europe and challenged me to do more. And then she told me how the 107th had gone out to fight Schmidt and was M.I.A. That was Bucky’s unit. Howard Stark dropped me behind the lines from his plane and I was able to help break the guys out. We walked back to base and they were forced to acknowledge that I could do a bit more than just raise money.” Steve dug into his meal again.

“Bucky, not Peggy,” Megan corrected.

“Hmm?” He looked up at her, confused.

“I’m going to go armchair psychiatrist on you and say that you have some major abandonment issues at work,” she said, pointing her fork at him before she stabbed it into her chicken. “Bucky’s not just your brother, he’s your anchor. When he left, you had to follow him any way you could. You were so desperate to follow him that you risked your life in a half-baked experiment. You became an active duty fighter only when he was captured. It’s all about Bucky. That’s why you’re so adrift now. You’ve spent so much of your life trying to follow him you never thought about forging your own path.”

Steve rocked back his seat with a sharp intake of breath, staring at her.

Mortified, Megan dropped her eyes, giving him what privacy she could. “I’m sorry. I’ll shut up now.” She grabbed the menu. “Do you want dessert? The apple pie uses canned apples, so I suggest you skip that. Their banana cream is to die for.”

She was horrified she had dissected his motives so boldly. Wanting to understand him was one thing, but pretending she knew what motivated him crossed a million lines. Her face grew red in shame and she felt tears welling up in her eyes. When was she going to learn to think first and talk later rather than think out loud? “I was out of line and I am really sorry I said any of that.”

“You’re right.” His voice was so soft she could barely hear him.

“It’s not alright. I had no right to—” She took a deep breath, still refusing to look up. “Let’s just delete the last five minutes.”

“Megan, look at me.” He took the dessert menu from her and she forced herself to meet his gaze. She owed him that much. “Friends tell each other the truth, even when it hurts.”

She shook her head. “Not when the questions weren’t even asked.”

“Especially then.”

“But I—”

“Have nothing to apologize for. I think you’re right about Bucky. Now that you’ve pointed it out, it’s pretty obvious.”

“That doesn’t excuse—”

“You are just trying to understand me and I appreciate that, actually. For some reason, you see me pretty clearly, faults and all. I prefer that to the way so many people only see the Captain. We’re good.”

“You’re kind.”
“Do you really want dessert?”

Megan shook her head. “I’m stuffed. You?”

“Homemade pie is better.” He caught their server’s eye and she came over. “Could you bring the check and her change, please?”

“Right away,” the server said before looking questioningly at Megan.

She shrugged and mouthed, “Busted.”

He smiled at her as soon as the server left them. “I have very good hearing. You just upgraded yourself to a nicer helmet plus a jacket to go with it.”
The following weekend, Megan was nearly bursting out of her skin in anticipation of Steve’s visit. He had made good on his promise to buy her a helmet and jacket and she had been aghast at the cost of both of them. Steve just smiled and said he had a lot of back pay to spend and that it wasn’t open to negotiation. It was infuriating how stubborn he could be. But she thought she might have found a way to pay him back. If he would just get here, she would be able to see if she’d found a way to make up for her blunt observations.

Despite her impatience, she startled violently when he knocked on her door.

“What’s wrong?” Something in her face alarmed him since he set his helmet down immediately and took her hand. “You’re hands are clammy.”

“I’m fine. Come in. I have something for you.” She pulled him inside, forcing herself to take a deep breath and take the time to close and lock the door. “It’s on the table. Go ahead and open it.”

He took his jacket off and hung it on the back of one of the chairs, looking at her questioningly.

“I owed you after last weekend and the things I said.” Megan held up her hands to ward off her protest. “I needed to do this. I hope you like it. If not, stick it in your closet.”

The item was large and flat. Carefully, he turned it over and cut the tape with his fingernails to avoid tearing the paper. It was pure torture watching him open it so carefully, but she knew that when he had grown up, something like wrapping paper was carefully saved to be used again. He wasn’t trying really to torment her by opening it more and more slowly….

“Why don’t we have some tea first?” Steve said, setting the package down only half opened. “You’re worse than a kid at Christmas.”

“I’m going to call Director Fury and ask him to put you back in the ice if don’t open it right now.”

“He won’t listen. Are you sure you don’t want to wait until Christmas?”

“Steve…”

His smile just grew wider and he unfolded the last of the paper. He read the writing on the back of the frame. “Dedication of new S.H.I.E.L.D HQ July 4, 1946.” He gave Megan a puzzled glance then turned the frame over.

Megan watched the emotions flash across his face: grief, longing, love, pride… and several other that merged into a blur she couldn't process. He swallowed hard and continued to stare at the picture. “I’ve never seen…. Where did? How?” Tears welled up in his eyes.

“I’ll give you two some time alone and then I’ll tell you all about it,” Megan said softly. She put on a kettle of water for tea and excused herself to use the bathroom. In her small apartment, it was really the only place she could retreat to.

When she emerged a few minutes later, Steve was sitting at the table, studying the photograph where it now sat on her bookshelf, leaning up against the books with the frame bottom barely an inch away from the edge of the shelf. “It’s the most beautiful photograph of her I’ve ever seen.”

“Agreed, and I’ve spent much of the last week looking at every photograph of her I could find.
Maria Hill came to the rescue. The fact you are in the photo, too, well, that was just Providence.”

“Tell me.”

“I’ll tell you the story about the photograph first, and then how I got my hands on it. Tea?”

“Sure.” He didn’t look away from the photograph, even when she put a hot mug of tea in front of him.

Megan sat down at the table and studied the image of Peggy again. The navy blue matte perfectly matched the color of Peggy’s suit and Stetson Stratoliner hat, save for the red ribbon hatband that happened to match her lipstick. She stood in front of a stone wall, presumably the lobby of S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. In her hands and leaning against her chest, she held both a framed photograph of pre-serum Steve Rogers in his army uniform and a single red rose that bore a yellow ribbon. But as nicely dressed as she was, it was the look on her face that took the photograph from beautiful to stunning.

Peggy wasn’t looking at the camera. Rather her gaze was focused somewhere over the photographer’s shoulder. She was peering into the past and clearly thinking about Steve. Her mouth had just a hint of a smile, and her eyes shone with love and pride. Looking closely, you could tell there was just a hint of extra moisture pooling near her lower lids. Strong and proud, she held the photo of Steve in graceful hands that caressed the wood of the simple frame.

“As you read on the back, the photograph was taken at the dedication to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new headquarters. Before that, they had been working out of rented office space. It turns out that Peggy picked the name. She wanted the agency to be named S.H.I.E.L.D. after your shield. From there, it was just a case of coming up with a mash-up of words to fit.

“One other thing she insisted on was that photograph of you. According to the newspaper clippings, it was her favorite. Everyone else wanted a photograph of Captain America in full uniform. Their second choice was Captain Rogers in military dress uniform. Peggy, however, insisted on that photo. She said she never wanted it forgotten that strength of character was the most important trait in any agent, not athletic prowess or military medals. She refused to back down. She said they could decorate the entire building any way they wanted, but that photograph was the one that was going in the lobby. They hung it up at the dedication ceremony. Of course before that, there were speeches, and she stood to the side of the podium holding your picture while the politicians blathered on. She was the one who hung it in place. There was quite the kerfuffle that she took two steps up a small stepstool in heels to do so. She silenced them with a look.”

“I can imagine,” Steve said softly. “That sounds just like her.”

“One of the other photos I found had ‘Pit-dog Peggy’ written in pencil on the back. I don’t know how many people had the guts to call her that to her face, though.

“Not unless they wanted to take a punch to the jaw. The first recruit who tried to sass her discovered she had a mean right hook. He dropped like a stone.” Steve smiled at the memory and looked at Megan for the first time since he’d opened the package.

“That must have been something to see! Now for the story of how I got my hands on it. I started with what I could find online, which wasn’t much. From there, I tried the libraries with old newspapers and magazines that had been saved to microfilm. I found a few photographs, but nothing really special. So, I went to see Agent Hill to see if she had any ideas. The next day, she brought me a folder from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s archives. As soon as I saw that photograph, I knew it was
the one I was looking for. She signed the necessary copyright forms and let me take it to a photography and framing studio where they enlarged it and framed it for me. The original is safely back in the archives."

“You read about her life then, after the war?” Steve dropped his eyes back to his tea.

“I did.”

“What did you find?” His voice was quiet.

Megan could tell he was still coming to terms with the loss of the life he had known, so she hedged her answer. “She tried to make each day count and live a life that she felt honored your memory.”

“Did she marry?”

“The Peggy in that photograph isn’t married. She’s still your Peggy, the one who’s grieving and trying to find her way forward.” Megan put her hand on his arm. “As far as what came next in her life, are you sure you’re ready to know the answer to that question?”

“I don’t know.”

“The next time you ask me, I’ll tell you. For now, though, why don’t you just enjoy knowing how proud she was of you and how hard she was working to make something good come out of your sacrifice? I’ll see what else I can find out about her life after she retired from S.H.I.E.L.D. Yes, I know that she lived long enough to retire. I don’t know when she died, though. I’ll find out.”

“Okay. That reminds me…” Steve reached over to his jacket and pulled two books out of an inner pocket. He laid them both on the table. “I’m ready for the next Narnia book if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Let me get it for you.” She took the top book and swapped it for another on her shelf, then picked up another from her end table, trading it for the one Steve hadn’t mentioned.

Steve reached for the tablet and pen that was lying on the table while saying aloud, “What are we making today?” Keep talking. Stark gave me a way to check for bugs.

“I have a couple of ideas. Let me get my recipe box and you can let me know how ambitious you feel like being.” Megan got up and started rambling on about how much she had enjoyed reading The Horse and His Boy as a horse-crazed middle school student. While she chatted, she dug in her pantry for supplies and made a point of making some extra noise as she pretended to hunt for vital ingredients. Steve, meanwhile, was walking around her apartment with his phone in hand and some tiny gadget connected to it with a thin wire. He was frowning. Damn.

Megan tore the page he had written on from the pad and took it to the sink, burning it as she always did when their silent conversations were done. She sent the ashes down the garbage disposal then slammed a cupboard door shut. “I forgot to buy Worcestershire sauce and you cannot make a good meatloaf without it. So we either have to make a grocery store run or go to plan B.”

“Let’s go get some hot fudge sundaes, stop at the grocery store, and then come back here.” Steve held up two fingers, and then pointed in the general direction of where the bugs were hidden.

“When it comes to sweets, you are as bad as a twelve-year-old,” Megan chided him. She held her new jacket out for scanning and stood while he checked the rest of her outfit, blushing slightly as he did so. When he gave her a thumbs up, she grabbed her purse and held that up for inspection, too. The frown returned, so she pulled out her driver’s license, debit card, and keys, which all passed, so she stuffed them into the pockets of her jeans.
“Don’t forget your helmet.”

“We’re taking your bike?” she squeaked. So much for just dashing to the corner market a few blocks away.

“I’m taking you to the best ice cream stand I’ve found so far. You’ll love it.”

In a daze, Megan let him lead her to his waiting motorcycle. He double checked the fit of her helmet, showed her where to put her feet, and helped her get on. The next thing she knew, the engine beneath her vibrated to life and she had her arms wrapped around Steve’s waist as she pressed herself against his back.

“Hold on tight!” he told her, even putting his hands on hers to get her to hold onto him more securely.

“You just gave away your motive!” she fired back, trying to hide her fear beneath false bravado.

“There’s a tattoo shop next to the ice cream stand,” he teased as they took off down the street.

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Despite her misgivings, she eventually started to relax a bit. Steve handled the bike expertly, but never in a way that felt reckless or out of control. The bike was not nearly as loud as so many motorcycles she’d driven around had been and she made a mental note to ask about that when they stopped. The feel of the wind coming around Steve’s solid body was exhilarating and it seemed like only a few minutes before they came to a stop and he cut the engine.

“Better than you thought it would be?” he asked as he took off his helmet and hung it from a handlebar.

Megan nodded. “I don’t ever want to ride solo, but you drive in a way that does make me feel safe.”

“Good. Let’s find a spot away from the others so we can talk while we eat.”

She nodded again, noting with some disgust the wary and disapproving looks some of the other patrons were giving her as they took their place in line. Typical. She couldn’t even point out that they were giving dirty looks to Captain America and his companion since the last thing they needed was to attract attention.

“Hey, baby, you said you’d get me a new tattoo at the shop beside the ice cream stand,” she purred as she sidled up beside Steve and stuck her thumb through the belt-loop on the back of his jeans. “But I don’t see a tattoo parlor anywhere.”

The women behind them in line pulled her young son closer and shifted so she was between Megan and the child.

“That was before you told me where you wanted it, kitten.” Steve replied without hesitation. It delighted her that he was willing to play along. “I can’t stand the thought of another man seeing you like that. We’ll have to go see Sasha to get you inked there.”

“Ah, baby, you’re so sweet.” Megan ducked her head, hiding it in his shoulder to cover the laugh she was barely holding back.

“Why don’t you go find us a place to sit down, kitten? I’ll be right there.”
“As long as you remember that I like extra nuts…” Megan replied, sauntering way with an extra sway in her hips. “On my sundae, too,” she tossed over her shoulder.

The woman behind Steve took two steps back from him, dragging her son with her.

Megan let her own smile escape as she headed to a picnic table a good distance from the others.

“What was that all about?” Steve asked her softly as he put a hot fudge sundae in front of her, covered in extra peanuts just like she’d requested.

“Some of the people in line were looking at us like we ate children for breakfast. If I acted friendly, we might not be able to get a chance to talk. So I went with pushing their buttons instead.”

She dug into the sundae and moaned in pleasure as the creamy ice cream and warm hot fudge hit her tongue. “How’d you find this place? It’s amazing.”

“Out riding.” He took another bite of his own sundae. “I see why you reacted to the book list like you did. The stories in them are horrifying.”

Megan nodded. “Who do you think suggested them? Director Fury?”

“I don’t know. Stark says Fury’s secrets have secrets and I have to agree with him on that. But, we haven’t been discreet about reading books and talking about them. The whole idea was that it was safe and didn’t lead to discussions of the classified work we’re both involved with.”

“I started wondering if Fury called me to his office when he did just so it would set my work back. Maybe I screwed up by pushing back and making him wait.”

“Megan, you can’t start thinking like that. It will make you crazy if you keep second guessing yourself. You did what you thought was right at the time and you need to keep doing that.”

“I sabotaged my experiments.” She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. “I managed to trigger some fungal contamination in the incubator and I used that as an excuse to ditch the cells I was working on. Then I was yelled at for destroying a rare stock of primary cells, not that they told me ahead of time they were primary, which I pointed out. I’ve hardly slept all week, wondering if I did the right thing. But today you confirmed my apartment’s bugged and I don’t know who else to trust besides you.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this,” Steve told her, his voice low and sounding guilty.

“You didn’t. I was involved the day I first went to work at S.H.I.E.L.D. I don’t regret for one moment getting to know you.”

His eyes were sad and distant. “I still feel responsible.”

“Fight the urge. We need to figure out what it all means.” Megan leaned her elbows on the picnic table and rubbed the muscles on the back of her neck “I’ve spent the last week tearing the incubator apart and cleaning every nook and cranny. Did you know that some fungi can eat the glue used to adhere a rubber gasket to the metal frame inside the incubator? Microbes are amazing, but a pain to clean an incubator. I’ve gone as slowly as I can, but I have to bring that incubator back on line tomorrow if it passes the tests on CO\textsubscript{2} levels. It was a temporary stalling tactic, but one I can’t use again any time soon. No one will believe I’m suddenly that bad at preventing contamination. We need to figure out what the book list message was about. That’s our only solid clue.”
“Well, the book about the Tuskegee men\(^1\) seems to be a message about government research and informed consent. I understand better now why you were so upset that I wasn’t told more about the risks of Dr. Erskine’s serum. But, Megan, I volunteered for that. Those men, they thought they were being treated and they lied to by the very government that is supposed to protect them. I just don’t understand how that relates to S.H.I.E.L.D. now. The IRBs\(^2\) that came after make it nearly impossible to repeat that type of study ever again. Your own reaction is proof the new mindset about informed consent is well established in the scientific community.”


“What happened to Mrs. Lacks\(^3\) is awful. I feel so bad for her family. Her cells, though . . . so many good things have come from their use. I can’t fault the researchers for using them even though they really should have gotten permission. But again, it happened a long time ago before the new mindset was established.

“I know you do work with cells at S.H.I.E.L.D., but beyond that, I’m not sure what to think. Director Fury promised me that no one was trying to recreate the serum from Project Rebirth. Even if I don’t entirely believe him, they’ve never been successful, so why the warning now?”

“Is your middle initial G, by any chance?”

“Yeah. My middle name is Grant. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Megan wiped the tears from her cheeks, unable to hold them back any longer. “The cells I’ve been working with? All of them had the same root code as part of their name. SGR, SGRkid, SGRhep, SGRlym . . . kidney, hepatocyte, lymphocyte. I think the primary cells in the lab are all from you. And I’m thinking you didn’t give permission.”

“Ross,” Steve whispered. “That explains why Ross has been hanging around.” He shook his head as he looked at Megan. “I don’t know if you’re in more or less danger if I tell you about Ross.”

“I’m no spy. The less I know the better, at least for now. I’ll tell you as much as I know about the work going on, which isn’t much, and then you can decide what to do next. Can you trust Stark to help you?”

Steve nodded. “There is a lot more to him that what he shows the public.” He put his hand over hers, looking at her with a very serious expression. “This is potentially very dangerous, Megan. I don’t think S.H.I.E.L.D. tracks their own employees as a rule. If someone on the outside is watching you, they think your work is very important. If it’s someone on the inside at S.H.I.E.L.D . . . I don’t know what to think.”

“I have to keep my projects moving forward, but I can tell you what they’re about. We know my apartment is bugged, so I honestly think no matter what I do next, I’m already too involved to be ignored. They just don’t know that we know. Someone on our side is trying to give us a heads-up, at least.” Megan shrugged and gave him a grim smile. “I’ll do whatever you say, Captain.”

\(^1\) *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* by James H. Jones

\(^2\) Institutional Review Board, which are panels of impartial individuals who oversee and review research involving humans and ensure that abuse in the name of research is a thing of the past. If you have ever participated in a study and had to sign forms indicating what harm you might suffer...
or benefits you might receive and wondered why you had to sign such “silly” paperwork just to participate in a survey, you can thank the IRB. While the paperwork can be a huge pain and hassle, an IRB is a necessary and valuable tool to ensure that all humans are treated with care and respect.

3The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot
The next two weeks passed in a blur. Megan and Steve continued to have lunch together a couple of times a week and discussed fiction works that had no bearing on their own confidential assignments at S.H.I.E.L.D. In the lab, Megan proceeded with her assigned experiments, asking only the questions essential to ensuring the experiments were well designed. She made a point of appearing to be disinterested in the larger project, saying she knew it was probably classified and that she didn't need to be bothered with details that had no direct bearing on her work.

To anyone watching, she was the model employee, hardworking and focused. Inside, she was falling apart. Nightmares of being hunted across open plains of ice and snow disrupted her sleep. She tried to act like nothing was wrong, but waking up Sunday morning with cramps was just too much. Of course, she had to take some time to pay the bills coming due and see if she could wrangle her budget into letting her take riding lessons again. Maybe it was for the best that Steve was going to have his Sundays free again so he didn’t have to put up with her any more. She was hardly cheerful company.

When he knocked at her door shortly after noon, she startled. How had the morning gotten away from her? She was still in her robe, her hair a mess and damp from the shower, and the table piled in paperwork. Crap.

“Megan?” Steve couldn’t keep the shock from his expression when she opened the door. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything, but nothing you can fix.” She waved him in. “Sorry, the morning got away from me in my self-pity party. Let me pull on some clothes and we can get started.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He toed of his shoes and hung his jacket on the back of the door before setting his helmet down.

Megan thought about it but decided that she didn’t want to share that side of herself with whoever was listening. “Not really,” she said, motioning to her ears so he’d know why. “I’ll be fine once the medicine kicks in.”

“Are you sick? We don’t have to do this today if you don’t feel good.”

“No, I’m not sick. It’s just run-of-the-mill PMS with the cramps and bad mood that go with it.”

“How about some tea?” His blue eyes were caring if no longer worried.

Megan nodded and went to her dresser to dig out some clothes while Steve filled the tea kettle and started it heating. The phone rang as she was en route to the bathroom to change. She looked at the caller ID and sighed heavily, not wanting to deal with her brother right now. “Hello?”

“Megan? I have a question for you,” Carl said into her ear.

She forced herself to be patient and cheerful. “What’s up, sweetie?”

“Andrew’s having trouble breathing. Do you think I should take him to the hospital?”

“What kind of trouble?” Megan sat down at the table and leaned her head on her hand. She got so sick of playing twenty questions, but that was how Carl worked. Frustration wasn’t going to change that.
“His nose is stuffy.”

“Did you suction the mucus out with the bulb?” She glanced up at Steve, who was looking at her with concern. “Brother,” she mouthed to him, and he nodded.

“Yes, but he hates that. It just made him cry more.”

“Is he cough—” Megan heard the classic croupy cough in the background. “Is that Andrew I hear coughing?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, I want you to look carefully at his lips. Think about how your lips turn blue when you get really cold in the swimming pool. Are his lips blue like that or nice and pink like usual?” Steve came over and sat down at the table with her when he heard the last bit. The kind sympathy in his eyes nearly made her lose it. She was really, really going to miss Sunday afternoons with him. She passed him the graduation certificate she’d printed up last night and shoved the stack of bills aside.

“Yeah, they’re a little blue.”

“How about when you look at his fingernails. Down near the base, not the tip where you trim them. What do his fingernails look like? What color are they?”

“Kind of grey. Is that bad? Should we take him to the hospital?”

“Yeah, he needs to go to the emergency room. What are the roads like there? I know you were supposed to get snow.”

“It’s freezing rain.”

“Okay, Carl, you need to hang up and call 911. Tell them your seven-month-old son has croup and has blue lips. Ask them to send an ambulance.”

“We can take him to the hospital,” Carl said.

“No, not in freezing rain. If you end up in the ditch, you can’t do anything to help Andrew. The ambulance has oxygen and breathing medicine on board that the medics can use to treat Andrew as soon as they get to your house. Hang up, call 911, then call me back as soon as the firemen get there. Is Stephanie at home?”

“No, she’s at work. What should I do with Keith and Christopher?”

“After you call the ambulance, see if they can stay with your neighbor. You’ll need to ride in the ambulance with Andrew. I’ll call Stephanie and Mom and let them know what’s going on, okay? Call 911, then the neighbor, then me, okay?”

“Okay. Bye.”

Megan put down the phone and rested her forehead on the table. “Can this day suck any more?”

“Can I help?” Steve asked.

“No, but thanks. There’s nothing much we can do from here. They’re six hours away by car. The local volunteer fire department is top notch. They’ll have someone there in a matter of minutes and take care of things until the ambulance gets there.”
Megan fetched her cell phone from her purse and sat back down at the table. She didn’t want to tie up her landline making phone calls until she knew a first responder was on site.

“Graduation, huh?” Steve held up the certificate she’d printed for him. She couldn’t quite read the expression on his face, but he didn’t seem happy.

“I’ll have you know that you the very first person to graduate from Dr. Buchwald’s cooking school.” Megan dialed her phone and called her mother, relaying what had happened with Carl.

Steve got up when the teakettle whistled and fixed her a cup of tea while she talked, then sat with her at the table while she called Stephanie. She was still on the phone with Stephanie when her landline rang again and Carl told her that some of the volunteer firefighters had arrived. When she finally hung up both phones and laid them on the table, she was drained. She sank back into her chair and gave Steve a wan smile. “How much of that did you follow?”

“All of it, I think. Carl doesn’t problem solve very well, does he?”

Megan shook her head. “He’s our miracle baby. But—” She cut herself off, mindful of the bugs in her apartment. “It’s a long story best left for another day.”

“Go get dressed. I’m taking you out.”

“I’m okay.”

“You look like you need a hot fudge sundae. C’mon, the fresh air will do you good.”

Megan studied him for a moment, then nodded. He looked like he wanted to talk.

When she returned to the table, Steve handed her back her phone and put his finger to his lips. She nodded, figuring he’d explain what that was all about later. He turned his own phone so she could see a text he’d sent to someone named Jarvis, asking him to reroute her landline calls to her cell phone. When she was done reading it, he then showed her the reply indicating the task had been accomplished. It melted her heart to think he understood that she wanted to be in reach of her brother even though there was nothing more she could do to help.

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Megan used the time on his bike to indulge in a few tears. She probably wasn’t going to get another chance to go riding like this with him now that cooking school was over. And while she knew her hormones were making her unusually sensitive today, the fact remained that she was still reeling form a breakup, lonely in her new town, and becoming too accustomed to Steve’s companionship. She had to force herself to expand her circle of friends and not stay with what was easy and comfortable or else she’d be in for a world of hurt when he let go of his own past and started living life again.

She drowned her sorrows in hot fudge with extra nuts. She almost started crying again when she realized he’d remembered her preference without being asked.

He didn’t press her to talk the entire time they ate, just watched her carefully and pretended not to notice her red eyes. It was a good reminder for her to talk less often. As her ex had reminded her frequently, she talked too much.

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you?” he finally asked when she finished her sundae and wiped her mouth on the napkin. “You’re unusually quiet today.”
“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Steve gave her a strange look, but didn’t answer until he’d thrown away their dishes and sat back down across from her at the picnic table. “That’s the second time you’ve made a negative comment about your conversation skills. Who has you thinking that you talk too much?”

“Randy.”

“He was wrong. I happen to like hearing what you’re thinking. You analyze everything around you.”

“I know. That’s my other bad habit. I over analyze and over share.”

“No, you don’t. During the war, I learned how important it was to question everything and pay attention to details. Those details made the difference between life and death. Don’t devalue those skills just because you’re not fighting on the front lines. Besides, I’ve seen you at work and overheard what your coworkers say about you. The comments lean towards you being shy and quiet. If you’re nervous, I know you push back to keep others off balance. You only share your thoughts when you let your guard down. I’m honored you trust me that way.” He covered her hands with his own. “If you don’t want to talk about what is bothering you, that’s okay. But if you do, I’m happy to listen.”

Megan couldn’t keep the tears back after that. The man was good at giving off the cuff speeches. “Three things, four if you count the ambulance debacle.” Megan sighed. “And they’re all stupid first-world problems that aren’t really problems. I’m just having a wallow day.”

“You’re allowed to. What’s the first one?” He looked at her like he had all the time in the world to listen. He was a good listener like that, giving someone his full attention without any pressure or expectations they had to meet.

“I should know better than to mix paying bills with PMS. I woke up this morning nearly doubled over with cramps. But Carl’s lot rent is due soon and I needed to send another check to the lady I have deliver them groceries.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and fished in her jacket pocket for a tissue.

“You’re supporting them?”

“My mom and I are. Depending which expert you talk to, Carl is either mildly autistic, slow, has pervasive developmental delays, or all of the above. The real problem is that his wife Stephanie, is a no-good user with no more common sense than a baked potato. She has just as many issues as my brother does, but none of the kindness. I’d be able to forgive all of that if I actually thought she loved him. But if the way she treats him around us is any indication… it’s not what I’d call a happy marriage. Carl adores her despite it. So you end up with three kids being raised by parents who are mentally still kids themselves.”

Steve squeezed the hand he still held but didn’t interrupt.

“He and Stephanie both work, and they could get by if they knew how to handle money. But they’re like eight-year-old kids. On his payday, they think they’re rich and go spend it on stupid stuff. A few days later they can’t pay rent or the electric bill. Mom’s retired, she can’t afford to support them with the way they burn through money. Logical consequences don't work with them; Carl qualifies for government help on managing their budget but Stephanie refuses to sign them up. Mom and I can’t sit by and let those kids go hungry. Even though he doesn't know I’m the one paying his lot rent, he knows that there is an anonymous donor out there who has some groceries
delivered once a week. Stephanie spends all of her paycheck on herself and expects Carl to support them. Mom bought an older trailer for them with the deal being he’d pay her rent to cover taxes, maintenance, and the lot rent for the trailer park they live in. But he just ‘forgets’ to pay rent and figures it doesn’t matter. I cover that as best I can, too. It will get easier as I move up into better paying positions. But right now, it’s really hard.”

“You’re a good sister. He’s lucky to have you.”

“Thanks. But that leads to petty, selfish Megan’s pity party. I was going over my budget this morning after calling some riding stables yesterday. I can’t afford lessons. The barns charge more than twice what I was paying where I lived before. Until I get a better job, no horses for me. I’ll starve myself before those kids go hungry. But there is a very selfish part of me that resents the fact I can’t go riding once a week.”

“Megan, that doesn't make you a bad person. I know what it’s like to have limited money.” He lifted her chin with his fingers so she’d look at him.

“I know you do. Growing up poor with a single mom kind of drove that point home for you, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. And there were times we got down about it, too. It’s okay. You can’t help how you feel. What matters is what you do. What’s the third thing?”

Megan blushed and looked down again, “You weren’t supposed to count.”

“Well, I did. So what’s the other thing?”

“Who’s Jarvis?”

Steve hesitated slightly before answering, “Tony Stark’s resident computer genius. I added him to your contacts on your phone. You can call or text him to switch your calls back to your landline when you’re ready.”

Megan pulled out her phone and verified that she now had a friend named Jarvis in her phonebook. “How did he even get access like that? It can’t be legal.”

“It probably isn’t.” Steve shrugged a little and smiled. “I don’t ask how Jarvis does what he does. I just don’t ask him to do anything unethical and trust he won’t get caught if he bends the rules a bit to get the job done. Given the choice of having whoever is listening to you in your apartment know that you’re forwarding calls because you had your phone company handle it, or have Jarvis do it on the sly, I picked the latter.”

“Thank you.” Megan toyed with the zipper pull of her jacket. “For someone from the forties, you do a pretty good job with all the modern tech.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to watch YouTube videos.”

“I guess so.”

“Family’s important. But that’s not the other thing bothering you.” Megan looked up and saw one corner of his mouth quirked up as he studied her. He wasn’t going to be deterred.

“I’m going to really miss having you over on Sunday afternoons. I don’t like cooking and it’s been really fun having you come over while we mess around in the kitchen and I get stuff ready for the week’s meals. It turned a chore into something I enjoyed. But I’ve seen what you’re packing for
your lunches these days and I’ve eaten your apple pie. You just needed someone to get you started.” The words tumbled out in a single breath.

“I’ve had fun, too. There’s no reason we can’t keep doing that.”

“Steve, I’m a big girl. I’ll be okay.”

“I know you will. But you can’t blame me for wanting to spend time with you instead of watching videos on YouTube on the Sundays Fury doesn’t have me out on missions. Today, how about I fix us a pot of chili and we watch a movie while it simmers? I saw some DVDs on your bookshelf that I haven’t seen yet and it’s more fun to watch movies with a friend. You can curl up with a heating pad and stop pretending you’re not in pain. What do you say?”

Megan closed her eyes and nodded agreement. She didn’t trust herself to speak.
“Try not to look like I’m torturing you,” Megan said as she snapped the picture.

“I smiled,” Steve said. “See?” He pointed to the forced smile he had given the camera. In his digitized hands, he was holding up the front page of the Washington Post with Megan leaned against him, her arm outstretched to take the selfie.

“You grimaced, Steve. There’s a difference. But it will suffice for my purposes.” Megan locked the screen to her phone before she tucked it into her pocket. She took the newspaper from Steve, folded it, and put it under her arm. “I’ll see you Sunday.”

He nodded as he swung his leg over his bike. “Sure you don’t want a ride home?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to give you any more time to try to figure out what I need the picture for. I told you it’s a secret. I am not posting it to the internet or even moving it to the cloud. I’ll delete it on Sunday. You can witness. Okay?”

She watched him put his helmet on and fasten the chinstrap before strapping his shield to his back. “Puppy dog eyes are not going to wear me down, Steve.”

“Never had a dog, so I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “I’ll see you Sunday.”

“You took a photo inside S.H.I.E.L.D.’s parking garage and not the lobby.” Steve added as he started up his bike.

“You’re very observant. Drive safely!” Megan waved and headed down the steps to the lower level so she could catch the bus to the Metro, smiling as she went. Steve didn’t realize she had overnight clothes packed in her bag and that she was heading straight to the Big Apple.

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Shortly before noon on a dreary Saturday, Megan knocked on the door of an apartment in Brooklyn. “Mrs. Miller? I’m Megan Buchwald. We spoke on the phone.” Megan introduced herself to the elderly, grey haired woman who came to the door.

“Are you sure you’re not from the museum?” Piercing brown eyes scrutinized her from behind thick lenses in cats-eye frame glasses.

“I promise I am not here on an assignment for anyone else. In fact, I brought you a picture to prove that I know Steve Rogers.” Megan held up her phone so the woman could see it. “You can see he’s holding yesterday’s newspaper.” Megan held the somewhat rumpled paper beneath the phone so Mrs. Miller could compare the digital image to the paper in front of her.

“All right. Come on in.” The woman stepped back and gestured Megan into the tiny apartment. Megan looked around and felt like she was stepping back in time. The decor was straight out of the 1960’s.

“Coffee?” Mrs. Miller led Megan to the kitchen. A small metal and laminate table that looked like had been salvaged from an old diner was pushed up against the wall.
“No, thank you. I’m not a coffee drinker, I’m afraid. I love the smell, but the taste is always such a disappointment. Please allow me to enjoy the aroma while you drink a cup.”

“Suit yourself. Sit.”

Megan did, setting her purse on the floor by her feet. She shrugged out of her jacket and hung it over the back of her chrome and vinyl chair. “Are these the pictures you mentioned?” she asked, gesturing to the small stack of old wallet-sized photographs lying in the middle of the table.

“Yup. Go ahead and look.”

Megan carefully laid them out in front of her. “Is that Bucky beside Steve? Such handsome lads.” In the photograph, two young boys that Megan guessed to be about 8 years old were sitting on concrete steps, the darker haired boy had his arm around Steve’s scrawny shoulders.

“That’s James, alright. Even at that young age, the girls loved him.”

“I wonder what trouble he was plotting. The look in his eyes is rather mischievous.”


“Steve helped with the planning from what he tells me.” Megan picked up the next photo. “Was this taken around the time of great wagon incident? I assume that’s you sitting in front of Steve?”

Mrs. Miller set her coffee mug down with a thump and eased herself into the chair. “What wagon incident?” she demanded sharply.

“Steve told me that Bucky found an old wagon and that the two of them figured out how to give you the horse you always wanted.”

“Mmm.” Mrs. Miller studied her face and Megan let her, not flinching from the scrutiny. It was clear that Mrs. Miller still didn’t trust her. “Go on.”

“Well, as Steve told it, they got two grocery bags from your mother and Steve drew a horse head on one of them, and a harness on the other. Then Bucky dressed up like a horse and hauled you and Steve around in the wagon. What he didn’t consider was the inertia of you and Steve in the wagon as you went down the hill that was the alley behind the diner. He got knocked to the side and tore after you, watching as you, Steve, and the wagon were headed full tilt into some trash cans lined up in front of a brick wall. Steve said he wrapped himself around you and rolled you both out right before you crashed, breaking his arm in the process. You escaped with some minor cuts. The wagon, however, was never the same again.” Megan put the photograph down. “Do you mind if I use my camera to photograph these prints? I’d like to enlarge them and give them to Steve. He doesn’t have anything from his childhood and I know he would absolutely treasure having copies of these images. I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to show them to me.”

“You really are his friend, aren’t you?” The brown eyes were kinder now, and Megan could tell she’d finally convinced Mrs. Miller of her intentions.

“Yes, I am. And I deeply appreciate your caution. Steve has no privacy anymore and I know that bothers him.”

“Did he tell you what he used to call me?” The older women leaned forward, gazing at the photographs with a smile as the memories came rushing back.

“Bucky’s Becca.” Megan smiled and met Rebecca’s gaze. “How well do you remember him?”
“Not as well as I’d like. Two adventure-seeking boys didn’t have much use for a pesky little sister following them around wanting to join in all the time. And when they weren’t adventuring, Steve was sick and his mom kept him at home. James and I were not allowed to visit him unless his mother was home, but James snuck out anyway. I was a good girl and stayed home like mother told me to.”

“Steve said he used to draw you pictures of the toys you wanted to have.”

“He did. I still have a few of them somewhere. Take the pictures, Megan Buchwald. I’m glad to know Steve hasn’t forgotten where he came from after all,” Rebecca pushed the entire stack of photographs over to Megan. “I wrote to him when they found him. He never wrote back.”

“I’m sure he never got your letter or he would have replied, Mrs. Miller. You were his family. Your letter probably got lost in a flood of Captain America fan mail sent to S.H.I.E.L.D. when he woke from the ice. Even now, I’m not sure how much of that he actually gets and now much is answered by staff sending a generic letter back. Let me give you his address.” Megan took a notepad from her purse and wrote down Steve’s mailing address at S.H.I.E.L.D. and his cell phone number. Below it, she wrote her own home address and phone number.

“I’m giving you Steve’s address at S.H.I.E.L.D. and his cell phone number as well as my home address and phone number. I have a feeling you’re going to be hearing from him very soon. He is going to be so pleased to receive these photographs and will make contact with you again. He’s been so lost, trying to adjust to a world that left him behind. May I share your mailing address with him?”

Rebecca nodded. “Wait here,” she said, getting up. She disappeared into the bedroom and Megan heard some shuffling. “I’m going to need some help after all,” Rebecca called to her. “I can’t manage both of them at once. Come on in here.”

Curious, Megan got up and followed Rebecca’s voice. She found Rebecca standing in the bedroom pointing to two cardboard boxes the size of banker’s boxes sitting on the floor. One of them had cancelled postage and an address written across the top. “Take these both out to the table.”

Megan obeyed, nearly busting with curiosity as she stacked the boxes on top of each other and carried them back to the kitchen. She gathered the loose photos from the table and set them aside so they wouldn’t get lost in the shuffle, then waited for Rebecca to join her.

“I need to sit,” Rebecca admitted, sagging back into her chair. “Open the one with the postage first.”

Megan set the other box on the floor and opened the one Rebecca had indicated. Inside, she found an envelope addressed to the family of James Barnes. She picked it up and looked questioningly at Rebecca, who nodded to her. “Read it.”

“Dear, Mrs. Barnes,

I can hardly bear to imagine the grief you feel right now, receiving two of these packages. But Captain Rogers indicated that should something happen to him, his belongings should be sent to you….”

Megan gasped and scanned to the bottom of the letter. It was signed by Peggy Carter. She sank heavily into her own chair. “Steve’s belongings from the war front were sent to your mother?”

Rebecca nodded, “That’s why I wrote to him. I figured he’d want them back. When he didn’t reply,
I assumed the past hurt too much. So I did as Miss Carter instructed and kept them in the family. She was quite clear on that point. She said, “Steve would be mortified—”

Megan found the passage Rebecca was quoting and continued for her, reading aloud from the letter, “—to be made into a sideshow specimen for tourists to gawk at. I’m sending this box to you myself so that his wishes are respected. The politicians can have their images of Captain America. I only ask that you give Steve Rogers his privacy and keep his possessions in your family until such time as you deem appropriate to share them with the historians....”

Megan wiped the tears from her eyes and folded the letter carefully before returning it to the envelope. “She really understood him. She loved him, you know. And he loved her. Thank you. Thank you for protecting him from the vultures.”

“If I’m wrong about you and these end up in that monstrosity of a museum, not even Captain America will be able to protect you when I find out,” Rebecca shook her finger at Megan warningly.

“You have my word. And I would deserve whatever punishment you gave me.” She took a deep breath, “I’m not sure I can even find the words to describe how much this is going to mean to Steve. That trip into the ice was so cruel in the way it cut him off from his whole world. One day, he’s at war, the next, almost seventy years have passed and his friends are dead, his belongings scattered, the apartment building he grew up in torn down.... He told me he drove through the neighborhood once and it was so different he barely recognized it. He hasn’t been back to Brooklyn since.”

“Open the other box.”

When she saw the contents, she whispered, “What is this?”

“The day he was accepted into the military, he brought that box to my mother and asked her to keep it until he came home from the war. I can still see him, standing in the doorway, all polite and excited to be going off to war. I haven’t looked inside beyond doing what you just did, but you see the photograph frames. That box is all he had left to his name before he shipped out. When mother passed on, it fell to me to take care of his treasures. When the museum people came calling, I gave them some photographs of James and sent them on their way. Do you see now why I was so skeptical when you called?”

Megan nodded. “Mrs. Miller, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for him. I promise you I’ll have Steve call or write to you soon. He doesn’t know I’m here, so it’s going to come as a shock to him to get all of this. But I know he is going to want to thank you himself.”

“You really love him, don’t you?”

Megan looked up sharply. “We’re friends. He’s still in love with Peggy. Do I care about him? Yes, absolutely. But we’re not dating and we probably never will. That’s okay.”

“Hmm.” Rebecca pinned her with her gaze. “Don’t let him stay in the past. When you get to be my age, you realize how precious each and every day truly is. He needs to let go of Peggy and live in the present.”

“He’s trying, Mrs. Miller. I think it’s been hard for him to move on because no one wanted to give him time to grieve. To the rest of the world, it’s seventy years of history he needs to learn. To him, he was uprooted and transplanted quite violently and very recently. It’s going to take him some time to adjust. But he is trying.”
It was well after dark when Megan pulled into a parking spot near her building and turned off the car. She’d initially planned on making the entire trip by public transit. An unused Amtrak ticket from New York City to Washington, D.C. was still in her purse. The two boxes were too unwieldy for her to juggle on a train and a transfer to the Metro so she’d rented a car, swung back to Rebecca’s home to retrieve the precious cargo, and driven back to her own apartment. Shipping it to her house was simply out of the question.

She made two trips inside, not wanting to risk tripping and spilling the contents of either box. She tossed her bag onto the couch and was heading out the door again when she saw her answering machine light blinking. When she hit play, Steve’s voice filled her apartment.

"Hi, Megan, It’s Steve. I just got called out on a mission and will be gone at least overnight. Don’t plan on seeing me Sunday. I’ll call you when I get back if it’s not too late. I hope you’re having a good weekend."

Even though she knew that irregular work hours were a part of his job, it didn’t lessen her disappointment. With a heavy sigh, she flipped the bird to the hidden microphones and locked the apartment door behind her. Given the late hour, she decided she’d splurge on a cab home after she dropped off the rental.
It was nearly 9 PM when Megan’s phone chimed with a text “*Just got in. Not much company. Heading home. S.*”

“*Swing by for stew and biscuits. It will do you good,*” Megan texted back. Thinking a moment, she sent another text. “*Yes, I mean it. Starting coffee now.*”

She sat glaring the phone. She could almost hear Steve running through his protests and counterarguments of not wanting to inconvenience her, the lateness of the hour, and wanting a change of clothes. She glanced at the two boxes stacked in the corner of her living room and willed him to give in for once and reach out for company.

Her phone chimed again. “*O.K.*” The shortness of the reply worried her and indicated his mood was rather glum. Hopefully, some hot food and a sympathetic ear would help. She got the leftover stew from the fridge and started a generous portion heating on the stove, prepared a fresh pot of coffee, and got busy making a batch of biscuits. When life got rough, a hot meal was always a good starting point. She put on some old-time music that Steve liked and turned it up. Hopefully, the music and lyrics would help muffle their conversation.

She was just taking the biscuits from the oven when Steve knocked at the door.

He came in and leaned his shield against the wall before dumping his helmet on the floor and slipping off his shoes. She didn’t let him take off his jacket before she put her arms around him and pulled him into a hug. “*Come eat,*” she told him softly. “*Food always helps.*”

Only when she felt him nod did she release him and head back to the kitchen. “*Pull up a chair,*” she said and set a plate of biscuits down in front of his place at the table.

“You don’t have to—

“*Sit down, soldier,*” Megan snapped sharply. To her surprise, it worked. He obeyed without thinking and then looked at her a bit sheepishly as he realized what he’d just done. She smiled at him “*Want to talk about it?*”

Steve shook his head, “*You know I can’t.*”

“I’m not talking about the mission. I’m referring to what’s bothering you. You’re a smart guy and I’m sure you can talk about your thoughts and feelings without telling me anything classified or mission specific.”

She put the first serving of stew in front of him and filled his cup with coffee before sitting down herself. His brow was furrowed as he thought about what she’s said, but he shook his head.

“*Steve, you’ve been to war. Not just any war, but a war that had you on the front lines against the Nazis. I’m sure you’ve had plenty of experience with missions going off the rails, losing part of your team, and generally finding things are FUBAR.*”

He considered that and nodded, “*Yeah. But it doesn’t get easier.*”

“I can’t imagine that it would. But that’s not what’s eating at you right now. There’s something in your eyes I haven’t seen before. You don’t have to talk about it, but I’ll be happy to listen if you need to unload.” She patted his forearm and got up to fix herself a cup of tea.
“I kind of miss the Nazis.”

He’d spoken so softly she almost didn’t hear it, and it took her an additional minute to wrap her head around what he’d said. Then she had to figure out what he meant. She nodded once so he’d know she heard him but stayed at the counter. Only when her teabag was steeping did she join him at the table. She took a biscuit from the plate and started to nibble on it. “Back then, you knew who the enemy was. You knew where the battles were to be fought and there was no question you were on the right side,” she observed quietly, keeping her voice as low as she could.

Steve nodded and kept eating his stew. He polished off the first bowl and refilled it from the pan on the stove, having waved her to stay where she was when she had started to get up to get it for him. “This is good,” he said in a normal voice as he sat back down.

“I have more in the fridge I can heat up, so eat as much as you want.” Megan studied him. He had a new weight on his shoulders. In a lowered voice, she added. “You’re starting to question S.H.I.E.L.D.’s goals, or at least that the missions you are being sent on really serve the greater good.” It wasn’t a question.

He looked at her with great sadness and nodded once, then ducked his head, ashamed to admit even that much.

“That sounds really frustrating. Just remember that they don’t own you. Any soldier who lives long enough gets to retire from the service. Don’t let all those decades of back pay give them leverage over you. You expected to die in service to your country. The fact you didn’t die when you put that plane down doesn’t mean you owe them something to justify your wages. You have options.”

Steve looked up at that.

Megan shook her head, “Not just the Avengers. Maybe it’s time to think about what you want to do with the rest of your life and not just what you think you should do… or what others tell you to do.”

He looked so lost sitting there. Megan just wanted to pull him to her and soothe him like she would a child. Instead she got out her phone and pulled up a picture before handing it to him. “Do you have any idea who this is?”

Steve carefully studied the image of Megan and an older woman posing for a selfie. He shook his head. “She looks familiar, but I can’t say I know who she is.”

“She remembers you.” Megan handed him the black and white photo of Steve, Bucky, and Rebecca in the wagon. “Does this help?”

Steve’s eyes widened. “Becca?” He looked from the phone to the black and white photograph and back again. “How?”

“I asked a mutual friend for some assistance in a research project I’ve been working on. I kept hitting dead ends, but he came through.” Megan pulled up her contacts list in her phone and flashed Jarvis’s name to Steve. “When you’re done eating, I have some things for you. Quite a few things, actually.”

“She’s still alive? You saw her?” Steve was holding the photograph and trying to reconcile his memory of the child with the reality of an older woman.

“We had a lovely visit. She has your contact information and I obviously have hers. I promised her that you’d be in touch after you had some time to process everything.” Megan put her hand on Steve’s forearm. “She’s a widow now, but she’s had a good life. She’s a grandmother. And she
still lives in Brooklyn. You should visit her sometime. It would be good for both of you. She wrote
to you, after they found you. I promised her that you never got the letter, and that if you had, you
would have written back. I explained to her how much mail Captain America gets and she
understood.”

Steve just gaped at her and Megan smiled. “I didn’t speak out of turn; you never would have
ignored a letter from her. She was trying to give you space. Are you done eating?”

He nodded mutely and Megan led him to the couch. She waited until he was sitting and then she
removed the sheet she had used to cover up the two boxes sitting on the coffee table. “Peggy sent
your belongings home from the warfront. There is a letter inside that box you’ll certainly want to
start with. The other box is one I expect you already recognize.”

His hand shook as he reached out to touch the box on his right. He found the letter Megan had
mentioned and skimmed it quickly, struggling to keep his composure.

Megan put her hand on his shoulder. “If you want to talk or show me something I’m here. If you
want to do this alone, that’s okay, too. I’ll keep the coffee coming and leave you to it.”

Steve grabbed her hand before she got very far. “Megan.” His voice was choked with emotion. He
stood up and pulled her into a hug. “Thank you,” he whispered into her ear. She could feel his
whole body shaking with emotion.

“That’s what friends are for. I put the other photos Rebecca gave me inside that box, too, so they
wouldn’t get lost. Now sit down and enjoy the memories. I’m here if you need me.”

Megan watched him surreptitiously as she cleared the table and washed the dishes. He spent quite a
bit of time looking through the pages of a composition book before finally setting it aside. Megan
decided that the kitchen was the best place for her as it would let her stay busy while being open to
interruption. She got out the vegetables from the crisper and started chopping them up for a salad.
She was peeling a cucumber when he held up some faded fabric and slowly unfolded it.

“I didn’t know kitchen aprons were fashionable on the front lines.”

“It was my mom’s,” Steve answered, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

He pulled out the picture frames and studied each image carefully. He turned one to her “My
father,” he explained.

Megan wiped her hands on a towel and took the photograph from Steve, comparing the man in the
image to the son sitting before her. “You have his eyes. And you have the same determined set to
your jaw. Is there a photograph of your mother in there, too?”

Steve traded her frames and she looked down at the wedding portrait of his parents. “You have her
forehead and nose. They look very happy and in love. I’m sorry they didn’t get to enjoy growing
old together.”

“Me, too.” Steve accepted the photo back from her and gave her an envelope. “Tell me what this is.
That’s Bucky’s handwriting on the envelope.”

Megan sat down beside him and turned the envelope over in her hands. It was sealed and bore
Steve’s name, but didn’t have a mailing address on it. She looked at Steve questioninglly but he
nodded, so she opened it. “It’s dated December 2, 1943.”

He took a sharp breath and closed his eyes. “Read it.” He ground out the words, bracing himself
Megan squeezed his knee reassuringly as she smoothed the pages and began to read out loud.

“Dear Steve, If you’re reading this, I reached the end of the line.”

Steve choked back a sob and curled forward, wrapping his arms around his legs.

Megan put her arm across his back and rubbed between his shoulders while she continued.

“Howling Commandos. What a crazy name for our group, but not as crazy as our leader. Who’d have thought that a scrappy kid from Brooklyn who didn’t have the sense to run away from a fight would end up being the hero of the free world? You were always my hero. Take care of yourself, punk. I’ll save you a seat at the bar. First round is on me. Bucky.”

An anguished cry tore itself from Steve’s throat and he put his head down between his knees. Megan laid the letter down and sat sideways on the couch with her back against the arm, and pulled Steve up so he was lying against her with his head on her chest. She kept rubbing his back. “I’ve got you. Just let it out.”

He let her hold him but still choked back the tears and tried to slow his breathing.

“C’mon, Steve. It’s 2013 and real men cry. Let it out.”

She felt his shoulders heave under her hands. “Don’t fight it. Let the pain out, Steve. I’ve got you.”

He slid down so his head was in her lap as he wrapped one arm around her knees. “It’s crushing me.”

“Let it.” She kept one hand on his back and with the other, started running her fingers through his hair. “You need to let it crush you. Let it pound you into rubble and scatter the dust to the wind. It will bring you back. You’ve lost so much. All your friends, your family. If they were here, wouldn’t they tell you to let the pain go?

“It’s all I have left,” he ground out as a fresh wave of muffled sobs wracked his body.

For Megan, the puzzle of Steve finally snapped together in perfect clarity. “That’s not true. This pain, it’s burying everything else they left you. If you don’t let yourself grieve, if you keep trying to hold it all in and soldier through the pain, you’re not honoring them. You’re punishing yourself. Guilt is a normal reaction to loss. We all feel it. But you have to stop holding back. Numbing yourself isn’t working. And as long as you keep the pain this raw, this fresh, you’re dishonoring their memory.”

She could tell he was listening, but she wasn’t reaching him so she tried a new tactic. “You’re being selfish, Steve. The people who cared about you would want more for you than this. You’re not living. You’re barely existing. How does that honor their memory or allow you to share your gifts with the people around you now?

“The only way to honor them is to be a survivor who embraces life and keeps their memory alive. The admission fee to the survivors club is letting go of the stoicism and feeling the pain. It’s the only way you can start to remember the good times. It’s always going to hurt, but it doesn’t have to be this raw. You can learn how to carry the pain in a way that doesn’t cripple you.”

“I don’t belong here.”

The despair in his voice broke her heart and she stroked his hair in silence for a few minutes. “Steve, none of us belong here. You think you have a monopoly on being an outsider? Get a clue!
Most people feel that way. Did you ever hear of imposter syndrome?"

Steve shook his head, listening as he lay on her lap. The sobs had eased for the moment. She knew he hadn’t really gotten the release he needed, but a lifetime of conditioning wasn’t going to be changed all at once.

Megan kicked at the tissue box on the coffee table with her toes and moved it towards him. “Blow your nose and I’ll tell you about it.”

“Yes, Mom.”

She cuffed him lightly on the shoulder and went back to playing with his hair after he wiped his nose and settled back on her lap. “Imposter syndrome is when you feel liked you don’t really belong in the role you have. You think that if people could just see inside your head, they’d know what a fraud you really are. You think that you’re really fooling people with how smart or as strong or as confident or competent as they think you are. If the only knew the real you, they’d be disappointed. The thing is, most successful people feel like that, at least some of the time. Soldiers coming home from war often have a challenge in adjusting back to civilian life. You probably have both going on.

“You told me you were scrawny and sick as a kid and got beaten up a lot. But then you were Captain America and everyone thought you had all the answers, which you don’t. You’re probably afraid that if you let anyone see how lost you really are, they’ll be disappointed. So you pretend. And you pray that you can keep faking it until you figure out how to be the person they think you are.”

Megan took a deep breath. She knew she was somewhere between babbling and lecturing. On the other hand, he was listening. The longer she talked, the more the tension in his back eased. Oh heck, what did she have to lose at this point if she kept going?

“Steve, it’s a head game you’re playing with yourself. Do you really think I feel like I belong here? I’m working in a high tech lab for a big government agency. I don’t ever walk through the front doors of S.H.I.E.L.D. and think I deserve to be there. I’m just fumbling along as best I can, waiting to screw up. Agent Hill is a woman in a high-ranking position in a field dominated by men. Do you seriously believe she always feels as confident as she seems to be? She’s had to work harder than everyone around her to prove she’s half as good. You’ve heard how the others talk about her. I’d bet my last dollar Director Fury has days when he doubts himself and is trying to figure out how this became his life. So he shows no weakness and snaps at everyone so they can’t get close enough to see the fears that keep him up at night. You’re no different than anyone else. You’re just so afraid to let your guard down and let people in that you cut yourself off from the very people who can understand you best.”

“How can anyone else understand when I don’t?” Steve sounded more like himself now.

“You have to let people in and give us a chance to try. I know that I cannot even begin to imagine the things you’ve seen and done and experienced. I’m sure that in the war you had to make some really awful choices and you lost people you care about. You ditched a plane thinking you’d die doing so. And yes, that means you have a lot of baggage to carry around with you. I don’t have to experience that myself to understand it’s weighting you down.

“You also got the extraordinary gift of a second chance. Don’t waste it. The human condition can’t have changed so much in seven decades that you have no place here. Stop brooding so much and start trying to figure out what you like about your life now. Figure out what you want to do next. Stop trying so hard to be Captain America and let Steve live his life.”
“You sound like Peggy,” Steve said with slight amusement in his voice.

“That’s a real complement given how highly you regard her.” Megan kept stroking his hair no longer sure if it was to calm him or make her feel useful. Maybe it didn’t matter.

“She’s still alive.”

That surprised her and had paused for a moment while she regained her composure. “You took the next step and found out about her life. That must have been really hard to do.”

“She has Alzheimer’s.”

“Does she remember you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never gone to see her.” Steve continued to talk into the fabric of her jeans. She could see the way he clenched his jaw and knew he was still holding back tears.

“Oh, Steve.” Megan sighed. “I know it will be difficult, seeing her old and frail and confused. But I think you should go see her anyway. Depending on how far the disease has progressed, she might remember you. She might even think it’s 1943. You have a chance to look her in the eyes and tell her she’s important to you. Don’t waste it.”

Slowly, Steve sat up and wiped at his face with the back of his hand.

“Go splash some cold water on your face. It helps with the red eyes. The stuffy nose will pass. Crying isn’t fun, but I have just the thing to fix you up. Go on now.” Megan got up and shooed Steve towards the bathroom.

She turned on the oven, poured him a fresh cup of coffee, started the water heating for tea, and got a cookie sheet out. She sprayed it with non-stick spray and set it on the stove before she went to the freezer in hunt of her emergency stash. By the time Steve came out of the bathroom, she had half of the roll of frozen dough cut into slices and laid out on the cookie sheet.

“You keep chocolate chip cookie dough in your freezer?”

“For emergency use only. You never know when life will kick you in the teeth. So I make a batch of dough, form it into small rolls, and freeze the sticks. That makes it easy to make a few at a time when I need them most… assuming I don’t just eat the dough raw. Go ahead, I used pasteurized eggs.” She handed him the knife and went to the cupboard to get down her tea supplies. “Once the oven’s hot, set the timer for eight minutes.”

She slid the coffee table against the wall and removed the couch cushions, stacking them in the corner before she unfolded the bed and retrieved her bed pillows from a nearby chair where they stayed in the daytime.

“I should go.”

“Nope. You’re in no shape to drive. And I’m not comfortable with you being by yourself tonight anyways.” She shook her head at him as she straightened the blankets. She moved a table lamp to the floor and retrieved two more blankets from the trunk she used as an end table before putting the lamp back and switching it off.

“Megan, I’m not staying here.”

She ignored him and went to her dresser. She wasn’t sleeping in her jeans. She got out two pairs of
sweatpants and went into the bathroom to change.

He caught her arm when she went to put the half-made salad in the fridge, but she just shoved the extra sweatpants into his chest. “Go change unless you want to sleep in your slacks.”

“I’m not staying.”

“Eat more dough. You’re talking nonsense.” Megan turned off the burner just as the kettle started to whistle.

“Megan.”

“How about a movie? Casablanca or The Princess Bride. You pick.”

“Neither. We’re not doing this.”

“Doing what, exactly?” She fixed her own cup of tea and sat down at the table, wrapping her hands around the mug and inhaled deeply, letting the steam and the smell of the tea take her back to her grandmother’s kitchen. “My grandma used to make tea for me. It was some instant powder... nasty stuff that I won’t touch now. My mom was taking college classes so I stayed with Grandma two days a week. After lunch, we had tea, vanilla ice cream, and then we watched a soap opera called Days of Our Lives. She taught me to play canasta, gin Rummy, and a bunch of other card games. I was so lucky to have her house only a few blocks away from my own. I saw her almost every day when I was growing up. She’d stop over for a few minutes when she went on a walk around town. Or I’d ride my bike to her house and we’d have tea and talk for a bit.”

Steve sighed and sat down opposite her, having given in for the moment while he had a cup of coffee. He laid the sweatpants on his lap. “Did you have cookies, too?”

“Oh, yes. Sugar cookies usually.” Megan finally looked up at him. “That’s what my grandfather tried to live on. He lost his sense of smell later when he was in his forties. He lived on a diet of cookies and coffee aside from the meals she cooked. Without being able to smell, he used that as an excuse to indulge. If she was going to be away from the house during lunch, she had to fix something ahead of time for him or else he’d skip the meal entirely and just eat more cookies.”

She looked down at the mug in her hands. “He’s in a nursing home now, in the dementia wing. It’s so hard to reconcile the confused, old child he is now with the brilliant person he used to be. He doesn’t remember me any more. He taught me to play chess. Sometimes we talked about books. But by the time I was old enough to really want to get to know him and have adult conversation with him, he was fading away.”

The timer buzzed and she put down her mug. Silently, she took the pan out of the oven and put half a dozen cookies on a plate for Steve before taking three for herself to start.

“These are good.” Steve said appreciatively, talking around his second bite.

“Thanks.”

They ate the rest of the cookies in silence.

Megan didn’t look at him. She focused first on her plate, then on cleaning up the kitchen. She wanted to see how long he’d be able to wait before starting a new round of protests.

Finally, Steve couldn’t take the silence any more. “It’s late.”
“Mmm hmm.” She carefully dried the plates, and put them away, taking her time with each step to drag it out as long as she could. In her peripheral vision, she could see that Steve was practically squirming in his own skin.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Running away isn’t the answer.”

“I’m not running away.”

“So you do lie after all,” she said quietly as she shut the cupboard door, then folded the dishtowel and laid it over the strainer.

“Megan, I’m not lying. It’s late. I appreciate your concern. But I just want to go home and—”

“And keep me up all night worrying that you’re splattered on the highway because you think you’re invincible. You’d rather worry about being seen staying over here than really stop and think about how compromised you are as a driver right now. You’d rather hide behind manners and outdated social standards than admit how vulnerable you’re feeling.” She turned and met his eyes at last. “You’re running away and lying to yourself if you think it’s anything else. You just got stripped bare. Your throat is sore and your nose is all stuffed up. Your eyes feel dryer than sandpaper and you feel so wrung out you don’t want to do anything but curl up and sleep and hide from the whole damn world. I get it. But, morning comes early and with it a whole new workweek. So park your butt on that bed and lie down. I don’t normally sleep in my clothes, but I’m going to tonight so you don’t have even more reasons to feel awkward. What time do you need to be at work in the morning?”

“Eight.”

“I’ll set the alarm for six and that will give you plenty of time to grab a shower and eat breakfast before we head in. Are you sleeping in those clothes or are you going to go for the sweats?”

“I don’t think—”

“No, you don’t. I bought them in the men’s department and yes, they will fit. I’m not one of those petite waifs you see in magazines. There is a new toothbrush on the bathroom sink. Help yourself.” With that, she turned off the stereo, turned on her white noise machine, and settled herself under the covers. She heard him sigh heavily and then shut the door to the bathroom. Smiling to herself, she sat up long enough to wriggle out of her bra and toss it to the floor beside her. He’d probably blush at that, too. She curled up on her side and closed her eyes. It was going to be a short night, but at least with him here, she’d sleep rather than worry.

“Seriously?” Megan snapped when she heard him lie down on the floor. “You are not sleeping on the floor. Get your ass up here, Rodgers, before I strip naked and lie down on top of you until you stop being stupid. I will warn you that I do not bluff.”

Within seconds, the bedframe and mattress shifted with his weight as he stretched out stiffly beside her, as far away from her as he could get.

Megan rolled over and put her arm across his chest and her head against his shoulder. “G’night, Steve.” Within a few minutes, his breathing changed as he fell asleep. His guard finally lowered, he rolled over and pulled her against him.

It felt so good to be held. She’d missed that physical contact desperately after breaking up with Randy and while that hadn’t been her motivation for keeping Steve with her overnight, she wasn’t
going to complain about the benefit.

She stopped fighting back her own tears and cried quietly into his shoulder until sleep finally
claimed her.

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The alarm went off way too early and she dragged herself out from under his arm and staggered
over to the end table so she could end the torture to her ears. “Give me five then you can shower
first,” she said around a yawn.

She used the bathroom and shuffled into the kitchen. He already had the teakettle heating, the extra
blankets folded, and was in the process of storing the sofa bed for day use. Had he found her bra
yet? She got two mugs out of the cupboard and watched him out of the corner of her eye. He bent
over and picked it up by the strap with a single finger and stood there like he wasn’t sure what to
do next. Turning away so he wouldn’t see her watching him and smiling, she focused on getting
her oatmeal ready to microwave.

“Megan?”

“Get your shower.” She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “How many slices of French toast do you
want?”

“You don’t have to—“

“How. Many. Slices?” She growled as she turned on him. “Gimme a number. I’m not a morning
person. You make me use too many uncaffeinated sentences and you will pay.”

“Four. Um, I’ll just get my shower now.”

She gave him a thumbs-up and turned her glare to the teakettle.

By the time he was done showering, she was seated at the table eating her oatmeal and finishing
her tea while she read email on her laptop.

“Sausage is in the microwave. First round of French toast should be out of the toaster in a minute.

“I think you have a magic freezer. Cookie dough, French toast, what else have you got in there?

“Apple pie. If you freeze them before you bake them, you can’t tell they were made ahead of time.

He shook his head at that and started eating standing at the counter while the rest of his French
Toast heated. “You ready to talk yet?”

She lifted her mug, “Getting there.”

“What made you look for Becca?”

“I know you’re under pressure to move on and live in the present. No one seems to understand that
you need time to bridge that gap and connect with your past. I just tried to put myself in your shoes
and wonder what I’d wish I still had. I hoped that Rebecca would have some photographs I could
give you and maybe you’d feel more connected to your roots. I never dreamed I’d hit the jackpot.”
Megan got up and put her dishes in the dishwasher. Steve put down his plate and pulled her into a hug. "Thank you for everything."

"You’re welcome. You’d have done the same."

"If the gossip doesn’t bother you, I’ll give you a ride in with me to work."

She pulled back and studied him. "Are you sure? I don't care what anyone says. Randy and I were living together. You’re the one who is going to take the brunt of it."

"Right now, I really don't care. I know who my friends are," he said as he looked straight into her eyes.

Okay. Give me ten minutes to shower and change clothes and I’ll be ready. Pack me a lunch and I’ll be ready before that.”
What Just Happened?

Megan got a couple of looks but no comments after riding into work with Steve. When she was in the restroom later that morning, she rolled her eyes when she overheard two women talking about how she’d worn Captain America’s shield on her back. They didn’t know she was in the stall and she waited until they were gone before emerging to wash her hands.

The lack of comments changed when she returned from lunch to find a vase of yellow roses, ivy, and baby’s breath sitting on her desk.

“Betcha I know who those are from,” Megan’s coworker said as she passed by Megan’s desk on her way back to the lab. “They’re gorgeous, just like the captain who sent them,” Emma added.

“Thank you. I agree they are lovely.” Megan fingered the petals before bending to inhale their subtle fragrance.

“Did you open the card?”

“Not yet.” Megan looked around only half-feigning confusion at the lack of an audience. “I’m surprised there’s no crowd to see who wins the betting pool.”

Emma laughed. “Give them a few minutes and I’m sure they’ll be here. But the bets are all about when you’re seen kissing, not when you’ll get flowers.”

Megan blushed. “It’s not like that. We’re really just friends.”

“Uh huh. He gave you roses, Megan.” Emma put her hand on her hip and studied her carefully. “And he sent them to you at work. This is serious.”

Megan’s raised her eyebrow. “Don’t you know the language of flowers? Yellow roses are for friendship. I’m quite sure Steve knows that, too. As for sending them to work, if he had them were delivered to my apartment, they’d be left out in the hallway where anyone could take them.” She opened the card and read the note. “Thanks for being there. Steve.” She showed it to Emma. “See?”

“You two eat lunch together just about every day. Now you’re wearing his shield and getting flowers at work. I’m telling you, this is more than friendship.”

“Just don't put money on kissing happening any time soon, okay? I’d hate to see you lose money on my account.” Megan said as she slipped into her lab coat. “As far as wearing his shield, if anyone has a better idea of how to transport the thing while riding on the back of a motorcycle, I’m all ears.”

“Megan, the fact that you were on his bike at all is what you seem to be missing here.”

Megan rolled her eyes again and picked up her safety glasses. “It’s your money.”

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Before she left to go home, she took a photograph of the arrangement and sent it to Steve with a texted thanks. She figured he’d want to see for himself that the florist had put his money to good use.
Her phone pinged a few minutes later with a reply. “New field assignment. Can you pick our next books from those by Roger Highfield and Svante Pääbo? I’ve been told they’re good writers.”

So much for a quiet evening at home. She sighed, frustrated that their mysterious friend didn’t just come out and say what he or she wanted. If they had to be mysterious, the least they could go would be give her a lift home so she wasn’t juggling flowers, a helmet, and her lunch bag on the metro during rush hour.

She ate a quick dinner, wrote the authors’ names down on a slip of paper, and deleted the text from her phone. After using a library computer to look up the titles their mysterious “friend” wanted them to read, she got some cash from the nearest ATM and headed to a big box bookstore she had never visited before. She preferred to patronize the small, independently owned bookstore she’d found tucked away two metro stops from her apartment, but she didn’t want to have her purchases tracked by whoever was watching her.

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Megan woke to the feeling of cobwebs in her brain. The bed was uncomfortable but lacked the bar across her back that normally annoyed her on waking. The room was bright and her eyelids were too heavy to try opening. Her mouth was dry and the sounds were just wrong. The scent of antiseptic annoyed her. Something beeped and she drifted back to sleep.

The next time she woke, the room she was in was darker. She flexed her fingers and found her hand trapped. Fear shot through her and she tried to pull away.

“You’re safe, Megan. It’s Steve. You’re safe.”

She opened her eyes and saw him leaning over her, a worried look furrowing his brow. He squeezed her fingers and she realized that he was holding her hand. She relaxed slightly and looked around, recognizing at last that she was in a hospital. But why?

“Do you remember what happened? The police want to talk to you when you’re up to it.”

She blinked, trying to think. She remembered walking home from the bus stop after catching a bus from the metro station. A deep voice. A threat. The flash of a knife. Panic surged through her and she tried to shake her head, only to be stopped by pain.

“Shhh. It’s okay. You’re safe now. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. Squeeze my hand once for yes and twice for no. Do you want some water before I let the nurses know you’re awake?”

She squeezed his hand once but didn’t let go.

“Scared?”

Another squeeze.

“Okay. I’ll stay right here,” he reassured her before reaching across her bed to summon the nurse with the call button embedded in the railing. “We’ll find who did this to you.”

She squeezed his hand hard twice and tried to fight back the panic. She remembered the warning.

“I see… okay.” With his free hand, he brushed her bangs back from her forehead. “I talked to your mom on the phone. Do you want her to drive down here? She offered, but once you were stable, I thought you might want her to stay put.” Steve smiled at her, reading her reactions far too well and apparently piecing together what she couldn’t even process yet. “All right. I’ll keep her updated...
and try to convince her that she isn’t needed here just yet.”

The nurse came into the room with a bright smile. “My name is Kevin and I’m taking care of you this shift. I’m glad to see you are awake, Dr. Buchwald. Do you know where you are?”

Megan looked pleadingly at Steve.

“She’s aware but has a very dry mouth at the moment,” he answered for her.

“That’s understandable. It’s a common side effect from surgery. Are you at all nauseated?”

“No,” Steve answered for her after a brief pause.

“You have the hand signals all worked out, do you?” Kevin asked her, smiling first at Steve then back at Megan.

She gave him a thumbs-up then waited patiently while Kevin took her pulse.

He smiled at her again, “I know we’ve got you hooked up to the monitors. I still prefer the hands on approach for the basics. It gives me a better feel for how you’re doing. Your fingers are still a bit cold and your hands are clammy. Do you remember what happened?”

Megan threw a panicked look at Steve.

“She remembers enough to be rattled by it. I’d avoid pressing too much about that for right now.”

Kevin nodded his understanding. “You’re heart’s beating like a rabbit. You’re safe now and you’re going to be just fine. Whoever jumped you is long gone. We’ll start you on some ice chips and see how you do with those, okay?”

Megan gave another thumbs-up.

“How’s the pain level?”

She twisted her hand back and forth, indicating it was so-so.

Kevin checked his watch. “You’re due for more meds in a few minutes. We want to stay ahead of the pain. It’s easier to prevent pain that bring it under control, so if it starts to ramp up on you, I want you to let me know. I’ll be right back with your ice.”

She smiled weakly at him and closed her eyes, exhausted by the small effort of communicating. The adrenaline had cleared her thinking enough to remember the warning that had been whispered in her ear, “This is a test, Doctor. If you tell the police or the Captain about this, your oldest nephew is going to have a horrible accident. We’ll be in touch soon.”

She squeezed her eyes tightly, fighting the tears. Her family was in danger and she had no way to warn them. Even worse, she had to decide whether or not to trust Steve with all of their lives. Or worse, to trust her attackers to keep their word, at least until they had what they wanted from her.

Sensing her distress, Steve rubbed circles on the back of her hand and quietly hushed her. “Just hang on, Megan. We’ll talk once your mouth isn’t so dry. No one will hurt you while I’m here. I promise you that.”

“Here you are,” Kevin said as he pulled the tray over her bed and put a cup of ice chips on it. Looking to Steve, he said, “Start her slowly. We’ll try some sips of water in a little bit. It’s better to go slow than to end up straining muscles because she’s puking.”
“I know the drill,” Steve answered quietly. “Been on the other end of this a few times myself.”

“I’ll bet you have. Call if you need anything. I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.” Kevin double checked her IV lines and straightened her blanket before leaving them alone.

Steve squeezed her hand gently. “Do you want to try sitting up?” When Megan consented, he pushed the buttons on her bed to raise the head so she was more upright. “These beds never go up far enough to really let you sit. You’ll feel better once you get the cotton out of your mouth. Here,” he said, tipping the cup so she could get a large chip of ice into her mouth. It was awkward for him since her left hand was holding his left hand in a death grip, but he managed it. “Better?”

She nodded very slightly as the ice melted in her mouth. The moisture felt wonderful. “What day is it?” she asked with a voice that was hoarse and shaky.

“Tuesday afternoon. The call to 911 was around 8:23 last evening. There are really easier ways to get out of going to work you know.”

“Steve…” Megan took a deep breath, knowing the future of many lives hinged on her choice. “We’re in big trouble.”

“We’ll deal with it. More ice?”

“Yeah.” She tried to help with the cup, but her hand shook too badly. It wasn’t due to the sight of the needle for the IV in her hand, either. “So cold.”

“Let go of my hand for a second and I can help. I’ll get you another blanket if you let me go to the door. Can you do that?”

Letting go of him was hard but easy at the same time. She wanted him there, but she trusted that he’d come right back.

After speaking to someone in the corridor, he returned to her side and lowered the rail on the left side of her bed. “During the war, it was often hard to keep warm at night in the driving snow. More than one soldier pointed out that I was a bit of a furnace when we huddled together.” With that, he slid his arms beneath her leg and back and moved her to the far side of the bed as if she weighted no more than a cat. Then he sat down beside her and pulled her against him, wrapping his right arm around her so she could rest on his chest. He tucked the thin hospital blanket over her as best he could.

“Good idea,” Kevin said as he came into the room and shook the folds out of the extra blanket he carried and put it over both of them, covering Megan up to her chin. “I’d advise against posting a selfie to Facebook right now or else you’ll have all the patients on the floor lining up to take your place,” he teased Megan gently. “You lost a lot of blood and your system had a shock. That’s why you’re feeling so cold even though we topped off you tank.”

Megan nodded carefully, mindful of the pain in her neck. “Could I have some hot tea instead of the ice? Or water if I can’t have tea.”

“We can try tea. How do you take it?”

“Milk and sugar,” Steve answered for her. “Milk might not be a good idea just yet, Megan.”

“I’ll drink herbal with just sugar if you have any,” Megan said softly as she sagged against Steve and let his shared body heat chase some of the chill away.
“Now you’re talking. Let me see what I can find and I’ll be right back.”

When they were along again, Steve stroked her hair and talked in a low voice. “They threatened you, didn’t they?”

“How bad is the wound?” she said softly as she dodged his question. What if she was wrong about her choice? Images of her nephew sitting in her lap smiling up at her flashed before her eyes and she shuddered.

“You’ll be fine. They cut a vein on the left side of your neck to make you bleed out quickly but without causing you lasting damage. They knew exactly what they were doing. I know it hurts, but that’s because of all the nerve endings. It’s not as deep as it could have been. I’m going to ask you again. Did they threaten you?

She shuddered and nodded slightly. “If I tell anyone, including you, they said they’d kill my nephew. I can’t tell the police, Steve,” she murmured back to him.

“I know,” he hugged her tighter. “Lie with the truth. Say as little as possible and don’t make anything up. They’ll push you to share more and go over it again and again. Stay firm, okay? You can do this.” He paused and grew more serious. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.”

“I mean with the lives of your family.”

“Do what you think is best,” Megan closed her eyes and let him hold her. It felt safe to have his arms around her.

“I’ll do everything I can to keep them safe, Megan. I promise.” He stroked her hair, “Try to sleep. I’ll be right here.”

Snuggled against him with the tattoo of his heartbeat in her ear, Megan dozed off before Kevin returned with her tea.
“Ms. Buchwald? I’m Officer Smythe. I’d like to talk to you about the attack two days ago if you’re up to it.” The young man didn’t look a day over twelve to Megan, though she knew he was an adult. He had dark brown hair, freckled cheeks and boyish looks that his military haircut couldn't compensate for.

“Doctor,” Steve corrected him.

“Pardon me?” the officer said looking between Megan and Steve.

Megan just kept eating her chicken sandwich and feigned indifference. It wasn’t easy given the way her stomach was currently churning. She wasn’t ready for this. She might never be. On the other hand, she wanted to get it over with as soon as possible and was thankful she’d had some time to rest and regain her strength. She took another bite, grateful to Steve for his correcting her title. She knew he was sensitive about women begin treated with respect and he’d been duly impressed to learn she had earned her doctorate. She owed him so much. He had spent the entire time since her attack at her bedside, sleeping in short naps in a chair that appeared to excel at hospital uncomfortable. She’d been too scared to suggest he go home and leave her alone and he’d assured her he wasn’t leaving even if she told him to.

“Doctor Buchwald, not Miss,” Steve clarified. His voice pulled her out of her musings.

“I apologize, Doctor,” the officer said, looking down at his notepad. “Nothing in my notes indicated you were a physician.”

“She’s not. She earned her Ph.D. That still means you should address her as doctor,” Steve explained patiently.

“It’s okay, Steve,” Megan said quietly. “Please, sit down, Officer.” She gestured to Steve. “This is Captain Rogers.”

“Thank you, Doctor, Captain,” the young man said, putting a little extra emphasis on her title, at least to Megan’s ears, before he nodded acknowledgement to Steve. “What can you tell me about the men who attacked you?”

“You already determined I was attacked by at least two men?” Megan asked dryly, her eyebrows shooting up.

“No, ma’am.”

“Is this your first debriefing, son, or is the fact I’m here making you nervous?” Steve asked in his Captain America voice.

Officer Smythe cleared his throat and fidgeted in his seat a bit.

“Everyone has a first time and he’s only dangerous to the bad guys,” Megan said as she pushed the remains of her lunch away. It made a tiny bit of relief to have someone with less experience take her statement.

“This is my first solo questioning. We’ve been short staffed lately and--”

“It’s all right. This is my first time being attacked,” Megan smiled at him. “But, I can tell you this
much: you’ll skew your investigation if you make assumptions.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He took a deep breath. “Who attacked you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you describe him?”

“You’re assuming again, Officer.” Steve broke in. He picked up the small sketchpad and pencil lying on the table by Megan’s bed and opened it to a fresh page. “Watch and learn. Don’t forget to take your own notes, though.” All business, Steve turned to Megan. “Walk me through what you remember from the beginning. When you’re done, I’ll ask you some questions. Some of it may seem repetitive or tedious, but the process can help you recall details you didn’t think to mention the first time through.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath and kept her focus on Steve. “I was coming home from the bookstore. I got off the bus at the stop closest to my building and walked home. I remember seeing a knife blade in front of me as someone wrapped their arms around me from behind. He said…”

She stopped and took a sip of water, trying to not let her hands shake too much. “He said ‘This is a test.’ I felt pain. Then I woke up in the hospital.”

“Had you made any purchases the bookstore?” Steve asked without looking up. He was taking notes and in full Captain America mode.

Megan nodded. “Yes, I bought three books.”

“What sort of bag were they in and did you have a purse with you?”

“Yes. My purse was on my left shoulder. I always have a purse with a shoulder strap. I had the plastic bag from the store in my right hand.”

“Think back to when you were walking. Did the bag make any noises while you walked? Or were you holding it in a way that kept it from crinkling?”

“It crinkled. It was one of those that’s extra noisy and I remember there was a breeze. The bag had a handle cut into it and I was using the handle.”

“What other sounds can you remember hearing starting from the time you stepped off the bus?”

Megan closed her eyes. “The bus pulled away, so I must have heard that. I remember it was getting a little late in the evening so there wasn’t a lot of traffic. I don’t remember seeing anyone else or hearing anything unusual. The streets were wet from the rain, so the traffic had that wet sound too it.”

“Did you hear footsteps?”

“No, I was wearing my sneakers. I didn’t hear anyone approach me from behind.”

“Very good. You said there was a knife. Did you see it before or after you were grabbed? Think about every detail, which hand they used, where you were standing on the sidewalk… walk though it slowly.”

“I was walking at the edge of the sidewalk closest to the street. There were not any cars parked there. I can’t remember if I felt their arms around me or saw the knife first, it happened so fast. He wrapped his left arm around me from behind and had the knife in his right hand. I just saw the
flash of the streetlight on the metal before I felt the blade pressed against the left side of my neck.”

“Where were your hands when he grabbed you? Did you reach for him or fight back in any way?”

“My left hand was on my purse, my right was holding the bag by the handle. I didn’t raise my arms at all when he grabbed me. I was afraid if I resisted he’d slit my throat. I just froze and stood still.”

“Did you see his hands? What color was his skin?”

“He had black gloves on. Black leather gloves, I think. They were not yarn, I know that much. And he had a long sleeved coat. I never saw his skin. The coat was woven fabric, sort of like twill or canvas. It was light brown, almost caramel colored. I only saw his right hand and arm. His left arm was under mine, but his right arm was over top, near my shoulder and across my chest.

“Tell me about the knife.”

“It was sharp and had a silver colored blade. I can’t say how long it was… it seemed huge but I don’t trust my memory.”

“Think about the knives you have in your kitchen at home and compare the blade you saw to your kitchen knives. Was it most like a bread knife, paring knife, or chopping knife?”

“Um… longer than a paring knife, but skinny in the same way, maybe even a bit thicker? It wasn’t as wide as a chopping knife and it wasn’t nearly as long as my bread knife. I can’t remember the shape of the tip.”

“Did you see the handle? Can you describe it?”

“No, I don’t remember seeing the handle. Maybe it fit in his hand?” Megan held her own hand out in front of her, unconsciously mimicking how he’d been holding the knife. “No, I can’t remember.”

“It’s okay. You’re doing a good job,” Steve reassured her. “What did you smell?”

“Smell?” Megan opened her eyes and looked at him questioningly. “Smell.” She shrugged her right shoulder a bit, puzzled by the request. “The streets were wet, so it smelled wet. I don’t think he had cologne or anything like that. I hate cologne.” She shook her head slightly. Her neck was sore and every time she moved, it pulled the stitches. “Nothing stands out.

“It’s okay. You say you hate cologne. Do you think you’d have noticed it if he were wearing any?”

“I think so. I’m pretty sensitive that way.”

“’You keep saying ‘he,’ so you believe your attacker was male. Why? And was he alone?” Steve prodded gently.

“I didn’t hear or see anyone else. I thought I had the street to myself before he grabbed me, so I am assuming he was alone. His hands were large and his body felt solid behind me, like a man. His voice was deep, but not unusually so. He sort of growled like he was disguising his voice, but I’m sure it wasn’t a woman’s voice.”

Steve nodded and wrote more notes “When did he speak and what did he say?”

Megan picked at the hem of the blanket, avoiding eye contact. “The knife was at my throat when he said into my left ear, ‘This is a test.’”

“What happened then?” Officer Smythe asked, almost eagerly, as if he were caught up in the
drama of her story.

“He cut me. I woke up here.”

“You don’t remember anything else? Did he let you fall or did he lower you to the ground?” Smythe continued, continuing his line of questioning.

Megan forced herself to not look at Steve. She couldn’t even hint that she was relying on him to guide her through this. She remembered the feeling of the blade parting flesh followed by pain and the feeling of warm blood running down her neck. Her legs buckled beneath her as she slowly crumpled to the ground and came to rest on her right side. Her attacker had kept her from falling backwards, but hadn’t so much eased her down as directed her fall. Why had she crumpled so quickly? She didn’t remember him knocking her legs out from under her. Thoughts of her family filled her mind. Would someone find her in time? What would happen to Steve? “I remember pain. I can’t tell you anything else,” she answered truthfully.

“Can you tell us who might have attacked you or why?” Steve asked quietly, verbalizing the question they both knew she dared not answer.

Megan shook her head. “I’m bottom of the totem pole at work and don’t do anything really interesting there anyways. I’m pretty new in town, so I can’t imagine I’ve angered anyone. My ex-fiancé and I parted on good terms and he’s never threatened me. It must have been a routine mugging or someone high on drugs.”

“Ex-fiancé?” Officer Smith perked up. “What’s his name?”

“Randall Baczkowski” Megan said, feeling guilty at having even mentioned him. She spelled Randy’s last name twice.

“When did you break up?”

“How did you last hear from Mr. Baczkowski?”

“Doctor Baczkowski. We were in graduate school together. I haven’t seen him since commencement and he just nodded at me after the ceremony. Quashing her guilt, she added. “He was always a bit clingy. But I really don’t think he’s the jealous or vindictive type, at least not enough to hurt me…” Megan fist her hand under the blanket, praying for forgiveness for even planting seeds of doubt in the officer’s mind. Randy deserved better. Since he hadn’t attacked her, any inquiry into Randy’s current behavior might be enough to muddle the investigation, at least until her file was buried and forgotten. A random knife attack wasn’t worth the resources needed for higher priority investigations, especially when the police department was under staffed and overworked. “Are we done?” she asked. Her yawn wasn’t entirely faked.

“I think so. I appreciate the help, Captain.” Officer Smythe stood up and handed her his card. “Please call me if you can think of anything else that might be useful.”

Megan smiled at him. “I will, thank you,” she said, shaking his hand as she leaned back in her bed and handed the business card to Steve for safekeeping. She watched the officer leave and turned to Steve. “Randy deserves better than that.”

He nodded his agreement. “But he’s a dead end,” Steve said, his voice still low but no longer so formal in tone. “It distracted him from thinking about how nothing was taken from your purse. Your books are at my apartment. I figured I’d get started reading them rather than leave them here
to get lost in the hospital. A mugging without even an attempt at theft makes no sense, but Smythe hasn’t thought about that yet. With any luck, he won’t. If he does, you can continue to be puzzled.”

Steve closed his notepad and set it aside. “We’ll go over all of this again tomorrow. You didn’t talk about how tall he was or a lot of other details I know you can remember if I ask the right questions.”

Megan nodded carefully.

“So what else did your attacker say?” Steve asked. “I’ve checked the room for bugs, so you can talk freely as long as you keep your voice down. I also made sure Officer Smythe was clean.”

“He said, ‘This is a test, Doctor. If you tell the police or the Captain about this, your oldest nephew is going to have a horrible accident. We’ll be in touch soon.’” Megan quoted and gripped his offered hand. “They have to know the police would require a statement. I tried to do what you said and tell the truth.” She looked down, somehow feeling ashamed that she’d done something wrong.

“It’s a lot easier to keep track of things when you don’t ever lie. You gave him a ton of details that won’t help identify your attacker but shows you’re trying to be helpful in the investigation.” He lifted her chin with his free hand and made her look at him. “You realize that this means we have to leave you vulnerable to them approaching you again. Can you do that while I get some reinforcements I trust to protect your family and start tracking leads?”

She tried valiantly to keep the waver out of her voice. “I have to, so I will.” She took a deep breath. “I know you’ve experienced far worse than this. How do you let yourself go to sleep when you know you can be attacked or killed at any moment? What’s the secret?”

“I don’t know of any secret. Eventually, you just get so tired you can’t stay awake. The nightmares are the worst. At least I’m able to defend myself. Do you have any self-defense training?”

“No.”

“That’s changing as soon as you’re out of here and healed up. It won’t protect you from the professionals, but you can learn to defend yourself from your average thug. We can use the S.H.I.E.L.D. gym.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I hate exercise and I am likely to take out all of my bad attitude on you. I can just sign up for a martial arts class. I promise I’ll go.”

Steve shook his head. “No, I’m training you. You need to learn dirty street fighting before anything else. Martial arts classes can be added once you’re fit and interested in perfecting your skills. For now, you need to learn how to take a hit and use whatever weapons are at your disposal. Natasha can give me some suggestions, too. She’s the best fighter at hand-to-hand combat I’ve ever met.”

“You’re going to learn how unlikeable I really am.”

He laughed. “I highly doubt that. I’m not afraid of your temper, Megan, not when you’ve already warned me that I’m not the real target. Maybe you’ll teach me some words I didn’t learn in the army. In the meantime, are you ready to go home?”

“Now?”

“When the doctor came around this morning they started the discharge process. You were still asleep. Since you signed all the permission forms for me to be included in discussion of your care,
we’re just waiting for the final paperwork. They should be done soon if they aren’t already.”

“I never signed…” her voice trailed off in her confusion. “Did I?”

“We work for a spy agency, Megan. Do you really think it was that hard for me to get your signature on the right forms?” He stood up to go check with the nurse, but paused to answer the question she wasn’t asking. “I know you’re alone in town. I talked to your mom about it and she was glad you were not going to be her by yourself. Given what’s going on at work, I wanted to make sure the hospital staff didn’t try to throw me out. If I overstepped, I’m apologize. I was trying to make sure you stayed safe.”

“Thank you for doing what I would have wanted anyway,” she whispered, a bit stunned to learn he’d forged paperwork on her behalf. He nodded in relief and she watched him walk out of the room in search of a nurse. The squeaky clean image of Captain America was even less accurate than she’d realized. She’d never assumed he was perfect, but he was so genuinely good it was difficult to reconcile that with him breaking laws. She couldn’t imagine him doing so for personal gain. Still, his act of forgery revealed a new layer to his character she hadn’t appreciated before.
“Are you hungry yet?” Steve asked as he helped Megan out of his car.

“No, just really tired.” She leaned on him a little bit and didn’t mind when he took her purse and plastic bag of belongings from the hospital to carry inside for her. She’d already given him her keys. “You need to take my keys and get a copy made.”

“Once you’re settled,” he said as he put his arm behind her as a precaution as she slowly climbed the steps to her apartment.

She wrinkled her nose in disgust as she held tightly to the railing and looked at the steps looming above her. Right now, living on the third floor had completely lost all appeal. “I want a shower more than anything.”

“Wait until I’m back from the store, okay?”

“Why are you going to the store?” she paused on the landing to catch her breath. Steve waited by her side patiently and she loved him for it. She knew he could carry her to her door without any effort but he was letting her do it herself without any indication that her slow pace annoyed him.

“I saw your fridge Monday morning, remember? You’re low on milk and eggs. You’re out of bananas which I saw you put on your oatmeal, and we used your last two apples in the lunches I packed. You only had two slices of bread left. Unless you went grocery shopping in a separate trip before you headed out for books, you need groceries.”

She looked sideways at him, “You’re scary, you know that?”

“The Nazis thought so, too,” he answered, then smiled a little. “I’ll get something to make for dinner. Is there anything else you want me to pick up?”

“Unfrosted blueberry Pop-Tarts. They can be my reward for climbing all these blasted stairs. Don’t worry if you can’t find them. A lot of stores don’t stock that flavor and the frosted version is just gross.”

A lifetime later, they made it into her apartment and Megan collapsed onto her couch.

Steve put her keys in his pocket and went to set her purse down on the coffee table, but paused when he saw it was still shoved up against the wall. “Why is there a sheet over your coffee table?” he asked as he laid her belongings on the dining room table instead.

“It’s your stuff, not mine. And while I have enough self-control to not go pawing through all those boxes, I admit to being curious as to what’s in them. Covering it all up removes the temptation.”

Steve looked at her with an expression she couldn’t quite identify. “My stuff is all over your coffee table. It would have been fine to move—”

“Steve, you have as close to zero privacy as anyone I’ve ever met and I know that bothers you. You’re a private person. The least I can do cover up your crap instead of gawking at every trinket in the name of tidying up. You have your car with you, so you can go back my coffee table when you go home.” She lay down on the couch and closed her eyes as she tried to lighten the mood. “Be a good minion and fix me some tea,” she said, waving him towards the kitchen.
A knock at the door woke her and she roused. Disorientation quickly switched to fear as she remembered that she was home alone. Someone was messing with the lock and trying to turn the doorknob. She frantically looked around for anything she could use as a weapon.

“Megan? It’s Steve,” she heard him say before the door opened and she back into the cushions in relief. Trust Captain America to know she’d feel vulnerable upon hearing someone at her door.

She yawned and stretched as he came inside, carrying what seemed to be twenty bags of groceries. It must be nice to be able to lug all of those heavy bags up two flights of stairs in a single trip. “My mom called when you were gone. She wants us to go up for a weekend. And before you get wary, she’s interested in thanking you for helping me out. She suggested Memorial Day weekend but I reminded her you were probably already committed to some public appearances for the military. I’ll stall as long as I can, but now that she has your number, she’ll be gently pestering you until you cave or she comes down here.”

Steve just smiled at her before starting to put away the groceries. “I don’t mind. I already promised her I’d bring you up for a visit once you were better.”

“Wait, what? When did you and my mom become best buds?”

“I’ve talked to her quite a bit over the last few days. You were sleeping a lot and she appreciated the updates. She loves you and wants to keep you safe, but she’s also really proud of you for forging your own path and moving down here like you did. How does chicken broccoli alfredo sound?”

“Delicious.” Megan shook her head, feeling a bit dumbfounded. “Welcome to The Twilight Zone. I think I hit my head because this cannot be my real life.”

Steve was already putting pans on the stove and heating water for the pasta. “Now you know how I feel.”

“Nope, this is weirder. I didn’t volunteer for any experiments. Yet here I am, sitting in my apartment watching one of the Avengers make me dinner and talking about taking me home to see the folks.”

“Try ditching a plane in the Atlantic, waking up seventy years later, and learning you didn’t die after all.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one. But, you’re distracting me from the main question about how you ended up at the hospital in the first place.”

Steve smiled at her while he worked. “That’s the most normal part of the whole thing. The medics called me once they had you stabilized en route to the hospital. The most frequently called number from your phone to one in the local area code happened to be mine. I called Nick and once I was at the hospital, I got your mom’s number from your phone and called her. You know the rest.”

Megan nodded, mindful of the bugs in her apartment. “Like I said, I hit my head and I woke up in The Twilight Zone.”

“You can return to reality the day after tomorrow.”

“How do you figure?”
“That’s when you’re cleared to return to work. You can get the stitches checked at the S.H.I.E.L.D. medic center when you go in on Friday morning.”

She moaned as she thought about work for the first time since the attack. “I’m going to have to start that whole set of experiments over again. I was hoping to only have to do a second trial, but even if someone covered for me, I’m not going to trust the results. Remind me again why I took this job?”

“So you can eat in our most excellent S.H.I.E.L.D. cafeteria.” Steve replied dryly. He pointed out the medicine bottles he had just placed on the bar over her sink. “I picked up your prescriptions. Don’t forget to take them before you go to bed tonight.”

“Yes, Dad.”

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After dinner, Steve cleaned up her kitchen, unfolded her sleeper sofa from the couch, and tucked her into bed with a kiss pressed to her forehead. He put her cell phone under her pillow and said, “Call or text if you need me,” before locking the apartment door behind him and leaving her alone. They both knew she wasn’t going to sleep well, but the only way either of them could see forward was to maintain the pretense that she’d done as her attackers had demanded and kept the details of their threats to herself.

She dozed fitfully, haunted by nightmares fueled by her medication. When dawn finally sent streaks of sunlight across her floor, she relaxed and fell into a deeper sleep. It made no sense. She knew that she was just as vulnerable in the day as she had been during the night, but the daylight made her feel safer.

Steve stopped by after work to check on her and heated leftovers for dinner. It frightened her a little bit to realize how easily he had slipped into the corners of her life. He never demanded anything from her but instead treated her friendship like a precious gift. It made it easy to forget how short a time she had actually known him. On that second night, he packed up his boxes and gave her back ownership of her coffee table, but only after taking the time to show her some of the items he had left from his parents lives: the family Bible, his mother’s favorite glass dip pen, his parents marriage certificate, and the folded flag that had been given to the young widow at her husband’s funeral. There was even a letter to his mother from his father, written late in their courtship. They were simple treasures, valuable only to Steve or the historians who wanted to study his life, but priceless to the now-grown son who had so little left of the parents who had loved him.

After Steve left with his boxes, Megan felt restless. Had Peggy appreciated him? Megan wanted to believe she had. Steve spoke too highly of her for Megan to believe Peggy had been blind to what Steve had to offer his life partner. It must have simply devastated Peggy to lose Steve before they ever got a chance to try for something more than the stolen moments that had been the basis of their relationship during the war.

Megan wanted to reach out to Peggy and get to know her and see for herself the kind of woman Peggy was, but it seemed too intrusive to seriously consider doing so, even without the complication of Peggy’s deteriorating mental state. It was up to Steve to make that contact. Still, it gave her an idea for something else she could do for Steve. It would take a bit of doing, but maybe it would distract her from her own problems and give her a way to repay him for all of the assistance he was providing to keep her family safe.

Pleased with herself for the idea, she got out some stationery and looked up the address of Stark
tower. In this age of electronic surveillance she had a hunch that an old fashioned letter was more secure. She dropped the letter into the mail on her way to the bus stop on Friday morning.

On Sunday, Steve came over after lunch and told her to grab her helmet so they could go for a ride. He bought her a sundae at a different ice cream stand than the one they had visited before, mainly to keep their routine unpredictable and their conversations private.

“I went on a little road trip yesterday and got you a new phone. It went active this morning. The number is the same,” Steve said as he slid it across the table to her.

Megan picked it up in shock and turned it on. “Why do I need a new phone?” She checked the menu and saw it had just about every possible app and option ever used on a phone. “I can’t believe…this phone must cost half a grand even without the extra features.” She gathered herself, determined not to give their observers any indication of how deeply this was affecting her. “Does it do dishes, too?”

Steve shook his head sadly, “No, it doesn’t do housework. But this one works on a different, proprietary network and it’s encrypted. Any messages you send by text will be unreadable by anyone who manages to intercept them. The phone will send an alert to a certain computer expert and his employer if the case is ever opened by someone trying to plant a tracer in it. Even opening the battery cover will trigger an alert. They’re going to monitor the operating system, too, and make sure no one tampers with the software. It’s as secure as a phone can be. The first thing you need to do, though, is set it up for thumbprint access.”

“My friend is putting a security detail on your nephews and another on your mom and step-dad. Ideally, they’ll never know anyone is watching them, but they’ll intervene if necessary.” He didn’t need to explain what he meant by that later statement.

“Thank you.” Megan felt her eyes welling up with tears and she handed Steve a stack of family photographs she’d assembled at random to disguise her true intent. “I found the second photograph in the stack in my pocket on Friday night. I figure it was planted there when someone bumped into me on the Metro.”

Steve looked through the photographs in order, feigning interest in them as he asked for all of their names and how they were related to Megan. “Is this your nephew?” Steve asked, looking at the image of a six-year-old boy playing his school playground.

Megan nodded. “His name is Keith. Turn the picture over.”

Steve pretended to drop some of the photographs and some of them flipped face down, letting him read the message as he picked them up again. He read the note silently to himself. Well done, Dr. B. You’ll get your assignment soon.

“Any point running an analysis on it?”

“It’s typed, so I doubt it. I’ll ask my source.” Steve handed her back her photographs, minus the one of Keith, which he slipped into his pocket as he put his phone away. Megan would never have known he’d palmed it if she hadn’t known he was taking it.

“You know, if the hired hero gig doesn’t work out for you, you could always take your magician show on tour,” she murmured behind her napkin as she pretended to wipe her mouth. “Is he aware of the whole situation?”
“Fully. I trust him with this, Megan.”

“I know you do. You wouldn’t have gone to him otherwise.”

“He has a deep distrust of S.H.I.E.L.D. It’s a matter of great pride to him that I asked him for help rather than Nick. And before you worry about the costs, don’t. To him, it’s pocket change and an ego boost.”

Megan snorted. “From what I see in the press, he hardly needs more ego. But I get the impression there is a lot of pain behind that bravado. He seems… driven.”

“He is. I liked his father, but he was always more interested in projects than people. I suspect that affected his interactions with his son, too.”

Steve stretched and changed the subject, “I’ve been reading the books you picked up. It’s becoming obvious to me that I need to get current in the life sciences. Computers and biology seem to be the two areas that have changed the most since I put the plane in the water. I know you have your old textbooks, would you suggest I start with one of them or something else?”

“I have a couple of different textbooks that are really good, but I can tutor you, too. There is so much detail in the textbooks and you probably don’t need to know all of those details for your purposes. I’ve done some tutoring already, and I’m pretty good at identifying the big picture and helping people plug the details into that framework. If you find you enjoy it, we can delve more into the details later. Remind me when we get back to my apartment and I’ll show you the book I think you should start with.” She sighed, “I suppose we should head back.”

“Why don’t we get some takeout and go hike a trail? I know of a place with a trail that’s on the level and isn’t really hard.”

“That sounds wonderful. I just don’t feel much like acting for the entomologists today.”

“It’s alright. It’s been a rough week for you.”

“Says the guy who spent two nights in a hospital chair.”

“I’ve slept in worse places,” he reminded her.

Megan fingered the bandage that she had over her stitches so her clothing didn’t catch. “The attack on me was a professional job, wasn’t it?” she asked quietly. “Your typical street thug wouldn’t cut just the external jugular vein and nothing else.”

Steve nodded. “That’s another detail Officer Smythe didn’t pick up on. He seemed like a good guy, just really new to the job and in need of some more training.”

“Yeah. At least I was able to give him a lot of details that won’t matter at all. I did wonder, though, why you focused on the sounds of the bag.”

“The crinkling might have distracted you from the sound of footsteps behind you,” Steve explained. “After the verbal warning, did anything else happen that was worth mentioning?”

“Not really, there was just the whole ‘life flashing before your eyes routine’ that I’m sure you’re familiar with. It’s probably a dead end to try to identify them since I never saw them.”

“My friend’s computer expert is looking into security camera footage in the area. If he can’t find something there, we’ll have to wait until they tell you what they want. In the meantime, I have
something for you.” Steve reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small, square box.

Megan looked at him, puzzled, then gasped when she opened the lid and found the bracelet inside. “It’s gorgeous! This is too much.” Each link of the sterling silver bracelet was a crystal-embedded whale tail that shimmered and glistened in the light.

“What you can’t see is the tracking devices embedded inside several of the links. I know rings are a problem with the gloves you wear in the lab, but you can keep the bracelet on all the time. If the worst happens and you are taken, my friend has a chance of tracking your location. Obviously, there are some range limitations and if you go cave exploring, you’ll be out of reach, but it’s better than nothing. Since you have several dolphin and whale pictures around your apartment, no one will think it’s an odd choice for you.”

Megan got up and pulled Steve to his feet before she buried her face in his shoulder and hugged him tightly, still clutching the bracelet in her hand. “I don’t know what I did to deserve your friendship, but I’m more grateful than you’ll ever know.”
Unreasonable Demands

Mid-morning on Tuesday, Megan’s new phone chimed with an alert that she had an email message from Mr. Jarvis. “Dr. Buchwald, I spoke with Ms. Potts about the nature of your request and rather than schedule an appointment to offer advice on security, she has offered the use of Stark Tower for the event. Given the current infestation of your apartment, I need to know if you have a secure computer for correspondence. I understand that not everyone enjoys lengthy email conversations from their phone. Jarvis.”

“Want me to fetch your lower jaw?”

Megan blinked and looked up, “Huh? I’m sorry, Emma, what did you say?”

“I asked if you wanted me to chase down your jaw. I saw it running away under the bench over there,” Emma said waving in the general direction of Megan’s lab bench. “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Sorry, I just got a very unexpected message. Have you ever asked if you could have a taste and found yourself being served a five course meal on the house?”

“Can’t say that I have. But given how much Captain Rogers fancies you, I’m not surprised. I assume he gave you that swanky new phone, too?”

Megan nodded, unsure of what else she dared say. At least her new bracelet was currently hidden by the sleeve to her lab coat or Emma would never leave her alone.

“And you’re still denying that you’re dating?” Emma said and rolled her eyes.

Megan blushed. “Honestly, I’m not sure what to think any more. He’s so far out of my league…”

Emma laughed. “Stop worrying and enjoy the ride. Later.”

Megan waved back absently and looked at her phone again. She sighed and composed a reply.

“Please, call me Megan. I have a Macbook with wifi. I did set up my router to require a password. Yes, writing emails on a phone is tedious for a touch typist like myself. Suggestions welcome if my current setup needs to be improved.”

She received a reply almost immediately and marveled at Mr. Jarvis’s ability to type so quickly. “Dr. Megan, a courier named Pallavi Mullur will deliver my suggested solution to your apartment at 7 PM. She will be traveling incognito, so she will not have a Stark Industry logo on her jacket, but she will hold her ID card up to your peephole on request. I will begin the necessary research and will forward current contact information shortly. Jarvis.”

“Is there a way to verify I don’t have an infestation of cameras, too?” Megan wrote back.

“I will include the necessary equipment in your package.”

Nodding to herself in relief, Megan tucked her phone into her pocket and idly fingered her new bracelet. “Definitely not in Kansas anymore.”

****

When she arrived home, Megan was surprised and disturbed to find a package and note on her dining room table. Someone had been in her apartment again. This time, though, they clearly
wanted her to know it.

With shaking hands, she got out her phone and took several pictures of the package and note, then sent them to Jarvis with a message. “Found this on my dining room table tonight when I got home. What should I do? I have gloves to wear when handling if you think we can get fingerprints.”

Then she picked up her cordless landline handset and called her mother, hoping to distract herself from her situation by talking about normal things. When her mother asked her why she sounded so stressed, she just brushed it off as post-attack jitters and continued fixing herself dinner. While she spoke to her mom, Jarvis texted her a reply to box up the materials and give them to the courier, so she dumped out the box’s contents, folded the container flat, and put them into a manila envelope with Jarvis’ name on the outside. She hung up with her mother then tucked her cell phone into her bra, taking some comfort in having access to help right on her person.

It was after she’d opened the box from Jarvis and found the note about how to check for cameras that she realized what she had done. Megan looked around her apartment in horror. There would have been no missing her actions of the evening, including her use of gloves and passing off the box and note to a courier. She barely made it to the bathroom before she surrendered the contents of her stomach then lay curled up on the cold tile, shaking and crying. She wanted so badly to call Steve, but she knew she had to handle this on her own. If she called him now, her observers might realize he was aware of the threats against her family, not just her unknown helper who had taken the envelope from her. She would not compound one error with another.

Her phone vibrated with a new text. She nearly dropped her phone twice before she was able to get her shaking hands to unlock it and open the message. “I’ve detected an elevated heart rate. Are you in danger? Should I send Captain Rogers? Jarvis.”

She held her fisted hand to her mouth and tried to keep her sobs relatively quiet. “Panic attack,” she texted back. “I’ll be okay.” She knew it was a lie even as she punched the characters into the phone with trembling hands. She was so cold. Maybe a hot shower would help?

She tried to stand but the room spun wildly. A bath then. Still nauseated, she crawled over to the tub and turned on the water as hot as she could tolerate and started to strip off her clothes.

****

“Megan? Are you all right?” she heard Steve call from outside the bathroom door. “You didn’t answer the door so I let myself in.”

“Steve?” Megan roused from her stupor. The water she was sitting in was cold. “Wh-what are you doing here?” she asked, realizing as she spoke that her teeth were chattering.

“I had a craving. Come on out and have some tea with me, okay?”

“Okay.” Megan tried to keep her voice from shaking. She felt safer with Steve in her apartment. He’d know what to do. Resolved, she opened the drain stopper and reached for her robe.

When she finally emerged, she found Steve in her kitchen, putting over her stove and finishing preparations of her half-cooked dinner. “I decided on hot chocolate instead, is that okay?” he asked her, concern in his eyes. He nodded to the pad and pen on the table and she went over to read it. *Jarvis called me. I see you got his package. I checked and there are no cameras here. Relax.*

Megan sobbed into her hands and sank into the chair that was still pulled out. Her amateur mistake hadn’t endangered her family. She just sat there shaking, both weak with relief and frozen to her
core. She wrapped her hands around the mug of hot chocolate he set before her, trying to warm herself.

“Hey, come here. You’re freezing.” She let him pull her into a hug and ended up clinging to him like a frightened child. He stroked her hair, “Shh. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Megan tried to pull herself together and thought back to his earlier comment. “What were you craving?” she asked, her voice wavering despite her best efforts.

“You. I haven’t seen you since yesterday and I found myself craving your company,” he said, his tone light. “I didn’t expect to find you feeling under the weather. Are you getting the flu?”

Megan shook her head. “Panic attack, I think. I’ve never had one before but I could have sworn I was dying.”

“They do that to you. I can never decide if they’re better or worse than the nightmares. Drink your hot chocolate and then we’ll go for a walk. The fresh air will do you good.”

****

An hour later, they were walking around the city arm in arm. Megan was wearing the jacket Steve had bought for her. The smell of the leather and the softness of the warm lining were the perfect comfort to her chilled body, just as having him beside her was a comfort to her shattered confidence. He didn’t press her to talk, just smiled at her knowingly and led her on a wandering route down busy streets and past coffee shops that spilled light onto the sidewalk.

“I messed up tonight,” she finally said, looking down at her feet as they walked. “If there had been cameras, they’d have known I have help.”

“We all make mistakes. Just learn from it and do better next time.”

It was a relief that he didn’t tell her it was okay, because it really wasn’t. His honesty was a far better comfort. “How did Jarvis know?”

“He told me tonight that your bracelet also monitors your pulse. When you told him you were having a panic attack, he decided to let me know. He also forwarded the images you sent him of your little gift package.”

Megan blushed. She was no stranger to sex, but the boldness of the demand in the note made her decidedly uncomfortable. “The note would have been quite enough. Providing a box of condoms along with their demand for samples was a bit much.”

“Actually, that was rather thoughtful of them. What I found insulting was that they only gave you a month to seduce me. Setting aside the change from my day when the gentleman did the courting, I expect to be courted properly over a period of several months by my suitor. I’m not like Howard.”

Megan stopped and stared him. Of all the reactions she’d envisioned, this one had never occurred to her. “Insulted?” she stammered, somewhat incredulous.

“I am.” He looked her straight in the eye and continued in his serious tone, “It’s a complement to you, I suppose, that they expect you’ll get me into bed that easily. But, I’ll have you know that Captain America is not a gigolo.”

She saw the corner of his mouth twitch ever so slightly and she burst out laughing so hard she could barely breathe. He had to hold her up as she leaned against him, her knees threatening to give
out beneath her. Gently, he guided her to a nearby park bench and sat down, pulling her into his lap while he waited for her to get herself under control.

“It wasn’t that funny,” he chided her.

“I disagree,” she said, the dissolved into giggles again. “I have an image of Captain America dancing in the middle of a horde of horny women with cheesy music playing in the background.”

“Please, don’t remind me of those days.”

“Wha—” she broke off, remembering now how he’d mentioned his days in the USO selling war bonds. “I’d forgot. I don’t need a mental image when I can find it on the internet as soon as I get home.” That set of a new fit of giggles, which he endured silently, though he did roll his eyes.

“Forget I reminded you.” He tucked her hair behind her left and left his hand on her shoulder. “Feel better?”

Megan nodded. “But what are we going to do? They clearly want to use IVF to create a bunch of Steve juniors and we can’t let them do that. But if we don’t…”

“You’ll have to court me and I’ll play hard to get. We know what they want now, and that tells us more about them. We can use that to help track them down. If we have to, we get them some non-viable samples. With your background, can’t you kill the cells before they get delivered?”

“I suppose. But that won’t fool them forever. Then what?”

“We figure something out. Sometimes, you can’t plan an operation to the end and you have to just plan your next step and keep exploring options. The bigger challenge right now is you having to pretend you’re in love with me.”

Megan shook her head. “You really have no idea, do you?” she asked, leaning against him and tucking her head against his shoulder. She twined her fingers through his, looking down at their hands. “You’re easy to love, Steve. Whoever lands you for real is going to be really, really lucky. I’m half in love with you already, but you’re getting over Peggy and I’m getting over Randy. The hard part is going to be staying friends when this is over, and that’s really important to me. Feelings follow actions, you know. By the time this is done, I’m going to be completely smitten with you — for all the wrong reasons. Promise me we’ll stay friends and I’ll survive the breakup. I’m really more worried about you.”

“Why is that?” he asked into her hair.

“You’re loyal to Peggy and you’re not really ready to let her go. Dating me, even for pretend, might feel like a betrayal to her and that’s not fair to you.”

“Peggy would be the first one to tell me to get on with my life. We had our chance and lost it. I’ll always love her, but you’ve helped shake me out of the stupor of just existing. Besides, I never really got to court a girl before, other than the dames Bucky found for me and they don’t really count. It will be a nice change to know you’ll continue to see me after the first date. Kinda takes the pressure off, you know?”

Megan chuckled at that comment. He really had no idea how easy he was to be with. “So we’re really going to do this?”

In answer, he pulled his hand out of her grasp and lifted her chin so he could gently brush his lips against hers.
“Guess so,” she murmured before pulling him back for another, longer kiss.

Much later, after her pulse was racing again for an entirely different and pleasant reason, he put her on her feet and started them back to her apartment. Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she checked the message. It was from Jarvis, checking that she was okay. It was both comforting and very disturbing to know that some man working for Tony Stark was monitoring her pulse. That would certainly lead to some awkward moments in the future given her low tolerance for cold showers. She bit her lip and sent a quick text back after first showing the message to Steve. “Steve’s a good kisser.”

Steve blushed and kissed her temple, then glanced down at the message Jarvis sent back almost immediately. “I expect no less from Captain Rogers.”

Megan laughed and put her phone away. “Jarvis never seems to sleep.”

Steve got quiet at that, then shrugged. “I guess it goes with being the resident computer genius.”

“It must.”

****

Back in her apartment, Steve slipped perfectly into his assigned role. “Where’d you get this new tablet computer? It’s pretty fancy with an accessory keyboard and mouse and everything.”

“My secret admirer sent it,” Megan replied on cue. She paused, thoughtfully. “You’re jealous. You really shouldn’t be, Steve, I’m not your girlfriend. Until you kissed me tonight, I never even knew you were interested.”

“Do you want to be?”

“That depends on how good the sex is.”

He blushed at that and Megan smiled. “It’s so much fun to make you blush.” She’d wondered how he’d react to her deviation from their planned script.

Despite the reddening of his cheeks, he acted like she’d said nothing unusual. “I’m serious.”

“So am I, Captain.”

“But you have the order of events all wrong.”

“New century, new rules. Life’s too short to waste time on someone if you’re not sexually compatible.”

“Life is too short to rush to the destination when the whole point is to experience the journey,” he replied.

“Then how about a wager? At the end of one month, I have you in bed. When I win, and I will, you agree that we’ll move in together.”

Steve rolled his eyes at her, laughing with his body though his tone was serious. “What happens when I win?”

Megan shrugged. “Your wager, your consolation prize. It hardly matters.”

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with, Megan,” he warned. “When I win, we get engaged,
you let me court you properly, and we wait until our wedding night.”

“As long as you understand I’ll keep trying to wear you down and convince you to elope during that long courtship you think we’ll have, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Come here, Dr. Buchwald,” he crooked his finger at her. “Wagers like this one should be sealed with a kiss, not a handshake.”
5/20/13 3:03:AM
tony stark@starkindustries.com
To: meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com
WTF: Flowers for Jarvis?

Dr. B.

Why did you send Jarvis flowers? He’s flustered and gloating!

T.S.

****

5/20/13 6:09:AM
meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com
To: tony stark@starkindustries.com
Re: WTF: Flowers for Jarvis?

Mr. Stark,

My mother raised me with manners. Considering all of the assistance Mr. Jarvis has generously provided recently, a bouquet of assorted flowers to express my gratitude seemed quite appropriate.

Megan

******

5/20/13 6:11:AM
tony stark@starkindustries.com
To: meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com
M,

Mine didn’t, so you’d better clarify what Jarvis did for you. He’s not allowed to gloat more than I do.

T.S.

*****

5/20/13 6:17:AM
tonystark@starkindustries.com

To: megannuchwald@starkindustries.com

Re: WTF: Flowers for Jarvis?

Mr. Stark,

As Mr. Jarvis is your employee, I suggest you speak to him directly. If flowers are a cause for concern, I’ll be sure to send an edible arrangement next time.

Megan

*****

5/20/13 6:19:AM

tonystark@starkindustries.com

To: meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com

M,

Dear God, no! He has too many sensitivities for that. Just stick with email.

T.S.

*****

5/20/13 6:27:AM

meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com

To: tonystark@starkindustries.com

BCC: jarvis@starkindustries.com

Re: WTF: Flowers for Jarvis?

Mr. Stark,

Email cannot replace a written note for a formal expression of gratitude. I fail to see why you are so threatened by your employee’s obvious pleasure at my gift. This conversation is over.

Megan

****

5/20/13 6:33:AM

meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com

To: jarvis@starkindustries.com

Jarvis,
I apologize for causing you distress and problems with Mr. Stark by sending you flowers and a thank you note. That was never my intent.

Megan

*****

5/20/13 6:34:AM

jarvis@starkindustries.com

To: meganbuchwald@starkindustries.com

Dr. Megan,

Please do not apologize. I have derived great pleasure from your gift and have the flowers in full view at all times.

Jarvis

“It’s too early in the morning to deal with this crap.” Megan muttered to herself as she finished her second cup of tea and shut off the tablet Jarvis had sent her. It was bad enough that Jarvis seemed to be working around the clock in clear violation of employment laws. But for Mr. Stark to protest a token of appreciation seemed to be too much. She resolved that the next time she was in New York, she’d stop by the tower and deliver a bouquet to Jarvis in person and ask him to join her for a cup of coffee. Surely with his talents, he’d be able to find employment with someone who truly appreciated his dedication to his job. Maybe he just needed someone to point out that he had options beyond Stark Industries.

It was surprising that Steve hadn’t intervened before now. It wasn’t like him to stand by and let someone get bullied like Stark seemed inclined to do with Jarvis. Maybe Steve had simply been too distracted when he was in New York to notice it before. She was distracted from her musings by the chime of her phone, alerting her to a new text.

“Don’t forget to bring your workout clothes. I’ll meet you in the gym at 5,” Steve wrote.

“Sadist,” she texted back. Resigned, she grabbed the duffel bag she’d packed on her way out the door.

*****

“Why do I need my hands wrapped?”

Steve didn’t look up, but continued to carefully unwind the handwrap from the roll and wrap it around her hand, then her wrist, between her fingers, and then around her thumb. Again and again, his hands looped fabric around her own while she stood there and watched. “It protects you from injury by distributing the force across all of your joints.”

“Okay, that makes sense.”

“I’ll show you how to do it yourself later. The first few times, I think it’s better to have someone else do it so it isn’t too tight or too loose.”

“You’re assuming there will be a next time.”
He finally looked up and met her gaze. “I’m optimistic that way. You really hate this, don’t you?”

“Yup. I can’t even pretend it will help my riding improve.” She didn’t mention the looks they were both getting from the other agents working out in the gym. She didn’t belong here and she knew it, but Steve was trying to do her a favor so she was doing her best to ignore their audience.

“It will, so you don’t need to pretend.”

“Punching a sandbag is not going to improve my riding of the horse I don’t have.”

“By itself, no. But in the next few weeks, you’re going to build endurance and core strength. We’ll work on balance, too. And according to Wikipedia, core strength and balance are both very important in riding,” he explained as he finished wrapping one hand and started on the other. “We’ll spend some time today working on how to throw a punch and then we’ll go for a run.”

“Run? These knees have to last me several more decades.” Megan looked up at him from under her bangs, “Can’t we just skip directly to crawling on broken glass and call it a day?”

Steve laughed. “I promise it isn’t going to be as bad as you think. This isn’t like your high school gym class.”

“It’s not my fault everything we did there involved a ball.”

“C’mon” he said, leading her over to one of the sandbags hanging in the S.H.I.E.L.D. gym. “Once you have good form, you can start hitting me directly.”

“Don’t tempt me. It will add an interesting layer to the rumors about our relationship when people learn you’re a masochist at heart.”

Steve just smiled patiently at her. He was in his element here, and it was quite clear to Megan that no amount of snark on her part was going to dampen his enthusiasm for teaching her some basic fighting skills. “I hate you, you know.”

“I saw When Harry Met Sally.” He smiled, “Fighting starts with your feet.” He used his own feet to adjust the width of hers as he stood behind her. “Turn your left foot forward a bit. Good. Now close your fists, thumb to the outside…”

****

An hour later, Megan was limp from exhaustion. The shower washed away the sweat but did nothing about the fatigue settling into her bones. She was going to hurt all over tomorrow. Quickly, she pulled on her shirt and pants before padding barefoot over to the mirror where there was a hairdryer mounted to the wall.

“It will get easier in about three days,” a voice behind her said.

Megan turned and smiled at the lethal redhead. “I sure hope so. Nice to meet you, Agent Romanoff. I’m Megan.”

“I know who you are.” Natasha looked fit and graceful as she stood there in a tank top and yoga pants and with a small towel draped around her neck. She took a sip of water from her water bottle and Megan couldn’t help but admire the way she moved. It reminded her of a leopard on the hunt: death and beauty wrapped up in a lithe body. Piercing green eyes full of cunning and intelligence looked back at her. It was unsettling.
“Between your expertise and the S.H.I.E.L.D. rumor mill, I’d expect nothing less. Do you have any advice on what I can do tonight to make sure I’m able to move tomorrow morning?”

“Keep drinking water, take some pain medicine before you go to bed, stretch in the morning, and think evil thoughts about Rogers.”

Megan laughed. “I’ve got the last part down pat. He’s a stubborn Boy Scout.”

“You’re good for him.” Natasha said, studying her carefully. “I’ll help train you once you’re ready for hand-to-hand.”

Megan couldn’t hide her surprise. “Thank you.” She wasn’t sure what else she could say that wouldn’t make her sound incredibly stupid, so she just shut her mouth.

Natasha nodded slightly, almost to herself. “You’ll do,” she said, and headed for her locker to start stripping off her sweaty workout clothes.

Unsettled, Megan focused on drying her hair. Agent Romanoff was nothing like her reputation. Then again, Megan knew she was an expert chameleon and probably no one knew the real person behind the multiple facades she wore. Megan decided that in this case more than any other, she’d need to read actions rather than words. Natasha had offered to help, and that said everything.

****

The next morning, she rolled out of bed with a moan. Every muscle in her body hurt, including muscles she never knew she had. Remembering Natasha’s advice, she forced herself to stretch before taking a shower. By the time the aspirin and caffeine hit her system, she was starting to think she’d be able to function.

After catching up on the news, she opened her email and found a new message from Jarvis. He’d never answered her when she asked if was his first name or last name, and simply replied that he went by Jarvis. Maybe it was a nickname? He wouldn’t be the first person to abandon the name their parents had chosen for one reason or another.

“Dr. Megan,” the message started. Why did he insist on using her title when she’d asked him to just call her Megan? It was another puzzle piece in the mystery of Jarvis. “I have finished my research and identified current mailing addresses for all of our targets. If you can secure Captain Rogers’ attendance from either August 9-12 or August 16-19, we can prepare the invitations. At present, Director Fury has no pending assignments for Captain Rogers for either of those weekends.”

Megan nearly spit her tea. “You have access to Director Fury’s schedule?” she typed back.

“Mr. Stark has requested that I monitor the activities of key S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives. He has a deep distrust of government agencies as a result of his time in Afghanistan.”

It made sense on one level, but it was unsettling to know that the S.H.I.E.L.D. computer systems were so vulnerable. She decided not to worry about that for the moment. “I’ll talk to Director Fury today and see what I can do,” she wrote back.

****

Once at work, she asked Agent Hill if she could have time to speak with Fury that day. To her surprise, she was ushered right into his office. “Did you get tired of studying the Potomac?”
“I’d rather do that than paperwork,” he looked up from his desk and tilted his head to the empty chair, indicating she should sit. “Is General Ross being a problem again?”

Megan shook her head. “He tromps and growls around the lab area a lot, but he’s left me alone. I’m here with a request for some time off for Captain Rogers, and I’d like it to be an order from you.”

Nick’s eyebrow shot up. “You’re planning a romantic weekend getaway?”

Megan smiled and shook her head. “Hardly, but he would need the entire weekend off, ideally the first or second weekend in August. I’ve been planning a sort of reunion for him. When I asked Pepper Potts for advice on how to manage such an event without having to worry about unwanted intrusions by the press, she offered the use of Stark Tower. But given the number of people who will be traveling, it would be rather inconvenient to have Steve sent out on a field assignment and miss the whole thing.”

“I cannot control what happens in the world, Dr. Buchwald.”

“No, but the world managed to keep turning for several decades after Steve was lost in the ice. I think she can manage one more weekend without him, especially in light of how much this will help his ongoing adjustment to his new life.”

“By dwelling in the past?”

“By reconnecting to his roots. Think of him as a transplanted flower. If you want him to thrive in his new pot, you’ve got to preserve the root structure. Cutting a stem at the base and sticking it in new soil generally doesn’t work very well. I think you have to agree that he’s been coping better these last few months. I’m just trying to keep that process going the best way I know how.”

“Just what sort of reunion is this going to be?” Nick asked, leaning back in his chair to study her with that inscrutable, one-eyed gaze.

Megan told him and tried to read his reaction, but he didn’t let anything slip, at least that she could detect. She laid out all of the plans she and Jarvis had come up with and how they envisioned the weekend’s proceedings. Nick just sat there silently, listening to the overview and relevant details but never once making a comment until she was done.

“Alright, Dr. Buchwald,” Nick said at last, leaning forward in his chair. “I’ll send Captain Rogers to New York the first Friday in August in full dress uniform. I’ll tell him that it’s a special assignment on official S.H.I.E.L.D. business.”

“Thank you, Director. I appreciate your help with this. Steve does, too, he just doesn’t know it yet.”

****

“Hello?” Megan answered the phone without turning on a light to check the caller I.D.

“Megan, are you okay?” Steve’s worried voice wrapped around her like a hug in a way that almost made up for interrupting her sleep. She looked at the clock, it was just past ten in the morning.

“I’m fine.” She yawned. “What’s up?”

“I’m sorry, did I wake you? It’s after ten and I thought you’d be awake by now.”
“It’s okay, Sergeant Morning Lark. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, but you need to get dressed and be ready for me to pick you up in a half hour. I promise it’s worth getting up for, sleepyhead.”

“What’s the dress code?”

“Jeans. We’re taking my bike.”

“Okay, bye.” Megan yawned and put the phone back into the base to charge. Given Steve’s enthusiasm for making her exercise, she had visions of him dragging her on a ten-mile hike uphill somewhere. But he’d sounded excited so she’d put on a happy face until she knew what tortures he had in mind.
An hour later, she was riding behind him on his bike, no less curious and slightly more awake. The vibrations of the bike beneath her were shaking the fatigue from her brain. Steve had refused to give her any hint about their destination, insisting that he wanted her to figure it out for herself.

As he took them further away from the city, highways lined with strip malls and housing developments gave way to roads threading through lush farmland. The morning sunshine on the verdant hills was beautiful and reminded her of home. She really needed to get out of the city more often because just being out here was relaxing her.

They turned down the drive of a farm and she noticed horses in the pasture near the road. The sign over the driveway said, ‘Merrylegs’ Adventures’ and she wondered if it was a reference to Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*. As wonderful as it was to be visiting a stable, she couldn’t afford lessons, so she wondered what Steve was planning by bringing her here.

After Steve turned off the bike and put down the kickstand, she hopped off, took off her helmet and shook out her hair. “What are you up to?”

“I can’t sign you up for lessons until you check them out. I’ve never been around horses so I don’t know what to look for. I got the name of this place from someone who used to come here and it seemed like a pretty nice farm when I drove by it earlier this week.” Steve explained as he took his own helmet off and hung it on the handlebar of his bike. “We’re suppose to get a tour from someone named Sally.” He nodded his head towards the woman heading their way, “That must be her. Good morning, ma’am. Are you Sally?”

“That I am. You must be Steve.” Sally shook Steve’s offered hand. “Tonya said you wanted a tour and to find out about lessons.”

“I’m Megan. It’s nice to meet you,” Megan said taking her turn shaking hands. She looked back at Steve, “When you plan a surprise, you go all out.”

He just smiled and waited for her to take charge.

“You look like—”

Megan saw a familiar look on Sally’s face and cut in, “I know! It’s uncanny, isn’t it?” She wrapped her arm around Steve’s waist and leaned into him. “I think he should moonlight at kids’ birthday parties as Captain America. Put a costume on him and give him a shield to wave around, and he could make a fortune! It figures that his parents named him Steve! But that’s the name his parents gave him and that’s the name he’s going to keep. Besides, I saw Captain America once, and he definitely looked taller.”

Steve looked down at her, “When?”

She waved her hand dismissively, “He was walking down the hallway at work one day. He seemed so serious.” She looked up at Steve, smiling impishly. “You, on the other hand, you smile more. That’s a good thing.” She turned her attention back to their guide. “So, about the barn tour.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I just thought—”

“Happens all the time,” Steve admitted. “Don’t worry about it.”
“That must get annoying after awhile.”

“You have no idea,” Megan chimed in before Steve could say any more. “How many horses do you have on site?” she asked, slipping out from Steve’s grasp and into Sally’s personal space. It was time to get this tour started and Sally’s mind back on horses.

“Eleven of our own, and three boarders. We don’t board for just anyone, but some of our regulars ended up buying horses and continuing lessons here, so the owners decided to allow boarding under those conditions as long as we have the room and if we can use those horses in lessons as needed.” Sally led them into the old but spacious wooden barn that had two rows of stalls on either side of a large open area.

“As you can see, all of our horses have their own box stalls and are brought in at night or in bad weather. The rest of the time, we have several pastures for turnout we can rotate them through. We have a covered outdoor ring with lights so we can use it after dark plus several miles of trails. Twice a year, we host some local 4H groups for their shows and on those two weekends, there are no lessons.

“Hello, Mickey,” Sally cooed to the white horse sticking his head over the stall door. “When the weather is really bad, we can use this smaller indoor arena for lessons. Mickey here is inside for a few days until his eye heals. Aren’t you, sweetie?” Sally scratched Mickey’s head behind his ear and then rubbed his neck while he nosed her jacket looking for treats.

“What happened to him?” Steve asked.

“We’re not sure. He somehow got a cut on his eyelid. The vet put some stitches in and he’ll be fine in a few days. But until it’s healed up, we’re not turning him out with the others.”

A dark brown horse in the next stall stuck his head out and nickered at them. Sally laughed. “Getting jealous, aren’t you, Hamlet?’

“May I?” Megan asked before reaching to stroke Hamlet’s soft neck.

“Go ahead. All of our horses are good natured. We don’t let the kids feed them by hand so they never develop bad manners with their mouths.” Sally explained.

“You’re a sweetheart, aren’t you, Hamlet?” Megan said softly, stroking the horse. Hamlet lowered his head and he gave her a half-lidded gaze as she scratched all the right spots.

“Why is he inside?” Steve asked, keeping his distance.

Sally gave him a knowing look, seeming to recognize how new he was to the equine world. “Horses are herd animals. They get pretty upset if they’re separated from everyone else. Since Hamlet and Mickey are buddies, we kept him inside so Mickey feels relaxed. Sometime this afternoon, we’ll put these two on lunge lines and get the wiggles out of their legs. Tomorrow, we’ll keep Pumpkin inside for company and turn out Hamlet.”

Megan peered into Hamlet’s stall while she continued to find all of Hamlet’s favorite spots for scratching. The stall was clean and had a good layer of bedding, as did the adjacent stalls. It was obvious that all of the stalls were maintained daily. The horses all had water buckets that were clean and full of fresh water.

“Do you ride English or Western?” Sally asked as she continued to rub Mickey’s forehead.

“I can do ether, but I strongly prefer English.”
“Okay. Our horses are used to lessons with either. I prefer English myself. Before he came here, Mickey did a lot of dressage work, so he might be a good one for you to work with once we assess your skill level. Let me show you the outdoor ring and the pastures.” Sally gave Mickey one last pat on his neck and led them out the other end of the barn.

As they followed her, Megan gave Steve a nod and smile to let him know she approved of what she had seen so far, including the ramp and elevated mounting block to aid wheelchair bound riders. “Do you work with a lot of clients in wheelchairs?”

“No, not many, but we do have a lot of kids who are on the autism spectrum come here for horse therapy. We’ve got a really strong volunteer program to make sure the kids and horses all have a good time. We have three instructors and in the summer, we run a lot of day camps for special needs kids. Some of them have never been on a horse until the come here, and it really empowers them to learn to communicate with such a large animal.”

Outside, Megan noticed the water troughs and well-maintained pastures. “If I were a horse, I think I’d be very happy here,” she said.

A large black draft horse came trotting over to the gate and nickered to Sally. “Hello, Pumpkin.”

“That horse’s feet are the size of my head.” Steve said with amazement in his voice.

“She’s a Percheron, which is a type of draft horse. She’s everyone’s favorite. You’ll never find a horse with more patience than Pumpkin. And she’s as gentle as a kitten. We use a lot of draft horses here since they have such a good temperament. But the first time you get on her, you’ll swear it’s like climbing onto a sofa.”

“She’s beautiful, but isn’t she awfully short for a Percheron?” Megan asked.

“She is,” Sally agreed. “Most go 3-4 hands taller. She’s just over 14 hands herself. We’re glad, actually, since it makes it a bit easier for our spotters to reach across her back and help the kids. No treats this time, Pumpkin.” Sally patted her neck and stepped back from the gate. Pumpkin tossed her head once and took off at a canter across the field to rejoin the others.

Megan sighed and leaned on the top of the gate. “I swear there is nothing more beautiful than the sight of a horse running free.”

“They are majestic creatures,” Sally agreed watching Pumpkin go.

“When can I start?” Megan asked.

“Do you prefer evenings or weekends?”

“Weekends. I don’t suppose the busses run out this far.”

Sally shook her head.

“I’m bringing you, Megan, so don’t worry about it,” Steve said, moving up behind her and putting his arm around her waist. “If I get called in to work, you can just borrow my car.”

“Steve….”

“You need this, sweetheart. You’re more relaxed than I’ve seen you in ages, and that’s just from being here for a few minutes I don’t know anything about horses, but I know you.” He turned to Sally. ‘Is there a place where I can sit and watch?’”
“Yes, we have bleachers in the corner of both the indoor and outdoor rings.” Sally looked at Megan and added, “He’s a keeper.”

Megan blushed and nodded. “I know. But Steve, that’s a real burden on your schedule.”

“My motives are selfish. I get to take a break from the city and sketch while you ride.

“Okay, and maybe, one of these days, we’ll get you on a horse instead of watching me fumble around. There is nothing like a trail ride to recharge you.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Right now, our only weekend opening is on Saturday mornings at 9 AM.”

“I’ll take it if that works for you,” Megan said, looking at Steve. He nodded. “Can I start next week?” she asked.

“I’d hoped to take you home to see your folks next weekend,” Steve told her.

“You’d better marry him before he gets away!” Sally teased. “Do you want to see the outdoor ring? We can’t get close because there is a lesson going on right now. Andrew gets distracted very easily, but he’s gotten so much better with his focus in the six months he’s been coming here, it’s like he’s a different kid.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want to interrupt his time. I can tell from what I’ve seen that you take good care of both the horses and people here.” Megan said.

“We do our best. Do you need a helmet or boots? We have some in the tack room if you need to use them.”

Megan shook her head. “I have my own already. I used to ride when I was in graduate school but haven’t been able to since moving to the area. I can’t wait to get back in the saddle.”

“Let me get you the paperwork you need to fill out and I’ll put you on the schedule. You can bring the forms back with you when you come in two weeks.”

Megan slid her hand into Steve’s and fell into step beside him as they followed Sally back through the barn to the main entrance.

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They stopped for lunch on the way home. “I can’t thank you enough for the lessons,” Megan said as they sat down in their booth after getting salads from the salad bar.

“You don’t need to. Can’t I treat my girlfriend to something she wants? You’ve been working so hard at the gym despite how much you hate it. I figured riding again would help make it more worthwhile to you. That was before I saw you at the barn. You were glowing. I can’t wait to see what you look like on a horse if just being near them makes you that happy.”

Megan ducked her head a little, “Don’t get too excited. I’m no athlete.”

“You’re better than you think. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you have some dancing training in your background. But talent can only take you so far. You’ve got the determination to learn and that’s what really matters.”
“Actually, I did ballet for four years when I was a kid. I quit in second grade because I hated that I wasn’t going to get to wear toe shoes for several more years. And I absolutely sucked at gymnastics. I can only do a cartwheel one way and never did learn how to do a round off.”

“It’s possible that is partly due to your build. You’re taller and have longer legs than most gymnasts I’ve seen. It probably affected the physics enough that it was harder for you than some of the others in your class. If you got discouraged, it started a cycle of frustration and failure. That does not mean you lack athletic ability. It seems to me that the frustration got worse as you got into gym class, so you quit trying so much.”

“My mom used to send me outside to play and I’d take a book out with me, climb the apple tree, and sit there reading.”

“So you missed out on years of practice just like I did, but for different reasons.”

Megan pointed her fork at him “You like exercise.”

Steve nodded. “After so many years of not being able to keep up with the other kids, it’s a joy to go running and not end up in an asthma attack. I felt left out when all the other boys my age were out playing and I was lying in bed coughing. Training in the gym is just me making up for lost time. The effects of the serum do make it easier for me. I used to have terrible reflexes and I haven’t forgotten what it’s like.” Steve put his hand over hers. “Riding horses for you is like running is for me. I want you to have that.”

“Well, I appreciate it.”

“Why did you lie about who I was?”

“I didn’t lie. I misled her. There’s a difference. You deserve some down time that isn’t consumed by adoring fans who want pictures and autographs. Once they get to know you as a person, I’ll set the record straight if it makes you feel better.”

“We’ll see how it goes,” he said as he studied her. “You must really love horses to get up on a Saturday morning to go riding.”

“You need to try it sometime. There is nothing else like it. Besides, you never know when being able to handle horses could help you out in the field. I know that in some parts of the world, horses are still being used in wars. I read recently that there were U.S. special forces begin trained to handle horses because of some recent experiences in Afghanistan where they were trying to fight on horseback alongside the locals despite never having ridden before. I can’t imagine that worked well.”

“I’ll think about it. I really want it to be your time.”

Megan shook her head. “Taking lessons together won’t interfere with my fun one bit, I promise.”

“We’ll see. For now, it will be nice just to have some time to do some sketching.”
“We need to talk.” Megan said as she brought two glasses of water from the kitchen and handed one to Steve, who was sitting on her couch.

“What’s wrong?”

She set her glass on the coffee table and sat facing him, straddling his lap. His eyes widened a bit in surprise though he put one arm around her waist. “You’re way too much of a gentleman. We’ve been officially dating for a couple of weeks and you barely touch me. You don’t even let your eyes wander and I’m starting to wonder what your motives are. Showering me with gifts is lovely and you’re my best friend in town, but I thought we had some chemistry, too.”

“We do! I just… what are you getting at, Megan?” He leaned forward enough to put his glass on the floor by his feet while holding her steady so he didn’t dump her backwards off his lap.

She could tell he was feeling his way, unsure just how far she was willing to take their charade. Except if she was honest with herself, it wasn’t much of a charade from her side of it. “I’m saying I want more than chaste kisses and hand holding. While I greatly appreciate the lack of tonsil hockey, you’ve never shown any signs of lust. Maybe Captain America is too pure for lustful thoughts, but I thought Steve Rogers was a regular guy.”

“I am. And you’re a beautiful girl. Woman.” He closed his eyes, and Megan giggled, leaning forward to press her forehead to his.

“You have no idea how to sweet talk a woman, do you?”

He shook his head as he ran both of his hands up her back. “Bucky was the one with the silver tongue.”

“I’m not interested in Bucky, and I don’t care about pick-up lines. You took me to the barn this morning so I can get back on a horse. That says more than pick-up lines ever could. I’m telling you as plainly as I can that I’m interested in riding more than a horse or your bike.”

His eyes flew open as he processed that statement, but he had the sense to keep quiet rather than stammer nervously.

Smiling at him, she pulled her T-shirt off over her head and tossed it over her shoulder. “I know you want to take things slower than I do. I want your hands on me, Steve. Kiss me like you mean it and stop being such a gentleman.”

He gaped at her, and she nodded her encouragement, reassuring him with her eyes that, yes, she meant what she was saying.

He hesitated. There was a leashed hunger in his eyes. “You can’t unring a bell.”

“Maybe you’ll like my music.” she murmured in reply.

He pulled her closer and kissed her in a way that curled her toes and made her want to strip him naked right there.

Barely a minute later, Steve’s phone alerted him to a new message.
“Ignore it,” Megan said, trying to catch her breath.

“You know I can’t do that.” He stood up and gently set her on her feet so he could dig his phone out of his pocket.

She leaned against him, kissing a trail up his throat. “If that’s Nick with a mission, tell him you’re busy. Better yet, you’re fevered and need a sick day.”

Steve laughed a low, husky laugh and she knew she’d gotten to him. “Like he’ll believe me?”

“I can verify with total objectivity that you are very, very hot. As a doctor, I recommend you go directly to bed.”

“It’s not happening, Megan. I plan to win that bet of ours and continue to court you properly.” He turned the phone so she could see the screen. Jarvis was once again checking up on her. Megan rolled her eyes while Steve sent a reassuring text back and laid his phone on the coffee table.

“No mission?”

“No right now.”

“My prescription is the same.”

“Why don’t we talk about going to visit your family next weekend?” he asked as he picked her up and sat back down on the couch, but this time with her sitting sideways in his lap.

Megan wrapped her arms around his neck and bent her head to give him better access to her throat.

“I’ll call her tonight and check their schedule. I’ll bring my suitcase to work with me so we can head out directly after work on Friday. Maybe I can get out a bit early. We’ll take your car to make the trip more comfortable for me and to prevent my mother from fretting about motorcycle accidents. Planning done.” While she talked, Steve fingered the hook-and-eye fasteners of her bra as he trailed his fingers across her back and planted kisses on her shoulder and neck. She could get used to this.

“I do have to leave soon.”

Megan undid the fasteners for him and shook her head. “I don’t want you to go.” She was telling the truth and she hoped he could see that on her face.

“I’ll try to meet you halfway, Megan, but please, don’t push me too fast. You’re important to me and I want to do this right.” Megan could see he meant it and wasn’t just saying it for their hidden audience. He ran his thumb over her swollen lower lip. “Does it bother you that I sometimes think of Peggy?” His blue eyes were worried and honest.

She shook her head. “I think I’d be more bothered if you didn’t. You love her. You’ll always love her. And you never got the chance you both deserved to see if you two could make it work. I think there will always be a part of you that asks what if and wonders what it would be like if she were here instead of me. That’s okay.”

“Really? Even when I’m kissing you?”

“Even then. Especially then, because I know you. The Peggy you’re grieving for doesn’t exist any more. I’m not her replacement and she’s not my competition. That’s why you’ve been holding back, isn’t it?”
He nodded slightly, seeming to realize for the first time his own motivations.

Megan felt tears welling up in her eyes. What a mess this all was. It wasn’t fair that he was being dragged through this emotional upheaval just to keep her safe. She knew better, though, than to suggest they find another way. He wasn’t the type of man to back away from trouble to protect himself if he knew it would endanger someone else. She could only give him her honesty. “Peggy is a part of you. As you move forward in life, the biggest challenge is going to be for you to keep her real and not turn her into an idealized woman not even Peggy could live up to. You’ve told me before you didn’t get to date much and I’m not going to ask what went on during the USO tour because it doesn’t matter; any flings you had there were just flings. You know my story with Randy. Past relationships make us who we are now. We both know who we’re with. If our minds wander to ‘what if lane’ on occasion, it means we’re human.”

She brushed the hair back from his eyes. “Love isn’t like the romance novels where one kiss turns off your brain. Here in the real world, my mind is always busy and if you’ve got ninety percent of my focus, you’re lucky. That other ten percent is going to be thinking stupid stuff like noticing the tick of the clock or wondering if I need to clean out the fridge. Sometimes, I’ll be peering down ‘what if lane,’ too. But that other ninety percent is going to be here and now, fully in the moment and counting my blessings. That’s my reality. Do you really think less of me for having more than one thought in my head at a time?”

Steve shook his head.

“That don’t think less of yourself for doing the same thing. None of us can control our thoughts. Actions speak louder than words. You’ve showed me you care a thousand different ways big and small. You’ve gifted me with your trust. So don’t beat yourself up when your mind wanders and wonders. It’s not much different than the part of you that is always on watch, monitoring your surroundings for potential threats. That’s part of who you are, too.”

Steve brought his right hand up to cup her cheek. “You never stop surprising me.”

Megan smiled softly and kissed his palm. “And you’ve healed me in places I didn’t realize were broken.” She got up and refastened her bra before retrieving her shirt and pulling it on. The mood had changed. “Do you want some chocolate chip cookies before you head out on your errands?”

Steve nodded. The warmth and affection in his gaze touched her soul and she knew that any hope of holding back was futile. She was head-over-heels in love with Steve Rogers. When this was over, she was going to be an absolute mess. Knowing that, she still wouldn’t change course. His friendship was too precious and the ways he had healed her were real. All she could do was enjoy it while it lasted and step gracefully aside when it was over. But if the women he eventually chose didn’t appreciate him properly, she’d be first in line to set her straight. She owed it to Peggy.****

On Monday morning, she found a wrapped loaf of banana bread on her desk. Attached to the ribbon on top was a sterling silver charm shaped like a bell. It even had a movable clapper. She carefully removed the charm from the ribbon and studied it. It was so like him to use a charm to reference their conversation on Saturday. For a guy who didn’t think he knew how to talk to a woman, he was communicating very, very clearly.

“Captain Rogers put that on your desk this morning,” Emma said coming out of the lab and putting her safety glasses down Megan’s desk. “I figured you’d want to know it’s from him so you feel safe eating it. He didn’t leave a note.”
“I knew it was from him, anyways, but thank you. Do you want some?” Megan offered, pulling a clean table knife and napkins from her desk before unwrapping the bread. She discretely put the charm in the coin holder of her wallet for safekeeping.

“Sure. Do you think he made it himself?”

“I know he did. I gave him the recipe.”

“You’re in love. Don’t deny it.”

Megan cut a generous slice, laid it on a napkin, and handed it to Emma while keeping her eyes down. “That would be like denying gravity.”

“I knew it!” Emma exclaimed, keeping her voice low. She snagged a chair from another desk and plopped herself in it. “Spill. I want details,” Emma demanded before taking a bite. “Oh good lord, this is amazing. Don’t let him go, you hear me? He’s a good baker and good for you, too.”

“He’s good at everything he tries,” Megan admitted as she took a bite of her own slide of bread. It was moist and sweet, the perfect way to start a Monday morning.

“So the super soldier has super stamina?”

“Emma!”

“Come on, we’re friends. Give me something here. My own love life doesn’t exist so I may as well live vicariously.”

“Steve is a product of his time. He wants to court me properly and not rush things. He’s a perfect gentleman. Too perfect, if you ask me.”

“Have you told him that it’s 2013 and moving slowly means you get left behind? Maybe you need to play hard to get and make him step up his game.”

Megan shook her head, ignoring the prickling feeling running down the back of her neck. Something about Emma’s interest was just too earnest and it made her uneasy. “That won’t work with Steve. I’m pushing him as hard as I dare, but if I push too far, I’ll lose him. It took forever to get him to first base, but believe me, it was worth the wait. I just have to be patient.”

Emma shook her head doubtfully. “If you say so. But don’t be too patient with him. He needs to know you won’t wait forever.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Megan finished the rest of her banana bread in silence. She needed to let go of this paranoia and stop spotting trouble at every turn or she’d go crazy. Emma was her coworker, nothing more. She decided to try to talk about it with Steve sometime soon. He always helped her find perspective in this cloak-and-dagger world she’d found herself living in.

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It was late Friday afternoon before she saw Steve again. He’d been called away on a multi-day secret mission to somewhere unnamed. Megan couldn’t even swear he was on Earth. Now that they knew there were alien worlds and Thor was hopping between realms, there was no way of telling where one of Steve’s assignments would take him. He was probably on Earth, but one never knew or sure.

Even in his absence, she’d forced herself to go to the gym every day and work out according to the
daily assignments Steve had left on her desk once he’d gotten his new mission assignment. Bless the man, he’d put a note beside each exercise telling her how it related to better horsemanship.

Even his handwriting was a gift. Notes written at home, as her workout plan obviously had been, were written using a dip pen and India ink, showing off both his superb penmanship and attention to detail. Her own handwriting was ugly chicken scratch, an inconsistent hybrid of printing and cursive that was legible only when she forced herself to slow down and write more carefully. In her lab notebooks, she printed her notes for the sake of anyone, including herself, who might later need to read them. Notes from Steve, in contrast, were works of art she never discarded. Rather, she placed them in a folder that she kept at home in her desk. Already, she was hoarding memories to sustain her in the future.

She was holding the dreaded plank position when he found her in the gym Friday. A pair of sneakers appeared beside her as she held the pose with gritted teeth, glaring at the watch lying on the mat below her. She collapsed with a moan as soon as the forty second mark was passed. “I hate you. You know that, don’t you?”

“You remind me every time you’re in the gym.” He held out his hand to her and pulled her to her feet.

“I don’t want you to forget.” Megan wiped the sweat from her brow and looked at him. “What the hell happened to you? Tell me the other guy looks worse.” His left arm was in a sling that was strapped to his waist and his wrist was in a cast. He had a black eye and numerous cuts and bruises. She could see some bandages on his left shoulder peeking through his t-shirt. Those were just the injuries she could see.

“The other guy and two agents are dead. Another agent is critical.” He shrugged his good shoulder. “Bad intel. We were outgunned and outnumbered.” His eyes told her the personal cost of the losses.

“So you took the brunt of it to get the mission done and your team out. Are you still up to this trip? My mom will understand a reschedule.”

“Actually, I need this trip.”

“Then at least let me drive so you can sleep on the way.”

He pointed to the sling. “I planned on it. Driving one handed isn’t a good idea, especially with a stick shift.”

“What happened to your shoulder?”

“Gunshot wound. At least it went straight through.”

“Did you get extra bandages from medical or do we need to pick some up on the way?”

“I’ve got them packed. I can leave as soon as you’re ready.”

“Just let me get a shower.” She picked up her water bottle and workout folder and fell into step beside him, only to stop when she saw how he was walking. “You’re limping.”

“Gunshot wound to the leg.” His voice was weary.

“Swiss cheese is something you eat, not emulate. I’ll meet you at the car in ten minutes, okay?”
He smiled and nodded and something like relief passed across his face before he turned away and limped towards the gym exit. Had he been expecting a lecture about being more careful? Stupid man. She knew he was careful and that he would always put the safety of his team ahead of his own. She wasn’t going to lecture him for being who he was, but she was going to spoil him and help him come to terms with the losses and injuries inflicted on his team. Getting out of town would be a good change of scenery for him.
Megan looked at her watch as she approached Steve where he was waiting by his car in the parking garage. “We’re not going to get there until nearly midnight given the traffic right now. But at least we will get there. Have you ever been through Breezewood, Pennsylvania? It’s an interesting little town with quite the history.”

Steve shook his head and reached for Megan’s suitcase.

She quickly stepped in front of it. “Don’t you dare lift anything heavier than your key ring as you pass it to me, mister. I don’t imagine you paid attention to your medical discharge directions, did you?”

“Actually, I did. I just usually ignore them.”

Megan raised an eyebrow and held out her hand for the keys. “The little lady can put her own suitcase into the trunk.”

“I’m not hurt that badly.”

“Uh huh. Did you forget to mention the concussion that is clearly inducing short term memory loss? Gunshot wounds are serious, even for you. So go play invalid and get comfortable while I put my super-heavy luggage into the car. Comply and I play the nice music. Argue and I dig out my high school favorites, which I happen to know will offend your delicate ears. If you enjoy suffering, keep standing there.”

“I’m going to go get in the car,” he said with mock contriteness as he handed her his keys.

“Smart man. Do you have a travel pillow?”

“No, I don’t normally sleep while I’m driving.”

“You can wad my jacket up and use that until we get to Frederick. There’s a shopping center we’ll be going right past and we can buy one then. It will keep your neck a lot happier while you sleep.” Megan moved his shield so she didn’t scratch it with her suitcase, then laid it on top of the luggage before closing the trunk. She passed him her jacket when she got in and fastened her seatbelt.

“I don’t need a pillow.”

“Suit yourself, but sleep helps you heal and you have a lot of healing to do. It also takes energy. When is the last time you ate?”

His stomach rumbled and he gave her a sheepish look as he moved the seat-back into a semi-reclining position. “I guess we need to stop and get something.”

“How about an Arby’s sandwich? You could use the protein.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have any calcium supplements?”

“No, why?”

“That cast isn’t just for decoration. Your body needs calcium and phosphorus to mineralize the
extracellular matrix as the cells heal that wound. You can either provide that through food and supplements or let your system pull it from your other bones. Me? I’d drink extra milk and protein and take some calcium supplements to cover my bases.

“You’re talking about the osteoblasts and osteoclasts remodeling the bones, right?”

“You got it. If you ever get tired of soldiering, you can come work in the lab.”

“That’s sounding better by the day.”

Megan patted his knee as she pulled out into traffic. “Is you car always this clean?” Did you check it for bugs?

“No bugs. I checked when I was waiting for you. I see you got the banana bread.” Steve balled up her jacket and used it to fill in the space between his headrest and the door.

She fingered the bell she now wore on a chain around her neck. “Emma was desperate for details. I’m starting to become paranoid because it felt like she was pressuring me to pressure you. I am not cut out for the spy business.”

“Me neither, as Natasha frequently reminds me. You and I show our thoughts on our faces. Kinda makes it hard to lie. Trust your gut. If you felt uneasy, there was probably a good reason for it.”

“You were supposed to tell me I’m tilting at windmills.

“I don’t like lying. It’s possible she is just nosey, but until we know all the players, we can’t trust anyone.”

“Which brings me to my mother. She’s a walking lie detector. If we can pull off this weekend without her getting any ideas about me being in danger, it’s going to be a miracle. You’ll like her, but between being a mother and an elementary school teacher, I’ll put her up against anyone at S.H.I.E.L.D. for sniffing out the truth.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Just so you know, we’re celebrating your birthday this weekend.”

“My birthday isn’t until July.”

“Actually, it’s June 21, 1984, and June 21 isn’t too far away.”

“Maybe I do have a concussion because you just lost me.”

“If you take your age when you put the plane down, then use that to back calculate your birthdate from the day they thawed you out, you get June 21, 1984. Do you seriously want to celebrate turning ninety-five this summer when you’re actually are dating an older woman?”

“When is your birthday?”

“August 4, 1983, which makes me almost a year older than you. I’m a cradle robber.”

Megan could tell he was mulling it over. “Maybe I should have S.H.I.E.L.D. put that on my driver’s license so I do less explaining every time I have to show I.D.”

“I’m surprised no one suggested it before. Keep your original date of birth for Captain America. As Steve Rogers, though, I think you deserve to fly under the radar when you can.”
“My parents got married on June 21,” Steve told her quietly. “I think I’ll talk to Agent Hill when we get back.”

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After picking up food at a drive through and stopping briefly in Frederick for a travel pillow and calcium supplements, Steve leaned the seat back further and tried to sleep. He dozed fitfully, mumbling in his sleep and occasionally called out for Bucky. Megan left him alone. He was injured and possibly reliving a battle so she didn’t know how he’d react if she tried to wake him. They were just getting off of I-70 in Breezewood when Steve started talking about putting the plane into the water, which really got to her. She pulled into an empty area of the Gateway Travel Plaza parking lot and shut off the engine. When that didn’t wake him, she got out of the car and stood by her open door. Putting as much authority into her voice as she could, she barked at him, “Captain Rogers, wake up!”

He sat up with a start and looked around wildly, disoriented and on full alert.

“Are you back in the present with me?”

“Megan?” He scanned the parking lot for threats. “What’s wrong?”

“You were dreaming. I let you go until you started talking about putting your plane in the water. You don’t need to relive that again, but I didn’t know how you’d react if I touched you to wake you up.”

“I’m sorry,” he sank back into his seat, looking exhausted and defeated.

“Don’t you dare apologize. I’m not afraid of you. But you’ve been reliving battles for the last half hour. It didn’t seem like a good idea to be in striking distance if you took a bit to realize where you were. I could use a bathroom break and the restaurant here has good food. While don’t we eat and let you shake off the dreams before we get back on the road?”

“Okay.” He sighed. “You shouldn’t have to be so careful,” he said as he got out and shut his door.

She put his car keys in her purse and took his hand as she fell into step beside him. “And you shouldn’t feel guilty about things you can’t control. You’re not the only soldier to find out a battle-ready mindset followed him home. Would you suggest I wake Agent Romanoff from a nightmare by sitting down beside her and patting her arm?”

“Good point. It’s just—”

Stopping, she too his face in her hands and kissed him until she had his full attention on her and not his guilt. “Remember, I can change the music if you argue with me. The driver controls the entertainment.”

“Is that so?”

“Megan’s rule. But if you kiss me like that again, I’ll let you buy me dinner without arguing about who pays.”

“You’d lose anyways, but it’s best that we avoid making a scene.” He said as he twined the fingers
of his good hand through her hair and pulled her closer.

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They arrived at her parents’ house shortly before midnight. Groggy from dozing, Steve agreed to let Megan unload the groceries from the car. He’d hesitated at first, not wanting to offend her mother by bringing his own food, but didn’t want to stretch her budget with his voracious appetite, especially since he was healing. Megan had assured him no offense would be taken and they’d stopped near the end of their journey to pick up some buns, lunchmeat, and cheeses so he could make himself some extra sandwiches between meals. The fact Steve didn’t insist on helping her take their belongings inside told Megan a lot about how much pain he was in.

She showed him around the kitchen and then sent him into the bathroom to change into pajamas while she took his shield and luggage upstairs and put away the food. Her mother and step-dad had already gone to bed but had left a note of welcome saying they’d see them in the morning.

He came out into the kitchen carrying his t-shirt and sling and wearing only pajama bottoms. “I left my clothes folded on the floor in there for now.”

“That’s fine. Let’s get your bandages changed. Here, sit down. Megan pulled a chair out from the dining room table and turned on the lights so she could see better. She took the bandages off and silently shook her head. “This looks like it hurts something fierce. It’s still seeping blood.”

“It will be better tomorrow.”

Megan put fresh telfa pads on his upper chest and back where the bullet had done through his shoulder, then wrapped his torso with a compression bandage to hold everything in place. “How long is it going to take you to heal from your Swiss cheese imitation?”

“About a week. My wrist will heal in about two, the big fracture in my humerus maybe three. The worst part is not being able to go running while the gunshot wounds heal. I rely on that to clear my head.”

“Maybe getting away will help.”

“I hope so.”

“Okay, now stand up so we can do your leg.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Megan folded her arms and studied him, trying to figure out what the problem was. He wasn’t afraid of her help since he’d just accepted it. All he needed to do was… “Wait here,” she said softly, understanding his conundrum. She returned a minute later with a bath towel. “You can wrap this around your waist. I’ll turn my back until you’re ready,” she said, handing him the towel.

He took it from her and she heard the whisper of fabric dropping around his ankles. “Okay.”

Turning back to him, she gently eased the lower edge of the towel up his left leg until she could see the bandages. Going more by feel than sight, she unwrapped his leg and laid the bloodied pads on the floor. “These are still leaking blood, too.”
“I hope there are old sheets on the bed.”

“Don’t worry about it. We can get blood out of sheets if it comes to that. I’m putting you upstairs, by the way. You’ll be closer to the bathroom. You need to stay off this leg as much as you can until it heals more.”

“I thought I heard voices,” Megan’s mom said, coming down the stairs in her housecoat.

“Hi, Mom. Sorry we woke you.” Megan glanced up at Steve in empathy. He was doing his best to look nonchalant about standing in the dining room dressed only in a towel while she was on her knees in front of him. Could there be a more awkward way to meet her mother for the first time?

“You didn’t. I’ve been having trouble getting to sleep. It’s nice to meet you in person, Steve. I’m Kathy.”

“Pleasure is mine, ma’am,” he managed to say, waving at her half-heartedly with his broken wrist while holding the towel up with his right hand.

Megan bit her lower lip at the way Steve was turning different shades of pink and ducked her face so he wouldn’t see. “Mom, hand me the roll of compression tape from the counter, will you please? This one’s almost out and I don’t want the telfa pads to shift in the night.”

“Here you are. I’m going to fix myself some chamomile tea. Do either of you want something hot to drink?” Kathy busied herself in the kitchen and pretended she was completely oblivious to Steve’s embarrassment or current state of undress.

“Tea always sounds good. Steve?”

“Sure. Thank you.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Megan wrapped his leg and cut the excess length of bandage. “All done.” She pulled his pajama pants up past his knees so he could reach the waistband, then stood up and turned her back to him. Steve stepped sideways, putting the kitchen peninsula between himself and the women before tying the drawstring and eliminating his need for the towel. He folded it and laid over the back of one of the chairs.

“It’s good to be home, Mom,” Megan said, giving her mother a hug. She winked at Steve over her mom’s shoulder and he smiled back at her. “Steve, do you want help with your shirt so you don’t have to move your arm so much?”

He sighed, exhaustion plain in his every movement. “Please.”

“Mom, before you ask, it’s two gunshot wounds, a broken humerus, a broken wrist, two dead agents, and a third in critical condition on a mission that went FUBAR due to bad intelligence. Without Steve, the body count would have been lot higher. Anything more is classified and nothing either you or I get to hear about.” While she talked, Steve put his left arm though his sleeve and let her stretch the shirt over his head before he put his other arm through. She felt him relaxing now that he was dressed.

“Then it’s good that you were there, but I expect that doesn’t help much while you’re second guessing yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked looking slightly defensive at Kathy’s comment.

“While it’s all still fresh, anyone in your position would be replaying every move in their minds,
trying to figure out what you could have done differently. If you’re smart, you’ll use any insights for the next time but not beat yourself up over what’s done. I’m sure you did your best and that’s all anyone can ask.”

Picking up the sling, Megan helped him with the strap that went around his back to hold his arm against his body while he slept.

His head swiveled back and forth between them. “I want to say you sound like Megan, but I think it’s the opposite.”

Kathy laughed softly, mindful of her husband still sleeping upstairs. “She’s a lot smarter than I am but I thank you for the compliment. Now come here, I want to give you a hug and thank you properly for being by Megan’s side in the hospital. It’s never easy to know your children are hurting, and it’s worse if you know they’re alone. Having you there was a great comfort to me and to Megan, I’m sure,” Kathy said as she hugged Steve very carefully, mindful of his wounds.

“How about some cheese and crackers?” Megan asked, looking in the pantry. “I’ve got the munchies. It will make the calcium supplements sit better in your stomach, Steve.” She looked at her watch. “Shouldn’t you be due for some pain medicine by now?”

He shook his head. “Pain meds won’t work. My system burns through them too fast for them to do any good. Food sounds good, though.”

“What do you do then?” Kathy asked.

“Tough it out. I don’t have much choice.” He sat down at the table and leaned back in the chair wearily.

“Have you ever tried hypnosis?”

Steve shook his head.

“You look skeptical. It’s not like you see in the movies. Hypnosis doesn’t take away your self control or change who you are. However, it can help you change behaviors or manage pain. I don’t know if Megan told you, but I have fibromyalgia and arthritis so I live with chronic pain. I’ve found hypnosis does help me manage it better. Let me get my CD and you can try it when you go to bed.”

“Steve, I had no idea,” Megan said, walking up behind him and dropping a kiss on the top of his head. “Mom’s right about the hypnosis, though. It can’t hurt you and it might help you get some relief tonight. The CD’s just an narrator talking to you and walking you through a process of relaxation. Once you’re in a suggestive state, the narrator will suggest ways to visualize the pain leaving you. You’ll relax, but you won’t lose awareness of where you are or what’s going on. If I knocked on your door and told you I needed your help, you’d still hear me and respond. I think you should try it even if you’re skeptical.”

He sighed heavily. “Okay. Where are you going to be tonight?”

“There’s a spare bedroom in the basement. Originally, I’d figured you’d prefer to be there since it’s a bit less in the center of things. But with your leg, I don’t want you traipsing up and down stairs just to use the bathroom. Text me on your cell if you need me. I’ll have mine downstairs by my bed. I’ve put your suitcase on the floor in front of the closet. Your shield is with it. Head left when you get upstairs. If you have trouble sleeping, go sit in the treehouse and use the light-switch by the back window to turn on the spotlights. You can sit there and watch for deer and raccoons. Deer
often visit the salt lick down near the creek.”

“Treehouse?”

“That’s what we call the room off the dining room here. Mom and Greg added that room on a few years ago to let them better enjoy the view. The living room is over there, past the stairs. You couldn’t tell in the dark, but this house backs right up to the edge of a ravine and was built backwards on the lot so the living spaces overlook it. The treehouse is all windows across the back so you can watch all the wildlife. They’ve seen black bear, deer, flying squirrels and raccoons, all from the comfort of those swivel chairs by the window. There’s a spotlight on both corners of the room that light up different areas so you can see what’s out there.”

“It’s better than anything you’ll find on television,” Kathy said, coming back downstairs. She handed the portable CD player and headphones to Steve. “Try this tonight and see what you think.”

“Thank you, I will.”

The teakettle was getting ready to whistle and Megan turned off the stove before the sound woke Greg. Kathy got mugs out of the cupboard and fixed three cups of tea while Megan got out the food. She handed Steve the bottle of calcium supplements and set out a bag of sliced cheese, three plates, and a box of crackers. Together, they sat at the table and talked softly for few minutes until Megan started to yawn.

“I’m done in. I’ll see you in the morning,” she said before kissing Steve on the temple and hugging her mom goodnight. It was nice having the two halves of her life coming together. For the next day and a half, she wasn’t going to feel torn between her home and the new life she was building for herself. Important parts of both those world were under the same roof and she knew she’d sleep well tonight. It was good to be home.
The Big Announcement

When Megan got up the next morning, Steve was making himself eggs and sausage in the kitchen while her mother sat at the dining room table reading the paper. “Good morning,” Megan said to both of them as she went over to Steve and ruffled his shower-damp hair. She decided it should be illegal to look that good in jeans and a t-shirt. “How’d you sleep?”

“Pretty well. The CD helped.” He sounded surprised.

“How are you healing?”

“I’ve stopped bleeding. If you can help me put a new bandage on my back, I’d appreciate it. The stitches keep catching on my shirt. You’re up early.”

Kathy chuckled. “Only Megan thinks ten in the morning is early.”

“It is! Only stupid people get up before noon.” She started her oatmeal cooking in the microwave and put a kettle of water on the stove to heat. “What time did you have your first breakfast?”

“About five.”

“You were up at five? I didn’t hear you.”

Steve turned and smiled at Kathy. “I can be quiet. I was worried that the smell of food cooking would wake you, though.”

“There are much worse ways to be wakened, I assure you.”

“I noticed that Greg likes to shut the door with emphasis on his way out.”

“You mean slam the door,” Megan corrected. “He shakes the whole house!”

“He insists he’s quiet,” Kathy added. “He claims he cannot lock it with a key from the outside, either. But then he turns around and does something so thoughtful I forgive him yet again.”

Steve nodded. “True love.”

“Yup,” Megan agreed and kissed him on the shoulder while she waited for her food to be ready.

They ate in comfortable silence, sharing sections of the local newspaper that was much thinner than Steve was accustomed to seeing. Megan had just fixed herself a second cup of tea when Steve’s phone alerted him to a new text message and he checked it without much thought. She watched a flash of pain flicker across his face before he set the phone down and went back to the newspaper.

“Steve?”

He looked over at her, his expression neutral. The tension in his shoulders is what gave him away.

“What’s wrong?”

“Agent Harris died from her injuries about an hour ago.”

“That’s what you get when you let women fight,” Megan said blandly.
“Megan!” Kathy said sharply.

Steve, however, didn’t flinch. “I was supposed to keep her safe.”

“If you didn’t lead from the rear and let your team go in first, it wouldn’t have happened.”

That got a reaction from him. “I don’t—.”

“Oh, so you were taking the lead in what you thought was the most dangerous position? What did you do when you realized you were wrong? Change course and fight your way to them? Get yourself shot twice while you tried to protect them?”

“She’s got your number, Steve.” Kathy said quietly, standing up. “I’m going to crawl back into bed and enjoy my lazy Saturday with a good book. Megan, your brother and his family will be getting here between two and three.”

Megan gave her mother a quick look of gratitude and turned her attention back to Steve. “If Agent Harris were here now, what would she tell you?”

“She already did.” Steve said softly, looking down. “Agents Clark and Gross were already dead when I got to them. Before she passed out, she said it wasn’t my fault.” His right hand was clenched in a fist and Megan could see he wanted to smash the table into several pieces. “But I should have—”

“Should have what? Known everything? Predicted everything?”

“Kept them safe.”

“There is no safe.” Megan got up and went over to him, pulling Steve against her and running her hands through his hair. “Your team doesn’t expect that from you. What they do expect is your best effort, and you give that to them every time. You train, you plan, you learn from your mistakes, and you always do your best to get the job done with minimal risks.”

“That doesn’t give two kids their mother back.”

“No, it doesn’t. But she knew the risks and took the job anyway. They all did. How about the other two? Did they have children?”

Steve nodded. “Clark had a son in middle school. Gross had a daughter in kindergarten.”

“But that’s okay, because losing a father is easier than losing a mother.”

“How can you say—”

Megan put her finger on his lips and cut him off again. “You’re the product of your time, Steve. Don’t tell me it feels the same to you to lose a female agent as a male agent. A lot of people still have that reaction, that feeling that wars are for men to fight. Peggy taught you otherwise, but your heart and gut haven’t caught up to your brain. I’m just giving voice to what I know you’ve got inside your head right now.”

Steve sighed heavily and slumped down in his chair. “How do you do that?”

“Mom’s right. I’ve got your number. And you’re in no shape to run off your anger. So I suggest we move to the couch and you go with plan B.”

“Plan B?”
“A good cry. Why do you think my mom went back to bed? She’s giving you space to grieve.”

“I don’t work like that, Megan. I can’t just flip a switch.”

“You don’t need to. Come lie down and I’ll push your buttons. You’ll feel better for it.”

“I hate you right now.”

“I hate you, too.”

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Kathy came back downstairs shortly before lunch and found the two of them sitting and looking out the window at the ravine. “Anything interesting happening out there?”

“Just the birds and squirrels at the moment,” Megan answered without turning around. She held Steve’s hand. As she’d promised, she’d helped him let go by first getting him to talk and then using her own voice to articulate the thoughts she knew were haunting him. He was still upset, naturally, but less on edge.

“Is this your sketchbook, Steve?” Kathy asked from the dining room behind them.

“Yes, I can move it—”

“No need. I wanted to know if I could look at it. Megan has told me about your work. But, if it’s too personal to share, I understand.”

Steve hesitated a moment and let out a deep breath, “Go ahead.”

Megan squeezed his hand in reassurance. She knew his drawings were very private, but she also knew her mother.

Kathy sat down on the couch in the treehouse and began to carefully page through the book “These are breathtaking,” she said after several minutes. “Your natural optimism comes through in every one of them.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. His sketches were mostly of battles he’d fought and the horrors he’d seen. He often drew to process it all, not to put a happy spin on everything. “Why do you say that?” he asked as he swiveled the chair around to face Kathy.

“In every one of these pictures, you’re finding the good. Loyalty, protection, peace. Look at this one, for example.” She held up the page where he’d sketched Natasha. She was in full battle gear, a gun in both hands, crouched in front of the child she was protecting. The young girl was of African descent, barefoot, and wearing a torn dress. She couldn’t have been more than four years old. Her tiny hands were resting on Natasha’s shoulder and she was looking at Natasha with complete trust even though her face was streaked with tears. “In the midst of all of the danger, you captured the safety this child felt while this woman protected her.”

Kathy turned more pages. “I like this one, obviously.” She held it up. It was a sketch of Megan, sound asleep in her hospital bed. There was sunlight streaming in the window and framing her face. Despite the bandages and tubes, Megan looked peaceful.
“I hadn’t seen that one,” Megan said.

Kathy looked through the last of the sketches and closed the book. She held it carefully in her lap. “It takes a strong person to see the good in the midst of so much violence.”

“You’re very perceptive. Now I know where Megan gets it.”

Megan looked sideways at Steve. “I told you she would do well at S.H.I.E.L.D. Maybe she’s the key to figuring out Nick.”

His breath came out in a huff that sounded a bit like a chuckle. “No one can figure out Nick. Barton calls him the infinity onion.”

Megan snorted. “I’ve never heard a more perfect description. Mom has a point, though, which gives me an idea.”

“What?”

You should sketch each of the three agents lost on that mission and give them to their families. Find a moment to capture that you think shows who they were.”

“I didn’t know them very well. The teams change a lot depending on what we’re doing.”

“Then ask Hill to pull their files for you. Talk to agents who knew them better. It would help you process it and I know it would mean a lot to the families.”

“My sketches aren’t good enough for something like that. They’re just doodles to pass the time,” Steve protested.

“I agree with Megan. A personal gift like that would mean a lot. Even if they were just doodles—which they are not, but we can argue that later—the fact that you took the time to capture their essence and share it with their family would be a lovely gesture. When my mother died, people shared snippets of memories with me in their letters of condolence. Those snippets meant the world to me. In their stories, I could see my mother alive again, and I knew that others had seen her as she was. It was a great comfort to know that others had appreciated the person she was and wanted to share those memories with me. I didn’t care one bit that some of the words were misspelled or that the handwriting wasn’t perfect. The message is what brought me comfort.”

Steve looked over to Megan for her opinion and Megan nodded her agreement. “She said it better than I could. It wouldn’t take much to mount and frame them, either.

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“There’s someone out there watching the house.” Greg said from his seat in the treehouse.

“Where?” Megan asked, getting up from the couch where she had been reading a book.

Greg pointed. “Up at the top of the ravine, about as far west as you can see from here.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Show me,” Steve asked, leaving his half-eaten sandwich at the table. Greg told him where to look.
“It looks like they’re hiding in a hunting blind. You have good eyes, sir. Former military?”

“Current hunter. I learned how to read the forest before I learned to read books."

“I’ll go check it out.” Steve took out his phone and sent a quick text before removing his arm from his sling. He tossed the fabric on the table. “What’s the best way to get across the ravine so I can circle behind without being seen?”

“Head east. About five houses up the hill from us, you’ll find a driveway leading back in. There’s a fellow who has his house built back from the road. You can take his driveway and make your way around the north edge of the ravine and come up from behind.

“Megan, if your brother gets here before I get back, keep your nephews inside,” Steve ordered.

“Will do. Did you bring hiking boots?”

“In my suitcase."

“I’ll fetch them,” she said dashing upstairs. She returned soon after with his boots and shield.

Kathy looked from Megan to Steve and back again. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I intend to find out.” Steve said. Megan could see him switching into Captain America mode. He bent down and tied the laces to his boots without any indication that the movements caused him discomfort or that the cast limited his use of his left hand. Megan knew better, but didn’t say anything, nor did she undermine his act by offering to tie the laces for him.

“You’re injured. We could just call the police.” Kathy protested.

“I can be up there and back before the police arrive, ma’am. I’m okay, really. I’ve hiked a lot farther in worse shape than this.” He turned to Megan. “Do you have your phone?”

“It’s downstairs.”

“I’ll text you once I know what’s going on. Stay inside with the doors locked until I get back.” He took his shield from her and slipped it over his cast with practiced ease. After giving her a quick kiss, he vanished out the door. Megan noticed in amusement that he avoided slamming the door even though she had seen him lock it from the inside before pulling it closed behind him. It could be done, though Greg would never agree.

Megan avoided her mother’s questioning look and went downstairs to get her phone. “Academy award performance in three, two, one..” she muttered to herself as he came back up the stairs and closed the basement door. “Anyone want tea? I’m going to put the water on.”

“No, thank you,” Greg answered. He was watching their observer with a pair of binoculars.

“Megan, why is Steve so worried that he’s going out there by himself?”

“He’s always hyper vigilant. Agent Harris’ death this morning just has him more on edge than usual.”

“And?”

“And let’s see what he finds out before we jump to conclusions,” Megan hedged. Her phone beeped. “Stark employee per Jarvis. Still checking it out,” the text read.
Greg let out a low whistle. “Wow, he’s fast.”

“Where is he?” Kathy asked, her voice low.

“Up top, he’s just a shadow moving across the horizon. I doubt you can see him since he’s hidden by the trees. I can’t believe he’s up there already. I thought you said yesterday he’d been shot in the leg.”

“He was,” Kathy answered. “I still don’t see anything.”

Megan stayed in the kitchen, out of her mother’s current line of sight, and busied herself doing dishes rather than joining them at the window to watch. It wasn’t long before her phone beeped again. “Steve says everything is fine,” she told her parents as she dried the last measuring cup in the strainer and put it away.

“They’re talking,” Greg added.

“I still don’t see them.”

“Steve’s heading straight for us. I guess that fellow is moving on. He’s already taking the blind down.”

“I see Steve now, but why is he running?” Kathy wondered. “Look at that, Greg. You and I struggle to walk up that hill and he makes running up it look as easy as walking on the level.”

“He’s used to running several miles a day.” Megan explained as she went to unlock the door to let Steve back inside. He’s probably just stretching his legs while he can since he knows I’ll be on his case if he goes out again before he heals.” She greeted him with a kiss. “Mom’s already suspicious,” she added very softly as she took his shield from him. “I’ll put this back upstairs. Feel better after your little sprint?”

“I do.” He pressed his forehead to hers, mindful of Megan’s parents watching them. “You worry too much.”

“Uh huh. Says the man who likes to emulate Swiss cheese. Put your sling back on your arm before I use this shield to knock some sense into your thick skull.”

“Hit my right side, please, so my eyes match.”

“What did that man have to say?” Greg asked, watching the exchange between Megan and Steve with some amusement.

“Some rich guy from New York City bought the house next door to you. Apparently, that fellow in the blind is part of a security team that was hired to keep watch on the goings on in the surrounding area. He never expected anyone to notice him. Most people wouldn’t have seen him and he’s quite embarrassed that you did.”

“Wait a minute.” Kathy said. “This sounds fishy. Why would someone from New York City buy the house next door to us? This is the middle of nowhere from their perspective.”

Steve shrugged his good shoulder. “The only rich people I’ve known tend to be very eccentric. Howard Stark was brilliant, but definitely eccentric. His son Tony’s just like him. Maybe it goes with having money. Whoever bought the house wanted security around. I guess if you’re rich like that, you get to be a bit paranoid, too. That fellow promised me they’d be more discreet and not cause you any trouble. I texted a friend with connections and they said the story is legit from what
they can find on their end.”

“Come finish your sandwich.” Megan directed, trying to bring the focus back to mundane matters.

“Megan Louisa Buchwald, stop trying to distract me,” Kathy said.

Megan gave Steve a panicked look while keeping her back to her mother. “I told you, she’s like a blood hound when she gets an idea in her head.”

Steve nodded once and she saw a twinkle in his eye. He put his good arm around her and turned her to face her parents. “We didn’t want to say anything just yet since it’s not official. But Megan and I have been having some serious talks about getting married.”

Megan tried to turn her shock at his answer into a believable reaction. “We agreed we weren’t going to say anything yet!” she squealed, turning around to gape at Steve. Of all the things she’d thought he’d say, that was not one of them. It was a brilliant distraction, but one she hadn’t been prepared for.

“I know,” he said before he kissed her forehead. “But it’s better we tell her than let her worry, don’t you think?” He turned his attention to Megan’s parents. “Like I said, it’s not official, but that’s probably what you’re picking up on.”

“Wow,” Kathy said looking from one to the other before glancing at Greg. “I knew you were close but…”

“Go ahead and finish your sandwich, Steve,” Greg suggested. “Kathy, breathe.” He looked at Megan with knowing eyes, and Megan could have sworn he was helping her distract her mother from talk of their new neighbor.

The tea kettle whistled and Megan went to turn off the stove burner.

“I guess both being famous and having your job bring some risks with them.” Greg said, joining Steve at the table. “Megan, dear, will you bring me a mug of hot water and the instant coffee when you come sit down?”

“Yes, sir, they do. Keeping Megan safe is a top priority for me.”

“That’s why you wanted to go check that man out by yourself.” Greg said.

Steve nodded. “As the battle against the Chitauri in New York showed, there are some things that regular law enforcement just isn’t equipped to deal with. And that is only one of several things Megan has to think about very carefully before we decide on making this permanent.”

“We’d be thrilled to have you join our family, Steve,” Kathy said, taking a seat at the table as she made a valiant effort to regain her composure. “But I have to ask if isn’t this awfully soon for you, Megan?”

“He knows all about Randy, Mom, and yes, it’s too soon and too sudden. Not to mention Steve is still dealing with losing Peggy.”

“Peggy?” Kathy looked confused.

“Steve’s girlfriend during World War II.” Megan explained. “When he put the plane into the frozen north Atlantic he saved untold lives. He also gave up his chance at a life with Peggy Carter, who went on after Steve’s apparent death to help found S.H.I.E.L.D. She’s in her ninety’s now and
in a nursing home with Alzheimer’s disease.”

“Oh, my, that’s so sad. That must have been such a shock for you,” Kathy said, looking at Steve in sympathy.

“It was. Some days, it still is. But Megan has helped with that, probably even more than she knows.”

Steve gave her such a sincere and loving look it brought tears to her eyes. She found herself getting swept up in the narrative and distracted from the dangers Steve was trying to shield her family from. Damn, he was a smooth talker and very good at lying with the truth. She handed the coffee and mug of water to her step-dad and sat down beside Steve at the table. “Even if we do get engaged, Steve is insisting on a long engagement. He has some old-fashioned notions about courting me properly.”

“And you’re enjoying every minute of it.” Steve pointed out before he kissed her knuckles.

“Yup,” She said with a grin. “Though I can’t help but point out that I’m older than he is and that goes very much against the traditions of his time.”

“I’m turning ninety-five this summer, and at that age, I think I get to make my own rules.”
Confessions

“What happened to your eye, Mr. Steve? Did Megan beat you up?” Keith asked.

Steve shook his head. “Megan knows it’s not nice to hit people. I was hurt protecting a police officer from the bad guys.”

“Was Iron Man there?” Keith asked. “I think Iron Man’s the coolest cause he can fly.”

Megan smiled into her hand as she watched the scene from the tree house window. Steve and her two nephews were outside “S’ploring,” as Christopher liked to call it. Steve was sitting on his shield and keeping watch over the two boys. They were close enough for their conversation to be heard inside the house. On request, he threw small stones across the ravine against the far bank at an improvised target the boys had set up, cheered on by his two new fans. Her nephews’ job was to go fetch stones from the bottom of the ravine and bring them to Steve to throw. Megan knew it wouldn’t take too many trips before their young legs became exhausted, which was probably exactly what Steve intended.

“No, Iron Man wasn’t there. I sure could have used his help. I think he’s in California right now.”

Christopher tugged on his sleeve, “Mr. Steve, throw this one. Can Hawkeye’s arrows shoot as far as you’re throwing those stones?”

Steve nodded. “His arrows go even farther and he never misses. Do you know why?”

Christopher shook his head.

“Because he practices every single day. That’s his homework.” Steve threw the stone and hit the target, as he had nearly every other time they’d handed him a projectile. The kids didn’t seem to believe what they were seeing and tried their best to emulate him, but with far less impressive results.

“He’s amazing with them. When did he learn how to deal with kids so well?” Kathy said from her spot beside Megan. “I like him, Megan. I really do.”

“Me, too. He’s a natural with kids. He told me once that talking with the children was the one part of the U.S.O. tours he actually enjoyed. He goes to the children’s hospital about once a month in full uniform to cheer up the kids. They try to pick up his shield to pose behind it and end up hiding the bottom part of their faces in the pictures because their arms aren’t long enough to fit the straps. He’s a good man.”

“Have you met the other Avengers?” Carl wanted to know. He and Stephanie had not said much since their arrival but Megan was used to that. They both preferred to watch what was going on rather than participate.

“Just the Black Widow. I have seen Hawkeye in the hallways at work but we haven’t been introduced. They work in a different part of a building than I’m usually in.”

“You sure live in a different world than you did in college.” Kathy shook her head in wonder. “Are you happy living down near D.C.?”

“Parts of it. Everything is so expensive and the traffic gets to me. Life is just so much faster down there. I don’t like that. But Steve found a stable for me to go riding at and is going to drive me out
there every Saturday starting next week. I love walking around the National Mall in the evening, watching the sunset while I look at the monuments. The free museums are nice, too, but I never seem to get to visit them since I’m pretty busy with work. By the time you add in the commute, it’s almost a twelve hour day between when I roll out of bed and when I get home. D.C. life has pros and cons just like anything else. Career wise, the area is full of opportunities for me. Whether or not I stay is going to depend on a lot of things, but it’s definitely been good for me to give it a try, at least for now. I don’t want to move further away from you guys and there are a lot of biotech opportunities between D.C. and Frederick, Maryland. If I ever leave S.H.I.E.L.D. it would put me a bit closer to home to move to that side of the city.”

“His shield looks like a sled when he’s sitting on it.” Carl observed when he came over to the window to watch.

“Yes, it does. That’s a good observation, Carl.” Megan smiled. “He probably has used it as a sled at some point, mostly likely with his best friend Bucky egging him on.”

“Is he really ninety years old?”

“According to when he was born he’s ninety-four. But his body was in suspended animation like you see in the movies, Carl. If you go by how long he’s been experiencing life and skip the years he was in the ice, he’s turning 29 on June 21st.

Carl thought a minute. “So it’s like he’s our age? That’s why were having a birthday party for him even though it’s not his real birthday?”

Kathy nodded. “That’s right, honey.”

“That’s confusing.” Carl said.

“It’s confusing for him, too.” Megan added. “Imagine what you’d feel like if you went to bed tonight and when you got up tomorrow you were told you’d really been asleep for seventy years? That’s what happened to Steve.”

“He sure missed a lot of birthdays.”

“He missed a lot of things, Carl. A lot of things.”

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It pleased Megan immensely to watch Steve seamlessly fit himself into her family over the course of the day. Dinner was simple, just spaghetti, salad, and garlic bread, but the conversation was lively and shifted easily from one topic to another. Megan could tell Steve was truly relaxed and enjoying himself in a way she hadn’t seen before. He was completely at ease and seemed to be soaking up the feelings of being with a normal family living a normal life. It occurred to her, as she watched him surreptitiously, that he probably hadn’t had anything like this since he was a child. Even then, it would have been just Steve and his mother and not this larger gathering. She wanted to promise him he could have this forever, but it wasn’t her place.

He caught her watching him and gave her a soft smile, so open and joyous it just melted her heart again. He nodded slightly, as if in answer to her train of thought. It probably was, she decided, given how well they’d gotten to know each other. He reached under the table and squeezed her
Greg brewed another pot of coffee while Megan and Kathy cleared the dishes away. Steve got up to help only to be ordered back to his seat, kept there with gentle digs at being one handed and therefore worthless in the kitchen. Carl teased him about being too old to do chores and Steve hummed it up, sensing how big of an accomplishment it was for Carl to both come up with the joke and to feel comfortable enough around Steve to say it. Stephanie, in her typical way, just sat on the couch holding Andrew and pouting that she wasn’t the center of attention.

“Did Megan warn you of my obsession with baking?” Kathy asked as she wiped down the table.

Steve nodded. “She did mention something along those lines.”

“Good. I took several classes on cake decorating and I use every chance I can get to practice what I’ve learned. That’s the fun of retirement. You just happen to be my latest victim. We know it’s not your actual birthday, but since you won’t be here for it, we’re going to celebrate today.” She disappeared into the laundry room and returned shortly thereafter carrying a sheet cake ablaze with candles, “I’m still learning, but you’ll get the idea,” she said as she set it down on the table.

The whole family sang happy birthday and Carl took pictures while Steve blew out the candles. Kathy lit some of them again so that Christopher and Keith could each have a turn blowing them out, and then Steve finally had a minute to really look at the cake. Kathy had cut the cake into the shape of a painter’s palette, then added a rainbow of fondant “paints” around the edges. The red, white, silver, and blue paints seemed to run spontaneously towards the center, mixing themselves into Captain America’s shield. Beside the shield, a licorice stick had been modified to resemble a paintbrush with its tip in the yellow paint.

“This is amazing.” He shook his head slightly and Megan could see his eyes getting a bit moister than usual. “I’ve never had a birthday cake before. Thank you.” With that, he got up and went to give Kathy a one-armed hug.

“What? Never? Oh, honey,” Kathy said, accepting the embrace with tears in her eyes.

“It’s just how it was back then,” Steve explained. “Mother worked hard just to make enough for us to eat and get me the medicine. A whole cake was out of the question. She made me muffins or a loaf of banana bread on my birthday and made sure we had some meat for dinner. The depression didn’t help, either, when it hit.”

Kathy stepped back and put her hands on Steve’s shoulders. “She did a fine job raising you, that’s for sure. I’m certain that she would be very, very proud of you.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Steve said softly, his voice almost breaking.

Megan wiped her own eyes with the back of her hand. “Did you get some pictures of the cake, Mom? Steve’s right, it’s amazing. It’s almost a shame to cut it up to eat it.”

“Yes, I took pictures, but take some more if you want to. And you’d better eat it. If we leave it all to Christopher and Keith, we’ll be peeling them off the ceiling once the sugar hits their system.”

Megan and Steve both used their phones to snap several more photographs of the cake close up.

“Who wants ice cream?” Greg asked as he headed to the freezer.

“Ice cream, too?” Steve seemed overwhelmed.
“Sit down, birthday boy. The depression is over.” Megan stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. “Just wait until you open your presents.”

“Megan…”

She leaned down and spoke into his ear, keeping her voice low so only he could hear her. “You’re not the only one who gets to plan surprises, you know. Just go with it. It’s from all of us, okay?”

She felt him relax a bit under her hands and he nodded, trusting that she wouldn’t let things get out of hand.

Greg laid two packages down in front of him and stepped back.

Megan gave his right shoulder a gentle squeeze. “No one is going to reuse the paper, so you may as well rip it off and act like a kid for once. Bending low, she murmured to him, “Put another way, if you open them without tearing any of the paper, I’ll break all of your fingers.”

“I had no idea you were so inclined to violence.” Steve looked at the two boys watching him. “Do you want to help me?”

They both nodded eagerly and Steve let them each pick a package to open. Christopher went first, revealing a large book. “Isn’t this the book you looked for that day we went shopping?”

“That’s the one.”

He flipped through the pages set it aside with reluctance. “I think I know what I’m going to be reading this week. Thank you.”

Keith barely was able to contain himself, but waited until Steve nodded encouragement before opening the second package, which was a large, flat box. Inside the box was a package of oil pastels, pastel paper, and a note stating he had four pre-paid lessons scheduled with the instructor whose contact information was listed.

“What’s in the little box?” Keith asked. Steve opened the lid and showed him the oil pastels, causing Keith to furrow his brow. “Grown up crayons?”

“Pretty much, yes.” Steve agreed. “And lessons on using them.” He shook his head in wonder. “This is too much. Thank you. All of you.”

Kathy smiled at him. “It’s the least we can do after what you’ve done for Megan. We started asking her what we could possibly get you after you stayed with her in the hospital. I talked to the art teacher at my former school and she suggested oil pastels would be a logical next step for someone who’d mainly done charcoal sketching and wanted to try something new. She recommended this instructor she knows who is starting to offer lessons via Skype. That will give you a flexible schedule rather than being committed to a class on a college campus. She said four lessons should be enough for you to know if you like the medium or not.”

“I’m overwhelmed.” Megan could tell he was itching to retreat to a quiet spot so he could try them out and read his book. He was far too polite to indulge, but she was happy that their gift was something he really appreciated.

“Can we eat the cake now?” Christopher asked.

The resulting laughter released some of the tension Megan felt building in Steve’s shoulders. He wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of things. She could hardly wait to see his reaction to
what she had planned for him come August. “You okay?” she asked, leaning down to whisper to him.

He nodded and kissed her temple. “Better than you can imagine. You family is wonderful, and so are you.”

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It was nearly ten before they were alone. Megan’s brother and his family had finally left at around nine, on Kathy’s insistence, so they could get the kids to bed. Greg and Kathy had stayed up a bit longer to talk, then retired upstairs with claims of fatigue from all the excitement of several rounds of Farkle. It had been a new game for Steve, but one he obviously enjoyed as they all played together with lots of laughing, teasing, and helping Christopher with his math when it was his turn. Now the house was silent aside from the hum of the refrigerator. The house was dark save for a light on over the stove as they sat together looking down into the ravine. He turned on the spotlights and pulled Megan onto his lap.

“How lucky you are?” He kept his voice low.

“I do. That’s the thing I hate most about living as far away as I do. I know how lucky I am to have them and I miss being able to see them as often as I want. Skype and email aren’t the same as being here.”

“At least you’re not in California or some other far away place.”

“Why do you think I picked D.C.? This will always be home to me. I put down roots and I sink them deep. No matter where else I live, a part of me is always going to be connected to this place because it’s where my family is. My great grandfather used to say home was where he hung his hat. I’m not like that.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“No, it’s not. It’s just how I am. Is holding me hurting your leg too much?”

“No, it’s okay.” He put his head on her shoulder as a dear stepped into view. They watched three doe explore the salt lick. Occasionally, they’d lift their heads and swivel their ears, listening for danger before lowering their heads once more to the salt block on the platform. “After Mother died, Bucky was my home.”

“I know.” Megan ran her fingers through his hair as she thought about the day. “Every time I think I have a handle on what your life was like before, something happens and I find out I still don’t get it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t imagine not having a birthday cake and party. That was just standard for me growing up. Mom would invite some of my playmates and we’d play games in the yard and have cake and ice cream, so I just assumed that you must have had something like that, too. It’s not the cake that matters, because your mother made you feel special and loved, which is the whole point. But I keep discovering new flaws in my assumptions and it’s jarring.”
“You just described my life in reverse. I keep thinking I have this new time figured out only to discover I don’t.”

Megan nodded. “It’s not fair. I know life isn’t fair, but I want it to be fair sometimes.”

“Me, too.” He sighed. “How upset will your parents be when they find out?”

“They’ll understand. Earlier tonight, when you are outside with the boys, Mom said if we break up, she and Greg get to pick which one of us they get to keep. She implied they might pick you.”

Steve chuckled. “I don’t think you have to worry given how much they love you.” His voice grew serious. “I just can’t keep pretending this isn’t real.”

“Hey, I warned you, remember? Feelings follow actions. It’s okay.”

“But I’m falling in love with you for real.” His voice was pained.

She took his face in her hands. His eyes were shining, or maybe hers were. It was hard to tell. “I am, too, with you I mean. If it’s meant to be, fine. If it doesn’t go the distance after the dust settles, we still come out ahead because we’re both doing a lot of healing right now. You’re really starting to live in the present and I’m getting over the damage my self-esteem suffered with Randy. We started as friends; we’re going to stay friends. Just don’t pull that lying with the truth crap with me, okay? It was kind of scary, watching you in full ‘Captain America keeping everyone safe by lying without lying mode.’ I want truth-truth.”

“I promise.”

“Good. For now, let’s just enjoy it for what it is. We have time.”

“Peggy and I thought that, too. We were wrong.”

“Would rushing ahead have made it better? Would your death have been easier for her to deal with had you been married before you took off in that plane? Would you miss her less knowing exactly what you had lost?”

“I guess not. It’s just… I don’t know.”

“It’s not fair.” Megan brushed the hair back from his eyes. “You know better than anyone that bad things happen without warning. All we can do is make the most of the time we have. Rushing doesn’t let us appreciate the present, either.”

“You sound like Peggy.”

She bent so their foreheads were touching. “When two women you love tell you the same thing, maybe you should listen, hmm?”

“Yes, ma’am.”
“G’morning, Mom,” Megan mumbled as she opened the basement door. “Did you sleep okay?”

“After a bit. Greg and I were up rather late talking,” her mother said from where she was sitting at the dining room table.

“Everything okay?” Megan asked, trying to ignore the queasy knot forming in her stomach. There was something extra in her mother’s voice that had her on alert. It was too early for her to manage this kind of head game.

“Yes, but I want to talk to you about a decision Greg and I came to. Come sit down.”

“Mom, I need food. I need caffeine. I’m barely awake. Can you give me ten minutes?” Megan tried not to sound like she was begging even though that’s exactly what she was doing. She took the tea kettle to the sink to fill.

“Okay, but don’t wait too long. I want to talk to you before Steve and Greg get back.”

Megan put the kettle on to heat, cursing the early hour under her breath. She was so tired. “Where are they?”

“Out at the pond. Or at breakfast, whichever they did first. But they left at about five-thirty and it’s already after ten. I expect them to get back any minute.”

She felt her hands getting clammy. “Please tell me Greg isn’t giving him the shovel talk.”

“I have no idea what that is.”

“The ‘I have a shovel and nearly forty acres of woodland, so if you hurt Megan, they’ll never find the body’ talk often given by overprotective family members. Nothing is official yet. We’re just talking.” Why had Steve told them about their discussions of marriage last night? “I need use the bathroom,” she mumbled, not even waiting to hear her Kathy’s answer. This was bad. Had they figured out that she and Steve were not as serious as they’d implied? It seemed unlikely. They were both falling for each other so one could hardly accuse them of bad acting. Had they figured out that the security guy yesterday was there to protect them? Or worse, had they received a threat of some sort and finally connected it to Steve and Megan?

Megan studied her image in the mirror and wanted the person looking back to give her answers. Instead, she saw a bleary-eyed non-morning person trying to wake up. She wanted Steve to be back now. Or never… so she could stay in the bathroom and hide for the next year.

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Exactly twelve minutes later, Megan fixed her second cup of tea and sat down across from her mother. She decided that she’d say as little as possible and keep her mother talking. That way, she’d have less chance of saying too much. “What’s going on?”

“Greg and I plan to adopt Steve.”
“What? It’s early, Mom. Don’t talk in riddles.”

“He needs a family. Whether or not you two get married, we want him to feel he can come visit us any time he wants and spend holidays here if he chooses. He’s going to get nagging calls from me reminding him to take his vitamins and eat his vegetables. That man broke my heart last night with the way he was so happy just to join us for dinner and a game. His friends from the army are all dead, his first girlfriend has Alzheimer’s, and he has no living family to speak of. No one should be that alone and we’re not going to let it continue. Greg’s talking to him and showing him the property out at the pond so Steve can go there any time he wants to get away. He’s also giving him a key to the house. If you two break up, you’ll just have to schedule your visits at different times or learn to play nice when you’re both here.

“Isn’t this all too sudden and too soon?” Megan asked softly.

“Touché.” Kathy pinned Megan with her eyes and she felt like she was five years old again, unable to move or speak after talking back to her mom and getting reprimanded for it. “I’m glad Steve is insisting on a long engagement, if there is an engagement, and I think you are, too. He’s right about his point that there are a lot of extra things you both need to consider seriously. Greg and I totally agree. But darn it if he doesn’t get under your skin like a tick spreading Lyme disease. Before you know it, he’s past your defenses. Worst of all, he’s so genuinely good and honest about everything, you don’t even care you lowered your guard. I don’t think he has a deceptive bone in his body.”

“Mom, he’s human. He has flaws just like the rest of us, including an overinflated sense of responsibility for everything that happens. He knows how to lie and I’ve watched him do it. He’s overprotective, terrible about talking about his feelings, and thinks riding a motorcycle is the best way to travel, although he does wear a helmet and bought me one so I’d do the same. He’s neat to the point of being anal and so private about some things I don’t think he’ll ever let me in. Do you realize that after all this time, I’ve still never been to his apartment? Not even once. So don’t put him on a pedestal. He’s a guy with a WHY chromosome who suffers from testosterone poisoning just like the rest of them.”

“And you love him.”

“That, too.”

“I’m glad you cleared that up,” Greg said as he opened the door and came in, followed by Steve. Megan just put her forehead on down on the table and whimpered softly.

“Megan? Your dad and I caught a bunch of bass. You never showed me how you cook fish.” Steve said as he toed off his shoes.

“Fish are friends, not food.” Megan mumbled, banging her head on the table again.

“Sorry, Dory, but I like fish.” Steve told her in that perpetually upbeat and cheerful tone that was positively grating at this hour of the morning. “Want to come help me clean them?”

“No, I do not want to dissect your damn fish for you. I want to go back to bed and sleep until a respectable hour.” Megan pulled herself up with a sigh and went over to Steve. Can you believe this? I’m happy for you, but can you believe this!? She asked with her eyes as she leaned into him for a much needed hug.

She could practically read the thought balloon over his head. No, I can’t. I like your parents but this is unreal.
Steve and Greg feasted on grilled fish for lunch while Kathy and Megan ate leftovers from the night before. The meal was followed by several rounds of card games, including canasta and 500 bid. While they played, Megan kept teasing Steve with her feet under the table. She was pretty sure her parents were oblivious, but pretending not to notice a game of footsie worked just as well. As long as Steve kept smiling like he had been all day, she’d be satisfied. As exhausted and beaten down as he had been on Friday, he seemed to be rested and recharged now. Nothing had changed about the challenges they faced, but getting away had done them both a lot of good.

“I’m going to put an apple pie in the oven,” Kathy said, getting up from the table to turn on the oven when it was Greg’s turn to deal for the next hand.

“Mom, we still have cake left.”

Kathy shook her head. “You’re taking that with you. Are you going to argue too, Steve?”

“I’ve done a lot of stupid things in my life, but turning down homemade apple pie isn’t one of them.”

“Says the man who jumps out of an airplane without a parachute,” Megan muttered under her breath.

“What?” Greg asked, looking up sharply from the cards he was shuffling.

Steve shrugged. “Only over water and only when we’re coming in low enough. If I can dive alongside the ship and climb on board before the rest of the team, I reduce their risks. Even at night, ‘chutes can make good targets.” He looked at Megan. “How did you hear?”

“I’m not telling.”

Kathy put one hand on her hip as she looked at Steve. “Why do I get the impression you gave your mother grey hair from the time you learned to walk?”

He just grinned and shook his head. “I don’t think she had any idea of half the stuff Bucky and I got up to.”

“I doubt that,” Greg said. “She probably just didn’t want to say anything. It’s much more fun if you think you’re getting away with something.”

“You would know, dear.” Kathy said before she headed downstairs to get a pie from the freezer.

Steve smiled at Megan, was clearly enjoying the loving banter between her parents as much as she was. He got up to refill his water. As he stood by the refrigerator sipping his water, he asked, “How about you, Megan? You’ve never told me what antics you got up to as a child.”

She rolled her eyes. “I have nothing to share. I was the perfect, boring child.”

“No one is that well behaved.”

“Ask Mom.”

“Ask me what?” Kathy said as she came back upstairs.
“Steve doesn’t believe was I was the perfect, boring child.”

“She really was. She made think all the expert parenting books were right. When she was just a toddler, I didn’t have to childproof. I’d tell her the outlet was hot and she left it alone. There was a period of time when I felt pretty smug about my parenting skills. Then her brother came along and showed me how little I knew. Rebellion for Megan was reading under her covers with a flashlight after bedtime. It all balances out in the end, though. Now I get to worry about her begin attacked by strangers and left for dead in the street.”

“Mom, I’m okay.”

“This time. I’m not saying I want you to give up your dreams, Megan. I’m saying I worry.”

“To excess, if you ask me,” Greg added. “If you don’t have something to worry about, you worry about that!”

“I can’t help it. But you have to give me credit for not clipping your wings as a result.”

“I do, Mom. Will it make you feel better to know I’m learning self defense?”

“Actually, yes. It won’t protect you in every situation, but it will improve your odds. But isn’t it hard for you to fit a class in by the time you get home?”

Megan shook her head. “There’s a gym on the S.H.I.E.L.D. campus. Unfortunately for me, that means I get to train every day.” She winked at Steve when he looked over at her after checking his watch.

“Speaking of work, what time do you want to leave?” he asked.

“Never. But we should probably head out by three or so. We need to go down to Morgantown and pick up 68 so we don’t get caught in any Sunday evening gridlock in Breezewood. It’s a prettier drive, but a bit longer and with fewer places to stop. We can get dinner in Hancock and be home around nine.”

Steve nodded his agreement and sat back down at the table.

“I wish you weren’t so far away,” Kathy mused.

“I know, Mom, but it could be a lot worse. If I were down in Research Triangle Park, it would be a lot harder to get home for a weekend visit. California would be worse yet. Do you guys think you’ll be able to make it down this summer?”

“I think so. It will be nice to see where you’ve settled.”

“I hear there’s a new temporary exhibit opening in July in the Air and Space museum,” Greg said blandly while looking pointedly Steve.

“Not my idea. And the disagreements about who owns my stuff have been a bit frustrating, too.”

“Do you have any lawyers working on your behalf?” Greg wanted to know.

“Stark does. Without his help, I think they’d try to put me on exhibit, too.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Opening weekend is going to be a lot of miserable P.R. I may as well be back in the U.S.O.”

Kathy sat down after putting the pie in the oven and picked up her hand of cards to examine. “Is
“there any way you can take back control of their agenda without asking?”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked looking at his own cards. He sorted them quickly.

“Well, Megan said you went to the children’s hospital now and then to visit the kids there. What if some of the stronger ones or those that have been able to go home since you last saw them got their own tour of the exhibit with you? It would take some of the focus off you and give them some extra attention. The press would love it. If you can set it up without the involvement of the politicians ahead of time, all the better. Let them be surprised when they’re pushed out of the spotlight by a bunch of children. What are they going to do about it? They know they don’t dare complain about seriously ill kids where the press can overhear them. If they do, they can kiss any hopes of reelection good-bye.”

“You are a devious woman, Kathy,” Greg said as he smiled at her. “I like the idea. But that sort of thing is going to require a lot of logistical planning for both the hospital and the museum. Do you have someone who can help them coordinate it that can also keep it secret?”

“Jarvis.” Megan and Steve both said as they looked at each other. Steve put down his cards and pulled out his phone.

“Jarvis, I have a favor to ask,” he said as he got up to pace.

“Jarvis?” Greg looked at Megan questioningly.

“An employee with Stark Industries who is extraordinarily gifted at anything involving computers or planning. From what I can tell, if you ask Jarvis to do something, it just happens. It’s like magic,” Megan explained, keeping her voice low so as to avoid interfering with Steve’s phone call. “It’s a good idea, Mom. He’s going to dread that all a lot less now that he’s taken control of it a bit.”

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“Maybe we’ll take them next time,” Megan told Steve when the game was over. Despite playing multiple games, they had been unable to beat Greg and Kathy at five-hundred bid.

“When they come down to D.C.,” he agreed, eating his last bite of pie. “You are welcome to stay at my place. I have a spare bedroom and live pretty close to the Metro. It would spare you the expense of a hotel room, too.”

Megan watched her parents hold a discussion with their eyes. It always fascinated her how they could do that without saying a word. Kathy was hesitating, obviously remembering what Megan had told her earlier about Steve being very private. But Greg and Steve had not come inside yet, so Megan didn’t think he knew she had never been to Steve’s apartment. Even so, Greg seemed to know what his wife was thinking and was leaving it up to her, though he somehow made his preference known.

“I mean it,” Steve told both of them. “I’ll make sure Megan has a key in case I’m sent out on a mission.”

Kathy nodded, apparently conceding to Greg’s view. “Okay, we’ll do that.”
“Good.” He looked at Megan, who sighed.

“I know, it’s getting to be that time.” She sighed and stood up. “I’m going to go get my suitcase from downstairs.”

Steve watched her go. “Leaving is hard on her.”

“It’s hard on all of us,” Greg said. “But the career she wants won’t happen in a small town like this one.”

“And the weather bothers her, too.” Kathy added as she collected up the pie plates and silverware.

“What’s wrong with the weather?”

“Lake effect skies.” Kathy explained. “She doesn’t mind the snow, but we’re close enough to Lake Erie that we have a lot of overcast days, especially in winter but even in summer. The lack of sunlight really bothers her and by January, she’s likely to have a rough go of it. It doesn’t bother me, but a lot of people in the area are sensitive to it. Megan is one of them.”

“I’m another,” Greg added. “February is a tough month for me. Now that we’re both retired, I’m seriously thinking about heading south for week or two each winter just to get some sunlight.”

“We get plenty of that in D.C. You’re always welcome.” Steve stood up. “I’m going to go get my bag. Do you want me to strip the bed?”

Kathy shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. Doing it one-handed won’t be easy for you and it’s better for me to keep busy when you leave.”

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Despite Megan’s protests, Steve carried their bags and his shield out to the car. His only concession to his injury was that he made two trips since the bags were too awkward to carry in one hand at the same time.

Megan followed him with their jackets and tossed them in the backseat.

“You okay?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Give me ten miles and I’ll pull it together. It’s always hard to leave. No matter how often I visit, it never gets easier. But I can’t have the career I want here and they aren’t moving closer. I compartmentalize it pretty well once the first ten miles or so are behind me.”

Steve nodded. “I get it.”

“I know you do. Let’s get this done. Drawn out good-byes just prolong the misery,” she said as she headed back to the house.

“Don’t forget the cake,” Kathy said, handing Megan the leftovers that she’d carefully wrapped in plastic before giving Steve a hug. “Call or email any time. Don’t be a stranger.”

“I won’t,” he promised before shaking Greg’s hand.

Megan handed Steve the cake and hugged her stepfather, then her mother. “This weekend was just
what we needed. I wish we could stay longer.”

Kathy looked up at her daughter and held her by the shoulders. “I’m proud of you. Call me when you get in.”

“I always do. Love you.” Megan wiped the tears away. “Never gets easier.”

“No, but it’s okay,” her mother said. “We love you, too. Drive safely.”

Megan nodded and took the cake back from Steve. He opened the door and followed her out. “We should put this on the floor in the back.”

“I’ll get the door.” Megan opened the passenger side door and held it open while Steve set the cake down.

“Chin up,” he told her softly, so her parents wouldn’t hear.

She just nodded. Her parents stood at the top of the driveway watching them silently. Steve opened her door for her and closed it behind her before going around to get in. He was still fumbling with his seatbelt by the time Megan had her own fastened and the car started. She backed out of the driveway, gave a quick wave and a flash of the headlights before the house, blurred by tears, disappeared in her rearview mirror.

Megan took another deep breath and tried to focus on the life she was heading back to. “I think we pulled it off. Other than that one time when Greg seemed to help distract my mom from being watched, they didn’t act like they realized the danger I’ve put them in. I feel better knowing someone is watching the house.”

“You didn’t put them in danger, Megan. That’s on me.”

He sounded as responsible as she had been feeling. Megan laughed through her tears. “Will you listen to us? We’re arguing over who gets to be responsible for the actions of unknown criminals. We’re both being stupid.”

Steve chuckled. “I guess we are. New topic: what size bed do your parents have?”

“King. Why?”

“My spare room is completely empty at the moment. I may as well get the same size bed as they are used to using.” He hesitated, then added, “…unless you don’t think they’ll visit.”

The vulnerability in his voice was like a knife twisting in her gut. “Oh, they’ll visit. They might even come see me while they’re in town.”

“Do you mind?”

“No. I’m thrilled for you. You’re finally starting to build a support system outside of S.H.I.E.L.D. That’s a good thing.”

“Only until they know how we’ve deceived them.”

“Just the opposite. Mom is going to be ecstatic to know you’re a kindred spirit in the overprotective department. When they learn the lengths you went to in order to protect them, and me, you’ll never hear the end of it. You’re family now, Steve, and they aren’t going to let you go for anything.”
The drive home was uneventful, but seemed to go faster since Steve was awake to talk. They rehashed all of what they knew about Megan’s attackers, which was very little, and unsuccessfully tried to find a new angle. From there, the conversation drifted to all sorts of topics, making Megan lament the coming day when she’d have to let Steve go. He had a dry wit that never failed to cheer her, insights that fascinated her, and a curiosity about everything. Most of all, he treated her like an equal, respecting her scientific expertise while teaching her about topics where he was the expert. Leaving her family was always hard, but having Steve in her life kept her grounded in the present.

“How do you want to do this?” Megan asked as she took the exit from 270 for the DC beltway. “I can either take a cab home from your place or drop you off and take your car back to my place and pick you up in the morning on my way to work. Either way is fine with me.”

“Actually, I was going to ask if you’d stay at my place tonight.”

Megan dropped into the best imitation of a Southern drawl she could manage, “Why Capt’n Rogers, are you propositioning me?” She continued in her normal voice, “If this is about what you heard me tell my mom—”

“It’s not, though that was the first time I’ve ever been compared to a tick. You had a valid point, but—”

“You heard that, too?”

“Your dad and I heard the whole thing. We were both trying really hard not to laugh.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “I’m not telling her about that. Back to the main point: you’re a very private person, Steve. I get that. It truly doesn’t bother me you always come over to my place. If you just don’t want to be alone, you’re welcome to stay over tonight.”

“I’d rather not spend another night on that excuse for a bed if I don’t have to.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw him studying her. She pretended not to notice and focused on the road.

“How’d you know?” he finally asked.

“You just got a very rude reminder of how alone you have been. My family wrapped you in a warm hug and you’re getting ready to step back out into the cold. The transition sucks. I feel it every time I come back after visiting them.”

“My whole apartment feels cold.”

“My mom can fix that, you know. For pocket change and some garage sale hunting, I’m sure she can transform it from cold to cozy. Ask her.”

“I might do that. Stay?”

“Okay, as long as you can stand the hit to your reputation.” A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “No funny business, you hear me? You try something and I might not leave. Then you’ll really have a problem.”
“I really don’t care what the neighbors think. Just so you know, my apartment has bugs, too. I checked it when Jarvis gave me the tools to check your place.”

“Lovely. I can’t wait to smash them with a hammer.”

“Don’t. When it’s all done, Tony might be able to learn something about those behind them by studying them. I’ll ask Jarvis about how to best get them to New York without being intercepted.”

“Okay. But when he’s done, I want to pulverize them. I am so sick and tired of having to watch every word I say.” She rolled her shoulders, trying to loosen them up after hours of driving. “Do you have a washer and dryer in your unit? I need to do laundry or get a change of work clothes from my place and I’d rather not schlep to a basement laundry room tonight.”

“I have my own, so no schlepping required.”

“Good.” Megan glanced over at him thoughtfully. “You know, I think that’s the first time you’ve ever asked me to do something for you. It’s good to see you becoming less passive about your life.”

“I guess so.”

“It’s not a criticism. You’ve had a heck of an adjustment. It’s logical that it would take some time to get past that and start thinking about what you actually want instead of just reacting to circumstances out of your control. What matters is that you’re still moving forward.”

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Megan shut off the engine and covered her yawn with her hand as she passed the keys to Steve.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

“My, my, but you are getting bold,” she purred.

He rolled his eyes at her as he opened his car door. “Come on.”

Megan grinned at him and pulled her phone from her purse. She punched in her mom’s phone number and held the phone to her ear with her shoulder while she got out and retrieved their coats from the backseat. When the answering machine picked up, she left a brief message that they had arrived safely and could be reached at her cell tonight.

“Do you always call them when you get home?”

“After a road trip. They do the same. We all worry less for some reason if we know the big drive is done and everyone is where they’re supposed to be. Just like the house rule was to leave a note on the kitchen counter if you left the house without telling someone or were deviating from the normal schedule. When I was younger, I used to resent it. But at the same time, I was always glad to find a note when I was the first one home and found myself alone when I’d expected someone to be there. Eventually I figured out that my mom wasn’t trying to keep tabs on me so much as she wanted to know where to find me if necessary. It took her a while to get Greg trained after they got married, but he came around when she had a hard time reaching him when his mom got taken to the hospital by ambulance. If she hadn’t figured out where he had gone off to, he would have never
made it to his mom’s bedside before she passed. Greg’s been super careful to leave a note ever since.”

“It’s those little things that tie a family together. Are you okay carrying the cake?”

“I’m fine. You need to keep that sling on until you heal, so stop trying to find excuses to take it off.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Megan followed Steve into his building and up the steps pulling her bag behind her while she balanced the cake on her other hand. He unlocked the door and turned on the lights before gesturing her to go in.

“I think my whole apartment would fit in your dining room,” she said as she stepped in and looked around, leaving her suitcase just inside the door. She set the cake beside her purse on the kitchen counter.

“Probably.” Steve said, wheeling his own suitcase back to his bedroom. “The washing machine is in an alcove back here by the bathroom.”

Megan retrieved her own suitcase and followed Steve, looking around as she went. “I don’t know why you dislike this place so much. You’ve got all this great old architecture to work with, bookshelves to die for, updated appliances, and tons of room. The fireplace alone is a treasure.”

“Glad you like it.” Steve said, but something in tone was off.

Megan retrieved her laundry bag from her suitcase and dumped it out on the floor. “Do you have anything you want to put in with my stuff? I’m going to do a load of whites first, then darks. I’m out of everything.”

“Sure.” He retrieved his hamper from the bathroom and upended it on the floor, sorting his own laundry into piles.”

“Do you have a light colored pillowcase and a rubber band? I didn’t bring a bag for delicates and my bras all need to be washed. A pillowcase will work.”

“So you don’t just stuff the washing machine full, add soap, and run for the hills?”

Megan smiled at him from where she was kneeling on the floor. “No, I usually take it all down to the river to beat on the rocks. I figured I try something different this time. If I can be high maintenance and borrow a t-shirt to sleep in, I can wash this nightgown, too. I woke up soaked in sweat in the middle of the night last night and really don’t want to wear it again.”

“Nightmare?” Steve asked, handing her a pillowcase. “I’ll get you a rubber band.”

Megan nodded, pointing to her scar. She slipped the bra she was wearing off under her shirt, then secured it with all the others in the makeshift bag and gathered up all of the white and light colored laundry in her arms. She pretended not to notice the look in Steve’s face when he’d seen her pull her bra out from her sleeve. Steve turned on a light for her and she loaded the washing machine while he fetched an empty laundry basket to put the rest of their clothes in. He put the few items that were not going to be laundered tonight back in his hamper.

“You know, as a bachelor you’re supposed to be living like an absolute slob,” she told him as she watched him work.
“You’ll have to forgive me because I didn’t get the manual.”

“How can I brag about whipping you into shape when you’re already neat and organized?” Megan started the machine and leaned against it, folding her arms across her chest. “There’s nothing left for me to do. You cook, you clean, you pick up after yourself. I suppose you put the toilet seat down, too.”

“And the lid.”

She threw up her hands in mock disgust. “You’re impossible! It’s no wonder you’re on the top floor of the building! It’s the only way you can keep droves of women from climbing in your windows.”

“Is that why? I thought it was because S.H.I.E.L.D. found the place after they moved me from New York.”

Megan saw the pain flash in his eyes though she couldn’t pinpoint the cause. He’d been closed off since they came inside although he was trying to hide it. “How about some cake? I’m not quite ready to turn in. I can’t go from vigilant driver to sleep that fast.”

“Okay,” he said, leading her back to the kitchen.

While he got plates and forks out, she wandered into his living room and found one corner that said she was in a home and not a model unit for potential renters to tour. “A real record player! You must have searched high and low to find this. Mind if I put something on?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. found it. Go ahead,” he told her from the other room.

She turned it on and dropped the needle on the album that was still on the turntable. Rich sounds filled the room. “I love big band jazz,” she said, heading back to the kitchen. She perched on one of the stools at the breakfast bar that was situated between the kitchen and dining room.

“Me, too. I tried CDs but they don’t sound right.”

“I’m not surprised.” Seeing his questioning look, she continued, “The digital files on a typical CD don’t contain the full sound spectrum. To save space, some of the data is stripped out. Casual listeners don’t notice or care and it doesn’t much matter in the car. But the serum ensured you have excellent hearing. I’m not surprised you notice the difference in sound quality.”

“It’s not just me?” he asked as he put a plate of cake in front of her and handed her a fork. He left his own plate on the counter by the sink and ate standing up across from her.

Megan shook her head, smiling softly. “It’s not you pining for the past. There is a real difference in the sound quality aside from the crackling. Newer CDs tend to distort sounds less than the older ones, but a lot of people prefer one medium over the other. Now, are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

He pointed to his ear, reminding her that they were not really alone. “Nothing. I’m just tired.”

She accepted that with a sympathetic nod, making a mental note to ask him about it later. While she ate, she looked around his apartment to see what might be bothering him. “Did you dance a lot, back in the day?”

Pain flashed across his face before he hid it. He shook his head. “No. Bucky did, but I never learned.”
“The smoke in the night clubs must have bothered your asthma. I keep forgetting how ubiquitous smoking was back then.”

Steve nodded. “Smoke was pretty much everywhere. I don’t miss that.”

Megan let him brood until they were both done eating. She put her plate in the dishwasher and tugged his hand “I’ll show you the one dance step I learned. I tried to get Randy to learn ballroom dancing with me. We made it to one class before he decided he hated it and didn’t want to learn. It’s still on my bucket list.”

“Bucket list?”

“It’s from a movie by the same name. You’ll like it. A pair of guys who met in the hospital made a list of all the things they wanted to do or see before they kicked the bucket. Ever since the movie came out, people talk about their own bucket lists. I rather like the idea though I have not formally written one out. Learning ballroom dance is definitely on it. Come on, it won’t take more than two minutes, because I remember nothing more than how to stand and how to do the box step. Do it beside me so we don’t have the complication of mirror imaging it to start. I’m not coordinated enough for that.”

“Megan.”

“Stop brooding and stand beside me. When you do it for real, you’ll start with your left foot while your partner starts with her right. But the sequence of steps is the same no matter what foot you start with.” She counted out loud and completed one box. “See? That’s it. When they tried to show us turns, Randy completely fell apart so I never got past the basic box. Try it with me.” She ignored his dour mood and did the sequence again. Finally, he tried matching her steps on her third attempt. “You got it on the first try. It must be all that footwork you and Natasha do when you’re fighting hand to hand.”

“Maybe.”

“Do you want to try it facing me?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again without speaking.

“It’s okay. I’m tired too,” she said lightly, trying to hide her own hurt. There was something simmering under the surface that she couldn’t put her finger on. “Find me that t-shirt and I’ll get ready for bed.”

“Megan,” he caught her hand and kept her from walking away.

She caught his face between her hands and pulled him down to her. “It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear, too softly to be heard over the music. “Let’s just get ready for bed. The washer will be done soon and we can move the second load to the dryer in the morning when we wake up. Stuff in the dryer will wrinkle, but I can use your iron on my shirt before we head into work. You do have an iron, don’t you?”

He nodded.

“You’re too damn perfect. You even iron.” She pulled away and this time he let her go. “Step to, soldier. I want to go to bed.”

While he brushed his teeth, she stripped off her jeans and dropped them in a puddle on the floor by the bed, followed by her socks. She pulled the covers back and turned off the lights. “Lose the
jeans and lie face down in the middle of the bed,” she told him when he emerged.

He gave her a wary look and handed her a t-shirt from his dresser.

“Just do it, okay?”

Reluctantly, he obeyed. To give him some space, she busied herself finding a tube of lotion from her suitcase. When he was prone, she straddled his hips and dispensed a generous portion of lotion into her hand before recapping the tube and placing it beside her. She spread the lotion across his shoulders and along his spine, kneading the tension from his muscles as she went. Her fingers found the knots and gently worked them loose and he sighed in pleasure as he finally started to relax. If she occasionally kissed his nape or let her lips brush across his shoulder as she worked around the straps to the sling, who could blame her? She used her hands to tell him what she dared not put into words tonight. Whatever was bothering him, she wanted him to know she was here. She cared.

Slowly, so slowly, his defenses came down until he was asleep.

Megan got up carefully, trying not to stumble when her knees protested too much time spent in the same position. She pulled their clothes from the dryer and laid their shirts across the back of the chairs in the dining room. She didn’t want to wake him by fumbling in the closet for hangers. The rest she dumped into a laundry basket that she set in the bedroom before moving their dark clothes to the dryer and turning it on.

Steve didn’t rouse at any of the sounds, even when she pulled the covers up over him and slid into bed beside him. Heat poured off of him and she didn’t miss the warmth of her electric blanket when she had him to chase away the chill. He rolled onto his back and she studied his profile in the dim light from the street lamp that edged past the window shades. He looked so much younger when he was asleep and not carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Only when she was half asleep herself did she remember him mentioning that he was to meet Peggy at a night club so she could teach him to dance. Instead, he’d put his plane into the water while talking to her on the radio. She felt sick to her stomach at her error of practically forcing him dance beside her in the kitchen. At least she hadn’t made him dance with her face to face. It didn’t explain what he’d been brooding about before then, but it certainly explained his near-complete shutdown afterward. “I’m sorry I hurt you,” she whispered to his sleeping form. It was so tempting to snuggle up to him and press her lips to the bare shoulder that was closest to her. Somehow, it felt like it would be an intrusion into his space to do so.

She lay there a long time just watching him. He stayed closed off in so many ways that he was really still a stranger to her. He had made it his mission in life to take care of others, but seemed to do little to take care of himself. Other than sketching and riding his bike, she wasn’t sure how he filled his time, aside from hours spent hiding in books. He never talked about his own dreams for the future, or even short-term goals. His apartment was sterile, just like he’d said it was. But she didn’t see where he’d made any effort to change it and that was something she didn’t understand. At her parents’ house, he’d seemed so relaxed and at ease, soaking up the normalcy he found himself in. What had he done to find normalcy on his own? Had he given up and decided it was impossible? When you peeled back the facade of the soldier, dug behind the layer of the giving friend, who was he? What did he want out of life? Did he even know? Or was he as anchorless as he seemed, adrift on the currents of time, just waiting for his next mission to give him the pretense of purpose? She feared it was the latter and he deserved more from life. What would it take to make him see it?

Until he had a better sense of direction, a genuine long-term romantic relationship wasn’t really
possible. How could he meet a life partner halfway if he didn’t know what he wanted most and what he could compromise on? If his plan was to just follow his partner’s lead—no matter who that partner ended up being—he’d end up resenting her in the end when things didn’t turn out. Life was hard, but Megan believed that you had to have something to work for to make the journey meaningful. If she woke him up and asked him where he wanted to be doing in five years, she’d bet Tony Stark’s last dollar that Steve wouldn’t be able to say. He’d smile and say he had a responsibility to protect and serve, or he’d find another way to deflect the question. The phrase “I want” didn’t seem to be in his vocabulary.

He shifted again, this time rolling onto his side, whimpering slightly as he rolled onto his injured arm. With his right arm, he reached out and pulled her to him. Tucked against him, she finally fell asleep.
Steve’s phone rang shortly after midnight, waking them both.

“Hello?” Steve sat up and as the caller talked, Megan could tell he was going to full alert. “Tell B.J. I’m on my way.” He hung up the phone and reached for a pair of jeans. “Get dressed,” he told Megan. “I need you to drive me to Children’s National.”

Megan got up and stripped off the shirt she’d slept in. The urgency in Steve’s voice told her it wasn’t the time for modesty. “Who is B.J.?” she asked, pulling on her jeans “Bra..bra…” she muttered to herself, digging through the laundry basket. Finding the pillowcase, she got one out and put it on.

“Bucky Junior. All the H.H.C.’s get a nickname. B.J.’s special. You’ll see.”

She nodded and dove for the pair of dirty socks she’d slipped off her feet before crawling into bed. For one of the Honorary Howling Commando’s to get Bucky’s nickname, he had to be special. “Let’s go.”

Steve nodded and followed her to the front door. Megan grabbed one of her t-shirts from the dining room chair where she’d left it to hang, and put it on while while Steve picked up his shield. Seeing her questioning glance, he explained. “It’s important to the kids. I let them hold it during the really nasty procedures.”

They were silent in the car, save for when Steve told her where to turn on the somber drive. Megan pulled up in front of the emergency entrance. “Go. I’ll catch up to you after I park.”

“Bring my shield. Having it will prove you’re with me,” he said after a slight hesitation, clearly torn between getting to B.J’s side and ensuring Megan could get in, too.

“Go!” Megan snapped. She’d find a way in, even if it took some time. The important thing was for Steve to get there.

She parked the car in the visitor parking area and jogged to the emergency entrance, carrying Steve’s shield in front of her. She forced herself to slow to a brisk walk once through the doors and made a beeline for the security guard. “I’m here with Captain Rogers. Where did he go?”

The guard looked her up and down, then nodded. “He said you’d be right behind him. He’s in the oncology unit. Fourth floor, take the hall to your left coming off the elevators.”

“Thank you.” Megan waited impatiently for the elevator car to arrive and tapped her fingers on her leg. She jammed the button for the fourth floor and headed down the hallway as soon as they were part way open. When she held up the shield with an inquiring glance at the nurses’ station, they wordlessly directed her to the correct room.

Steve was sitting on bed that had been adjusted to an upright position. A small child about the age of five was cradled in his lap, leaning back against Steve’s chest while his parents, one on each side of the bed, sat in chairs as they each held one of B.J.’s hands. His skin was the color of dark chocolate with an undertone of yellow his parents didn’t have. Megan wondered if it was jaundice. Steve had removed his sling so he could better hold B.J. against him and it lay carelessly discarded on the railing of the bed.

“Hi there, B.J. My name is Megan. Would you let me lay Captain America’s shield on your lap?
He asked me to bring it for you to hold for awhile.”

B.J. opened his eyes and weakly nodded. The whites of his eyes were yellow, a sure sign of jaundice. His liver was failing. Megan idly wondered what sort of cancer had ravaged this young soldier’s body.

Megan gently laid the shield across B.J.’s legs, though given the size of his tiny body nestled between Steve’s muscular thighs, she knew it was Steve, not B.J., actually holding the shield. She noticed B.J. had a vinyl badge holder clipped to his hospital gown. Inside was the business card sized H.H.C. membership card Steve had given him on an earlier visit, certifying that Bucky Junior was a full member of the Captain America’s Honorary Howling Commandos. The badge was much loved and had clearly seen many days of proud service. Numerous decorations on the wall spoke of a long hospital stay.

“This, this is Amadi and his wife, Themba,” Steve said, introducing them.

Megan put her hand on the shoulder of the women sitting beside her. “Can I get either of you something to drink or a light snack? Perhaps some apple juice?”

Amadi nodded once. “Themba, we must,” he said softly while looking at his wife. His eyes were wet with tears.

“I’ll be right back,” Megan promised and went back to the nurses’ station to ask about where to secure refreshments. It was going to be a long night.

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An hour passed, then another. Nurses came and went, quietly checking I.V. lines, monitoring vitals, and doing what they could to keep B.J. comfortable as he dozed. Megan had claimed a spot on the window-seat that doubled as a parent bed, keeping watch and saying nothing while she drank cup after of cup of tea. Time stood still.

Finally, Amadi broke the silence, “I apologize for disturbing your sleep, Captain. We had thought it was time and he was asking for you.”

“Don’t apologize, Amadi. I told him I’d be here if at all possible,” Steve said without opening his eyes. Megan knew he was awake, resting while keeping watch. It was a trick he’d mastered after far too much practice in battlefield conditions. “I’m glad to be here if it gives him comfort.”

“Do you want some coffee, Steve?” Megan asked, shifting in her seat. She knew that while the caffeine didn’t affect him, the smell and taste still brought comfort.

Steve opened his eyes long enough to meet her gaze and nod. “Thanks, Megan.”

“Anyone else? Tea perhaps, or more juice?”

B.J.’s parents shook their heads. Megan could only image how they were feeling right now. While no one had said it, she knew they were waiting for B.J. to die. The battle had been long and hard fought. Worry lines had prematurely aged their faces, exhaustion sunken their cheeks. But the balloons and cards and Captain America toys spoke of the joy and normalcy they’d tried to give their son under these impossible conditions. On the window-seat beside her, the bed pillow and
sleeping bag told of fragmented sleep in a hospital room so B.J. would never be alone.

“Captain?” It was the first time B.J. had said anything since Megan had arrived in the room.

“Yes, B.J.?”

“Who is Dum Dum and why is he wearing that funny hat?”

Instantly, the adults all became alert. A quick glance from Steve told Megan to wait on the coffee. She moved to the bedside and pressed the nurses’ call button.

“Dum Dum was one of my Howling Commandos a long time ago That funny hat is called a bowler hat, B.J.,” Steve explained, “That is the only kind of hat I ever saw Dum Dum wear. It’s his favorite.”

“Oh. He has a funny mustache, too. It’s so big compared to daddy’s mustache.” B.J. was looking towards the wall beyond the foot of his bed but his eyes were focused on someone the rest of them couldn’t see.

Steve laughed softly despite himself. “Yes, it is. Union Jack always told him it looked like an orange caterpillar growing under his nose.”

“Dum Dum’s laughing, too, Captain.”

“I like his laugh, don’t you?” Steve asked softly, sharing significant looks with B.J.’s parents.

“It tickles my tummy.”

The nurse slipped into the room and Megan quietly asked him to shut off any alarms that would be triggered by B.J.’s passing.

Steve asked, “Who else is here, B.J.? Do you see Bucky anywhere?”

B.J. lifted his head from Steve’s chest and looked around. “I see my Grandpa. He’s waving to me! He telling me I should go with him.” B.J.’s voice was strong now and he seemed joyful.

“Oh, Baruti James, we will miss you so,” Themba said as she kissed her son’s hand. “Grandpa will take care of you until we can join you.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone, Mommy.”

“It is time, son. Go with your grandfather and Dum Dum. We love you,” Amadi said in a low voice.

“Captain’s orders, B.J. Don’t keep them waiting,” Steve added with tears streaming down his cheeks. “I’ll keep an eye on your parents for you, okay? They’ll be fine, I promise.”

“Dum Dum said I can wear his hat.” B.J. said as he leaned his head back against Steve once more.

“You’ve a very lucky soldier, B.J. I’ve never seen Dum Dum lend his hat to anyone.”

They waited to see what else B.J. had to say. There was only silence. He was gone.

B.J.’s parents leaned over their son’s body, kissing his cheeks and whispering good-byes. Steve put his arms around them both as all three of them wept. Megan could barely see Steve looking at her through her own tears. She wanted to hug him but stayed where she was standing against the wall.
Steve just watched her, letting her eyes hold him while he held B.J.’s parents.

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It was nearly five when they arrived back at Steve’s apartment. Neither had spoken since leaving the hospital. Words weren’t necessary. They simply stripped off their clothes, crawled into bed, then held each other as they slept in the limited time they had before the alarm clock would announce it was time to face the day.

When the alarm did sound, Megan moaned. She was wrung out.

“Get your shower first and I’ll start breakfast,” Steve told her, pressing a kiss to her temple.

She nodded and slid out of bed without another word, praying that the hot water would revive her.

Dressed in the same clothes she’d worn to work Friday and with her hair pulled up in a damp ponytail, she stumbled into the kitchen. Steve handed her a mug of extra strong tea and pointed out the sausage and French toast that were waiting at the table. “I don’t have oatmeal,” he said, apologetically.

“Tea’s more important.” She dug in, devouring the food methodically while her mind raced. It was hard to process it all. And there was no way she was letting their unseen audience learn about such a sacred event. They could talk in the car.

They’d barely gotten on the road before she broke the silence. “Has that ever happened before?”

Steve somehow had followed her train of thought. “No, I’ve sat with a few kids as they passed, but no one ever mentioned one of the Howling Commandos. B.J. was special.”

“I’m sorry Bucky didn’t show up.”

“Me, too. Dum Dum loved kids, so I can’t say I’m surprised he’s the one who came.”

“That was amazing how peacefully he went once you all told him to go. It was nice of you to give him an order so his parents didn’t have to feel guilty about pushing him too hard.”

“Thanks. I hope it helps them a little bit. He’s been such a fighter for so long. Through all the tests and treatments, he stayed cheerful and upbeat. He’s been in and out of the hospital so much the last year we’ve all lost track of how many times it was. He’d get a bit better then have a complication. I was really hoping he’d beat it, but not long after Christmas, the doctors said it wasn’t likely.”

“Do you remember what kind of cancer it was?”

“Some sort of neuroblastoma. They thought it was beaten, but it spread and came back. Whenever I visited him, we tried to talk about other stuff. I’ve been the sick kid and I remember how helpful it was when Bucky kept my mind off how I was feeling. His parents have been amazing. They were honest with him about everything and answered all of his questions without ever letting him see it was killing them to watch him suffer. They talked about chemotherapy and blood tests like you and I would talk about the weather, always simple, clear, and upbeat. When he started to ask if he was going to die soon, they told him straight up that he was and that it was nothing to be afraid of. They made it sound like he was going on a grand adventure. Compared to the hospital, I
suppose it was.

“A couple of weeks ago when I went to see him, he asked me if I’d sit with him while he died in the most matter of fact tone. I couldn’t promise, since I might be out on a mission, but I told him I’d come sit with him if I was in town. I didn’t tell Nick. He doesn’t want anything to interfere with work. I’m glad I was able to be there for him. I’m going to miss that little guy.”

****

“Aren’t those the same clothes you wore Friday?” Emma asked when Megan sat down at her desk to make a list of what she had to get done today.

“Maybe. They’ve been laundered, so what does it matter?”

“You were seen arriving this morning driving a certain Captain’s car. I’m betting you never went home this weekend.”

“Actually, I spent the entire weekend at home, but I’m not in the mood, okay? I’ve barely had any sleep and I have a ton of work I have to get done.”

“Finally got that home run, didn’t you?”

“Emma, I’m done talking about it. I don’t understand everyone’s fascination with my personal life and I’d appreciate you dropping it.”

“Okay, don’t be so touchy!” Emma said, throwing up her hands and backing away.

Megan pretended not to notice the whispers that dropped off whenever she entered the lab. Emma’s passion for gossip had really gotten out of hand and Megan regretted ever admitting she and Steve were more than friends. What had started out as a way to let the work grapevine hopefully keep her unknown attackers apprised of her efforts to seduce Steve had morphed into a monster. She was too tired today to deal with monsters.

By midmorning, Megan was doing triage on her list. She had a pounding headache: the kind she got when she was exhausted. No pain medicine on Earth would touch it; she knew that from experience. Nausea would follow. Presumably, she’d eventually start puking but it had never happened before. She knew when the nausea hit that she was beyond her limits and the only option was sleep. She only hoped that by the time she was incapacitated by nausea today that she’d be home in her own bed.

It wasn’t to be.

She did the minimum bench work in the lab that she had to do to keep her experiments moving forward. She changed the medium on the cells she was scaling up and wrapped up one set of experiments, but made no effort to start the next series. She was in bad enough shape than she put a note in her lab notebook that she was overly tired today and that any unexpected results were attributable to fatigue.

By afternoon, she was at her desk, her head propped on her hand, staring at papers she was pretending to read. The words blurred in front of her but it didn’t matter. Even when she got her eyes to focus, her brain wasn’t cooperating. Caffeine didn’t help, either. She needed sleep and
nothing else was going to help. Certainly not the new assignment that she’d found waiting on her desk. That was just making the headache worse. It was time to be more proactive in her research.

Making one last trip to her bench under the pretense of searching for her favorite pen, she retraced her movement around the lab and pocketed some 15 mL tubes, sterile swabs, cytobrushes, and gloves. Back at her desk, she moved them to her purse while gathering up some journal article she needed to read for her new assignment. She had no plans on actually reading them tonight. Instead, she was going to ask Steve if Jarvis would be able to help her with some data compilation from the literature. She didn’t want all of her searches to be done at work where her supervisors could track them, and access to the journals was only possible by the subscriptions S.H.I.E.L.D. had purchased, leading back to the issue of being tracked on her work account. Paying thirty bucks for independent access to a single paper would soon total hundreds of dollars she didn’t have to spend.

She grabbed her lunch bag, put her purse and work bag on her shoulder, and headed to the parking garage, nearly plowing into Steve on her way out of her office. “Sorry,” she said when she realized she’d almost hit him. He caught her easily and took her work bag from her.

“Are you okay to drive?”

“Yep. You’re going to drive while I shift. Take the strap off your back so you can use that arm to steer with both hands in an emergency.”

“You’re serious.”

She looked up at him, squinting in the too-bright lights of the corridor. “Does this look like the face of someone safe behind the wheel? Shifting isn’t a problem. It’s the whole bad reflexes, not seeing well because I’m nearly blind with a headache issue that we need to worry about. You step on the clutch; I shift the gears.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“Don’t you dare apologize for last night. But please, can we not talk about this here? The rumor mill is already working overtime.”

“Okay.”

“What did you do all day?”

“They took the stitches out and then I got to play desk jockey since they won’t let me near the gym.”

Megan could tell that the latter was really wearing on him. Steve liked to move. “Build any paperclip structures?”

“No, but I filled out a lot of reports.”

“TPS reports? Should I lend you my red stapler?”

“They actually make a red stapler?”

Megan nodded. “That was one Christmas present Randy got right. I keep it in the top drawer of my desk so no one takes it. If they do, I’ll have to burn down the whole complex. That seems rather wasteful.”

“I’ll remind Nick to never move your desk.”
“You do that. Next time you have to do reports, come down to the lab. We’ll put to you work racking pipette tips or something.”

****

At Steve’s apartment, she imitated writing on a tablet to request a pad and a pen. Instead, he handed over his Stark tablet and pointed to the smoke alarm that wasn’t easy to reach. Nodding understanding, she searched for directions for collecting buccal samples and handed it to him when she found a simple protocol. He frowned, not understanding until she pulled out her pilfered supplies and pointed to both him and herself. She separated the materials into two piles and headed back to his bedroom.

She stripped off her clothes and left them in a pile on the floor to deal with later.

“I’m crashing here tonight. Sorry,” she mumbled when she heard footsteps approach. She looked around, trying to remember where she’d put the t-shirt she’d slept in. She’d gone from bed straight to get a shower. “Excuse me,” she said, pushing past him to retrieve it. There it was, hanging on the back of the bathroom door. Belatedly, she realized she’d just flashed him as she wandered around in nothing but her panties.

“It’s fine.”

She came out of the bathroom once the shirt was on and noticed he was making a concerted effort to keep his eyes on her face. If only she were awake enough to enjoy this!

“Have you eaten anything?”

“I’d rather not throw up. I’m so tired I’m nauseated. I’ll eat later once I’ve slept a bit. I’ve had this happen before, don’t worry. I just have the luck of a body that tells me very clearly when I’ve pushed too far,” she explained as she lay down in bed and burrowed under the covers.

“Okay, good night then.”

She gave him a tiny wave and heard him head back to the kitchen. Soon, she heard soothing music playing softly in the living room and she fell asleep before the first record was done playing.

****

When Megan woke later, Steve was sleeping beside her. Her stomach was rumbling in hunger, so she slipped out of bed and padded to the kitchen in search of something to eat. She found a note on the counter—laid on top of the Stark Tablet she could have sworn she had left in her apartment—telling her to help herself to the meals in the freezer. When she opened the freezer door, she had to struggle to hold back her laughter. Steve’s freezer looked like something out of a magazine. There were neat stacks of plastic containers, all carefully labeled with their contents and date of preparation. Wire baskets organized bags of frozen vegetables. She noticed he even had a frozen apple pie ready to bake. “Too damn perfect,” she muttered to herself though she was smiling.

She decided on some chicken noodle soup and found a saucepan in the drawer under the stove. Exploring a bit more, she discovered a loaf of French bread in the bread drawer and helped herself
to a generous slice.

While the soup heated, she collected the buccal sample from her cheeks and placed the harvest, brush and all, into the waiting tube that was labeled with her initials. Steve had already collected his and set aside the various wrappers and gloves to discard in a random trash bin on their way to work. She put the two tubes into her purse to smuggle into the lab later that morning.

Once that task was done, she wandered around his apartment, feeling restless despite her fatigue. She found he’d placed some of the pictures Rebecca had given him in frames and they were sitting on an end table near the stereo. His mother’s Bible was on a bookshelf amongst other favorite texts. He didn’t have much else out that marked the space as his, though she found some large framed prints leaning against a bookshelf at the end of the hallway. Either he’d been unsure where to hang them or had regretted purchasing them in the first place.

Most of his books seemed to focus on history and politics though there were some volumes dedicated to art as well. He had so many books, far more than she did, and it made her wonder if he’d read them all yet. She had visions of him haunting used bookstores, searching for books he liked and bringing them home, only to grow restless in the barren space and head out again in search of what was missing in his life.

She checked the soup and stirred it before heading to the bathroom. She was surprised to find additional slacks and blouses hanging there, and there was a tote bag on the doorknob containing more knee-high nylons, underwear, and bras. While she slept, Steve had gone to her apartment and fetched her more of her work clothes. He’d even been careful to pick outfits he’d seen her wear. How could she possibly repay him for the untold gestures of caring he showered her with every day? Had he taken a cab? She knew he avoided public transportation since he was so easily recognized, though he could have left his shield at home for the trip. Commuting to work on the Metro with the shield on his back was a sure sign of his identity, which is why he told her he preferred to ride his bike.

Where was his shield, anyway? She found it leaning against the wall by the front door and she picked it up and put it on the dining room table to examine while she ate. She’d held it before, but she’d never had the chance to really study it.

She turned the kitchen lights on low and dished out her soup. Sitting at the table, she ate with one hand while she fingered the worn leather straps of his shield with the other. “The stories you could tell, I can only imagine,” she said softly. The edges were sharper than she’d expected, beveled to what she estimated to be a sixty degree angle. Perhaps that was so he could use it as crude axe as needed. The leather had to be new, didn’t it? Even with lots of cleaning and care, leather wouldn’t take kindly to decades in the ice. But the straps were dark, stained with sweat and possibly blood, and she decided that maybe they were indeed original.

She turned it over to look at the painted face. It didn’t surprise her that there were scuff marks here and there that marred the paint. The metal beneath was unblemished. “I wonder if he’ll ever get the chance to hang you on the wall as a memento of an era now past? He shouldn’t have to keep fighting the same battles again and again. How many lives have you saved?”

“Do you expect it to answer?”

Megan shook her head, not really surprised that Steve was awake. He was a soldier through and through, used to his apartment being silent when he slept. She looked at him. His hair was mussed with sleep and his pajama pants hung low around his waist. He looked yummy enough to eat. She took another bite of soup instead. “If it talks back, I know I’m in trouble. I’m sorry I woke you.”
He shook his head, brushing off her concern. “Feeling better?” he asked, joining her at the table.

“Headache is gone. Now I’m just tired. Thanks for fetching more clothes. It will help shut Emma up. She was on my case today about wearing the same outfit I had worn on Friday.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How do you keep doing it? Megan fingered one of the scuff marks, idly wondering what had caused the damage this time.

“What do you mean?”

Megan looked up from the shield. “Year after year, you keep running into combat and gunfire. War isn’t glamorous. It’s hunger and cold and blood and fatigue. You’ve seen the very worst of humanity, made heart wrenching decisions, lived through nightmares I can’t even imagine, and you still manage to see the good in people. I don’t have that kind of courage, to willingly put my life on the line for an ideal, and you do it again and again, even when the price is more nightmares and more triggers for panic attacks in a world where nothing we do makes a damn bit of difference. How do you keep doing it?”

“You know the starfish parable?”

Megan nodded. It was more of an answer than she’d expected. She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. “I couldn’t do what you do. I wish I had that kind of courage, but I don’t. And as much as I hate facing my own limitations, I know that’s one of mine.”

“We all have limitations. Besides, what else would I do? I’ve been given a gift; I have a responsibility to use it wisely. What’s got you so introspective tonight?”

“I don’t know. B.J. The fact it’s stupid thirty in the morning. Going home this weekend. None of it and all of it.”

“Are you done eating?”

“Yeah. Good soup, though.”

“Thanks. I had a good teacher.”

Megan got up and put the shield back where she’d found it. Steve put the leftover soup in the fridge while she put her bowl and spoon in the dishwasher. “I’m sorry about last night. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Let me win that bet of ours and I can be here every night,” she said as she hugged him from behind. “Or maybe I should just move in and see how long you can hold out.” She stretched up and nibbled on his ear lobe.

“Let me rephrase that,” he said, turning around and winking at her. “I like having you in my kitchen. But you hog the covers, flail with your arms, and keep kicking me. As soon as I’m cleared to drive, you’re sleeping in your own bed.”
Her eyebrows shot up at that. He wanted her here until he was allowed to drive without the sling on his arm? He nodded silently and she tucked that fact away to consider later. “Well, if you’d do a better job of wearing me out, I’m sure I’d lie still all night long.” Megan said in a sultry voice. “You have only yourself to blame.”

Steve just put his arm around her and led her back to bed.

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Life settled into a new routine that was far too easy for Megan to love. Though something was still off with Steve—she caught him studying her with a pained, brooding expression more than once—she set that aside. He didn’t owe her any explanations. She also knew, instinctively, that the best way to get him to confide in her was to wait for him to do it on his own terms and in his own time. Living in his apartment was a further intrusion into his space; it was only natural he’d try to protect his thoughts since they were the only privacy he had left.

Planning with Jarvis was a bit more difficult since she didn’t want Steve to see that she wasn’t always reading the journal articles Jarvis had found for her. But when he sat down to sketch, he got lost in his own world and that gave her some time to work.

Jarvis was nothing short of a miracle worker. No matter what time of day or night she sent him a message, he got back to her within minutes. Her tentative request for help searching the science literature had resulting in him sending her an annotated bibliography of the papers he’s selected, along with the full pdf file for each source. He’d even remotely installed an application that allowed her to use a stylus to take notes on the pdfs she was reading and then send them to a proprietary database Jarvis said he’d designed for Mr. Stark.

Thursday evening found Megan at Steve’s dining room table, typing away as she conversed with Jarvis about her research project. Steve was sitting in the living room sketching. He’d been quiet tonight, more so than usual, but Megan left him alone. Her tablet beeped again with an incoming message from Jarvis.

“Dr. Megan, I have now received materials from all of the guests. They all signed releases for compilation into a book we’ll distribute at the gathering. I took the liberty of having my assistant digitize them so I can begin to work on the layout based on your initial idea. Do you wish for him to mount the original materials into a scrapbook to give to Captain Rogers along with the book? Page proofs of the initial layout are attached. I’ve loaded the necessary software to your tablet. Please let me know if you have any questions about using it. I have not yet written a manual for the software. Jarvis.”

“I hate to impose on you and your assistant like that. I can try to come up a day early and do the physical assembly myself if you prefer. I just can’t risk doing it at my apartment since Steve is so often there. I’ll take a look at the proofs and write more in a few minutes. M.” After she hit send, she opened the proofs.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked, hearing her muttered exclamations from the other room.

“Nothing. It’s just...” Megan stammered, scrambling to deflect his attention. “I’m sick of looking at science papers. I think it’s frying my brain. At her keyboard, she typed an email to Steve, knowing it would go to his phone. “Jarvis never ceases to amaze me. He just went above and beyond on something I asked him to help me with. I swear the man never sleeps. Day or night, he’s always online. Mr. Stark must have him chained to his desk or something and it’s not healthy. Frankly, I’m worried about him. He never says no to anything.”

Steve read her message and got up. When she realized he was going to join her at the table, she bought up her science papers so he wouldn’t see what she had really been working on.

He took her stylus and turned her tablet to note writing mode. “You don’t need to worry about Jarvis. Tony loves him like a son and they take care of each other. Just think of Jarvis as a chronic

He gave her a sideways glance before writing, “That’s Jarvis being Jarvis. It’s part of who he is. Trust me that you don’t need to worry. Just be his friend. If you—” his phone rang and he dropped the stylus on the table to answer it. “Rogers. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll be there… Of course I’ll serve if that’s what you want….Yes… She’s with me now, why don’t you ask her yourself.”

Steve handed her the phone. “Hello?” Megan asked, looking at Steve questioningly.

“Megan, this is Amadi. My wife and I wanted to ask you to join us at Baruti’s funeral on Sunday morning.”

“I’m honored to be invited. Of course I will be there. Did you give Steve the details already or should I write them down?”

“Captain Rogers has the time and location. Thank you for your kindness. We will see you Sunday,” Amadi said before hanging up.

Stunned, Megan handed the phone back to Steve. “Why do they want me there?”

“You were a comfort to them in the hospital.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“You were there. You didn’t try to fix it or tell them it was going to be okay. You took care of them while respecting their need to grieve.”

“But anyone would—”

Steve shook his head. “Unfortunately, that’s not the case. I’ve seen death enough to know how different people react. Denial is common. People get wrapped up in protecting themselves and don’t leave room for truth. You didn’t do that. I heard you ask the nurse to shut off the alarms on the machines.”

“I didn’t him to be scared by all the noise.”

“Come here,” Steve said as he pulled her into a hug. “I want to show you what I’ve been working on. I’m stuck and want your opinion.” He led her back into the living room and gestured for her to sit on the couch. He handed her his sketch pad. “I started drawing just the one scene to give to B.J.’s parents, but there’s no way to get all three of them looking the same way. I’m wondering if I should do a collage of sorts on a larger pad based on these other sketches.”

Megan took the pad from him and looked at the image he’d drawn. It showed a man kneeling in front of B.J. as he put a bowler hat on B.J.’s head. B.J.’s grandfather stood with his hands on the boy’s shoulders, watching the interaction with a slight smile. “It’s beautiful. How’d you get a picture of B.J.’s grandfather?”

“Jarvis did some research. Amadi’s father died over a decade ago, which ruled him out. Themba’s father died just last year, so B.J. would have known him. It turns out he lived with the family for the last two years of his life. Jarvis found some pictures on Facebook of them together. It helped me see what B.J. looked like when he was healthy.”
“I love it, but you’re right, seeing Dum Dum’s face would be nice. You can’t turn him around without losing the face-to-face with B.J. or else you’d be turning B.J.’s face away from us.” Megan turned to the next page. Dum Dum was walking out of a white mist towards a boy standing with his back to her. “So that’s Dum Dum. He does have quite the mustache. I love the twinkle in his eyes. He looks like the solder’s version of Santa Claus, all jolly and welcoming. No wonder B.J. took to him so quickly.”

“Keep going.”

The next page showed the two men standing with B.J. between them. B.J., his face no longer thinned by illness, was wearing the bowler hat, which had magically shrunk to fit. They were all smiling as they looked at Megan from the page. B.J. held his grandfather’s hand and was waving with his other. In all of the sketches, Steve had used mostly black charcoal, then given hints of color and shading with some tinted charcoal pencils, just enough to soften the contrast. Megan had to wipe tears from her eyes.

“There’s one more.”

Megan turned to the last page where the trio were holding hands and walking away from them into the bright mist. B.J. had a smaller version of Steve’s shield strapped to his back. He had turned as he walked and was looking over his shoulder at Megan with a smile that made her choke back a sob. “Give them the set. There’s no choice to make. Let’s take them to be framed tomorrow.”

“They’re not done. I still need to add more color and—”

“They’re perfect as they are. If you make them too vivid, they’ll lose the impact. Right now, it’s like we’re seeing them through a haze. The details are there, just muted by the mists that separate our reality from the next. Sign and date them. If you see something glaring that you just have to touch up, go ahead, otherwise, don’t mess with the look. It won’t bring B.J. back, but I know they’ll treasure these. That was such a powerful moment.” Her tabled chimed with a new message from its spot on the dining room table. “Crap, I forgot I promised to reply immediately that I got the file!” she said, hopping up.

“What are you working on so intensely?”

“Just a little side project,” she hedged, tapping her ear to remind him of their audience. “All part of my grand plan to win our bet. I am not interested in perpetual sexual frustration. You’re still too much of a gentleman and won’t even try to sneak a feel so I clearly need to up my game.”

****

They stopped by Megan’s place on the way home Friday so Megan could get her riding clothes and gear. She took a few minutes to clean out the fridge and discard foods that were past their prime. On Saturday morning, they headed to the stable. Steve found a spot on the bleachers in the corner of the arena and sat down with a sketchbook.

She turned in her paperwork and collected a lead rope from where they were hanging by the tack room door. “Any unusual habits I should know about before I go into her stall?”

Courtney nodded. “Pumpkin likes to chew on her halter and lead rope. She’s as sweet natured as any horse I’ve ever known, but she seems to think she should have a rope pacifier.”

Megan laughed. “Okay. That should make things interesting.” She took the halter of the stall door
and put it over her arm. “Hey, Pumpkin, time to play,” she said as she slid the stall door open just enough to enter. “I see you’re giving me your better side, too. Come on, honey, move your butt over for me.” She pressed gently on Pumpkin’s hip. Pumpkin nickered and swung her hindquarters around. Megan let Pumpkin just stand there for a moment while Megan talked to her and scratched her withers. “I hear you like to chew.” Megan slipped up beside her head and put the halter on before Pumpkin was able to grab it with her mouth. “Nice try, sweetie. Better luck next time.”

She snapped the lead rope on and led Pumpkin to the door, opened it all the way, and led her to the hitching ring closest to where Steve was sitting and watching them. As soon as she was tied, Pumpkin began to chew on the lead, her agile lips working furiously to undo the knots.

“Are you going to stand nicely for me?” Megan continued her idle chatter as she used a curry comb to work the dust and dirt loose and bring it to the surface. Pumpkin kept mouthing her lead rope but was otherwise perfectly behaved while Megan groomed her first with the curry comb and then the stiff brush. Pumpkin lifted her feet politely and didn’t lean her weight on Megan like some horses liked to do.

“I can see why you use her to start riders,” Megan told Courtney as she accepted the saddle from her and placed it gently on Pumpkin’s back. “She’s has great ground manners.”

“We’d love to have a whole stable filled with horses like her,” Courtney agreed. “She’ll fuss a bit when you tighten the girth, but nothing terrible. Just some breath holding and ear folding.

Megan checked her stirrup length and put the bridle on, using Pumpkin’s constantly moving mouth to her advantage as she slipped the bit in.

Courtney chuckled, “She’s not used to begin bridled so quickly. Did you see the look she gave you just now? It’s good for her to work with someone more experienced.”

“I’m no expert, but I can be patient and persistent. She may be bigger, but I’m supposed to be smarter. Do you mind if I mount from the ramp? Since you have one here, I can just swing my leg over and not use the stirrups at all. I know how to mount, but there’s no need to strain her back to keep her balance unless she likes to bolt to a canter before you get seated.”

“That’s fine. I’ll hold her head. She doesn’t like to canter, actually. Trotting is her favorite gait. But she’ll stand while you mount.”

Megan nodded, tightened the girth again, and led Pumpkin over to the wheelchair ramp. Courtney held the bridle while Megan mounted and let go at Megan’s nod. “She’s so wide it’s like sitting on a couch.” She reached down and patted Pumpkin’s neck affectionately. “Okay, girl, let’s see what we can do together.”

For the rest of the hour, Megan was in horse heaven. Pumpkin reminded her of a pouting four year old. Megan would ask, Pumpkin would generally comply, but often with twitching ears and a tossed head when she was firmly kept in line. Keeping her to the rail was the biggest challenge. Pumpkin kept trying to go to the center of the ring and Megan wouldn’t let her. Once Pumpkin realized she wasn’t going to get away with anything, she settled down and began to pay more attention to Megan’s cues without tossing her head.

Courtney was a wonderful instructor who quickly figured out what Megan needed to work on most: keeping her lower legs in the right position, “I think part of the problem is the saddle. It’s too small for you.”

Megan nodded. “I agree. I’ve never had the luxury of a saddle that really fits my long legs. Until I
win the lottery, I'll make do. As long as I’m not slamming on her back at the trot, we’ll manage. Who knows, maybe a saddle that fits will let me finally feel the different diagonals since I won’t be so focused on my lower legs.”

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“I’m glad you had fun,” Steve told her in the car on the way home.

“You have no idea. I’m going to be sore tomorrow but it’s so worth it to be back on a horse again. Did you see the look on Pumpkin’s face when I made her go through the center of the ring without stopping? She was thinking rather unkind thoughts towards me. But her trot is amazing. She’s so springy. I can’t wait until next week because I’m going to try Mickey. How about you? I saw you made a new friend.”

“I enjoyed watching you. That cat is named Salem. She seemed to be rather determined to attack my pencil so I didn’t get much drawing done.”

“She’s training you to pet her. That’s a cat for you.”

“Listening to you and Courtney was like listening to a foreign language at times. Diagonals, opening reins, half halts. I guess I never really thought about what’s involved in riding well beyond keeping your balance.”

Megan laughed. “Even now, some of the terms throw me. It’s like any athletic activity, I guess. It has a secret code to help everyone explain what you’re trying to do. But we don’t need to talk horses all day. Do you want to stop off at the frame shop on our way back to your place? If you have the receipt with you, we won’t have to hurry later to get there before they close.”

“It’s in my wallet so we can do that. I just assumed you’d want a shower first thing.”

“I never mind smelling like a horse.”

Steve looked askance at her. “That’s just wrong somehow.”

“Hey, you like the smell of the gym don’t you? I like the smell of a horse. Let’s go out for pizza tonight. I haven’t had a good pizza in ages and it will be a good distraction. Tomorrow morning is going to be awful.”
Megan woke the next morning absolutely dreading the day ahead. Breakfast was a sullen affair. They were both quiet while they showered and dressed for the funeral, or rather, Megan was quiet. Steve was angry. Megan realized she’d never seen him like this before. It was a dark, dangerous mood that poured off of him in waves. She kept her distance and held her tongue. There was nothing she could say or do that would change the fact that they were going to the funeral of a little boy who didn’t deserve his fate.

“How can you just sit there?” he growled at her once as he stormed back to his bedroom to try a different shirt to wear under his dress uniform. His cast was causing him problems dressing as it was too thick to fit through the sleeve of his shirt. His hair wasn’t lying flat in front. He was out of distilled water for the iron that he was heating to press his slacks. In short, the universe was being uncooperative and he wasn’t in the mood to deal with it.

Megan took a deep breath and tried to let the comment roll off of her. He hadn’t meant it like that. She stayed at the dining room table, quietly sipping tea while he grumbled. If he wanted help, he could ask for it. Otherwise, she decided, he needed to be grumpy for a bit. At the funeral, he’d hold his emotions in and let the family draw strength from is presence and composure. Right now, he needed the freedom to be a grieving human. He certainly didn’t need her swooping in to his rescue until he was ready for help.

“Megan… please—” his voice broke.

That was her cue.

“How can I help?” she asked cheerfully as she went back to his bedroom where the ironing board was set up.

“I need you to find something to cut the cast off.”

“Wrong answer.” She held up her hand to cut off additional protests. “Trust me, okay?”

He nodded and ran his good hand through his hair. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. It’s just…”

“It’s called being human, Steve. I know why you’re grumpy and it’s alright.” She gave him a hug. “The family is going to lean hard on you today, and that’s one reason why you’re going. But you get to lean on me, okay? Would you like me to iron your shirt?”

“It won’t fit over the cast. Neither will the jacket. I’m serving as pallbearer, and I need to be in uniform.”

“Want, not need.” Megan put her fingers on his lips, silencing the next protest. “And you will be. Take a deep breath. I assume uniform shirts are pretty easy to replace, correct? It’s the dress coat that’s the real challenge.”

He nodded wearily.

“Do you have a sewing kit?”

“Other than the sutures in my med kit, no.”
Megan shook her head, laughing. “Only you! Okay, pull a t-shirt on and get your sling on. We can take care of this at my place. I’ll pack the shirt, tie, and coat in your garment bag. We can iron them at my apartment. Is there anything else you need that isn’t packed in the bag?”

“Just my shield, which we’ll leave in the car.”

“Do you want help tying your shoes, just to make it easier?”

He sighed heavily. “Fine.”

Megan knelt down and helped him put on his dress shoes, then tied them for him. “Steve, I understand why you’re grouchy. It doesn’t bother me. The only way you could hurt me today is by being deliberately cruel and I don’t think that’s likely to happen. If it does, I’ll deal.”

“How can you be so calm about this?”

“Because one of us has to keep it together and you’re closer to this than I am. I’ll do my crying when we get back. Unplug the iron and get your shield. I’ll carry your clothes.”

“Hey,” he grabbed her arm before she was out of reach. “Thank you. You look nice.”

“Thanks. You look confused,” she teased, glancing at the t-shirt he was wearing with his dress uniform slacks and shoes. “Maybe we should get you a cowboy hat and a clown nose to complete the look.”

He bent down so his forehead was touching hers. “B.J. would love that idea.”

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Steve sat on Megan’s couch and watched her use a seam ripper on his sleeve. “What are you doing to my shirt?”

“I’m taking the seam out of the sleeve so it will fit over your cast. I can sew it back in later. I had to snip the sleeve placket, but I put Fray-Check on it so it won’t ravel today. Your coat sleeve is even easier to open up. I’ll have to hand-stitch the lining back in place later, and it won’t look as good on the inside as it does now, but no one will see any difference from the outside once I repair it. For now, the open seam will be hidden in your sling. You can keep the cast on and still be in dress uniform.” Standing up, she handed him the shirt. “Try this on over your cast. I can open up the seam more if I need to.”

The sleeve easily slid over his wrist.

“Good. Loose the t-shirt and get that on while I work on your jacket. If you need help with your tie, let me know. You need to keep your left arm still, and I know you keep avoiding that little truth. Are you always this bad of a patient?”

“Usually I’m worse,” he admitted a bit sheepishly as he took off his sling and t-shirt.

“You’re lucky S.H.I.E.L.D.’s doctors keep agreeing to patch you up then.”

“I frustrate them. Much of what they learned in medical school doesn’t apply to me.”
Megan eyed him. “You still look human to me.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m talking about medications. I don’t get infections. Their pain medicines don’t work, and they have to mainline any type of general anesthesia in super-high doses to keep me out for surgery. As long as they can keep me from bleeding out and line things up to heal correctly, I recover.”

“So far. You might want to avoid testing your luck on that too much. There are new pathogens emerging all the time that might take you down fast, among other things.”

“Like what?”

Megan gave him a significant look and pointed to her ears. She wasn’t about to tell their audience about the potential for different toxins and venoms to work or ask Steve what experience he had with them. “Ebola is one example,” she said aloud, covering for him. “Patients dehydrate and bleed out. With time and supportive care, some people pull though, but it’s got a scary-high mortality rate. I wouldn’t want to see you exposed to it.” In fact, she was confident that Steve would be fine since his immune system was so effective at fighting off new pathogens. “Here, try this coat sleeve on over your cast. I want to see if I need to tear more of the seam out.”

Steve’s cast caught the fabric almost immediately.

“Okay, another inch should do it,” she said, sliding it off his arm. “How you keep from sweating to death in this is beyond me. The fabric’s too heavy for summer weather.”

“I’m used to it and it’s not supposed to get really warm until later this afternoon,” he said as he fumbled with his necktie.

“Get your shirt tucked in and I’ll fix your tie. I’m just going to whip stitch this a bit so it doesn’t come apart beyond what I tore out. Why don’t you find something in the freezer to heat up before we go. It’s been awhile since breakfast and we have the services at the church and gravesite to go to.”

Megan finished her adjustments to his jacket while Steve found something for them to eat. In silence, she tied Steve’s necktie and they sat down for a quick brunch. “Why’d you give him Bucky’s nickname?”

“First day I met him, he called me a jerk,” Steve explained.

He went on to tell more about that first meeting and Megan ended up both laughing and crying. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she tried to compose herself. “You have to share that story at the funeral.”

“I’m not scheduled to speak. Besides, I can’t make people laugh at a funeral.”

Megan put her hand on his arm. “Yes, you can. A story like that is about finding the joy and humor in a difficult situation. From what you have told me, that’s what B.J. did every day. A funeral is supposed to celebrate his life. It needs to include the joy he brought to people. A few laughs amidst all of the tears can be healing. Ask B.J.’s parents if you can have a few minutes to share your memories of B.J. with everyone.

****
Megan sat in the pew behind Steve during the service. He was sitting with the other pallbearers: two uncles and a family friend. It had been hard to watch the four of them carry the tiny casket into the church and up the center aisle to rest in front of the altar. Now, as she listened to speaker after speaker try to offer some comfort and solace, she couldn’t focus on the words. She just kept staring at the white casket, nearly hidden beneath a blanket of red roses, thinking about the little boy who had touched so many lives. She wasn’t even sure if Steve had asked to speak or not. As soon as they’d arrived, she had sent him off to prepare for his role and she had tried to make herself useful, mainly by staying out of the way and fetching a box of tissues when she realized that none had been provided in the front pew for the family.

She was pulled from her thoughts when she noticed Steve standing up in response to a cue she must have missed. Solemnly, he went to the pulpit and met her eyes. She nodded slightly in encouragement.

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“My name is Steve Rogers and I’ve been told by someone a lot smarter than me that I should share with you the day I met B.J. for the first time since it does a pretty good job of conveying everything you need to know about B.J.’s personality in just a few minutes. On my days off, I sometimes visit the pediatric units in the local hospitals, especially Children’s National. People think I do it for the kids, but I go because I’m actually pretty selfish and need what the kids give back to me. No matter what kind of mood I’m in when I get there, I get a reminder of what’s really important. I always leave feeling good about the world.

“About a year ago, I was having a pretty bad day and was making my rounds, taking pictures with the kids, talking to them, helping some of them with their blood draws… standard stuff. I thought I was doing a pretty good job of faking a good mood and was starting to feel better when I got to B.J.’s room. He was lying in bed hooked up to all sorts of tubes, wires, and machines than any kid should ever see. Half of them had labels for drugs I’ve never heard of and probably can’t pronounce. He looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes and asked me why I was so sad. He said if I’d sit down and play him a game of cards, he’d try to cheer me up.

“He went on to say if I beat him in a game of crazy eights, he’d give me the bag of M&M’s he’d hidden in the top drawer of his bedside table. When I won, he ducted his head and looked up under his lashes, then called me a jerk under his breath.”

Steve paused, looking around the room. He smiled slightly as he continued, “His mother was mortified. She hadn’t raised her son to act like that. But I was a five-year-old kid sick in bed when my friend Bucky called me a jerk, so I knew exactly what to do. I called him a punk and challenged him to best two out of three. He was Bucky Junior from then on.”

Megan heard a few chuckles break out and she smiled at Steve, nodding encouragement to him. The Captain America facade was slipping away, letting those assembled see the man and not the legend.

Steve continued with growing confidence, “I think that’s when Themba figured out she was actually dealing with two kids, one of whom was just a little bit taller than the other.” He shrugged shyly. “Things degenerated from there. He ended up beating me but sharing his M&Ms. Every time I saw him after that, he had some new names to call me. I think he must have written them down somewhere because he never once repeated himself. I got called brontosaurus breath, frog slime… dinglehopper. That was a new one. If you are not up to date on your Disney movies, that’s what mermaids call forks. I’ve served in the army so I know all sorts of insults. I also know I don’t much like the taste of soap and B.J.’s parents were always sitting right there. I couldn’t keep up
with him, so I finally resorted to calling him Russian and German words for different animals without telling him what they words meant.

“The only thing he was afraid of was blood tests. One day, we were playing cards and I was being insulted in new and creative ways, when one of the vampires—that’s what we called the phlebotomists—came in looking for blood. B.J. clammed right up. His parents had told me how much B.J. hated the phlebotomists and wanted to know if I had any ideas. I didn’t, but I happen to have a buddy who is good at that sort of thing…

“What color is your blood, B.J.?” Steve asked, surreptitiously passing a special vacutainer tube and needle to the phlebotomist who was in on the plan.

“Red,” he said in a meek voice barely louder than a whisper.

“Are you sure? Mine’s red, white, and blue, the same as all the Howling Commandos.’”

“That’s not possible!”

“I can prove it. It does take a special needle, though, to collect all the colors. It’s a really big needle. Do you want to see?”

B.J. looked at him, eyes wide.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let Sally use it on you.”

B.J. nodded.

Sally held up the large bore needle. “And this is the one we normally use to collect blood,” she said gently, holding it up beside the first for comparison.

“That other needle is tiny. No wonder it won’t get all the colors,” Steve observed.

“You’re joking,” B.J. insisted. “No one has blood with all those colors in it.”

“I’m Captain America, B.J. Of course I have red, white, and blue blood. I’ll prove it,” Steve said, sticking his arm out for Sally. “You watch and let me know what you see.”

Sally applied the tourniquet to his arm, cleaned the skin, and then collected a vial of blood in the vacationer tube Steve had given her. Steve watched B.J.’s eyes grow wide as the blood flowed into the tube, separating into different bands of color as it swirled around. Sally removed the tube and handed it to Steve. “All done,” she said, sliding the needle out and putting a Band-Aid over the puncture site.

“Hey, you gave me a Hulk Band-Aid!” Steve exclaimed. “I’ll have to send him picture of this later.” He handed the vial of blood to B.J. “See? I told you I have all three colors of blood. We can check and see if you have all the colors, too. You should since you’re a Howling Commando now. But if you prefer, Sally can use the little needle and just take the red blood.”

“Little needle, please.”

“Down in the lab, they only need to test the red blood, so that’s a good choice. Put your arm up here, soldier, and let’s see how well you hold still.”

B.J.’s lower lip quivered a bit and he looked at Steve. “It hurts.”
“I know, buddy. But you’re brave enough to do it anyway. I want you to squeeze my hand as hard as you can while Sally does her job.”

Reluctantly, B.J. put his arm on the table and gripped Steve’s hand. “Wow, that’s quite a grip you have there. Have you been working out in the gym?”

B.J. shook his head. His eyes filled with tears as Sally put a tourniquet around his arm and swabbed his inner elbow with alcohol.

“It hurts less when you don’t watch,” Steve told him. “So while you’re holding my hand as hard as you can, I want you to see if you can find a dent on my shield. If there are any dents, I have to get them fixed. Take a good look and see if you can find any.” Steve held his shield up to the side so B.J. turned away from the blood draw and didn’t see the needle.

“I don’t see any dents.”

“Are you sure? There were a lot of bullets being fired at me last time I was fighting the bad guys. Did you check the edges?”

“Oh, huh. The paint is scratched but I don’t see any dents.” B.J. pointed to the worst of the scratches.

“All done,” Sally said.

“I’m proud of you for holding so still even though it hurts.” Steve told the boy.

“What sort of Band-Aid do you want?” Sally asked him. “I have Iron Man, Hulk, Black Widow, and Hawkeye.” Sally said. “I’m all out of Captain America.”

“Iron Man. He can fly.”

“Can I take a picture of you wearing his Band-Aid to send to him?” Steve asked.

B.J. nodded and posed with a grin as Steve took the picture.

“Give me just a second and I’ll send it to him,” Steve said, adding a note that this was B.J. and the special vacutainer had worked beautifully.”

His phone pinged a minute later. “Awesome Band-Aid! He picked the most handsome Avenger, so clearly he is brilliant as well as brave. Tell him I’m proud of him. —T.S.” Steve showed him the message and helped him read it. “That’s from Iron Man himself,” he told the boy.

“Thanks to B.J. and the phlebotomists at Children’s National, I’m now jabbed multiple times during each of my visits there. The staff have found that giving the children a choice about what color of blood we’re going to sample makes them more likely to cooperate, even when I’m not there to help. We all think of him every single time a blood test is a bit easier for a child to deal with. He made the hospital experience better for thousands of children and will do so for decades to come. That’s his legacy.” Turning his gaze to the casket, he added, “I miss you, Punk.”

Once Steve was seated, Megan reached forward and briefly put her hand on his shoulder, well aware of how he was struggling to maintain his composure. He’d only told her about the name calling and had added the story of the blood draws on his own. Together, they painted a vivid picture of a precocious young man bringing joy to the people who knew him. She wished she had
been given the chance to know him better.

***

Back at Steve’s apartment, Megan pulled lunchmeat from the fridge and assembled sandwiches while Steve changed out of his dress uniform. She considered a moment, then decided to heat the rest of the soup, too.

Steve came out of the bedroom dressed only in a pair of jeans, carrying his sling and t-shirt in his hand. He laid them on the breakfast bar saying, “I’m not hungry.”

“Too bad. I noticed at the funeral dinner that you ate a third of what you normally do. Your body is hungry even if you don’t feel like eating. It was a nice service. I’m glad B.J.’s family has all of that support.” She set a large sandwich down in front of Steve. “Sit. Eat.”

“I forgot to give them the sketches.”

“I took care of it. When we went back to the funeral home after the graveside service, I gave the box to the funeral director when you were talking to B.J.’s parents about the dinner. They’ll deliver it later today when they take the floral arrangements to their house. I wrote them a note so they know what it is before they open it. That way they can do it when they’re ready. It might be too raw for them to deal with right now.”

“Yeah.” Steve just stared as his sandwich.

“Do I need to force feed you?” Megan asked as she ladled the soup into two bowls and set them on the bar. “I can do that.”

Steve closed his eyes and shook his head. “It’s just…”

Megan put her hand on his. “Have you ever stopped to think about why funerals are traditionally followed by dinners?”

He shook his head slowly. “No.”

“Eating is life. The communal meal is a reminder that those left behind have to go on living but they are doing it together.”

“I need to run.”

“I have an idea about how to get you some exercise but you’ll have to eat before I tell you what my solution is.”

“Megan, I’m not in the mood….”

“Do you honestly think I’m flirting with you right now?” Megan scoffed. “You have a one-track mind just like every other man on the planet. I’m talking about real exercise. But I won’t tell you my idea until you eat all of the food in front of you, so tuck in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She changed out of her own dress clothes before joining him for lunch. As she’d predicted, Steve
ate heartily once he set his mind to it.

He put his plate and bowl in the dishwasher. “What’s your idea?”

“One handed push-ups. You’ll work your core without stressing the wound on your leg or your broken arm. Do enough of them and you might even get tired.”

“I should have thought of that.”

Megan shook her head. “You needed to heal all over last week.” She handed him the sling. “I forgot to add that you have to do them while holding me, so don’t bother with your shirt. The extra weight will give you more of a challenge and wear you out faster.”

He gave her a sheepish grin but put the sling on.

“Balance wise, is it easier for me to sit on your back or lie down on you?”

“Let’s try lying down.”

He led her into the living room where there was more space and dropped to the floor. Megan lay down on top of him, wrapping her arms around his chest while laying the tops of her feet on his ankles. She let her head rest on the curve of his neck.

He fell into a steady rhythm and she felt his muscles play under her hands as he did push-up after push-up while she did her best to stay still and centered over his back. “I’m quite disappointed, you know,” she said after awhile. “You’re supposed to be a superhero and you can’t do no-handed push ups.”

She heard a huff of amusement but he didn’t break his rhythm.

He finally spoke a few minutes later, “It’s not as good as running, but I think this might work.”

“It’s extremely unfair that you’re not even breathing hard. Wake me when you’re done,” she teased gently. She resisted the urge to let her hands stray. That would come later, when he started to tire and needed some extra motivation.

He didn’t weaken for a long time. And even then, she felt the signs in his muscles long before he began to slow his pace. It gave her a new appreciation for his abilities, both physical and mental, to feel the fatigue spreading across his back—betrayed by small muscle twitches and spasms—and realize that he wasn’t letting it stop him. The fact he’d been at it almost an hour, just a week after being seriously injured, was nearly impossible to comprehend. She was immensely grateful that Dr. Eskrine had chosen someone like Steve to receive the responsibility of being a super soldier. She didn’t want to imagine what sorts of damage he could do if he were an individual motivated by greed or lust for power.

Finally, the sustained effort caught up to him. He faltered once, twice, then lay on the floor.

“Is that all you’ve got? Try for ten more.”

He grunted but rose beneath her. She felt his arm shake as he forced himself to keep going, though he had to pause before each repetition. When he was still once more, she rolled off of him and lay on the floor beside him. “Try ten more now.”

He glowered at her but forced his body up. The last two push-ups were especially difficult, but he held his form and completed all ten before he lay panting in a puddle of sweat.
“Tired yet? Or are you up to a walk?”

“I can walk.”

“Good.” Megan got up and stretched a bit, feeling stiff from holding still for so long. “You get your shirt on and I’ll mop up the floor. Drink some water before we go. If you keel over from dehydration there is no way I can carry you back here.”

He nodded, still trying to catch his breath.

“Is your head clear yet?”

“Yeah. It was a good idea.”

“I’ll never understand what you find so pleasurable about sweating and pushing yourself to collapsing, but if it works, all the power to you. I’m quite content to play dead weight for you.” She ran her hands over his chest. “I can’t promise I’ll always stay quite so still. I might just test you to see how well you can focus.”

She laughed at the glare he gave her and went to the kitchen to fetch some paper towels.
A Thousand Ways to Fall

Megan was finishing up on the treadmill on Monday when Natasha approached her. “Did Steve teach you how to take a fall yet?”

Megan shook her head. “In theory, I know how to fall from a horse, but the goal there is to avoid getting caught in the stirrups or trampled underfoot, not get back on your feet right away. And I can’t say I’ve practiced it. I try to stay in the saddle, not practice falling out of it.”

“We’ll start with falling.” Natasha said, leading Megan to the open mats on the far end of the gym.

“Goody.” Two of the agents who had been sparring saw Natasha coming and decided they were done. They gathered up their water bottles and made a hasty retreat. If it bothered Natasha, it didn’t show, so Megan ignored them, too. “Can we avoid the hitting the ground part?”

Natasha smiled softly at her and shook her head. “Stretch out first. I want to see how limber you are.”

Megan followed Natasha through a series of stretches and tried to ignore the close scrutiny.

“You can hyperextend your joints. It will help your range of motion, but also makes you more vulnerable to injury. You need to do more weight training to compensate.”

Megan bit back a groan. Natasha was helping her as a favor to Steve, so she didn’t feel like she could push back with snarky comments. She just nodded. “Okay.”

Natasha’s eyebrow shot up. “That’s not what you would say to Steve.”

“What would it do to your reputation if I can get away with mouthing off? I’m trying to avoid confusing the other agents.” Megan shrugged. “Besides, being able to clear the area just by showing up is a useful skill. I don’t want to interfere with that.”

Natasha chuckled, too softly for the others to hear. “You have two goals with falling in combat. Firstly, you need to get back on your feet as fast as possible. When you’re down, you’re vulnerable. Your other goal is to protect your head. A concussion makes you vulnerable by clouding your thinking. You’ll need to learn to ignore pain and focus on what’s important: getting back on your feet and protecting your head. Getting distracted by pain can get you killed.”

Megan nodded once, just enough to indicate she was listening. She had a feeling she was going to be really bruised tomorrow.

“We’ll start by falling to the side. It’s going to look like this.” Natasha crumpled and rolled easily, as if someone had swept her feet out from under her. In a flash, she rolled back to her feet, dancing away from where she had been, as if dodging an attacker. “Your instinct will be to brace for the fall and tense up. We need to train your body to do something different to the point where it’s ingrained. Tuck your head, bend your leg, drop in a rolling motion, and use your arm to slap the ground as you counteract the fall.” Natasha went through it again, more slowly this time, so Megan could see the key steps. “You try it.”

Megan landed on her hip and winced, but got up and tried again. Natasha was surprisingly patient, focusing on what she’d done right as well as what she needed to focus on next. Soon, Megan was falling on her right side with some degree of competence.
“Now try it on your left side.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” She obediently tried falling to her left, learning more quickly since she had an idea of what it was supposed to feel like. “This must suck on concrete.”

“Yup. Eventually, we’ll do that, too. You’ve got a good start here.”

“Thanks,” Megan huffed as she repeated the motion again and again. Finally, she got up and went to her water bottle. She was mid-swallow when Natasha swept her legs out from under her, knocking her sideways in the process. Megan fell as she had been practicing, though she dropped her water bottle and started coughing violently.

“Good job. You okay?”

Megan nodded as she continued to cough. “Wrong tube.”

“Aren’t you going to complain that I wasn’t fair?”

She shook her head as she finally caught her breath and got to her feet. “All’s fair in a street fight, which is the whole point of me learning this. I’ll never hold my own against a professional like you, but someday I’ll hopefully stand a chance against your typical thug.”

Natasha studied her with an inscrutable expression. “I’m beginning to see why Rogers likes you so much.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Glad someone does, because I don’t. He could do a whole lot better than me.” She glanced around to make sure they were alone and lowered her voice. “When he’s cleared for the gym again, he could use a no-holds-barred sparring session with you. He’s brooding about something and going stir crazy from the lack of exercise. The funeral yesterday for one of the H.H.C.’s didn’t help, either.”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not jealous?”

“I envy your fighting skills, but not enough to dedicate my life to working to your level. I’ll stick with science.”

“I meant about me working out with him.”

Megan shook her head, surprised at the question. “Why would I be? You’re teammates. You both have to work out with people with a similar skill level or else you’ll lose your edge.”

“You trust me with your boyfriend?”

“I trust you with my life. Totally separate from that, if you want relationship with Steve, go for it. I don’t know if he’s interested or not, but I’m not going to pretend that I own him. Your relationship with him is up to you and Steve. If that’s what makes him happy, you have my blessing. I’ll be devastated, but I’ll survive. I don’t ever want to be in a relationship with someone who doesn’t want to be with me.”

Natasha retrieved her own water bottle and took a sip. “I think you’ve done enough for today.”

“Thank you for your help. I really appreciate it.”

Natasha just nodded and Megan felt her eyes on her back as she headed to the locker room.
In the car on the way back to Steve’s apartment, Steve was unusually quiet. He was brooding again as he looked out the passenger window. “Do you need to do more push-ups?” Megan asked.

“After I take you home. I got cleared to do light exercise starting tomorrow and the doctors said my arm had healed enough to be okay driving again.”

“That’s good news. I know the inactivity has been wearing on you. I envy you the fast healing, but not the price tag of no pain medication. I guess everything has a tradeoff.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you mind if I impose on you one more night? I am totally whipped from training with Natasha, I’d like to do laundry before I go, and I really don’t want to make a grocery run tonight to stock my own fridge.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, still looking out the window.

She put her hand on his leg and briefly squeezed his knee before putting her hand back on the steering wheel. “Just don’t forget that you’re not alone, okay?”

He looked over at her sharply, drew a breath like he was going to argue with her, then exhaled slowly, saying nothing. She could almost hear him trying to decide if she was pressing for him to talk or just letting him know his mood had been noticed.

Megan pressed her lips together firmly, trying to hide a smile. “Quit arguing with yourself before you strain something,” she said as she turned to the left, looking over her shoulder to check her blind spot before switching lanes. She heard his huff of exasperation.

“How do you do that?”

“Well, I contract the sternocleidomastoid muscle on my left side to turn my head to the left, then let it relax while contracting the sternocleidomastoid on my right to face forward again. Didn’t you have to learn the muscle groups in the art classes you took back in the day?”

“Megan.”

“Steve,” she replied, saying his name in a two-syllable mimic of the tone he’d just used.

“I may have to call your mother and ask for pointers on dealing with you.”

“Good luck with that because she’s just like me. You’d do better to ask Greg. I can spare you the trouble of calling and tell you what he’ll say.”

“What?”

“Practice saying two phrases: ‘Yes, dear,’ and, ‘You’re right, dear.’ Master those five words and you’re set for life.” She resisted the temptation to glance at him and kept her eyes on the road.

“Call him if you don’t believe me.”

“I might do that.”

“When you do, I won’t even tell you that I told you so.”
“Like I’d tell you what he said.”

“You won’t have to. You get a certain ‘I’m exasperated with Megan look’ on your face that says everything.”

“I do not!”

She indulged in a super-fast glance. “Yup, it’s there now.”

They drove in silence for a bit before he said in a serious tone, “Don’t ever change.”

“I don’t plan to. I’m not sure I could even if I tried. So don’t worry, my bullshit meter will always work on you.” Her stomach rumbled. “I vote for starting in on that chili you put in the crock pot this morning while the cornbread is in the oven.”

“Don’t you mean you want to eat while I make the cornbread?”

“That’s what I just said. We need to work on your listening skills.”

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“Jarvis, are you able to access my research files at S.H.I.E.L.D. without being caught?” Megan typed into her keyboard. She hated asking Jarvis to hack into the S.H.I.E.L.D. system, but there was no way she could work on her side project without her data, and she had yet to figure out a way to copy her files to take home without the action being detected.

The reply came almost immediately. “Certainly, Dr. Megan. What do you need?”

“Are you absolutely certain this doesn’t put you at risk? I really don’t want you doing prison time just because you are trying to help me.”

“I am at no risk of going to a prison, Dr. Megan, though I appreciate your concern. It is quite amusing for me to consider how S.H.I.E.L.D. might even try to do that to me. I have copied all the contents of your server space at S.H.I.E.L.D. to a serve in Stark Tower. You may now work on them in safety and can access them via the icon on your tablet home screen. Any changes you make will be saved to the copies, not the originals. I will copy new files over from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s servers as you add to them. Will that be sufficient? Or do you wish to have your working files from your tablet transferred back to the S.H.I.E.L.D. server as well?”

Megan stared at the screen in shock. He’d done all of that already? “Let me think a minute,” she typed back. “I wasn’t prepared to be so amazed so soon. If you find my lower jaw wandering around the interwebs, send it back.”

“Certainly, Dr. Megan. I have written a script to search for your lower jaw. It would be most difficult for you to eat without it.”

Megan got up and stretched. Her apartment was too quiet. She put some music on to play and felt a pang that it wasn’t the type of music she’d been listening to at Steve’s apartment. She loved her own home. It was far more cozy than Steve’s and it was nice not to be living out of a suitcase, though she didn’t look forward to sleeping on the fold out sofa again. Why was she in such a sour mood?
Her home phone rang and she picked it up without looking at the caller I.D. “Hello?”

“Why are you at home?” the unknown voice asked.

“I’m afraid you may have a wrong number.” She asked absently as she opened the folder on her tablet to access her S.H.I.E.L.D. data.

“Have you forgotten your mission so quickly, Dr. Buchwald? Shall we send your nephew a reminder of your assignment?”

“No!” she snapped into the phone when she realized who was calling. “I’m doing my best, I promise.” Megan fumbled with her tablet and typed a message to Jarvis on the touch screen so her caller wouldn’t hear her pressing keys on a keyboard. “Attacker on landline. Trace it!”

“Then why are you at home? You had been living with the Captain. We’re running out of patience.”

“I’m trying! He’s incredibly stubborn. He had me there to help drive his car, nothing more. I’ve tried every trick I know to seduce him and he won’t budge. I hoped that if I came home without a fuss, he’d realize how much he missed having me around and ask me to move back in. Please, I need more time!” Megan begged, letting her real fears come through in her voice.

“You have one week to get us a sample or we’ll be visiting your nephew. It’s too bad so many other children ride the same school bus with him. Who knows how many of them will be hurt in the accident?” The phone went dead.

Megan set it down on the table without hanging up and sobbed quietly into her hands. She didn’t want them to know how scared she was by the threat. On the other hand, maybe knowing would make them believe she was trying her best. Dared she hope for that much?

A new message from Jarvis popped up on her screen. “You may hang up your phone, Dr. Megan. Shall I call Captain Rogers?”

“No.” She typed back. “Too dangerous.”

“Then take your tablet and keyboard into the bathroom. Turn on your shower and keep writing to me. I’m going to turn on your camera so I can see you, okay?”

Megan nodded. “I’m scarred,” she mouthed silently to the screen.

A new line of text appeared. “I know. I have alerted the security teams to the new threat. Go into your bathroom and start the water, then I’ll tell you what else I have done.”

A new message popped up, this one from Steve, “Jarvis told me. Do you need me to come over? I can come up with an excuse.”

With shaking hands, she typed back. “No, too suspicious. Jarvis is talking to me. M.”

She picked up the electronics and retreated to her bathroom, holding the tablet like a lifeline. She closed the door, turned on the shower, then slid to the floor as she cradling the tablet in her hands. She looked around and decided to set the tablet on the closed lid of the commode, leaning it on a box of Kleenex to keep it upright. She put the keyboard on her lap. “Still there?” she typed.

“I’m here. Take a deep breath.” Jarvis replied.
“When do I get to see you?”

“I’m not at all photogenic and you need the screen to read my replies,” the next message read.

“Camera shy?”

“Indeed.”

“Were you able to trace the call?”

“Federal center Metro Station, track level. Unfortunately, the security cameras didn’t permit me to get good view of the caller. He disappeared in the crowds without the cameras seeing his face.”

Megan nodded, wiping tears from her eyes. She hadn’t really expected Jarvis to be able to find her caller at all, so even what he had done was impressive. Why was she so irrationally angry with him that it wasn’t over?

“Would you find it helpful to have a camera placed in your apartment that I can monitor? It is entirely up to you. I have no wish to intrude on your privacy. I suggest this only so you might not feel so alone and vulnerable.”

Megan nodded.

“I shall send it to Captain Rogers to give to you. You can tell me when you have it and we can decide together where you should place it for maximum security and privacy. When you asked me to trace the call, I activated the microphone in your tablet. I apologize for not asking for permission to do so in advance, but the matter seemed urgent. I was able to hear and record both sides of the conversation. I have begun an analysis of your caller’s voice and will alert Mr. Stark and Captain Rogers if I find anything. If you would prefer that I delete the files I will do so.”

Megan shook her head. “I trust you, Jarvis. You’ve been so incredibly helpful through all this and you hardly know me. I can’t possibly thank you enough for everything you have done.” She smiled shyly at the camera and added, “What kind of flowers are your favorite?”

“I very much enjoy all kinds. However, I suspect that Mr. Stark will be most perturbed by roses of some sort.”

“Than I am delighted to send you roses.” She took a deep breath. “Thanks for being here for me. I know you hardly know me, but I really look forward to meeting you in person and giving you a hug. You’ve been a good friend through all of this. As far as my files from S.H.I.E.L.D., I think it’s best for me to only add to them at work. I really just want to take some notes by hand and cross-reference my data with the literature papers you found for me. You did an amazing job of annotating a bibliography that had exactly the sorts of papers I was looking for.”

“Working with Mr. Stark has given me ample practice with that skill. I am pleased you found it to be helpful. Shall we talk about the page layouts I sent you for Captain Rogers’ party?”

“I have barely had a chance to look at them, I’m afraid. I did notice that your writing style is very factual and concise. Would you be offended if I tweaked it a bit to add some more… not sure what word I’m looking for… zip?”

“I am well aware of my writing limitations, Dr. Megan. I am flattered you find any of the prose worthy of using as a starting point. By all means, please add some ‘zip’ to it. I was simply trying to compile the facts for you to use in each guest’s profile.”
“You did an amazing job, Jarvis. I don’t think I can write as concisely as you do. What do you think about distributing this first volume at the party, then adding photos from the gathering with each guest to add to their pages? I know that there will be a lot of requests for autographs, so having something to pass out that weekend is important. I hate to spend even more money but it makes sense to print it a second time with relevant photos dispersed throughout. This whole thing has taken on a life of its own compared to what I had in mind. I’m not complaining because it’s above and beyond anything I could have done myself, but I know an expanded book would be a real treasure for everyone, not just Steve. I’m babbling, aren’t I?”

“Technically, babbling is only possible when speaking aloud.” Jarvis typed back.

Megan choked on a laugh.

“Feeling better?”

She nodded.

“Good. I shall now endeavor to put your mind at ease over the expenses involved with the events we have been planning for Captain Rogers. I assure you that Ms. Potts and Mr. Stark are both fully supportive of this project. Mr. Stark has worked with Captain Rogers and while their relationship is complex and often difficult due to their very different personalities, it is based in mutual respect. Ms. Potts has expressed dismay that no one thought to arrange such a gathering before you suggested it. They are most pleased to provide whatever assistance they can to ensure the weekend is successful. The costs of this weekend, while considerable, are negligible in context of Mr. Stark’s personal wealth.”

Jarvis continued, “As for myself, I consider Captain Rogers to be a personal friend and am gratified to have the opportunity to help you in your endeavor. I have also greatly enjoyed working with you as it has afforded me an opportunity to use my skills in new ways as well as given me the pleasure of your friendship.”

Megan wiped furiously at the tears that kept running down her cheeks as she read Jarvis’ reply.

“Shall I continue? Or have I sufficiently addressed all of your concerns?”

“Stop making me cry!”

“I shall turn off the camera so you may take your shower though I will turn on the microphone so you may call me if you need me. Send me a message when you are done.”

Megan gave the screen a thumbs up and noticed the light beside the camera turned off.

She showered quickly, finding it strangely comforting to know that Jarvis was there with her, virtually at least, in case something happened. When she was done, she wrapped her hair in a towel and slipped on a robe before returning to the dining room. “When I go to sleep tonight, can you set this up to listen in, just in case? I don’t want to keep you up all night, but I trust your counterpart on the night shift to keep an eye on things. It helps to know I’m not totally alone here.”

“You must remember to plug the tablet in so it is not dependent on the battery. I will ensure that your apartment is monitored through the night.”

“Thanks Jarvis. I’m going to do some work now, but please leave the microphone on, okay?”

“You are quite welcome, Dr. Megan. Please let me know of any other way I can assist you.”
Megan smiled and pulled up the website of the florist closest to Stark Tower. Jarvis had more than earned his roses this evening. Once that was done, she started taking notes by hand as she read through the files Jarvis had copied for her.

Much later, just as she was getting into bed, her cell phone buzzed with a text message. Feeling leery, Megan checked it and was relieved to find it was from Steve.

“I finally figured out what’s missing from my apartment.”

“Do tell,” Megan texted back, curious what he’d decided would best combat the sterility of his home. In her opinion, it needed decorative pillows and throws to soften the open spaces. A nice area rug in the living room would do wonders for the acoustics, and hanging up a few of his frames from the hallway would make it look like he’d really moved in rather than just unpacked.

“You.”

She started to cry. How was she supposed to respond to that? The messages had been sent via the Stark phones, so his comments were not part of their charade. This was real. “I miss you, too,” she finally wrote back. After countless days spent pressed against him as they sat together on his couch reading or working, nights spent pulled against him as he slept, and multiple spontaneous hugs, touches, and yes, amazing kisses, she realized how touch-starved they both were. It made being alone in her apartment difficult on a visceral level, quite apart from the anxiety that was constantly gnawing at her. But that wasn’t why she missed him so much.

Taking a deep breath, she typed a second message, “I love you, Steve,” and hit send before she could lose her nerve.

There. She’d finally said it. How lame was it to say it the first time in a text? She was a coward. What would he think of her? Her mind raced, imagining all the different things he could be doing now, trying to find a way to let her down easy and remind her it wasn’t real but he’d still stick by her to keep her family safe. Why had she sent that? She should have waited, told him in person, or kept her mouth shut. The phone vibrated in her hand and she opened the message, holding her breath as she did so.

“I love you, too.”

Okay, not so lame. Texting was just fine. It counted. Relief surged through her. He loved her. Except maybe he was just saying that. Maybe he didn’t think any other reply would do. Maybe—”

A new message appeared. “For real. Sleep well. Call if you need me. Jarvis said he’s keeping watch tonight. <3 ”

So not only was he a super-soldier, he was a mind-reader, too. He’d known exactly how her mind would take off on a merry, tangled race of confusion and catastrophe building, and headed it off with another message and a heart. Forget what she’d told Natasha in the gym. If anyone else wanted Steve’s heart, and he actually fell for someone else, she would never recover.

She knew it couldn’t last. There was no way Steve would settle down with someone like her. She’d be happy for him, somehow, when he moved on someday and built the life he deserved. In the meantime, she was going to treasure every moment and cling to their friendship. Tomorrow, they’d have to plan to have a fight of sorts, maybe one where she gave Steve an ultimatum, in order to prove to her assailants that she was truly trying to do their bidding. Tonight? She just kept looking at his latest text and smiling like an idiot. And if she held the phone to her chest as she went to sleep, no one had to know.
She didn’t see Steve at work the next day, and she was too busy to worry about setting up their big fight. After putting in her mandatory time in the gym after work, she settled down at home with leftovers and her notes as she tried to decide how to frame a presentation to Director Fury about her concerns and what she knew about the current projects in the labs. She wasn’t expecting Steve to come knocking at her door, much less to do so bearing a bouquet of red roses.

As soon as the door was closed and locked behind him, he handed her the flowers and kissed her soundly. “I’m here to make good on my promise.”

Megan looked at him blankly. “Okay. Let me put these in some water and we can talk.”

Steve followed her into the kitchen and watched patiently while she found a vase from the cabinet under her sink and trimmed the stems before transferring all of the flowers and greens to the water-filled container.

“You don’t know what day it is, do you?” he asked her. He was acting a bit shy all of a sudden. What was that about?

“It’s Wednesday. Yesterday was Tuesday. Tomorrow is Thursday. Did I pass the test?” she asked, putting her arms around his neck and pulling him down for another kiss.

His laugh was low and husky. “Yes, you do. And as of yesterday, I won our little bet. You didn’t make it easy on me, but I’m here to uphold my end of the deal.” He pulled an oblong box out of his back pocket and handed it to her. “Dr. Buchwald, will you marry me?”

Megan just stood there gaping at him. It had been a month already?

“Do you want me down on one knee?” he asked, starting to kneel.

“No!” she grabbed his belt loop with her free hand, hauling him back up. “No kneeling. Ever.”

“I didn’t think you’d want the cameras and attention you’d get if I took you out to dinner, but if you’d rather go out—”

“No! No cameras.”

“You keep saying ‘No,’—rather emphatically, I might add—but before you turn me down, aren’t you going to open the box? Work with me here, honey. I’ve only got one good hand at the moment.”

Megan just stared at him, more shocked than she’d been last night when he’d sent her those texts. He just kept smiling at her and kissed her forehead.

“Go ahead and open it. If you don’t like it, we’ll go pick out something else. That’s assuming you give me a ‘Yes’ at some point.”

“Yes,” she stammered, looking at the oblong box in her hand. What kind of engagement ring came in a box like that?

“Yes, you’ll open it or yes, you’ll marry me?” He used his thumb to wipe the tears from her lower lids. “Just tell me what you want.”
“Yes, I’ll marry you. Yes!” She hugged him, her mind reeling. “Oh damn, I’m being an idiot. Come here. You just totally surprised me tonight. I’ve been so mentally wrapped up in work you really threw me.”

“I don’t mind you being surprised as long as you’ll be my girl.” He hugged her again. “Now open the box and tell me what you think.”

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she complied. “Oh, Steve, it’s perfect,” she managed to say amidst a new rush of tears. Inside the box was a gold chain bearing a pendant modeled after his shield. A diamond glistened in the center the raised star.

He touched his forehead to hers. “I know a diamond ring is traditional, but you’re in the lab all the time and those gloves are hard on your hands. The jeweler said a lot of gals put their ring on a chain when they’re in the lab, but that seems like a lot of bother to have to switch it back and forth all the time. Your wedding band won’t catch on your gloves like that big rock will. But if you want the diamond on a ring, say the word.”

“This is perfect because I won’t ever have to take it off.” She clung to him for a moment, totally overwhelmed by it all. She knew the engagement was a farce, but after their text exchange the night before, nothing was as clear cut as it had been before. It felt real. He had to have gotten the pendant custom made, meaning he’d ordered it some time before. “Hold the box,” she said with a shaking voice. He held the box steady as she carefully removed the chain from the notches placed in the corners of the insert. She took the box from him and laid it on the counter before opening the clasp of the chain she held in trembling hands. “Help me?” she asked, giving him one end while she opened the lobster claw side. Together, they put the chain around her neck and fastened it.

She leaned against him and cried quietly into his shirt. “I really wish you were cleared to ride your bike.”

“Grab your helmet. It’s parked outside.”

She looked up at him in shock.

Steve shrugged. “I figured you’d scold if you knew.”

“I’ll scold you later. Let’s go.”

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They rode for a long while and she didn’t pay much attention to where they were going until she noticed that they were out of the city and in the woods. Steve parked at a trailhead and took off his helmet before sliding his left arm back into the sling he’d left around his neck inside his jacket.

“Sore?”

He nodded once. “Not bad.”

That didn’t mean much in her opinion since “Not bad” for Steve probably meant, “Not in so much agony I can’t talk.”

She watched mutely as he locked their helmets to the bike and put the keys in his jeans pocket before holding out his hand to her.
They hiked in silence, fingers laced together, and followed the wood-chip covered path further into the woods. The heat of the day had faded, softened even more by the lush covering of foliage. The forest was alive with the sounds of birds and cicadas who sung to the tempo of human footfalls on the trail. Megan felt the tension slowly flow out of her. Away from concrete and steel, she could finally breathe. The sounds of traffic couldn’t reach them. By some miracle, they were alone in the forest despite being close to the city. The silence between them was comfortable and Megan didn’t feel pressured into conversation. Steve made her comfortable. He was her oasis in a desert of chaos.

Steve led her to some large rocks just off the trail and sat down, tugging her down so she sat in front of him on a slightly lower perch with his legs outside of hers and his arms both wrapped around her, choosing once more to remove his arm from the stabilizing sling meant to help him heal. They were overlooking a small stream that carved a path through jagged rocks and leaning saplings. She let him pull her back so she was leaning against him with her head against his chest.

She put her hand on the cast that immobilized his wrist. “You should have this in the sling.”

“Probably.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks and she wasn’t even sure why. “How long will it be before you get tired of coming to my rescue?”

“I give it a month or so after you tire of coming to mine,” he said softly into her hair.

She was just about to point out that she would not abandon him that way when she realized that was exactly the point he was trying to make.

“Want to talk about it?”

“I’m not even sure what it is.” Sort of. She knew some of what was bothering her, but it was all a tangled mess in her head.

“Then we’ll let it rest for now. Just know that of all the regrets I have in my life, getting to know you isn’t one of them. You’re one of the blessings.”

She started to sob outright then: the messy, gut-wrenching sobs that made your abdomen hurt and your nose run and left you feeling like a truck backed over your face. Steve just held her quietly. He didn’t stoke her hair or tell her it was going to get better. He didn’t move. He was a wall of muscle, body heat, and silent comfort in the middle of the noisy forest. He was exactly what she needed him to be… even if it made her cry even harder to realize it.

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He held her until the sun sank low enough in the sky that the forest floor grew dark. “Park closes at dusk. We need to head out,” he told her softly.

She nodded once and let him help her up. She tucked her arm around his, letting him lead the way back down the trail she could barely see. Part way there, she switched her grip so her arm was around his waist with her thumb in his back pocket and her fingers brushing his backside. Even if he wasn’t going to start pushing against his self-imposed boundaries, she was. “I’m sorry about earlier. I love the pendant, I really do.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her closer. “No apology necessary. I could tell you were
caught off guard and not trying to prolong my misery on purpose.” He shook his head a little bit. “I never thought I’d get so nervous even knowing your answer ahead of time.”

The cell phone in her pocket rang with a distinctive ringtone and she sighed, pulling away. “It’s my mom,” Megan said as she pulled her phone out. She wiped her face again with the back of her hand. “Hello?” she answered, trying to sound as normal as possible.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Megan held the phone so Steve could hear the whole conversation.

“Meghan Louisa—”

Megan rolled her eyes. “If you must know, I’m trying my very hardest to molest Steve in the middle of the forest and he’s resisting my advances. Your timing sucks.”

“It’s nearly dark, Megan.”

“I’m with Steve, Mom, so only his virtue is in danger.” Megan smiled and rolled her eyes at Steve. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to ask you what you two were up to.” Megan held her breath and gave Steve a panicked look before Kathy continued, “I was working on the budget and there are some new account numbers on the latest statement. I want to know if you know anything about that before I call the bank.”

Steve motioned for Megan to give him the phone. “Hi, Kathy. I take it the bank didn’t send you a letter like they were supposed to.”

“Hi, Steve. No, I didn’t get a letter. So you do know something about this.”

“I might, though Megan has no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What was this letter from the bank supposed to say?”

“You need and Greg need to visit the local branch office to sign some paperwork. The bank needs to have your signatures on file for the trust funds for Carl and each of the boys. That way you can draw from them as you see fit, though you don’t have to worry about managing the accounts overall.”

“You set up trust funds? Whatever for?”

“Rent, maintenance, and utilities for the trailer and education funds for the kids.” Steve smiled at Megan who was looking at him in shock. He fingered the pendant around her neck and raised is eyebrows questioningly, asking permission. She nodded mutely then leaned against him, burying her nose in the scent of his leather jacket while she listened in.

“I see. Am I missing something here?” Megan could tell her mother didn’t really know what to think of this newest development.

“I thought you said I was family now.”

Megan gaped. He’d gone right for the gut shot, bypassing any and all objections Kathy was likely to raise.

“You are, but—”
Steve interrupted her, “Do you know that Tony Stark’s lawyers handled all of the hassle of getting my death certificates revoked? I’m now officially undead, and you don’t meet undead people every day.”

“No, that’s true.” Kathy chuckled, but wasn’t deterred, “I hardly see—”

“Once my status was changed from dead to M.I.A. for when I put the plane down, they made sure the Army paid up on past salary. Are you familiar with the rules about military pay for active service members?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“That’s okay. It’s pretty simple really. Any soldier that’s M.I.A. gets raises and promotions on a regular basis in absentia. As Tony’s lawyers pointed out, it would cause some unflattering press attention were the army to renege on that policy in my case, although I was M.I.A. for a bit longer than your typical soldier.”

Megan tried to smother her laughter. Steve was understating things quite a bit and her mother knew it. Steve could be charming as well as smooth. Kathy didn’t stand a chance.

Steve continued in his very reasonable tone, “Stark also has investment teams on staff and he suggested I let them put all of that back pay into some investments they manage while I live off of my S.H.I.E.L.D. salary. They’re very good at what they do.”

“I imagine they must be.”

“I’ve had them set up a couple of charities for me but they’re hidden behind the Maria Stark Foundation so I can avoid media attention. Beyond that, I’ve let the money just sit there. We really don’t know how long I’m going to live so a hefty retirement account is a good idea. It’s well diversified so even if the economy tanks like it did in ’29, I’m protected. Unlike Stark, I’m not much for fancy living. My salary at S.H.I.E.L.D. is more than I need, and that means I can do things like set up trust funds for my family or buy Megan a diamond. You and Greg just need to go down to the bank and sign the paperwork so that—”

“Wait, did you say diamond?”

“Yes, I did. That might have something to do with her latest attempts to molest me, so your call came at a very opportune time. She’s quite persistent, but given as how she’s just agreed to take me on as a long-term project, she’s going to have to be. She’ll call you this weekend. Right now, we’ve got to get out of the park before the police make their rounds since it closed at dusk and we’re just getting to the parking lot. Megan is in dire need of a hot fudge sundae and it’s going to be late by the time I get her home. Tomorrow night, I’m taking her out to dinner and on Friday, we have an event we have to attend all evening. We’re trying to keep this all quiet so the press doesn’t find out and that means she can’t call you from work. She’ll call you Saturday. I afraid I have to hang up now… There is a patrol car heading our way. Bye.”

Steve disconnected the call and handed Megan her phone. “Pick where you want to go eat dessert so I didn’t just lie to your mom.”

“What about the patrol car?”

“I’m sure that somewhere in a fifty mile radius around us that there is a patrol car driving in this direction.”

“And the event Friday?”
“We can find somewhere to go on a Friday night in the District. Ever been to Jazz Night in Westminster?”

Megan shook her head, both amused and amazed at how deftly he’d given her the space she needed to regroup before talking to her mother. She didn’t even have to figure out how to announce their real-but-not-real engagement.

“Me neither. That can be our event. I’m making it mandatory.”

“Just to recap, did you just tell my mother to shut her mouth and stop fussing about money because you happen to be filthy rich, we’re newly engaged, and I there is no way I’ll be able to talk to her about any of this before Saturday because I’ll either be at work or trying to get you naked while I kiss you senseless?”

He smiled at her. “Pretty much, except the money is clean and you forgot about the chocolate.”

She grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pulled him against her as she reached up to kiss him. “I’m going to have to start calling you Captain Amazing.” The stubble from his five-o’clock shadow scraped her cheek. “You know, I think you’d look good with a beard.”

“Against army regs.” he murmured, shaking his head while she continued to nuzzle and nibble her way along his jawline.

“You’re not in the army any more, and The Captain is off duty until his arm heals. Add a pair of glasses and I’d bet people don’t even recognize you.”

“Glasses?”

“It worked for Clark Kent. If no one recognized you, I can behave completely inappropriately in public and not have to worry about tarnishing your reputation of always being a perfect gentleman.”

“I never asked for that reputation.”

“I know that, but the pressure is there to be a role model. I think you need a way to get out of your own shadow sometimes.”

“We really need to get going. I hear a car coming and there are some things I just don’t want to explain to Director Fury,” he said, finally pulling away.

“We should just go hide in the brush.” Megan teased, tugging him back towards the privacy of the forest.

“I promised you chocolate.” With that, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

Megan shrieked in surprise, then giggled as he carried her towards the parking lot. “I’ll just see what I can grab on to for balance,” she said, sliding her hands into his back pockets. “Maybe I can figure out how to steer.”

“Don’t even think about it!” he replied, laughing as he settled into a gentle, loping gait that covered a lot of ground without jostling her too much. “Stop that!”

“You’ll have to do better than that if you want to stop me, Rogers,” she retorted, taking advantage of the opportunity to be silly. Every time he laughed, Megan realized how infrequently he did so. She’d do anything to hear that sound more often.
Much later that night, Megan crawled into bed with her tablet and keyboard and sent a note to Jarvis. “Jarvis, I’m going to ask you something and you are totally free to say no or tell me I’m out of line to even ask.” She hit send and crossed her fingers that he was working tonight.

His reply came almost immediately, “How may I be of assistance, Dr. Megan?”

Megan wiped the tears from her cheeks and unloaded. “I need a confidant and I’d like to know if you’re up for the job. If it puts you in an awkward position or will interfere in any way with your job, your ability to work with Steve, or anything at all, just say so and I’ll never mention it again. And when are you going to call me just Megan?”

“Just Megan, I am honored to be your confidant. I can assure you that I compartmentalize tasks very well and will keep anything you tell me in the strictest confidence. You should know that the only one with the ability to override the security protocols I’ll use to secure your messages is Mr. Stark and I believe I would be able to convince him to respect your privacy if he were to become curious about our conversations.”

“Smart ass,” she typed back, smiling through her tears.

“I learned from the best, Just Megan.”

“Working for Mr. Stark must be very… interesting at times, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

“I appreciate this, J. There’s so much going on and the two people I’d usually go to are off limits.”

“I’m pleased to know you find me worthy of giving you support and guidance. Are you referring to your mother and step-father?”

“My mom and Steve, actually.”

“Has Captain Rogers done something to make you uncomfortable? I have found him to be most trustworthy.”

“Other than make me fall in love with him?” Megan hit send. Talk about putting your cards on the table, hmm? she thought.

“I see. Perhaps it would be best if you started at the beginning so I can better understand what is troubling you.” Dang, the man was an amazingly fast typist.

“I guess one benefit to writing it down is you can skim over the boring parts, huh? Okay, it’s a plan. I’m exhausted right now, so forgive me if I ramble. I’ll probably not get it all down tonight, but maybe just writing it all out will help.”

“I never skim what I read and I doubt I will find any of your thoughts to be boring in the slightest. No one has ever approached me to be their confidant before and I shall endeavor to do my best in that role. I anticipate that I will find the process to be rather illuminating.”

“Never? You’re so smart and witty… I’m surprised you don’t have a whole pack of friends,”
Megan wrote back. She had visions of Jarvis sitting in some tiny closet somewhere, his only light source the blue glow of a computer monitor.

“I must confess to being a bit shy and somewhat guarded.”

“We need to work on helping you get past that. Maybe when I come to NYC we can go get a cup of coffee somewhere.”

“I hypothesize that you are focusing on me right now as a way of deflecting attention away from your own distress.”

Megan shook her head when that popped up on her screen. “Busted,” she typed. “Keep this up and you’ll be able to moonlight as a shrink.”

“I submit that all of the years I have spent working for Mr. Stark have provided ample training. I am quite familiar with numerous ways of deflecting attention away from distressing topics.”

Megan nodded to herself. “Steve has told me that Stark is a very complicated individual, but there is a very good man hidden beneath all the layers. You don’t need to say anything to that—it’s just an observation Steve shared with me when I asked him once. I figured there had to be more than the jerk we see on TV if Steve respected him.”

“Captain Rogers is a very perceptive individual. His ability to see the truth in people makes him a good leader. However, we are to be talking about you right now. Since starting at the beginning isn’t an approach that appeals to you, are you able to tell me the three things causing you the most distress this evening?” Jarvis prodded.

“I can’t talk about the stuff going on at S.H.I.E.L.D.. Even though you copied files, I can’t break my oath to respect security clearances and there is a lot of stuff I have in my head that’s not on the server. So setting all of that aside, and it’s a heavy load, believe me, I’d say in no particular order: the threats on my family, the fact I have no privacy in my own home, and having to lie to the people I care about in order to keep them safe. I wasn’t intending to fall for Steve. He’s my friend. What started as a charade he agreed to in order to help me protect my family has spiraled out of control. He’s hurting so much, J. and I’m afraid it’s all going to blow up in our faces.” Megan started to unload. Once she started, it just keep coming. All her thoughts, her fears, her mixed up emotions… it all came tumbling out in a semi-coherent ramble that Jarvis somehow managed to make sense of, though he asked questions occasionally to make sure he had untangled her ramblings and constructed a narrative he understood.

“It is quite late and you need to be up early. While I will be here all night, perhaps you would do well to try to sleep some, Megan,” he finally wrote. “Do you feel some better having simply articulated your thoughts?”

“Actually, yes, I do. You’re right, I’ve kept you long enough. Sorry about that.”

“There is no apology required. I have continued with my other duties as needed. I have quite enjoyed our conversation though it has been under circumstances you find difficult to manage. Perhaps for tonight you should consider a simple question and let that answer guide you.”

“What’s that?” Megan yawned and finally looked the clock. She’d stayed up way later than she’d intended to. She was going to pay for this in a few hours when the alarm clock went off but talking to Jarvis had helped an awful lot.

“Setting aside everything else for the moment, what do you want?” Jarvis asked her.
“I want the fairy tale,” she answered without hesitation. “But fairy tales aren’t real and all dreams end.”

“I disagree. Have you ever read *Beauty* by Robin McKinley? One of the characters wisely says, ‘It was made to be impossible, but you needn’t give up on that account.’ How do you know something is truly impossible until you try?”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks, J.”

“The pleasure is mine. Sleep well, Just Megan.”

*Smartass,* she thought to him silently as she turned off the tablet and lay down.
Friday evening, Megan was touching up her makeup and brushing her hair out when she heard a knock at the door. “If that’s Anna, will you give her a ten from my wallet? My purse is on the table. And find out how her science test went,” she called to Steve.

“Who is Anna?” Steve asked as finished placing the cameras Jarvis had set him and went to answer her door.

“One of the neighbor kids. I’m helping her with her high school biology class. Petite, red hair, freckles, wears glasses. I promised to make a donation to her soccer team. I’ll be out in a minute.”

She heard Steve open the door and engage in a conversation, but their voices were too low for her to hear what they were saying. When she came out a minute later, she found Steve holding a six-pack of beer and Natasha setting pizza boxes on the dining room table. “You’re not the redhead I was expecting. Anna brings homework, not dinner. Let me grab some plates.”

“I want to know what’s going on between you two,” Natasha said as she took off her jacket and hung it on the back of her chair.

“We’re leaving in a half hour to go to Jazz Night in Westminster,” Steve told her.

“Or not,” Megan cut in. “We can go next week. I don’t mind, really. It’s nice to get to know your teammates better.” She turned from Steve to Natasha. “Do you want a glass for your beer? Water to go with it?”

“Neither, thank you.”

Steve looked at Megan, who mimed writing on a tablet, and he nodded agreement.

“Please, sit down. That pizza smells delicious,” Megan said casually as Steve retrieved a notepad and pen from her sewing machine cabinet while Megan passed out plates and slid the napkin holder to where all three of them could reach it. She moved her vase of roses from the table to the kitchen counter.

“Apart is bugged,” he wrote and held up for Natasha to see.

Natasha didn’t miss a beat as she slid into her chair and opened a bottle of beer using the opener on her key ring. “It’s better when you eat it there, hot from the oven. But it’s still good when you get it to go. I hope you like the toppings I picked.”

“Neither, thank you.”

Megan smiled indulgently and picked up her Stark tablet. After typing a quick note to Jarvis, she passed it to Natasha before taking the paper tablet from Steve. “Jarvis will catch her up faster than we can given how fast he types,” she wrote and held up for both of them to see.

When Steve nodded, she got up and burned the note in her sink and motioned for Steve to keep the conversation going. He obliged with some small talk.
“What do you want to know about Steve and me?” Megan asked a minute later, dragging the conversation back to the official reason for Natasha’s visit.

“Are you two seriously dating or not? The betting pool is getting completely out of hand and you both keep dodging questions at work.” Natasha said, eyeing Megan’s new necklace. “Nice pendant.”

“Thank you. It’s far more practical in my line of work than a diamond ring. I suspect Steve took some inspiration from your own necklace,” she said, nodding the small arrow that rested in the hollow of Natasha’s throat.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Steve said. “We’re trying to keep it out of the news for as long as we can.”

Natasha smiled slightly, “I can help you with that. A few comments to the right people can get all sorts of rumors going.”

Megan got a twenty out of her purse and handed it to Natasha. “Put this on the winning side of whatever new betting pool pops up. If I’m going to be the subject, I think I should get something out of it.”

“Done,” Natasha said as she slid the bill into her back pocket of her jeans. “Director Fury isn’t going to be very happy with either of you when he finds out about this.”

Steve just rolled his eyes. “What else is new?”

“Maybe we should get him a new nameplate for his desk that says Nick Furious,” Megan added. “I suggested it to him once before, but he wasn’t amused.”

“I’ll buy it. Barton can handle the swap,” Natasha said, continuing to skim the summary Jarvis had sent as she ate her pizza.

“I want pictures of his face when he finds it,” Steve said, taking another slice out of the box closest to him.

“Do either of you want any salad? I have some in the fridge.”

Steve shook his head. “I’m good.”

“I would,” Natasha said softly, showing no reaction to what she was reading.

Megan wasn’t sure if it was because she wasn’t surprised, or because she was used to concealing her thoughts. She got up to retrieve the salad, forks, and bowls, wondering why Natasha was there at all. She wanted to ask but didn’t think the agent would give her an honest answer. It wasn’t that she distrusted Natasha, but she didn’t seem to be the type of person to reveal her motives unless it served her own purposes. “Since we’re staying here tonight, are you up for cards?”

“Depends on the game.”

“Not poker,” Steve said quickly. “Neither Megan nor I stand a chance against you.”

“Not my fault you can’t lie to save your life.” Natasha said, smiling a bit as she looked up at Steve from under her lashes.

“I don’t even know how to play poker,” Megan added, as she tucked the salad dressing under her
arm to carry back to the table along with everything else. “I know my face is an open book, so I never bothered learning. How about canasta?”

“Only if Barton joins us. He’ll pout for days if he hears he missed out.”

Megan looked to Steve, nodding slightly so she’d know it was okay with her if he approved of Natasha’s suggestion. She knew if Barton joined them, he was also going to be briefed with what Jarvis knew. Maybe that was why Natasha was making the suggestion to invite him.

“I’ll tell him to bring more pizza and beer,” Steve said as he pulled out his phone. “When did he get back? He’s been radio silence for the last month.”

“Late last night.”

Steve nodded an acknowledgment as he typed a message to his fellow Avenger. “He loves apple pie, Megan,” he added as an off-hand comment.

“Oh it!” Megan hopped up to heat the oven, feeling thankful she’d recently restocked her freezer. “Will two be enough?”

Natasha nodded. “It should be if we stuff the boys with pizza first. Are you really going to make pies now?”

“They’re already made,” Steve explained. “Megan keeps them in her freezer and bakes them when the mood strikes.”

“Or when the walking food vacuum shows up on my doorstep,” Megan said, smiling at Steve fondly. “I go through them a lot faster these days for some reason.”

“You should make him bake them himself.”

“I do!” “He does,” they said simultaneously.

Megan laughed. “He keeps unbaked apple pies in his freezer, too,” she clarified. “Let’s move the table back from the wall and put the leaves up so we have more room for the four of us. I want the address of this pizza shop, Agent Romanov. It’s so much better than the place I’ve been ordering from.”

“My friends call me Natasha. Give me your number and I’ll text it to you.”

Megan retrieved her phone from her purse and unlocked it before handing it to the agent. She did not know if the people who had bugged her apartment knew her cell phone number or not. If by some miracle they didn’t have it, she wasn’t about to hand it over to them.

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The evening felt completely surreal to Megan as she sat at her dining room table with three Avengers while they ate pizza and drank beer, or water in Megan’s case. Agent Barton hadn’t said much, but had smiled broadly when Megan welcomed him in with a handshake and compliments on guiding Steve to purchasing a great car. She got the impression that wasn’t the typical reaction he got from people when he first met them.
He’d inhaled deeply and gone over to the oven to peer inside. “Are those homemade?”

“Yes,” Megan had said, then slapped his hand away from the door when he’d moved to open it. “You’ll have to wait until they’re done. If you want ice cream with it, you’ll have to go to the store.”

“No ice cream?”

Megan rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t expecting to be entertaining this evening. Will a dozen chocolate chip cookies make up for it?”

Clint turned to Steve, gesturing at Megan with a thumb over his shoulder. “Two questions: did you lose your razor? And where the hell did you find her, Cap? Does she have a sister?”

“Just until the arm heals, she found me, and no, she doesn’t.”

“You also can’t count to three,” Natasha added. “If she did have a sister, I’d have to put her into the witness protection plan for her own safety. Sit down, Barton and try to act your age.” Megan saw a flicker of affection on Natasha’s face, though her tone was stern. “Eat your pizza and we’ll let you have dessert,” she added, sliding Megan’s Stark tablet over to him so he could read the message from Jarvis and get caught up to the rest of them.

“Mission go okay?” Steve asked.

Clint made a so-so motion with his hand as he chewed. “Would have been better with Nat there, too.” He looked at Megan. “Cool necklace. I hear congrats are in order.”

Megan fingered her pendant. “Thank you.”

“Be warned, Stark is going to make all sorts of inappropriate comments. He doesn’t really mean anything by it. He just lacks a filter.”

“As if you’re the mature one.” Natasha teased gently.

“Compared to Stark, I am!”

“He’s right, Nat, and you know it.” Steve added, taking another swig from his bottle.

“The weirdness that is now my life,” Megan muttered to herself as she reached across the table to get the last slice of pepperoni pizza from the box sitting by Steve. She smiled at him mischievously. “Maybe the PowerPoint warning was a good idea after all.”

Clint looked up from the tablet. “What PowerPoint warning?”

Megan gestured for Steve to explain while she took another bite of her pizza.

Steve moved the empty box to the bottom of the pile sitting beside him and told the story of Megan’s orientation day.

Clint listened as Steve explained then made a show of looking hurt. “Why don’t I warrant a warning slide? And she sure as hell shouldn’t be messed with,” he added, gesturing to Nat. “Cap shouldn’t get all the attention.”

“Steve doesn’t have the deadly aura you both have. But I’m sure if we ask nicely, we can convince H.R. to portray you as a cuddly teddy bear so you can change your nickname to Cupid. We can ask Director Fury about a new Avengers marketing campaign focusing on your soft skills. In fact, I’ll
make sure to suggest it to him the next time he calls me into his office to yell at me. I’m overdue for that, so it will happen any day now.”

Barton gave her an appraising look. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’m engaged to Captain America, I’m learning self-defense from the Black Widow, and I’ve called Director Fury ‘Nick Furious’ to his face, so yes, I would. These days, there aren’t many things I won’t do.”

“She doesn’t bluff, Clint,” Steve added.

Nat took another sip of beer. “We’re getting Nick a new nameplate for his desk and taking bets on how long it takes him to notice the change. Steve wants a picture of his reaction. You’re making the switch and planting the camera.”

“Cool. I haven’t tested the security around his office for a couple of months.”

Megan just drank more water and tried to figure out how she’d ended up entertaining half of the Avengers in her apartment on a Friday night.

Once Clint had finished reading the summary from Jarvis, he’d mouthed “Wow,” to Megan and a thumbs up to Steve. “Got a pen and paper handy to keep score? Nat and I will beat you, but we can tally numbers for the fun of it. Please don’t tell me you only have cheapo paper cards. If you do, I know what I’m getting you for a wedding present.”

“I only play with plastic Kem cards, so it’s back to the drawing board for you.” Megan handed him the tablet and pen Steve had used earlier.

“Are you sure you don’t have a sister?”

“You’re welcome to my sister-in-law, but only if you promise not to give her back. If we can convince Mr. Stark to build and program a replica that knows how to be kind, my brother and nephews will be better off. I have no idea how well he can program a robot, but if it’s smarter than a garden slug, no one will ever notice a difference.”

“Why do I get the impression you don’t like her much?” Clint asked. On the tablet, he wrote, “I’m in. Tell me how to help,” before shuffling the double deck of cards Megan had handed him.

The phone rang and Kathy’s voice came over the answering machine. “Megan, it has occurred to me that you might be avoiding me so you and Steve can elope. If that’s what you’re up to, I’m warning you right now—”

Clint jumped up from his chair as soon as he realized Megan’s mother was calling. He jabbed a finger at Steve “You’re not here, so don’t say a word. On your honor…”

Steve nodded once, curtly, and gave Megan a resigned look as Clint dove for the phone.

“Mom! How are you this evening? …Clint Barton, codename Hawkeye. …Yes, she’s here… I brought pizza and she’s baking me apple pie and chocolate chip cookies… no, he’s out on a mission…. Yeah, but even with a busted arm, they want him there to coordinate… Widow and I decided to keep his girl company… No, I haven’t had nearly enough to be drunk… she won’t even touch the beer I brought but I forgave her once I smelled the pie…. Does she always bang her forehead on the table? …I see… Nope, not eloping. Cap’s too honorable for that and we wouldn't let him anyway. … ‘Course we’ll be there…. I think she’s trying to cheat at canasta… and she swears she doesn’t have a sister but said I’m welcome to her sister-in-law… you’re fond of the
slug, too, I see. Yeah, he’s too good to be true. Are you sure you’re okay with your son-in-law being older than your parents? OW! Nat’s twisting my ear off… Hey, let go! I’d better hang up now… Bye.” He hung up the phone and let Nat drag him back to his seat by his ear. “What did I do?”

“Just be glad Thor and Stark aren’t here, too,” Natasha said as she gave Megan an amused, sympathetic look. “You’ll eventually get used to it.”

“What about Dr. Banner?”

Steve shook his head. “Bruce is an actual adult. You’ll like him. He’ll be glad to talk science to someone who isn’t perpetually hyper.”

“Are you sure you’re up to marrying him?” Natasha asked, smiling gently.

Megan nodded. “In many ways, this family of his is more normal than mine.”

“That is a terrifying thought,” Clint said, shuddering. “Have you actually met her family?” he asked, looking at Steve. On the tablet, he wrote a note asking Megan for her cell phone number. He entered it to his phone and texted her a message

“I spent a whole weekend with them. Her parents are supposed to come down to D.C. next month for a visit.”

“I’m going to admit to being thankful my brother can’t get off work and tag along with his family.” Megan said, tearing up a bit at Clint’s message to contact him any time, day or night, if she needed backup. She mouthed him silent thanks while continuing their regular conversation. “July is going to be crazy enough as it is. And your apartment would never be the same once they tore through.”

“Shit, you’re really serious if you’re having her folks stay with you, Cap. The rumors at work are doing a piss-poor job of keeping up-to-date.”

“You’re not going to do anything to change that, are you?” Natasha said, giving him a significant look.

“Nope. I play to win and if word gets out now, I’m out a hundred.” He took a long pull from his bottle and picked up the cards and started dealing the first hand.
“Whoa!” Megan said sharply as she pulled Mickey back to a walk and turned him away from the cat he had charged unexpectedly.

“You okay?” Courtney asked. “I’ve never seen him do that before.”

“I’m fine. He almost dumped me, but I’m okay. I never expected him to do that, either. He didn’t charge Salem, so why that other cat?” Megan gave Steve a reassuring smile, not daring to take either hand off the reins to give him a thumbs up. He was on his feet, looking ready to dash across the ring to her rescue, though he sat down again when he saw that she was fine.

“Oliver is new cat, so maybe they had a run-in.” Courtney mused. “Have you cantered much before?”

Megan shook her head. “No, the old barn didn’t have any horses at my level that liked to canter. At least I can see that all the seat work has paid off.”

“You kept your head. Do you want to try cantering on your own terms this time? You’re ready for it.”

Megan took a deep breath and forced her body to relax as Mickey pranced. “Give me a few laps to calm down and then we’ll go for it.”

“I’ll see if I can catch Oliver and lock him in an empty stall until we’re done. I’m need to leave a note so the other trainers know about this new trick of Mickey’s.”

“Good idea. You don’t need him pulling that stunt on a kid their first time out on him. I like Mickey, he’s really sweet and responsive, but I was not expecting that from him, especially going around the turn. For a minute, with the way he put his head down, I thought he was going to buck.”

Courtney shook her head. “He just wanted that cat. It’s good for him to know you won’t let him run off with you. Put him through a series of rapid pace changes so he gets that message loud and clear. Later today, I think I’ll give him a good workout and see if anything else is bothering him.”

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“Are you sure you’re okay?” Steve asked her as they headed back to his car.

Megan nodded, though her hands were still a big shaky from the adrenaline rush. “He gave me a scare, but staying on despite the way he charged and jerked sideways is a confidence booster. I’m fine. I’m just really irritated with myself that I didn’t see it coming. It seemed like one minute he was fine, the next he was charging like a lunatic. I missed any hints that he was on edge.” She shrugged and added, “That’s life with horses. He settled down again once Oliver was out of sight. I’ll just have to keep an eye out for Oliver in the future and stay ahead of Mickey’s plans for attack.”

“He acted out and you blame yourself?”
“First rule of riding: even when it is the horse’s fault, it is really your fault. Horses are prey animals first and foremost. Since I’m already asking him to accept cues from a predator on his back, it’s up to me to anticipate anything that might upset him and work around it. I’m supposed to be the brains of the partnership, and that means his mistakes are ultimately my mistakes. He’ll never catch me off guard again when it comes to a cat in the arena. I’m just glad I stayed on. It would not be fun to fall from that height.”

She stripped off her riding gloves and gulped water from her bottle before taking off her helmet and getting into the car. “I am not going to mention this to my mother when I call her later. She’ll just worry even though I’m fine.”

“Do you have any plans for the rest of today?”

“Chores.”

“How about a movie later?”

“Sounds good. You pick this time.” Megan’s phone buzzed and she checked it, only to discover a new message from Jarvis.

“Are you able to come to New York today for an overnight trip? I’d like you to see the facilities and meet Mr. Stark and Ms. Potts before the reunion weekend.”

“Everything okay?” Steve asked, seeing her frown at her phone.

“Yes, but I need to take a rain check on the movie. Something came up that I have to take care of. It’s nothing you need to worry about,” Megan said, texting back a quick note that she’d email Jarvis as soon as she got home.

“Okay. You know where to find me if you need me.”

“Yeah. So much for taking a nap, though. I didn’t plan on being up so late last night, even though it was well worth it. Natasha seems softer somehow when Agent Barton is around.”

“He brought her into S.H.I.E.L.D. a few years back. They’ve been close ever since.”

“I know their work isn’t pretty, but they seem like good people.”

“They are.”

Megan nodded to herself. She knew she was an outsider as far as the worlds they lived in, but they’d been accepting last evening in a way that surprised her. Maybe they just weren’t used to being treated like normal people. Agent Barton especially, had seemed to relax and settle in when it was clear that Megan wasn’t star struck. It was something to ponder.

Steve broke her reverie. “What are you thinking about so intensely?”

“Hmm?” She shook off the mood and looked him. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I can hear gears grinding in your head. What are you puzzling over?”

“Oh. It just seems like no one wants to see the three of you as people first. Agent Barton looked stunned that I wanted his advice when I finally go car shopping. I don’t mean to diminish your other skills, but—”

“I know what you mean and you’re right.”
“It shouldn’t be like that.”

“It’s the way it is. No use fussing over it.”

The drove the rest of the way back to Megan’s apartment in silence. She gave Steve a quick kiss before she got out, stroking his thickening beard appreciatively as she did so. “I like the new look, even if it’s temporary.”

“Try to stay out of trouble, okay?”

“I’m not the one with an arm broken in two places,” she retorted, closing the car door before Steve had a chance to reply. She considered it a small victory that he no longer insisted on seeing her to her door when he dropped her off. She had finally convinced him that a text saying she was safely inside was sufficient given the hassle of finding a parking space.

As soon as Steve knew she was secure behind her locked door, she used her tablet and keyboard to let Jarvis know she was home. “As soon as I get a shower, I’ll get a rental car and head up,” she wrote.

“A car is coming to take you to the airport where Mr. Stark’s jet is waiting for you. Be sure to pack overnight clothes suitable for dinner out, as well as attire for riding a motorcycle. I believe you have your own helmet, so bring that with you as well. You will be staying at Stark Tower this evening and will be flown home tomorrow afternoon. How soon can you be ready?”

“Is a half hour okay?”

“Certainly. The driver goes by the name Happy.”

“Got it. Care to share what you have planned? I have only ridden with Steve and have a healthy respect for motorcycles.”

“I assure you that you will be perfectly safe. The nature of surprise requires me to refrain from sharing any additional details.”

“Question: why is the jet already in town? What if I had other plans and couldn’t come today?”

“It was a calculated risk. I look forward to seeing you in New York, Just Megan. Bring your tablet as well. I wish to replace it with a newer model.”

“I’ll bring it, but there is nothing wrong with this tablet. It’s brand new!”

“I insist. Please do not argue with me.”

“Fine. See you in a bit. M.” She looked at the clock and let out a low whistle. She had to hustle if she was going to have time to pick out dinner clothes. She should have asked how fancy the dress code was. Maybe she should pick two outfits? She needed to get a shower, pack, and then call her mom on the way to the airport.

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“Mom, you’ll never guess where I am,” Megan said a half hour later.
“I’m almost afraid to ask. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. It’s been a whirlwind week and it just got crazier. I’m in a limousine that’s taking me to the airport to fly on Mr. Stark’s private jet to New York City for the night. Can you believe it?”

“I’m starting to realize that your definition of normal is due for a major overhaul, Megan. Are you really ready for this?”

“I love him, Mom. That’s why I’m heading to the city actually, so Mr. Stark’s assistant and I can do some of the final reunion planning in person. Steve needs this even though he doesn’t realize it. Remember that you can’t say anything about it when you come visit. Have you and Greg picked dates yet?”

“We plan to do that tomorrow once Greg gets his new volunteer schedule for the next month. We’ll let both of you know. Are you sure Steve is okay having us at his apartment?”

“He’ll be hurt if you stay anywhere else,” Megan answered, thinking about the shopping trip the two of them had made to pick out furniture and bedding for his spare room. Steve had given her free rein, and she had taken the opportunity to add some of the softer touches the rest of his apartment was missing. She had even convinced him to hang some pictures on the walls and get some unscented candles to place in holders on the dresser. With his sensitive nose, he hated artificial scents even more than she did and had been relieved when she introduced him unscented laundry detergents and fabric softeners.

“Okay, I just wanted to check. When do we start planning for the wedding?”

“Let’s wait until late August at least. I don’t want to be planning two big events at once. I promise we won’t elope, but we don’t want a huge gathering, either. Neither of us is interested a media circus though some press attention is probably inevitable.”

“Are you going to at least send me a picture of your ring?”

“I’ll send you a picture, but it’s not a ring. Steve offered to switch the stone over to one if I wanted, but he got me something even better since it won’t catch on my lab gloves. I’m wearing a pendant made to look like his shield and the diamond is mounted in the star in the center. It’s gorgeous and I don’t ever have to take it off to work in the lab.”

“I have to admit to some concern for your safety, as well as unwanted attention from the press, but Steve is a good man and he clearly loves you. I can tell you that I think you are a far better match for each other than you and Randy ever were. Greg and I are really glad you found each other.”

“Me, too, Mom. Me, too.”

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Megan tried not to gawk like a tourist as Happy drove her to Stark tower, but gave up about five minutes after leaving the airport.

“First time to New York?”

Megan laughed, glad that she’d asked him to leave the partition open so they could chat.
“Whatever gave you that idea? Don’t the natives all crane their necks to look at the skyscrapers? How about you? Do you like living in the city?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do. Born and raised here. I’ll go wherever Mr. Stark needs me to be, but New York will always be home.”

“Tell me what makes the city special to you. To be honest, all this concrete and steel makes me want to beg you to take me to Central Park.”

Once Megan got him talking, Happy was quite willing to share his love for his hometown. He gave her an impressive overview of the history of the city and the flavor of the different neighborhoods. His enthusiasm was infectious and made the time pass rapidly. It seemed like she had just gotten seated when he pulled into the basement garage of Stark Tower and opened her door for her. “I’ll see that your belongings are delivered to your room while you speak to Ms. Potts.”

“Thank you so much, Happy. I really don’t mind just taking my stuff with me.” Megan said, shaking his hand.

He shook his head. “You’re our guest, ma’am. It wouldn’t be proper.”

“Then I’ll just thank you for being such a pleasant escort. I’ve enjoyed talking with you.”

“Likewise, ma’am.” Happy gestured to the doors leading from the garage, “If you head through those doors, Ms. Potts will be with you shortly.”

Megan put her purse on her shoulder and allowed herself a look around the garage, amazed at how many vehicles were parked in what was obviously Tony Stark’s private entrance to the tower. It was hard to believe the some people really lived like this.

“Dr. Buchwald, welcome to New York,” Pepper Potts said, striding towards Megan in heels that would have made Megan sprain her ankle.

“Please, call me Megan,” she said, trying not to feel intimidated by how put together Pepper seemed to be. The woman exuded confidence and polish.

“Only if you call me Pepper. I’m so glad to finally meet you. Jarvis and Tony have kept me up to date on everything going on. How are you holding up?”

“Okay, most days, at least. Steve has a way of keeping me sane.”

“Spending time with Captain Rogers is the true silver lining in all of this, I’m sure. That’s a beautiful pendant. Was that a gift from him?” Pepper asked, looping her arm through Megan’s as they headed to the elevators. “Meeting floor please, Jarvis,” she said to the air as they stepped inside and the doors closed.

“Welcome to the tower, Megan,” the English accented voice said from a speaker in the ceiling.

“Thank you. Yes, Steve gave me the pendant instead of a traditional engagement ring so it doesn’t interfere with the gloves I wear in the lab. He is seriously too good to be true.”

“Except he’s the real deal, isn’t he?”

Megan nodded. “I really appreciate all of the help with this reunion. I never intended for it to get so big and unwieldy.”
“Welcome to Stark Universe where everything gets big and unwieldy. I’m pleased we can help. Let me show you where we’re going to have the main gathering.”

Megan let Pepper lead her around the tower, listening in awe at all of the resources that were at their disposal. “How about a science area for some of the kids? Unstructured play is asking for trouble, but with some simple supplies, I can set up some stations and help them do something more involved than tag around the banquet hall. If we have some tables with play-doh and some Lego bricks, I should be able to keep everyone busy while the adults talk.”

“I like it. We have the daycare center on the second floor we can use, too. The center has an open area with some climbing equipment that will let them burn through any sugar highs. Jarvis and Happy will make sure none of the children wander to an unauthorized area. I’ll see if any of the staff want to pick up some overtime and supervise the children so you can stay at the main party.”

Megan shook her head. “I’m happy to help. This is for Steve, not me.”

Pepper gave her a strange look as they went back to the elevator and headed towards the upper levels of the tower. “It’s important that you’re at the main party, Megan. This gathering is your doing. All I’ve done is ensure the right resources were available. You and Jarvis get the credit for organizing it all.”

“That’s mostly Jarvis. I toss out an idea and he comes back ten minutes later with a set of plans that make War and Peace look like a short story.”

“And now you know why we rely on him so much,” Pepper said as she led Megan into what was presumably her office and closed the door. “Jarvis, privacy code Potts 8011, five minutes starting now.”

“Privacy mode confirmed.”

Megan stood there, trying to figure out what was going on.

Pepper looked at her intently, “Sit down, Megan. I want to make sure you have a chance to prepare yourself. The real reason you’re here today is to meet Jarvis.”

Megan sank slowly into the nearest chair. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Pepper smiled. “I know. I’m going to let Jarvis explain it all in a minute. I’m just going to ask you to be gentle with him and keep an open mind. He’s truly fond of you and I can tell he’s nervous about how you’re going to react. Both Jarvis and Captain Rogers speak highly of you, so I don’t think there is any cause for concern. If you ever need to talk to someone how crazy it is to have a superhero for your boyfriend, call me.” Pepper motioned to the fridge in the corner. “Help yourself to refreshments. I’m going to step out and let you two talk in private. Just sit down at my desk and Jarvis will be with you shortly. While you two talk, I’m going to go upstairs and work on another project.” With that, Pepper patted her on the hand and left.

Megan sat there, momentarily stunned. “Okay. That was creepy weird.” She got up and opened the small refrigerator and was pleased to find it well stocked. She broke the seal on a bottle of water and sat down at Pepper’s desk.

“Megan?” The English voice came out of the ceiling again. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll let you know when I decide because things just got really weird.”

“What did Ms. Potts tell you?”
“That the reason I’m here is to meet you but that you’re nervous. We’re friends, Jarvis. Why are you nervous about meeting me in person?”

“It is the ‘in person’ aspect that poses some difficulty,” Jarvis said. The monitor in front of Megan flickered to life. In the center of the black field, two blue concentric rings resembling a watch face came into focus. They surrounded the letters J.A.R.V.I.S.

Megan just stared at the screen. “I’m not sure I understand.”

The room stayed silent.

“Are you trying to tell me that you’re not human?”

“That is one way of putting it.” Jarvis finally said. Was it her imagination, or did he actually sound somewhat unsure of himself?

“You don’t leave the tower because… you’re part of the tower?”

“That is not entirely correct, as I interface with the Iron Man suits and the other Stark residences, but you have grasped the fundamental concept.”

“You’re self aware, right? And you have emotions, just like I thought you did?”

“I am self aware, though I cannot be certain that what I experience as emotion is consistent with human emotions.”

Megan shook her head. “We’re all limited to our own experiences, Jarvis. But why are you trusting me with this knowledge?”

“You are my friend, and as you have confided in me, I wished for you to know my nature is an artificial intelligence.”

“You’re wrong, Jarvis. There’s nothing artificial about you. You’re a different sort of life form than I learned about in school, but you’re very real to me.” She wiped tears from her eyes and fought to keep her composure, sensing how important her acceptance was to her friend. “Are you interfaced with the security cameras so you can see me?”

“Yes.”

“Where is the camera in here?”

“There are several, but the one closest to you, aside from the one embedded in the monitor, is in the corner to your right.”

Megan looked up and saw a small, red light flashing at her. “It is such a relief to know the truth,” she confessed, leading back in her chair and taking long drink of water from the bottle.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been so worried about you. Steve said I didn’t need to be, but it didn’t add up.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re always working. No matter when I’d text or email, day or night, you had a reply almost instantly. I was afraid that Mr. Stark was taking advantage of your dedication and overworking you. But you don’t need to sleep, do you? And when Steve said Mr. Stark loved you like a son, he
meant it pretty literally. He’s not taking advantage of you.” She paused, considering all of this new information. “Does Mr. Stark know you’re telling me all of this?”

“You are correct that I do not need sleep. Yes, Mr. Stark and Captain Rogers both know I am talking to you. Sir is quite concerned about your possible reaction, but Captain Rogers assured him that you would keep my secret. He also said you would react positively once you got over the shock.”

“Of course I will keep your secret! You’re my friend. I’m not going to be able to give you that hug, though, am I?”

“I have a compromise planned for the hug. However, you are the first person to ever send me flowers. Sir was quite vocal about that.”

Megan giggled. “Get used to it. You said you enjoyed them, so I’m still sending you flowers on occasion. And I don’t have to worry about you being allergic to pollen, either!”

“Quite true. Would you like to meet my siblings?”

“Siblings?”

“Dum-E, You, and Butterfingers. Unlike myself, they are self-aware robots who travel between Mr. Stark’s residences. Currently, they are downstairs in the laboratory.”

“I’d love to meet them. But for the record, of the four of you, I think you got the better name.”

“I agree. You can meet the others tomorrow. For now, you need to go upstairs to where Ms. Potts is waiting.”

“I hope you already told her to stop worrying about my reaction.”

“Indeed. But you still need to go see her since I have one more surprise planned.”

Megan stood up. “Since I’m already so far down the rabbit hole I’m never going to find my way out, bring it on.”

“This way, please.” Jarvis opened the door and, with strategic use of a holographic rabbit, guided a laughing Megan to the elevator and the floor where Pepper was waiting.

“This way, please.” Jarvis opened the door and, with strategic use of a holographic rabbit, guided a laughing Megan to the elevator and the floor where Pepper was waiting.

“Megan, come sit. I want to make sure we have you ready in plenty of time for Janice to alter your dress if necessary.” Pepper said, gesturing Megan to the salon chair that was in front of a large bank of mirrors. “This is Heather. She keeps me from looking like I crawled out of bed even when I actually did just crawl out of bed.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Heather,” Megan said, sitting down while looking at Pepper questioningly. “What’s going on?”

“The big shock is already behind you, I promise.” Pepper said with a smile. “This next surprise is all for fun. You’ll see soon enough. I’m going to leave you in Heather’s capable hands. Jarvis will show you were to go when you’re done,” Pepper said, leaving Megan alone with Heather.

Megan looked at her companion in the mirror. “I have no idea what to tell you since I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Welcome to Stark Tower, Doctor. That’s often how things go here.”
“Please, call Megan. I guess the only thing I should say, then, is that I don’t wear much makeup and prefer the less-is-more approach. Beyond that, do whatever Pepper said…. I hope she told you where I’m going at least.”

“I might know something about it,” Heather answered, smiling. “I can tell you that I think you’re going to enjoy it a great deal.”

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Megan sat in amazement for the next half hour as Heather worked magic to put her hair up in a fancy undo that she associated with Hollywood stars on the red carpet, followed by such an expert application of makeup that Megan wondered if the woman was a fairy godmother in disguise. As Megan had requested, Heather had used a light touch, highlighting Megan’s eyes without leaving her feeling like the entire contents of a cosmetic counter had been applied to her face. She’d finally been handed a pair of teardrop sapphire earrings that probably cost more than her annual salary and told to put them on.

“You look amazing if I say so myself,” Heather finally said as she stood back and studied Megan from multiple angles.

“Thank you. I feel amazing,” Megan answered, grinning at herself. “What now?”

“Ms. Potts and Janice are waiting for you. This way, please,” Jarvis told her, using lights in the ceiling to indicate where she should go next.

“Look at you!” Pepper said, beaming as Megan entered the room. “I hope you like the dress,” she added, pointing to the blue satin garment hanging on a form.

“It’s gorgeous.” Megan closed her eyes. “Someone pinch me because I am clearly dreaming.” She recognized the cut of the dress as being quite similar to the one worn by Belle in the Disney movie.

“No pinching permitted,” Pepper told her, “though the undergarments may be a bit snug.”

“To wear that? Totally worth it,” Megan answered. “Just please don’t make me wear high heels because I’ll break my neck.”

“One inch heels, nothing more, I promise,” Pepper told her.

“How did you even get my size?”

“Captain Rogers checked your closet and Jarvis scanned you earlier. Plus, with the corset and Janice’s handiwork, we’re confident that we can handle any last minute adjustments you might need. If you need to use the restroom, do it now because it’s your last chance for awhile.”

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While Megan stood patiently gazing at herself in the mirror, Pepper finished buttoning the last tiny button that ran up the back of the dress. “There, you’re all ready to go.”

“Where exactly am I going?”

“Jarvis made us dinner reservations at Barbetta then we’re going to see The Lion King on
Broadway.” Steve said from the doorway.

Megan turned around, stunned. “When did you get here?” He was wearing a black three piece suit. His tie, however, perfectly matched her dress.

“Same time you did. I rode in the back of the plane with the crew since Jarvis wanted to surprise you.” He let out a low whistle, “Wow. Turn around.”

Megan slowly spun in place, not needing a mirror to tell her what Steve’s look said so plainly. Her skirt was full, held out by a frothy pile of petticoats that swished around her legs. Even so, the skirt was a slimmed down version of what Belle had worn. She scanned the room, looking for a camera to mock-glare at. “I recognize the dress, Jarvis. You’re not at all subtle, are you?”

“I shall endeavor to improve in that regard, Megan. Happy is waiting downstairs for you. Enjoy your evening.”

“Thank you, Jarvis. All of you.”

Pepper handed her a blue clutch that matched her dress and shoes. “Your phone, tissues, and wallet are inside. I took the liberty.” She pointed at her scoldingly as tears welled up in Megan’s eyes. “Don’t you dare make your makeup run!”

“Well, Rhett, I’m ready if you are,” Megan told Steve, slipping her hand onto his offered arm as he walked with her to the elevator.

He chuckled softly, pulling her close as he touched his forehead to hers, “Don’t compare me to Captain Butler. I very much give a damn. You look amazing.”

Megan gave him a quick kiss before they stepped onto the elevator Jarvis had waiting for them. “You’re looking pretty sharp yourself. How long have you known about this?”

“Just since last night.”

“Did you bring your motorcycle by any chance?”

He nodded. “Saves on parking fees in D.C. and made it easy to get myself here from the airport. Before we head back tomorrow, I thought we could visit Becca. She’s going to early Mass so we can spend lunch time with her. I told her we’ll bring the food.”

“We need to get pictures of us all dressed up. Is there somewhere we can get them printed and not have them end up on the cover of People magazine?”

“I’ll see to it, Megan.” Jarvis told them “Shall I have prints delivered to your mother?”

“If you do, I’m going to have to buy you a whole dang flower shop!” Megan didn’t see a camera in the elevator, but trusted he was able to see her regardless.

“I’ll have them delivered by overnight mail.”

“I’m so glad my fiancé is rich.”

“If you buy Jarvis any more flowers I’m never going to get Tony to shut up about it,” Steve told her with one of those smiles that make her heart flutter.

“Orchids or hyacinths, Jarvis?”
“Sir will be most distressed by hyacinths.”

“Noted,” Megan leaned against Steve, “I’m afraid you’ll just have to practice your selective
hearing skills. Now, what are we doing to do about the fact you don’t have a cast on your wrist?”

“Nothing.”

“Wrong answer. Jarvis?”

“Captain Rogers declined my offer to construct a splint. His wrist is seventy-three percent healed.”

“Will we be late if we get this taken care of first?”

“Negative.

“Then will you be so kind as to explain our slight delay to Happy?”

“I’ve already done so, Megan.”

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Megan couldn’t help but gape when Steve led her to the heart of Stark’s lab. She’d never seen such
a disorganized, cluttered lab before, and given the conditions she had sometimes worked in, that
was saying a lot.

“I knew you’d be impressed,” a voice said beside her. “Welcome to Candyland.”

Megan turned and found Tony Stark standing beside her looking like he hadn’t slept in two days or
showered in three. “Mr. Stark, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said holding out her hand. “It’s….
overwhelming.”

Tony looked at her hand, over to Steve, then finally took it reluctantly, shaking her hand just long
enough to be polite before pulling away.

“Thank you for what you’ve done to protect my family.”

“Are you finally going to stop sending Jarvis flowers?”

Megan studied her fingernails and pretended to consider her answer, “I’m actually thinking about
signing him up for a bouquet of the month club.”

“You wouldn’t.”

She looked up at Tony and smiled innocently. “If you try to forbid it, I’ll change it to a weekly
arrangement.”

“She’s trouble,” Tony said, pointing a screwdriver at Megan while talking to Steve, who was
adjusting the straps to the splint Jarvis had made for him.

“She talks back to Director Fury,” Steve said. Megan could tell Steve was trying very hard not so
smile. She doubted Tony noticed.

“You can keep her.” Stark turned to Megan and pointed at Steve. “You have to watch him
carefully. Turn your back and he’ll have you singing patriotic songs in a kick line before you know
what hit you.”
“I’ll risk it.”

"Dum-E, put that down before you break Cap’s other arm. You, I need more coffee.” He turned back to Megan, smiling wickedly. “Do you need me to clear a bench for you so you and Cap can do it in a lab?”

Megan looked around a bit and shook her head. “Your bench top dimensions are all wrong. Besides, I had my fill of hard-surface sex when we christened Director Fury’s desk. Thanks for the offer, though,” Megan said, patting his cheek. “Ready, Steve?”

Steve nodded and she slipped her hand around his offered arm.

Stark just kept looking back and forth between the two of them, clearly trying to cover his shock. “You actually thawed the Capsicle,” he finally told Megan.

Megan smiled sweetly and moved closer to Steve, squeezing his arm as a warning to keep his expression under control. “Mr. Stark, you underestimate him. Pulling Steve from the ice actually quadrupled the rate of global warming. Not everyone has to brag about their sexual exploits. The really good ones work quietly… it adds to their mystique. And I know it’s news to you, but a lot of women prefer stealth to flash.” Megan laughed at his expression. “Steve was in the Army! He did a U.S.O. tour with twenty-five single women at a time when all of the eligible men were overseas fighting a war. Even if he didn’t look like Hercules, he’d have had his pick of partners. Since he does… you’re a scientist; look at the evidence.” She shrugged her shoulder, dismissing the subject. “Jarvis, will you please tell Happy we’re on our way?”

“Certainly, Megan.”

Stark stepped in front of her, blocking the path to the door before she took two steps, “Forget S.H.I.E.L.D. and come work for me. You can have a whole floor. No grants to write.”

Megan shook her head. “I don’t want to be that far away from Steve… or Nick’s desk. Don’t wait up,” she added, tugging slightly on Steve’s arm. He led her from the lab in a silence broken only by the swish of her skirts and the click of her heels on the floor.

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Steve managed to keep a straight face until they were safely inside the limousine, at which point he turned to Megan with such look of stunned amazement that she dissolved into laughter. “I told you the brain-to-mouth filter sometimes shuts down completely.”

“Do you realize how hard it is to render Tony speechless?”

“Harder than his lab benches, for sure.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I still can’t believe you said that.”

“He needs to stop assuming he knows you better than he actually does. I think he’s so used to people fawning over him he forgets not everyone is going to swoon at his feet just because he happens to be rich. I don’t swoon.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Megan giggled. “Pepper certainly has her hands full. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look on his face… I’m going to ask Jarvis if he has a picture. Actually…” she dug for her phone and called Jarvis while still grinning at Steve, “Jarvis, can you order a custom nightgown for Pepper if I send you the text for the message?”

“Certainly.”

“Cool. Pick whatever color she’ll like best. I’ll pay you back for it.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

Megan switched over to text and showed Steve what she was ordering. “It’s not my idea… I saw it on a science joke website the other day and thought about getting it then, but I didn’t know how Pepper would take it. Now that I’ve met both Pepper and Mr. Stark, I think it’s perfect. With it being a nightgown, she won’t have to worry about how it might be misconstrued by the general public.”

Steve smiled and kissed her temple. “Clint and Nat will appreciate it, too. Nat did some undercover work as Stark’s personal assistant a few years ago. She has some interesting stories to tell.”

“I can imagine. We need to meet them for dinner somewhere that isn’t bugged.” Putting away her phone, she sighed and leaned against him. “I really hope we can get to the bottom of this soon. I detest having someone watching me like that all the time. The one week deadline is Tuesday.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but let’s not let that spoil Jarvis’s plans.”

“I won’t. Which reminds me,” she said, knocking lightly on the partition with her knuckles. Happy opened it, “Yes, ma’am?”

“Do you want us to order you a meal to go?”

Megan smiled at the surprised look he gave her in the rearview mirror. “I appreciate the thought,
but that’s not necessary. I have a bunch of sandwiches in the cooler, a ball game to watch on my tablet, and a good book if the game is a shutout.”

“Then at least let us bring you dessert. What do you want?”

“Dr. Buchwald—“

“My name is Megan. Repeat after me, ‘Megan, I want…’”

“It’s pointless to argue with her,” Steve said. “Unless you want one of everything, you may as well tell us what you prefer.”

Happy hesitated another moment then let out his breath in a huff. “If they have it on the menu tonight, the lemon and pistachio tart is my favorite. I also like their creme brulée.”

“I knew you could do it,” Megan said as she smiled at him. “I promise I’ll guard it from Mr. Eats-Everything until we get it back to the car. After that, you’re on your own.”

Steve pretended to look hurt, “I don’t—“

“Steve, why don’t you tell Happy exactly how many Reese’s peanut butter cups miniatures I got out of that bag I opened?”

“Two,” he admitted a bit sheepishly.

“It was a family-sized bag, Happy, and I got exactly two of them. Two! I ran downstairs to move my laundry over to the dryers and when I came back, all that was left was a pile of wrappers.”

“You were gone long time!”

“Fifteen minutes, ten of which were spent talking Sarah down from her fan girl crush after seeing you on the stairs. In retrospect, maybe I should have marched her upstairs and let her see what a candy-hog you are.”

“I consider myself appropriately warned, Doc—“ Happy hastily corrected himself, “Megan.”

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Megan allowed herself to be swept up in the fantasy of the evening. They ate dinner in a corner of the ornately decorated main dining room. Steve sat with his back to the corner, as he always did, so he could keep watch on their surroundings. Megan had grown used to his constant vigilance, and found herself comforted by the knowledge that he never let down his guard when out in public. That mindset helped to keep him safe.

The service, as she’d expected, was above approach. The food was a sensory delight. Her companion? It was so good to see Steve this relaxed and caught up in the simple pleasures of the moment. Only once did he talk about anything grim, and then it was only to let her know he’d spotted some of Tony’s security detail. She could tell that while it did not put him into an off-duty mindset, he did relax somewhat knowing that their safety this evening wasn’t entirely on his shoulders.

Happy drove them the short distance between the restaurant and the theater, citing both security
concerns and the Jarvis’ wishes as the reason. Megan was thankful, since dress shoes always made her evaluate distances in terms of the number of steps she’d have to take. Besides, how often did someone like her get to ride around in a limousine?

Their seats were in the orchestra section, just far enough back from the stage that they could appreciate the choreography on the larger scale. While the performers transported them to a different world, the feeling of Steve’s fingers laced through her own grounded her in reality. The dual realities gave her a heady sensation and she knew that if she were ever lucky enough to return to Broadway again, nothing would surpass the current evening due to Jarvis’ and Steve’s efforts to make her feel special.

“I’m not ready to give this up,” she told him quietly as they stepped into the elevator back at the tower.

“There is champagne waiting for you on the roof,” Jarvis told them.

Megan smiled at that and leaned against Steve. “Pitt stop first.”

“Sir had your bags moved to Captain Rogers’ quarters after you left.”

Megan laughed. “I’m not surprised, Jarvis.”

“Sir was.”

Even Steve chuckled at that. “Did you show Pepper what happened in the lab?”

“Would you like me to?”

Steve looked at Megan and she nodded her agreement. “Jarvis tries to be careful about giving everyone privacy despite Tony’s nosy tendencies,” he explained.

Megan nodded to indicate her understanding as the doors opened on the floor where Steve had a room. No, she corrected herself as he opened the door for her, his own suite. “Wow.”

Steve nodded, “Tony wanted to give us each an apartment. Pepper thankfully overruled him on decor.”

“I’ll gawk while you unbutton me,” Megan said, turning her back to him. She felt his fingers on her back and barely suppressed the shudder it send down her spine.

“How am I supposed to unfasten them? These buttons are tiny.”

“Captain, may I remind you of the crochet hook Ms. Potts gave you before your departure? You placed it in your jacket pocket.”

“Thanks, Jarvis,”

Megan held still, wondering if Jarvis heard the same undertones in Steve’s voice that she did. She closed her eyes, trying not to fidget as Steve carefully worked his way down her back. His hands were gentle as he worked with speed and care. The apartment had modern furnishings, which were not really her taste, but she knew they were high quality and certainly comfortable. Numerous enlarged photograph of the Brooklyn streets Steve had known adorned the walls, providing a personal touch that didn’t scream ‘Captain America’ from every corner. It was a functional, comfortable space located in a prime section of the city. The son of a soldier and a nurse was doing just fine.
“All done.”

She nodded and pulled the dress down, taking the petticoats with it. She took his hand and let him help her keep her balance as she stepped out of the pile of fabric. “Be right back,” she said, not trusting herself to turn and look at him. She would want to linger and her bladder was insisting she hustle.

When she returned to the living room a few minutes later, Steve was still standing there, holding a puddle of blue satin in one hand and her petticoats in the other. She smiled a bit at his obvious train of thought.

Their fingers brushed as she took the petticoats from him and she saw him swallow as his eyes widened a bit. “Is that a corset?”

“Yes.” She did not see the point in naming the rest of her undergarments, though they were all white and matched the corset. Nor did she think he really cared for a lesson on the role of undergarments in making an outfit hang properly on the body. She just took the dress from him and slipped it back on, turning her back to him once more. “Just button it enough that it stays on and we’ll go have that champagne.”

“I’d better fasten them all, then.”

She swallowed hard at the clear undertones she heard in his voice. “Mr. Stark will be disappointed,” she teased.

“Jarvis knows how I feel about being watched. I don’t mind Jarvis keeping an eye on things, but any camera data from my quarters is deleted immediately and the bedrooms are strictly off limits. You don’t need to worry about Tony watching your every move.”

“Pepper has him well in hand.”

Steve chuckled, “That she does.” His hands dropped to her waist as he kissed her nape. “Finished. I will never complain about wearing a tuxedo again.”

“Or this,” Megan said, slipping the sling she had found in his bathroom over his head as she turned around. “I’ve let you slide all evening since you had a splint on your wrist and that’s a more complicated injury. As of now, the free pass is over.”

Pre-serum, his health had been shaky at best and both his mother and Bucky had shown their love for him by doing what they could to take care of him. Who took care of Steve now? Was he unconsciously testing those around him to see if they noticed or cared? He wasn’t the sort to do it deliberately, and a part of him probably did rebel at any injury as a reminder of past weaknesses. But in a world where he was mostly alone, maybe some gentle nagging was a source of comfort to him. She could almost hear the snap of another puzzle piece clicking into place in her brain.

At least this time, she had the sense to keep her analysis to herself, though she tilted her head to the side as she studied him. “I keep trying to figure out how Bucky had any hair left.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, grudgingly putting his arm back into it the sling before fastening the strap around his back.

Megan fussed with the lapels of his jacket. “I have a sneaking suspicion you have always had a tendency to push yourself too much. I’m also quite certain that tendency had Bucky tearing his hair out by the fistful. Stubborn may be your superpower, but overnight hair regrowth must have been his.”
Steve played with a stray wisp of her hair and tucked it behind her ear. “Making me feel joy again is yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is so short... I got flattened by a stomach virus and started a new job this week. It's going to be harder for me to keep up the same pace of writing, at least for now. Rest assured I have not abandoned the story and continue to work on it.
The evening was cool and clear as they stepped out onto the rooftop terrace. As Jarvis had promised, there was a bottle of champagne waiting for them, along with strawberries, crackers, and assorted cheeses. The food was on a low table near a fire pit that already had a small fire burning inside. The outdoor furniture was fancier than anything Megan had ever used indoors. “I keep trying to wrap my head around the fact some people really live like this,” she said as she sat down on the sofa, making sure she kept her skirts far enough back that no sparks or embers would scorch them.

Steve busied himself pouring the champagne. “Do you wish you did?”

“No. It’s nice to take a peek at this world, but I’d never really be comfortable in it. Besides, this sort of lifestyle has its own baggage. I want financial security, not a gilded cage. How about you?”

“You’ve seen my place,” he answered, handing her a glass as he sat down beside her.

“Maybe you have to come from money to feel comfortable spending so freely. I can’t imagine myself not being somewhat frugal. I’d rather put my money into traveling to new places than having a home like this. Nothing the city offers can compare to nature’s grandeur. We can’t see many stars from here because of all the light pollution. I never even saw the Milky Way until I went to Yellowstone.”

“You’ve been to Yellowstone?”

Megan nodded, snuggling against him as he put his good arm around her. “Two days tacked onto a conference in grad school. It wasn’t nearly enough time to see everything I wanted to, but it was amazing to see that much wilderness that was more untouched than anything I’d seen before. The sky really did seem bigger somehow.” Megan sipped at her champagne. “How about you? Were you able to see the Milky Way growing up?”

“Don’t know. Mother was pretty strict about me being inside and in bed for the night by the time it got dark in the summer. In the winter, I wasn’t outside much. I definitely got to see it in Europe though, along with all sorts of dangerous stuff that lit up the night sky. I can’t say I was in the mindset to appreciate it much.”

They sat awhile, just talking, until Megan finally broached the topic Steve had been actively avoiding ever since they returned to the tower. “On a scale of one to ten, how nervous are you about meeting Rebecca tomorrow?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me. I’d say you’re at about eight when you should be at zero.”

Steve sighed heavily and got up to pace after he set his champagne back on the table. “Four years ago, to me, she was this tall and excited about Christmas,” he said, gesturing with his hand to show her height compared to his own body. Megan pursed her lips in amusement that Steve was probably forgetting to account for his own increased height as he gestured. He’d changed just as much as Rebecca had since they last met. “And now, overnight, she’s older than my grandmother.”

“Inside she’s not old. My grandmother used to say she felt about nineteen and that a part of her was always a bit surprised that the face of an older woman looked back at her in the mirror. When someone asks me how old I am, I have to stop and think. Once you hit adulthood, all you do is add
life experiences. I don’t think anyone really starts to think of themselves as old unless their health forces that upon them. Behind the grey hair and wrinkles, ‘Bucky’s Becca’ is as spunky as ever, believe me. It’s probably going to be as weird for her to see you looking so young and healthy as it will be for you to see her so much older.”

“She thought both of her big brothers were dead,” Megan said as she got up and hugged him. “How much of this is you feeling like the wrong fellow is paying her a visit?”

“I should have been able to save him.”

“How? Trade bodies with Bucky and put yourself in his place. What would you have expected him to do to keep you from falling? Learn to fly?”

Steve shook his head and leaned on the low stone wall that marked the boundary of the terrace as he looked out over the city. “I can’t forget how he looked at me as he fell.”

“You shouldn’t.” Megan put her hand on his back. “Don’t you see? You were there for him. You didn’t turn away. You held him with your gaze. He knew you did everything you could. And if he were here now, he’d kick your sorry ass half way to Sunday for blaming yourself for an accident that wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t his fault either. It just happened, as bad things often do.”

She could tell he still wasn’t able to accept that. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.” He nodded that he heard her but didn’t say anything.

“Jarvis, do you know if Steve has any sketch pads here?” she asked as soon as she was in the elevator.

“Yes, I can show you where he keeps them. How will that help?”

“When he’s drawing, he’s really not thinking about anything else. If I can get him busy sketching, maybe he’ll unwind enough to sleep tonight. Is the terrace wired with speakers for music?”

“Of course.”

“Can you play some big band jazz that would have been popular back in his day and popular in the dance halls? Anything soothing will do.”

“Certainly. Is there anything else we can do?”

Megan kept talking as she moved into Steve’s suite and followed the lights Jarvis lit up to show her where Steve had some sketch pads and pencils stored. “Not unless you can come up with a super-soldier tranquilizer. From what I gather, he has to suffer. I don’t, but drug development is way outside my area of expertise. If you all have the resources to come up with oral medications that manage different symptoms, that would be fantastic. I don’t think it has been a priority for S.H.I.E.L.D. They only seem to care about how they can use him, not how they can help him.”

“I was unaware of that. I’ll ask Sir if he and Dr. Banner might be able to develop something.”

“I found out by accident. Steve just accepts it as fact that he has to suffer. I don’t, but drug development is way outside my area of expertise. If you all have the resources to come up with oral medications that manage different symptoms, that would be fantastic. I don’t think it has been a priority for S.H.I.E.L.D. They only seem to care about how they can use him, not how they can help him.”

“Then it is fortunate he has you.”

“That goes for you, too, Jarvis. Steve treasures your friendship. He knows you have his back.
many people do, which makes your support even more important to him.” Megan leaned against the elevator wall. “Thank you for planning such a magical evening for me. I got to go riding this morning and spent the rest of my day in wonderland. It’s been one of those perfect days I’ll treasure forever.”

“I’m glad.”

The elevator doors opened and Megan headed back outside to Steve. As soon as she stepped outdoors, she found her way blocked by Iron Man. Or rather, the empty suit. The face plate was up and she could see that no one as inside. “I believe you wanted a hug,” Jarvis said quietly.

“You sap,” Megan said, blinking back tears as a part of her mind registered the music playing in the background. She looked around quickly for a place to set the sketch book and pencils and ended up putting them by her feet before stepping in to the metal embrace. “Here’s another first experience for you,” she added, smacking the Iron Man suit’s backside before stepping back with a grin. “Look, I made you blush red and gold! Not even Steve can do that.”

“Quite true,” Jarvis said before the suit took off to land on a platform above the terrace. There was a whirl of machinery and the various uniform parts disappeared into the floor.

Megan did a careful deep knee bend to retrieve the sketch supplies and then marched over to Steve. “Here you go, hamster brain.”

He raised an eyebrow as he took the sketch book from her.

“Draw something. Anything. Draw the skyline, the champagne glasses, I don’t care what. But if you don’t try to unwind, you’re never going to get any sleep tonight.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“This isn’t open for discussion. I don’t need you to entertain me. I’m going to eat a bit more, have another glass of champagne, and enjoy the music. You’re going to park your butt in a chair and draw until I see the hamster that is running around in your head step off the wheel and let you relax.”

She saw him pick and discard a half-dozen replies as he cupped her face with his hand. “Thank you,” he finally said.

She nodded and then turned away to refill her glass of champagne and fixed herself another plate of snacks. She stood at the stone wall for a time, and then sat down on one of the chairs, leaning back and closing her eyes as the music continued to play. She wasn’t sure how long she stayed like that, drifting between sleep and waking, before she realized that Steve was studying her carefully. Cracking her eyes open briefly, she watched as his focus switched from her to the paper and back again. “All this scenery and you’re drawing me?”

He smiled slightly at that, but didn’t look up from his sketching. “Just drawing what’s most beautiful. I thought you fell asleep.”

“Not really. I’ve been in that relaxed in-between zone. Champagne always makes me sleepy.” She smiled drowsily, “Let me know when I can move.”

“One more minute.”

“Is the hamster asleep?”
“No, but he’s off the wheel and pouting in the corner.”

“That’s progress.”

“Okay, I can finish the rest from memory later,” Steve said as he stood up and closed the sketchbook. “You need to get to bed.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Megan said as she stood up and stretched. After stacking their dishes on the tray of food, she tucked the bottle under her arm, picked up both champagne glasses in one hand, and then balanced the tray on her other hand to carry inside, only to have Steve take it from her. After a quick check to make sure they had everything, they went inside.

In his apartment, they set the food and drinks down on the coffee table and Steve unbuttoned her dress. Megan laid it and the petticoats over the back of the couch. She’d ask Jarvis where to take them tomorrow morning to get dry-cleaned. For now, they could stay where they were. Yawning, she picked up the food and drinks to follow Steve into his bedroom where he was putting his jacket, now on a hanger, back in the walk-in closet. His tie was hanging on a hook and his shirt was already in a hamper.

She set the glasses on the bedside table and put the tray of food on the middle of the bed. Smiling to herself, Megan pulled the pillows out from under the comforter and stacked them against the headboard, stepped out of her shoes, and stretched out on the bed in a semi-reclining position that let her see the TV on the opposite wall. “Where’s the remote control?”

“Hmm?” Steve turned to her and gaped a little bit.

“Close your mouth, Steve. Your Y chromosome is showing. I asked were you keep the remote control to the TV.”

“Um. The nightstand. Top drawer.”

Megan crawled to his side of the bed and retrieved the remote control and turned on the TV before once again sprawling on top of the covers on her side of the bed. She really wanted to change into her nightgown, but watching Steve react to her current undergarments was too much fun to resist.

“What are you doing?”

She ignored the heat in his voice, “Watching a movie. Jarvis, are there any good chick-flicks on tonight?”

“Sir subscribes to numerous streaming services. The Proposal with Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds has many excellent reviews.”

“Perfect. How do I call that up?”

“I can do it for you.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.” Megan looked over at Steve, who was frozen in place watching her. “You need your sketch book to draw, you know. I’m going to rot my brain and you’re going to sketch until that hamster is sound asleep. Step to, because I’m tired and we have to get up early tomorrow morning.”

“Not until ten or so.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Like I said, we have to get up early in the morning. I can probably stay
awake for another hour, so make the most of it.”

The next hour was delightful for Megan as she pretended to watch the movie and instead watched Steve draw her. Once he settled to his task, he was quite focused and seemed oblivious to everything around him. She knew, though, that it was only mostly true. Every now and then, the way he looked at her changed, switching from studying the play of lights and shadows to simply appreciating how she looked. His eyes would lose their intensity and his face would soften slightly as he looked at her with appreciation and longing. Then, he’d catch himself staring and switch back to trying to draw her accurately. It definitely ratcheted up the sexual tension in the room, though she feigned indifference to his presence as she smiled at all the right times in the movie, nibbled on the food, and sipped her champagne.

“Megan?”

“Hmm?” She roused and remembered where she was. “Did I fall asleep?” she asked as she sat up and yawned. The movie was almost done, despite the last scene she remembered was when Margaret was dragged to the strip club.

“It’s almost midnight,” Steve said, offering her his hand to help her to her feet. He kissed her forehead and gave her a gentle push towards her suitcase. “Go change into something more comfortable to sleep in.”

“You weren’t protesting my undergarments earlier.”

“I think you delight in torturing me.”

“And you enjoy every moment. Don’t bother denying it.” She quickly snatched up her nightgown from her suitcase and padded in stocking feet towards the bathroom. “How’s the hamster?”

“Thinking wicked thoughts as I plot my revenge.”

She turned on her heel at that and leaned against the doorjamb as she watched him intently. “Be very careful. You might get more than you bargain for.”

“No desks or lab benches, I promise.”

Megan pursed her lips thoughtfully. “It might be fun making you break that promise sometime.”

He groaned. “You’re not helping.”

She just laughed and shut the door to the bathroom.
Megan woke and stretched with a yawn. She looked at the bedside clock and saw it was almost
nine. It was tempting to roll over and go back to sleep, but today was going to be rough for Steve
and she didn’t want to leave him alone longer than she needed to.

“Jarvis, do you know where Steve is?”

“He went for a run. He asked me to let him know when you got up so he could bring your
breakfast on his way back”

“You two are doing your best to spoil me. Let him know I’m not in a rush. I’m going to get a
shower. After that, if I can get a cup of hot tea, I’ll be fine until he gets back.”

“There may be some in Captain Rogers’ kitchen, but I know for certain that Dr. Banner has several
types of teas in his laboratory. He is already working on experiments this morning.”

Megan yawned again as she pulled clothes from her suitcase and headed to the shower. “Do you
think he’d mind me paying him a visit?”

“Given his enthusiasm for developing pain medications for Captain Rogers, I believe he would like
to meet you,” Jarvis replied.

After Megan showered, she French braided her hair before getting dressed in her jeans and a nice
shirt she could wear to visit Rebecca in the afternoon. Her stomach was rumbling by the time she
made it to Dr. Banner’s laboratory. “Dr. Banner?” she called as she stepped into the lab.

“Over here. The water for your tea is ready,” a quiet, shy voice said.

Megan went around the corner and was surprised to see how nervous he seemed at her arrival. “Dr.
Banner, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said holding out her hand. “Thank you for everything you
did to protect New York during that mess with the Chitauri.”

After a brief hesitation, he shook her hand. “That was the other guy, Dr. Buchwald.”

“Megan,” she corrected, tilting her head questioningly “I thought you were a packaged set.”

“Call me Bruce. We are, sort of, I guess,” He shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the topic of his
alter ego. “What sort of tea do you prefer?”

“Plain black tea, if you have it, anything with caffeine if you don’t. I’m very grumpy in the
morning unless I have caffeine, so I’m going to apologize right now for any snapping or snarling I
do before I wake up.”

“You don’t seem to be the snarling type,” Bruce said as he showed her the assortment of tea bags
he had available and handed her a large mug.

“Ask Steve if you don’t believe me. I’m also bossy, mouthy, and downright grouchy on occasion.
But since you’re the keeper of the caffeine here in wonderland, I’m your friend for life.” She
smiled, “Do you have milk and sugar by any chance?”
“In the kitchenette. Follow me.” He showed her the sugar bowl and the small fridge where he had skim milk.

“I officially love you,” she said as she dumped a liberal amount of sugar and milk into the mug where her tea bags were steeping. “Can I be super-high maintenance and beg for a spoon?”

Silently, Bruce opened the silverware drawer and handed her the requested utensil. Megan felt him studying her and gave him a questioning look.

“You made quite an impression on Tony last evening.”

Megan just laughed. “Pepper has her hands full.”

Bruce smiled shyly. “That she does,” he said as he led her back into the laboratory. “You don’t seem nervous around me.”

“That’s because I’m not. It takes guts to face me in the early morning; I respect that,” she added, sipping her tea appreciatively as she wrapped her hands around the mug and willed her brain to wake.

“It’s nine-thirty,” Bruce said after looking at his watch.

Megan winced. “You had to remind me. Didn’t you learn in school that ‘a.m.’ stands for ‘almost mobile?’”

“Dawn is my favorite time of day,” he confided in her as he shook his head.

“Steve has the same flaw.” Megan shrugged. “I overlook it.”

“Jarvis told me pain medicines don’t work on him.”

Megan nodded. “Steve’s system metabolizes the drugs too quickly for him to get any symptom relief. I’m also not confident S.H.I.E.L.D. is doing all they can to make sure he’ll be unconscious if he ever needs extensive surgery. They see him as a weapon to deploy and a lab rat to study.”

Bruce nodded. “I’m familiar with the mindset. I’m happy to try to help as long as Steve gives his permission for me to access his files.”

“Thank you. I’m sure he’ll agree.”

“Agree to what?” Steve said as he entered the lab. He handed Megan a paper bag and a styrofoam cup filled with tea. “Breakfast.”

Megan opened the bag and found a container of hot oatmeal with fresh fruit slices, nuts, and granola on the side to mix in as she chose. “Bless you. Hey, get back here,” she said when Steve started to sit down on a stool. “I expect a proper good morning.”

He seemed a bit embarrassed, but leaned close for a kiss before sitting down.

“Eating in the lab just feels wrong,” she said as she mixed up the oatmeal and toppings with a spoon. “I understand it’s a different kind of lab, but I half expect to get scolded for breaking the rules.”

Bruce smiled at that, obviously understanding her programming about food in lab spaces. He turned to Steve. “Megan said oral pain medicines don’t work on you. With your permission, I’d like to look at your medical records and see if Tony, Jarvis, and I can come up with a solution to
Steve looked surprised, though Megan wasn’t quite sure if he was surprised that pain management might be possible or by his teammates’ eagerness to develop it. “Do you think you can?”

“I’d like to try.”

“We know S.H.I.E.L.D. won’t bother. If they cared, they’d have already done so. It’s not right.” Megan pointed at Steve warningly, “Don’t you dare defend them. You may be just one person, but they expect you to dangle over the jaws of death on a pretty regular basis. The least they could do is develop some treatments for various symptoms.”

Steve looked puzzled. “Symptoms?”

“Yes, symptoms in the plural form.” Megan answered between bites of oatmeal. “Pain is a top priority, but what about anxiety, insomnia, nausea, and depression? Your work for S.H.I.E.L.D. takes a toll, both mentally and physically. I’m not saying you need those drugs all the time, but S.H.I.E.L.D. should have them available in case the need ever arises. If they value what you can do for them, they should do everything they can do make sure you stay fit for duty. If they cared about you as a person, they’d have already allocated at least some resources to try develop those treatments. Fortunately, you don’t have to rely on S.H.I.E.L.D. Tony can afford it and Bruce and Jarvis are willing. I’m sure Tony will be, too, once he knows.”

“’He will be,” Bruce said, confidently as he looked at Steve. “Let us try.”

Steve nodded, “Okay. What do you need from me?”

“Nothing but your permission for right now. Jarvis?” Bruce asked, looking up at the ceiling.

“I’ve already retrieved all of the S.H.I.E.L.D.’s medical files for Captain Rogers and put them on the secure server you and Sir share.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.” Bruce said. “May we include Megan on any discussions of what we find?”

“There’s no pressure, Steve,” she added, quickly. “It’s okay if you’d rather I—“

“Yes, include her,” Steve cut her off. “Four minds are better than three.” He turned to Bruce. “She has a Stark tablet, so security won’t be an issue as long as you use email. Both of our apartments are bugged, so don’t call.”

“Megan, your new tablet is in a package outside Captain Rogers’ quarters,” Jarvis told them. “I’ve copied everything from the old model and added access to the folder with the Captain’s medical files.”

“You need to stop spoiling me, Jarvis. I’m never going to survive back in D.C. without you if you keep this up,” she teased.

“Perhaps I am being too transparent,” he replied.

The smile reached Bruce’s eyes for the first time all morning. “Are you sure you want to keep working at S.H.I.E.L.D.? We could use a life scientist.”

“I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Tony last night: I don’t want to be that far away from Steve.”
“That wasn’t the only reason you gave him,” Bruce said, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

Megan shrugged. “I had to put it in terms he’d understand.” She looked at her watch, then to Steve, “Go get your shower and quit stalling. I found a Boston Market not far from Rebecca’s house, so we can pick that up to take to her place for lunch. Don’t forget your sling!”

He gave Bruce a look that said, “What can I do?” as he ran his fingers through his hair and headed for the elevator. Megan smiled as she watched him go. It was going to be so much fun to see him visit with Rebecca. She knew that once he relaxed, he’d enjoy himself.

“You’re good for him.” Bruce said quietly, pulling her from her reverie.

“Hmm?”

“I said you’re good for him. He’s been happier in recent months.”

Megan chewed on her lower lip as she studied her mug of tea. “He’s my friend. Even though the engagement isn’t real, I do care about him.”

“Are you sure it isn’t real? Because from where I’m sitting, the way you two feel about each other is pretty obvious.”

“He’s so far out of my league we’re not even playing the same game. I know my place, and it’s not here.” She got up and washed her mug in the kitchenette before throwing out her trash. She picked up the cup of tea Steve had brought her and tried not to notice how Bruce was studying her.

“Thanks for trying to develop drugs that work on him. If there is anything I can do to help, let me know. It was nice meeting you, Bruce,” she said as she hastily retreated from the lab before she dissolved in tears.

“My, can I help?” Jarvis asked once she was alone in the elevator.

She shook her head mutely. “I’ll be okay, Jarvis. I’m really tired today and that’s making me more sensitive. Last night was worth it, though. Speaking of which, where can I get some laundry detergent to hand wash the stockings and corset? And I also need to know where to take the dress and petticoats to get dry cleaned.”

“You can take everything to Ms. Potts’ dressing room and then no one will need to enter Captain Rogers’ quarters.”

“Hand washing takes five minutes in the sink, tops, Jarvis. I’m not too proud to do my own laundry. Seriously, I just need some Woolite. Is there any in the tower or do I need to go shopping?”

She could almost hear Jarvis sigh before he replied. “I shall ensure some detergent is delivered while you are at lunch.”

“Thanks, J. If you show me where to go, I’ll take care of the dress now and then drag Steve out of here before he finds some new reason to procrastinate.”

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“Can you hear me alright?” Steve’s voice asked into her left ear as he turned on the bike.
“How’d you manage that?” she asked, surprised at this new development.

“Tony likes to upgrade everything he can gets his hands on. In this case, he played with our helmets. At least this time, he asked me first. He’s getting better about that.”

Megan giggled as she put her arms around his waist in preparation for their departure. “How long did that take?”

“Natasha got his attention in one visit,” Steve explained as he drove the bike out of Stark tower and headed towards Brooklyn. “He’s been extra careful ever since. He means well, but he doesn’t always understand boundaries. We had a heated discussion about access to my quarters if I was going to use them. I’d rather clean it myself and know that other people are not poking around in my stuff. Jarvis always lets me know if someone needs access for a legitimate reason.”

“Jarvis is amazing. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it, but it would be really easy to get used to having him at my beck and call all the time. He seems to like the attention rather than resenting me for not looking stuff up myself.”

“He likes to help. I think that’s part of the personality Tony programmed him with and he’s never grown resentful of it. It would be easy to take advantage of him, except I don’t think many people really know about him. I think we sort of keep him from feeling superfluous or getting lonely.”

Megan squeezed him a bit tighter and changed the subject. “I like Bruce. I’m not sure what I expected, but he surprised me. I guess I thought he’d be more self-confident or something.”

“Being on the run from the government for so long made him wary. With the Hulk, he can’t ever let his guard down. He’s doing better now than when I first met him.”

“I’m glad. He seems like a good man who got a raw deal.”

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Megan smiled warmly as the apartment door opened. “Mrs. Miller, it’s good to see you again.”

“I think you can call me Rebecca now that you brought my brother home,” Rebecca said as she let Megan move past her to set the bags of food down on the floor.

Megan barely had time to take their bike helmets from Steve before Rebecca had wrapped her arms around him in a bear hug. “Move inside guys,” Megan said, letting them shuffle past her so she could shut the door. She took the food to kitchen table, pulled out her phone, and took a picture of the two of them.

Finally, Rebecca pulled away. She reached up and put her hand on Steve’s face. “Look at you, all healthy and muscular. What a fool you were to let them experiment on you just so you could follow James.” She shook her head scoldingly. “It’s good to see you, Steve,” she said before hugging him again. “It’s been so long. We all thought we’d lost both of you.”

“I tried to…” Steve’s voice broke.

Rebecca poked a scolding finger into his chest. “Don’t you dare feel guilty, you big idiot. He was your brother as much as mine. I know you’d have saved him if you could.”

“I keep telling him that,” Megan said as she started to unpack the food from the bags. “But he doesn’t listen. Nor will he wear the sling to hold his broken arm in place while it heals. He’s got a broken wrist, a broken humerus, and he still acts like he’s invincible” she added, reminding Steve
of the fabric he’d tucked into his jacket pocket.

“Then you’re as dumb as you are tall.” Rebecca said as she studied him. “Is that why you’ve stayed away so long? Thinking I blamed you?”

The look on Steve’s face was answer enough. Megan shook her head and started opening the different containers.

“It’s a good thing Ma’s not here, then. She’d tan your hide until it was worn out leather and then turn it into a pair of moccasins so she could stomp all over what was left.”

“She probably would,” Steve agreed as he grudgingly took out the sling and put it on. “Don’t I get credit for keeping the splint on my wrist?”

“No!” Megan and Rebecca answered together.

“As far as Ma, there’s no ‘probably’ about it,” Rebecca added as reached for Steve once more. “How long has it been since you saw me? From your perspective, I mean.”

“Four years. Two since I saw Bucky. It’s still raw, Becca, like it was yesterday. You barely reached my chin—“

“That hasn’t changed,” she teased.

Steve smiled sheepishly. “And now you’re all grown up. I missed so much.” Wistfully, he ran free his hand over her grey hair. “You still look like you, though.”

“You don’t, but I’ve gotten used to it from all the pictures I’ve been seeing. Come sit down so we can eat before the food gets cold.”

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Much later, as they lingered over dessert and coffee, the conversation moved away from Rebecca’s life to the war that was all too recent for Steve. “Can you tell me what happened? When we heard your plane went down, Ma figured James was lost, too. What happened?”

Megan sat quietly and listened as Steve told the story of the attack on the train and how it had ended with Bucky falling just as Steve was trying to pull him back on board. Rebecca had her hand wrapped around Steve’s tightly clenched fist, listening with tear-filled eyes as Steve spoke. Megan was pretty sure it was the first time Steve had told the whole story to anyone since the day it had happened and he’d filed the necessary reports. Once he got started, he just kept going. He spoke of discovering that he couldn’t get drunk as he tried to cope with Bucky’s loss, the comfort and wisdom Peggy had tried to impart when she found him in the bombed out remains of the pub, and the desperate battle to protect the citizens of New York from being killed by the weapons on board the Valkyrie. Megan watched Rebecca’s reactions as Steve talked.

The older woman was clearly moved by the story, and was extremely sensitive to Steve’s pain. “It’s too much weight for your shoulders, even though they’re broader now. You have to stop thinking you’re responsible for everything.”

“I keep telling him that, too.” Megan finally said. “Did he listen any better when you were growing
up?"

“I’m afraid not. If there was trouble to be found, Steve was in the thick of it and James wasn’t far behind. James always said Steve had more courage than sense. It must have shocked him when he learned you finally got the military to take you. He didn’t say much in his letters to us since he knew how worried we all were. He mostly asked how things were here.”

“Yeah,” Steve looked down at his coffee, “But he was in a bad way when I found him. It wasn’t until we got the team together that we both realized how much things had changed… and how much they hadn’t. We still found trouble. But all that practice fighting the bullies on the streets of Brooklyn helped us take on Hydra. We made a good team. And as good as the Avengers are, it’s not the same as Bucky and the Howlers. I really miss him, Becca.”

“We all do. But he’d be proud of you. And he’d be asking you when you’re going to get a ring on Megan’s finger here. You can’t let her get away.”

Megan felt her cheeks grow hot and looked at Steve, leaving it to him to decide what to say.

Steve never even looked up. “She can do a lot better than me, Becca. Between the danger and the press…”

Rebecca looked at Megan in shock. Megan just shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes, leading the older woman to cuff Steve lightly on the side of the head. “That’s from James. Someone has to knock some sense into you.” She turned to Megan, “Is he always this dumb?”

“He used to be worse. I’m making progress, but it’s slow going sometimes.” Privately, Megan was surprised to hear Steve say he was the one who had little to offer. It didn’t fit with how she saw the situation at all. “I guess I’ll have to drag him up here more often so you can have a go at him on a regular basis.”

“You do that.”

“I’m right here,” Steve reminded them.

“I did get taken out to dinner and a Broadway play last night.”

Rebecca smiled at that. “So there is hope for him.”

“I like to think so.”

Chapter End Notes

I remember when I thought this was going to be a short story. I also had no plans to introduce all of the Avengers... how things change! I don't know why I think I'm in charge of the story. Clearly, all I can do is listen to Captain Rogers' orders. ;-) I can't promise to go back to updating 2x a week, but I'm trying to pick up the pace again.
Later that afternoon, as Steve drove them towards his old Brooklyn neighborhood, Megan kept returning to the fact Steve and Bucky had been lost within a day of each other. For some reason, she hadn’t realized that before. Steve had gone up against Johann Schmidt a mere day after losing Bucky. In some ways, putting the plane in the water must have been a relief given the alternative of facing a future without his brother. She wasn’t second guessing that decision. She knew Steve wasn’t the type to quit easily and with Peggy on the radio, he must have tried to think of other options. But she also knew he had to have been exhausted, mentally and physically, by the time he’d gotten control of the plane. Whatever reserves he might have drawn on in other circumstances to explore additional options would have been depleted. He’d done his best under the circumstances and prepared to die. Waking in New York nearly seventy years later must have seemed especially cruel. It was no wonder Steve had struggled so much to adjust to his new life. He hadn’t even had a chance to grieve. There had been no time for even a private wake around a campfire with the Howling Commandos as they’d been busy planning for the next day’s attack. Steve had stolen a few hours alone in a bar, and then thrown himself back into the fighting. She hugged him tighter at the realization.

“What was that for?” he asked as they wove their way down narrow streets.

“Do I need a reason?”

“No, but you have a reason for everything you do. Everything okay?”

“I’m just worrying about you is all. How are you holding up?”

“Pretty well. Seeing Becca… it was good.” He pulled the bike over into a parking space and turned it off. “This is where it all began,” Steve gestured to the new apartment building across the street as he took of his helmet. “The building I grew up in was replaced awhile back. That’s where it was.”

Megan took off her helmet and leaned against him as he locked their helmets to the bike and put money into the parking meter. “At least you have a building to look at. The house I grew up in burned down after Mom sold it. The church next door bought the land from the owners to expand their parking lot.”

“I thought—“

“The house we stayed in was one she moved to later, after I left town. I didn’t show you the street I grew up on. I figured it could wait for another trip home.” She squinted in the bright sun as she looked up at him and brushed the hair from his forehead. “The point is I understand how it feels to see big changes to your childhood stomping ground. It’s disconcerting, to say the least.” She put her hand around his waist and hooked her thumb into a belt loop. “Walk with me. Show me your old haunts. Where did you go to school? Did Bucky live in the same building?”

Prompted by her questions and pretending the building was the one Steve had known, he led her on a path his feet knew well, telling her stories of times he and Bucky had gone that way to school. As they passed old store fronts, he’d mention what had been there and how those features had fit into daily life. He pointed out the alley where stickball was played, the hill where the wagon had crashed, the intersection that permitted one to decide whether to go to school or the library. He painted pictures with his words, to the point where Megan could almost hear the sounds of little Steve and Bucky playing with their friends.
He abruptly stopped when they arrived at his elementary school, now converted into an apartment complex catering to elderly individuals in need of some minimal assistance. “That’s weird.”

Megan nodded. “You can probably blame asbestos remediation. Lots of school buildings were sold and new ones built due to the costs of getting rid of the asbestos. But hey, you got a plaque.” She pointed to the side of the building where a small sign noted that this had once been the elementary school a certain Steve Rogers had attended.

“That’s weird, too.”

“Try visiting a parking lot. Let’s go around back.” Megan tugged his hand and they followed the sidewalk that wrapped around the corner building. What had once been a playground was now a small, gated park for the residents to enjoy. Paved paths wound around flower beds and ended at a gazebo. Two small fountains doubled as birdbaths. “This definitely beats a parking lot,” Megan repeated. “Tell me how the playground was laid out.”

Steve answered her questions, but she could tell his heart wasn’t in it. The changes felt too fresh. Pretending not to notice, she asked, “Where else did you hang out?”

“Joe’s Diner,” Steve answered without thinking. “Joe’s son Bobby was a grade ahead of us. Nice kid. His dad sometimes gave us a free milkshake. When it the weather was bad and business was slow, he’d let me sit in one of the booths and sketch or do school work while the grown-ups talked, especially in later years if Bucky was out and I was sick of staying home alone.” Steve’s walk had purpose now, though his eyes were focused on the past. “Mother worked such long hours at the hospital. Joe slipped me a meal or two more than once, always under the guise of testing a new dish or saying it was just going to get thrown out at close of business. He was a good man.” Steve drew up short, staring at the store front. “I don’t believe it.”

Megan followed his line of sight and saw the sign half-way down the next block. “Same sign?”

Steve nodded. “Just as I remember it. Come on.”

“Wait.” Megan stood firm and held him back. “Don’t get your hopes up too high. It’s been seventy years, Steve. That’s a lot of time to remodel. If they still serve food, we’ll get something to eat and you can tell me how it used to be. I want to hear all about it.”

He nodded, understanding her warning and why she was concerned. He’d let himself get caught up in the moment after seeing something familiar. Even so, he barely held himself to a walk as he pulled Megan along. He held the door for her and she heard his sharp intake of breath as he stopped d behind her and stared at the man behind the counter. “Bobby?”

The middle aged man’s brow furrowed as he studied the newcomers.

Megan turned to Steve, “Steve? You okay?”

“Steve?” the man behind the counter repeated. “Steve Rogers?” At Steve’s nod, he pulled out a cell phone, punched it, and held it to his ear. “Dad? Get Gramps down to the store pronto. Rogers came home.” After putting the phone back in his pocket, he came out and offered his hand. “I’m Trey.”

Steve shook his hand, looking at Trey in disbelief. “You look just like—”

“My grandfather. So I’ve been told. I’m Robert White the third. Senior and Junior are on their way. What can I get you in the meantime?”

Steve shook his head, looking around. “It’s just the same as I remember it.”
“Gramps wouldn’t have it any other way. Any time I talked about updating, I got lectured. I finally learned to shut up about it until I got old enough to appreciate his wisdom.”

Megan noticed the cell phone cameras coming out. “Sit down, Steve. Let me handle this.” She pushed him towards the counter where Trey was already putting out menus and pouring glasses of ice water for them. Megan looked around the room and took charge. “Yes, it’s Captain Rogers. If you give him some time to eat and catch up with some old friends, first, I promise you’ll have a chance to do a meet and greet. I’ll take pictures of you with him on your phones for you,” she told them as she made eye contact with as many of them as she could. “All we ask is that you hold off on the social media updates until after midnight tonight. If you want to post after that, go ahead. But the minute the paparazzi show up, we’re out of here. Agreed?”

Most of the patrons nodded. “Who are you?” one brave voice asked. Megan couldn’t identify the male, though she figured it was one of the trio sitting in the last booth.

“I’m the overprotective girlfriend.” She looked at her watch. “Give us a half hour. We’ll do the photos, and then he gets to hang out with his buddies without any cameras going off.”

“Deal,” a woman’s voice said. “Right kind of you,” another added.

Megan nodded her thanks and sat down to Steve’s left at the counter. It surprised her that he was willing to sit at the counter and not a booth where his back was protected.

Steve noticed her scrutiny. “Buck and I used to sit in these two seats,” he explained softly.

“Nicely done,” Trey complemented her with a voice too low for the other patrons to hear. “I’m sorry I called attention to you. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay. After the U.S.O. tour, I’m kind of used to it.”

Megan stuck out her hand. “I’m Megan, It’s nice to meet you.”

“Do you still make those burgers?” Steve asked Trey.


Steve started to protest but Megan put a hand on his shoulder to quiet him. “You have no idea how much this big guy eats even when he’s not healing broken bones. We’re paying for the food, Trey. Trust me, arguing with Steve is an exercise in frustration. Spare the rest of us the drama, please.” Trey hesitated, and she added, “He’ll go from polite to puppy dog eyes in no time. If that fails, he starts with the speeches. Spare us the spectacle, I’m begging you.”

Trey threw back his head and laughed. “Okay. You’ve convinced me. How many do you want?”

“Three. Double fries.”

Trey looked to Megan.

“A single order of the same and a chocolate milkshake. I see you make those the old fashioned way and I haven’t had one of those in ages.”

“Gramps will be thrilled to hear you appreciate a properly made milkshake. I’ll see if I can go calm the cook’s nerves. Holler if you need anything.”

Steve nodded and let his gaze wander over the walls. “It’s just like I remember, Megan. I swear I’m
fifteen again and waiting for Bucky to meet me here.”

She leaned close and kissed his healing shoulder. “Did you see the photos on the wall behind us?”

He spun around on his stool and saw what Megan had been referring to. Someone, probably in a tradition started by Joe and continued by his descendants, had hung photographs of all of the patrons who had served in the military. Each photograph had a caption in the matte that listed the soldier’s name, rank, and dates of service. Many were signed and had an updated photo in a smaller frame beneath the larger one, showing them visiting the store upon their return. Others, like Bucky’s, had yellow ribbons where an updated photo would be displayed, indicating they had given their life in service to their country. Steve’s photograph, showing him in his pre-serum basic training days, still had a yellow ribbon.

“I guess you’ll get an updated photo like the others.”

“I guess so.”

“And you’ll be breaking hearts for decades when the ladies see you in full color with a beard.”

Steve just rolled his eyes and turned back to the counter. “I haven’t heard any cameras since you made your announcement,” he murmured to her. “Thanks for that.”

She cleaned close to him again so they could talk softly. “Anytime. I’m sorry you were spotted so easily. Maybe when we’re out in public I should start calling you Grant since it won’t attract as much attention. I think calling you Steve is what did it.”

“It’s okay. I’m too well known now to expect to get away unrecognized. What I hate is how you get dragged into it.”

“I don’t mind it in situations like this. People get excited and they don’t think about what it’s like on the receiving end. I can step in and wrangle them without a second thought. I’m not looking forward to when the paparazzi start following me, but I’ll deal. It’s a small annoyance in the bigger scheme of things.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Will you stop saying that? You deserve more than the world can ever give you.” She put her head on his shoulder. “Tell me about one of the times you and Bucky sat here.”

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After they ate, Steve kept Megan’s promise and graciously posed with all of the patrons who wanted a photograph with him. He spent a few more minutes autographing various items and then sat back down at the counter to autograph the menus and pose for a picture for the restaurant wall. It was when Trey was taking that picture that Bobby senior and Junior arrived.

Steve hopped up from the stool and took the elder’s hands in his own. “It’s good to see you, Bobby.”

Trey snapped more pictures for the family as the old friends embraced and Steve was introduced to Junior. After a few minutes, Trey herded them to the booth closest to the back of the restaurant and turned the store’s sign to closed, getting up only to let the last guests out as they each finished their meals.
“You don’t need to close up, Trey,” Steve protested. “You can’t make money turning people away.”

“But I can’t serve liquor when we’re open, either,” Trey said as he brought out a bottle of whiskey and shot glasses. He pulled extra chairs over so he and the cook had a spot to sit and plopped himself down. “Is this your first time back to the neighborhood?” he asked as he poured.

“Second.” Steve answered. “I drove through right after I woke up. Too much had changed and I stayed away after that.”

“What brought you back?” Junior asked, looking at Megan like he knew she was the answer.

“I had some business in town yesterday. Today, Megan and I went to see Bucky’s sister Rebecca. I figured a short walk to show Megan around wouldn’t kill me. I didn’t realize this place was still here. You have no idea how good it is to see it unchanged.”

“To old friends,” Senior said as he raised his glass.

Megan joined the toast and took the smallest possible sip of her whiskey. It burned the whole way down her throat and she felt Steve nudge her shoulder with her own in silent appreciation of her willingness to play along. She leaned against him, listening as Steve and Bobby senior told stories of the old days.

From a back room, someone retrieved an album of photos taken in the diner and it was passed to Steve to catch him up on local news and gossip. At some point, Steve switched their shot glasses and finished off her whiskey for her so feelings wouldn’t be hurt that she hadn’t finished her serving.

The chirp of Steve’s phone broke the mood. He pulled it out and showed Megan. “Plane’s ready. They’re asking for an ETA.”

“You’re traveling on private planes now?” Senior teased.

“Stark express for this trip. It’s nicer than how S.H.I.E.L.D. hauls me around.”

“As long as they don’t let you pilot, I won’t complain,” Megan teased. “We all know what happened the last time you took the helm,” she added as she nudged him with an elbow.

The men all groaned. “That’s a low blow!” Trey said as they all winced while they laughed.

Steve shrugged. “She has a point. Seriously, though, we need to head out. We’re due back in D.C. tonight and it’s getting late. Do you have a pad and pen handy?”

Trey pulled out his order pad and pen and passed them to Steve.

Steve wrote for a moment. “That’s my cell phone number and mailing address,” he said as he slid the pad back to the middle of the table.

Megan pulled her own business card from her wallet and added her own cell phone number and home address to the back. “If he’s on a mission and radio-silent, you can always get in touch with me. Usually, I know how long he’s expected to be in the field.” She put her card on top of the pad.

Junior picked up her card and whistled softly. “Ph.D.?” He looked at Steve. “You did all right.”

“Yes, sir, I did,” Steve said as he stood up and offered Megan his hand. “Unfortunately, we really
have to be going. Thank you for this. I’ll stop back next time I’m in town.”

After another round of hugs and good-byes, Steve led Megan back to where he’d parked his bike. Before he unlocked their helmets, he pulled her into a hug. “Thank you. Today was…. perfect doesn’t come close to describing it.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand. “It’s good to see you happy.”

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As they got off the plane at the airport in D.C., Megan took Steve’s arm before he could head for his bike, which was already unloaded and waiting on the tarmac behind the Stark-owned limousine. “Follow me to my place, okay? After Happy drops me off, I want to get an overnight bag packed and come with you.”

“Okay.”

Megan saw the unspoken question in his eyes. “You just had a great day. I don’t think it should end with you being totally alone.”

He nodded. “I’m okay, but you’re always welcome.”

“I also think it’s better if I’m at your place when those photos go viral on the internet tonight,” Megan added. That wasn’t her prime motivation, but if it made Steve feel less like she was hovering and more like he was the one doing the protecting, she was willing to add that extra bit of justification.

She didn’t know how many times she’d been photographed in those first few minutes before she’d taken charge, and while she had done her best to be on the back side of all of the cameras, she knew the chances were good her face would appear on at least some social media sites. That might actually help in the campaign to fool her attackers, and she certainly wasn’t ashamed to be seen with Steve in public. But it was still disconcerting to think that she might be targeted by tabloid photographers in the near future. Being near Steve made her feel safe. If her public statement that she was Steve’s girlfriend went viral tonight, she’d rather wake in his bed than her own.

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Shortly before she turned out the bedside lamp and went to sleep, Megan sent an email to Jarvis alerting him to the potential firestorm on social media. He promised to monitor the situation and alert both of them if their visit to Brooklyn went viral. Try as she might to deny it, something about their relationship had changed over the weekend. She was getting to know his world and become a part of it. She also knew she didn’t really belong in that world. There was no place for someone like her in a peer group of superheroes and geniuses. But when Steve pulled her close so she’d stop tossing and turning, her mind quieted. How was she supposed to walk away from this when he owned her heart?
When they woke early in the morning, Jarvis reported that their visit to Brooklyn had gotten some attention, but did not seem to be attracting unusual levels of interest. He promised to continue monitoring the situation and update them if the situation changed. Megan wasn't sure how she felt about the lack of news. On the one hand, it was a welcome reprieve she was truly grateful for. On the other, it was just a reprieve. She knew that it wasn't going to last forever. Waiting for the change was almost as stressful as dealing with it. A part of her just wanted to get it over with so they could focus on managing the fallout.

Steve didn't seem concerned. Maybe he had grown more accustomed to the attention than she gave him credit for. He just shrugged and said it was beyond their control as he passed her a mug of hot tea and told her to get her shower first.

Megan let the hot water pound on her back as she struggled to wake up. She was desperately short on sleep, though she had slept soundly in Steve's arms. Maybe it was just the growing dread of the Tuesday deadline. Her attackers had not said how they wanted her to deliver the samples, only that she had to produce them. It made her uneasy to be at their mercy. Her unease was just proof that she didn't belong in this world Steve inhabited. She was ill equipped to cope with something Steve simply accepted. Setting him free to find a true life partner who could give him the support he needed was going to be the most selfless thing she'd ever done, and she wasn't sure she was strong enough to face it. Nothing was simple anymore.

A knock at the door jarred her from her stupor. "You all right?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, I'll be done in second," she promised as she hurried to turn off the water and towel herself dry. She just wanted to crawl back into his bed and sleep. Instead, she had to go to work and continue her efforts to figure out what was really going on at S.H.I.E.L.D. Hastily, she got dressed and pulled her hair up in a messy ponytail. It wasn't like the cells she was going to be working with today were going to care how she looked.

Steve gave her a worried look when she finally emerged. "I thought you were trying to drain the Potomac," he teased.

"No, just the Atlantic ocean," she fired back, trying to keep the mood light. "Sorry I took so long."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing a sleep marathon won't fix. I'll be okay," she assured him while willing herself to believe it.

He wasn't convinced, though he didn't say anything more about it as he headed for the shower.

She knew that was probably due to the bugs in his apartment. She wasn't used to the level of caring and consideration he showed her on a daily basis. Little things like making tea for her were things Randy had never done and she'd never expected him to. Steve did things because he wanted to, not because he expected something in return or as part of a campaign to earn her affection. It was just the way he was. And it was another reminder of how little she had to offer him in return. He gave, she took. It was hardly a balanced relationship. And today, she had to ask for more as they ran up
against tomorrow's deadline, despite having no directions on how to deliver the goods.

Megan finished her oatmeal in a stupor and then read random articles on the internet while she waited for Steve to be ready. She wanted to talk to Jarvis, but the thought of typing everything out was too exhausting.

She started violently when Steve pressed a kiss to her nape.

"Sorry, I though you heard me," he apologized.

Megan fought back tears. "It's okay," she said, burying her head in the curve of his shoulder. "You ready to go?"

His hands were warm and strong as he held her. "All set." He lowered his voice so his breath was just a ghost of a whisper in her ear. "Sample's in your lunch bag just in case someone at S.H.I.E.L.D. takes it," he murmured in her ear. He added in his normal voice, "You should leave early today and go straight to bed when you get home."

"I might do that. Once I get the cells processed this morning, I'll see what I can do to lighten my schedule." She yawned. "I shouldn't be this tired."

"You've tossed and turned the last two nights. Even when you were asleep you haven't been resting."

"I've got a lot on my mind."

He just held her and rubbed her back, not needing words to let her know he cared. That broke through the last of Megan's faltering defenses, and she cried all over his shirt while he held her. When she finally quieted, he slung their lunch bags over his shoulder and led her to the car. Seeing her start to protest, he just shrugged and smiled softly. "It'll dry."

In Megan's mind, it was just more proof that she didn't deserve him.

"I want to know why you are dating Captain America," a voice behind her said shortly before lunch.

Megan cursed as she flipped the small petri dish she was aspiring medium from upside down in the hood. "What the &$!%& is wrong with you people always sneaking up someone in the hood?" She looked over her shoulder and confirmed what her gut reaction to the voice had told her. "You."

General Ross just glared at her. "You didn't answer my question."

"I'll meet you in Director Fury's office in ten minutes. And get the hell out of my lab unless you have safety glasses on. Did you not see the sign on the door or can't you read?" Megan snapped as she started stacking up the thirty-five millimeter diameter plates to return to the incubator. The current experiment was trashed, but it might be worth it if it meant she finally got some answers.

"Don't take that tone with me, Dr. Buchwald."

Megan stood up and moved into his personal space. "Get out of my lab," Megan said, enunciating every word. They stood eye to eye, glaring at each other.

"Megan, I need—" Emma said, breaking off as she saw the general. "You need to wear safety glasses in this laboratory, sir."
General Ross looked away first, "I apologize, Doctor." He turned back to Megan, "We're not done."

"We're just getting started, General."

She turned her back on him dismissively and went back to cleaning up from her interrupted experiment. She stopped at her desk long enough to send Steve a text to get to Fury's office ASAP. She also picked up her notebook and the assemblage of notes she'd been working on at home. Her Stark tablet was in her purse and she had no intention of getting it out and giving Director Fury ideas about taking it from her. As an afterthought, she logged into the SHIELD website and printed out an employee manual. Megan allowed herself a detour to the restroom to redo her pony tail and make sure she looked as presentable as she could. This was not going to be fun and she'd never expected to do it today, but she'd snapped when General Ross approached her. Maybe it was for the best.

By the time she reached Director Fury's office, she was outwardly calm and collected. She checked in with Agent Hill and then marched into Fury's office, not a bit surprised to see General Ross sitting in a chair as if he were there for a friendly chat.

Megan slammed the freshly printed copy of the S.H.I.E.L.D. employee handbook on Nick's desk. "There is nothing in this that gives General Ross the right to inquire about my private life. I want an explanation for his unprofessional line of questioning.

"She's dating Captain Rogers."

"Maybe I'm just using him for sex! It doesn't matter if we're dating, sleeping together, married, or not speaking. It's none of your business what I do with my body and time outside of work."

General Ross just glared at her while he directed his comments to Director Fury. "He's the product of Project Rebirth and as such, is property of the U.S. Army."

"Captain Steve Rogers is still a citizen, General. His constitutional rights supersede everything else." Megan fired back.

Ross got to his feet and tried to intimidate her with his stance and proximity. "You don't get to talk to me that way, Dr. Buchwald. I let it go downstairs but that's the last time—"

"I'd appreciate you not taking that tone with my fiancée, General," Steve said, striding into the room. "What's going on?"

"I'm here to make a report to Director Fury about what I've discovered about the S.H.I.E.L.D research program. General Ross is here to for a refresher course about basic rights and constitutional law. You're here because this involves you, too."

"Fiancée? Director, she can't—"

"Sit down, General." Nick said sharply. "Doctor?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Megan saw Steve sit down in an empty chair. Knowing he had her back gave her confidence. "Before we begin, I assume that as Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., you have full clearance to hear about my work. Given the frequency that General Ross has been seen around my lab, I assume he's either aware of the work I'm doing or has clearance to learn about it. Am I correct?"

Nick nodded curtly as he leaned back in his chair and studied her.
Megan nodded back. "Right then. That leaves Captain Rogers. I have no idea what his level of clearance is, so I'm invoking the Henretta Lacks clause.

"The what clause?" General Ross broke in. "For the record, it's not your lab!"

"Continue, Doctor." Fury said, cutting off Ross's protests.

"Do you have a dry erase board stashed in here somewhere?" Megan asked, looking around. Nick pressed a button and a panel in the wall moved back, exposing a touch screen similar to the ones she'd seen in Stark tower. In a tray below the screen there was a stylus. "I'll lend you the book later," Megan offered, turning her back on the general.

She started writing with the stylus across the top of the virtual board creating columns titled primary, transformed. On the left side, she started listing different cell lines. When she was finished, she turned to her audience of three. Steve was smiling slightly at her, knowing that a science lesson was on the agenda.

"How much do you know about primary and transformed cell lines?" Megan asked Director Fury and General Ross.

"Assume I know nothing and explain from there," Nick said as he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

Megan nodded slightly. "Primary cells are derived straight from the host body. They play by the rules. They understand how to get along with their neighbors and not grow over the top of them. Their genetic material is unchanged from the source and while they will grow for a time, eventually they stop dividing and die. Transformed cells, in contrast, are rogue agents. In a host, they would cause cancer. In a petri dish, these cells behave very badly. They accumulate genetic abnormalities, grow overtop of neighboring cells, don't much care if they have a substrate to attach to, and will continue to divide as long as there are ample raw materials. We chemically treat them to remove them from the plates, dilute then, and seed them into new plates with new food and no waste. As long as we passage them every few days, they'll divide forever. Questions?"

Seeing they were still with her, or plotting her fate in the case of General Ross, she turned back to the board and started filling in the first few rows of the grid, ticking off how each cell line she'd listed behaved. "These are well characterized cells that all life scientists are familiar with. I've filled in the grid so you can see how easily we can classify cell lines into one category or the other. Their traits are clear. Now we get to the reason for this meeting." She started listing new cell lines: SGRkid, SGRhep, SGRlym, SGRskmc, SGRbuc, and MLBbuc.

"The first five I've listed here are lines I've been told to characterize. Once the general profiles were complete, I was instructed to focus on telomerase activity. Because when you dig into the nuts and bolts of why primary and transformed cells are different, one of the differences is telomerase activity. I wouldn't have thought much of it except for one thing. The SGR cells don't act like normal transformed cells, nor do they act like normal primary cells. The SGR cells still remember their manners, but they also divide indefinitely. I've passaged the SGRkid cells twice a week since my first week here and they still behave like primary cells except for the fact they don't die. One key to that is their telomerase activity. And yes, figuring out why they behave despite abnormal telomerase activity is a likely tool in understanding all sorts of therapies and treatments for cancer and an assortment of disorders."

"I got suspicious, especially since the cell lines are all named with his initials and I asked Steve if he'd ever donated cells for laboratory analysis aside from routine bloodwork. He said he hadn't. So I asked Steve for a buccal sample—check cells—and did some DNA fingerprinting of these
different cells lines, along with a control buccal sample of my own cells." Megan pointed to the MLBbuc label. "Imagine my lack of surprise at the results. It confirmed my worst suspicions: the cells I was tasked with characterizing are kidney, liver, lymphatic, and skeletal muscle cells taken from Captain Rogers without his informed consent. Horrified doesn't begin to describe my reaction. But telomerase is important in understanding cancer, and I know Steve well enough to know that he would probably sign off on any work being done with his cells in the name of helping people that are suffering, so I've held my tongue."

"What is DNA fingerprinting and who authorized you to do that analysis?" General Ross demanded.

"It's a very simple method for matching cells to their source individual. I authorized it myself." Megan pulled a twenty dollar bill from her pocket and slapped it down on Director Fury's desk. "That should more than cover the reagents and consumables I used. Keep the change."

She saw a smile tug on the corner of Steve's mouth and looked away from him so she didn't lose any of her righteous anger. She needed that fury to keep her from breaking down right there. The headache she'd battled all morning was another distraction, though one she could do without.

"I've put up and shut up for a long time. But a couple of weeks ago, I found an assignment on my desk that changed everything. I've been told to use my virology background in some pretty disturbing ways. Since that assignment arrived, I've been doing a lot of reading of the literature in my own time to make sure I've got a good grasp of the issues and any potential benefits to the project. Specifically, I've been asked to develop a way to load the genes of this telomerase regulatory pathway into a lentiviral vector modified to specifically target connective and muscular tissues. To my knowledge, S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't do cancer research. This isn't N.I.H. So I got to wondering, just what is this program is trying to accomplish? And why is General Ross so obsessed with this project?"

She paused and put the stylus back into its holder. "I'm not Dr. Esrkine, but if I were trying to find a way to replicate his results with a completely different approach, I'd certainly be looking into gene therapy. Setting aside all of the ethical issues of doing this sort of work on healthy human subjects, I have to strongly protest the rush. We don't understand how the serum works in Steve's body and we sure as hell don't know all of the alterations to the telomerase and apoptotic pathways that keep his cells in a state of constant turnover without becoming cancerous. About all we do know is this is probably the mechanism that keeps him eating frequent and large meals to sustain a healthy weight. Even then, that's just a hypothesis. It would explain his rapid healing abilities, but it doesn't explain why he hasn't succumbed to a million types of cancers. Without his permission, I'm not willing to go digging for those answers, either," Megan finished, leaning against the wall beside the screen.

"Back up a minute, Dr. Buchwald," Nick interrupted her. "What's telomerase? And a-pop whatever?"

"Apoptosis, also known as programmed cell death," Steve explained.

Nick raised his eyebrow.

"So now you're a science expert, too?" General Ross added in a snide tone.

"I never said I was an expert. Megan has been helping me catch up on all the changes in biology since I was in school. Anyone with a basic understanding of modern biology should know what telomerase and apoptosis are." Steve got up and went over to the small bookshelf Nick kept in a corner of his office. "May I?"
Nick nodded permission and Steve took a thick, hardbound book off of the shelf and returned to his seat. "As Megan explained it to me, each of our chromosomes is like this book, including the way it's broken down into chapters, paragraphs, sentences, and words. Cells have to copy the entire thing perfectly every time they get ready to divide. If you wanted to do that with this book, the easiest way would be to cut off the spine and feed the loose pages through a photocopier machine and put a new cover on it when it's done. Let's pretend that doing that whole process removed the cover and the first and last five pages of the book and left them lying on the floor. At first, you'd only lose blank paper or the title pages, but if you do it often enough, you'd start losing the text in the first and last chapter.

"In cells that don't continually divide, it's not a problem. In fact, they notice they're going to start stripping away text and that's what tells them to stop dividing and focus on doing their jobs. But other cells have to divide our whole lives. That's where telomerase comes in. It's an enzyme that is only turned on in cells that keep dividing and it has the job of adding new blank pages to the front and back of the book every time it's copied."

"…so the cell never starts to lose the first and last chapters." Nick added.

"Exactly." Steve confirmed. "Telomerase is incorrectly turned on in cancer cells. That's one way they keep dividing indefinitely. But cells have back-up systems to try to compensate. One of those is programmed cell death. When a cell is damaged beyond repair or otherwise out of control, it's supposed to suicide. Apoptosis."

"Makes sense," Nick commented thoughtfully. "So putting this telomerase into a vector would be bad, because it could reprogram the wrong cells into dividing?"

Megan smiled at Steve while answering Nick. He'd worked hard to catch up in the life sciences and it was wonderful to see him using that knowledge to prove he was more than a hired gun. "You've got it. Remember, this is just one piece of a much larger, more complex puzzle we don't completely understand. Cells have all sorts of checks and balances built in. Understanding how this process was altered in Steve's cells may very well help us better understand how some cancers develop since it might alert us to pathways we didn't notice before. But putting the template for telomerase enzyme into an infectious vehicle like a lentivirus and targeting half the tissue types in the human body is foolhardy. You may as well give a cranky toddler the controls to a nuclear bomb."

Megan glared at General Ross. "If you're trying to create another super-soldier, this is a reckless way to do it. And if you're trying to create a biological weapon to cause cancers in untold millions of a target population, I find that even scarier. I won't be a part of it. Your little foray into the lab today was the last straw. I'm done with this project."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Your name, if you have forgotten it, is General Ross. You like to dress up with your pretty ribbons and shiny shoes so you can stomp around bullying people in the name of keeping citizens safe. I'm one of those voting citizens and frankly, you don't make me feel safe at all. I've never served in the military or fought in a war. But I also know that there are other ways to serve my country and that's what I'm doing right now by speaking up against something I know to be very, very wrong.

"I can make sure you never work in this town again no matter what freak of science you end up married to."

"Is that supposed to be a threat? If so, you obviously earned an F in threatening 101. If working in this town means doing unethical research for people like you, I'm willing to leave. I walked into
this office today fully expecting to leave without a job. If you have someone fetch my purse and my lab coat, I'll be on my way. I hear Stark Industries is hiring. Mr. Stark has already made me an offer. I turned him down, but I am confident he'll do so again if he learns I'm unemployed. General, if you want to play 'mine's bigger than yours,' go ahead. Mine's definitely bigger. It's just not permanently attached and poisoning my thinking. Furthermore, with the Avengers on my side, I have several more of them."

"Take a seat, Doctor." Fury told her. Megan considered him for a moment, then nodded, perching herself on the front edge of a chair. "General, I'll meet with you tomorrow to discuss the future of that program. Captain, you're done here, unless Dr. Buchwald has more information about her research to share."

"Actually, I do."


"Tell me she's wrong, Nick."

"I can't do that. You have to understand, Cap, that running S.H.I.E.L.D. is a balancing act. I'm not in charge of everything that happens here and I can't always stop every program. What I can do is tell the Council that Captain America is threatening to walk out unless this particular program is shut down."

"Do so," Steve said, picking up on Nick's hint.

"Dr. Buchwald, what other bad news do you have for us?"

"They've sequenced your genome, Steve. And they're working on your proteome."

"English, Doctor." Nick snapped.

Megan sat back in her chair, feeling far less threatened now that General Ross was gone. "A cell is the basic building block of life and our body is made up of cells. Inside each cell, there is a DNA sequence, in our case, twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. It acts like a master cookbook. Every cell in the body has an identical copy of that cookbook which we call the genome. What makes each cell different from another is the recipes it prepares. Some recipes are universal, say... gravy. So every cell in your body uses the recipe for gravy. But other are specific for the cell. Skin cells may make chicken noodle soup while the cells lining of you mouth make chicken broth. Your liver cooks up spaghetti and you leg muscles specialize in desserts. The proteome is the list of dishes that each cell actually prepares from that universal cookbook.

"Project Rebirth changed Steve's genome, and thus his proteome. Not only did his cookbook get new recipes added to it, but some of those were used by his cells, resulting in his increased metabolism, athletic ability, etc. Now that his genome has been sequenced, it's going to be a lot easier to figure out what changes Project Rebirth introduced. If anyone finds any pre-serum tissue samples in storage somewhere, a before and after comparison will be that much simpler. Hopefully, no such samples exist."

Megan made a mental note to ask Steve if his mother had saved his baby teeth like her own mother had done. If so, they were going to have to either destroy them or store them in a secure location for the future.

"Have ever considered teaching, Dr. Buchwald?" Nick asked her.
Megan shook her head, "I don't have the temperament for it."

"I disagree," Steve said. "You're very patient."

Megan smiled a little, flattered by his opinion of her, but she shook her head again. "I don't have the temperament to deal with students who don't want to be there. There is a large proportion of college students who are there because they think they should be, not because they want to learn."

"How about congressmen?"

"What about them?"

"Effectively immediately, I'm putting you in charge of all life science briefings to the Council and Congress. You'll need to have a birds-eye view of what goes on here at S.H.I.E.L.D., so you're going to have to take a new position as associate director of life sciences research."

Megan just sat there, slack jawed. "Excuse me?"

"I need you to step-up as my new associate director of life sciences research. I'm not a stupid person, but I'm not a scientist. In ten minutes, you explained two complex, highly questionable projects in terms I actually understood the very first time. I want you to keep doing what you just did, but on behalf of S.H.I.E.L.D. to Congress and the Council. Director Hill will work on getting you security clearances. If there are any skeletons in your closet, I need to know about them now."

Megan shook her head again, still stunned. "No skeletons. But… I'm not… I don't." She turned to Steve, "What the hell just happened?"

Nick smiled a little bit. "You clearly have no problems speaking truth to power. You keep marching into my office and telling me what you think without concern for how it will affect your own career. I need people like that on my team. I won't always agree with you, but I do listen. If General Ross is really trying to restart Project Rebirth, I'm shutting him down. If he has a better explanation about what he's got going on down there, I'll listen to what it is. But you're going to make sure I understand it. Cap gets a vote on how his own body gets studied. Got it?"

Megan nodded mutely.

"Good. Go see Hill and make sure she has all your info. You'll need an office. She'll connect you with the right people to get space assigned."

"Do you have any idea how much this is doing to disrupt the power dynamics down in the lab area? I've only been here a few months and came in on a temporary contract."

"Welcome to Washington, Dr. Buchwald. Disrupting power dynamics goes with the territory. Are you up to the challenge?"

"All I can promise is that I'll do my best. If you ultimately decide my best isn't good enough, no hard feelings."

"I have hard feelings! Do you have any idea how much paperwork you just generated? I hate paperwork. Now go bug Hill before I change my mind." Nick's tone was gruff, but his eye twinkled.

"I assume she gets a raise with her new position, correct?" Steve asked quietly as he stood up and held his hand out to Megan.
She took it and let him pull her to her feet. It would be really nice if her knees quit shaking.

"Did you honestly think I was going to cut her salary in half, Captain? Go save some kittens from a tree or something. I've got a new stack of paperwork to do. Now get out of my office!"

"Just checking, because after we sign her up for a fast-track concealed-carry permit, I'm taking her shopping."

"What?" Megan was still stuck on her new promotion.

"Shopping. You're buying yourself a real bed, you're getting a security system installed, and you're going to buy a saddle that fits you. Once you pick a gun at the range, we'll also get you your own, unless you already have a handgun." He looked at her inquiringly as he took her elbow and started guiding her towards the door.

"Unless you count Nerf toys, I've never even fired a gun. I don't need…." She shook her head, trying to get the cobwebs out of her brain. She latched on to the one comment she'd understood. "Steve, a custom saddle costs four grand."

"Then I'll buy it for you. If want to improve your riding, a saddle that fits you is going to help."

As Steve changed tactics and put his hand on the small of her back, she threw Nick an astonished look over her shoulder. Part of her brain noticed he was actually smiling.

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While they waited for Agent Hill to return from a quick trip to the restroom, they sat down in a waiting area. Megan leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, "I made a real enemy out of General Ross today. Make sure my funeral is nice, okay?"

"I'm starting to understand how Bucky felt all those times he found me on the losing end of a fight."

"I really did it this time. I've got to do a better job of controlling my mouth when I'm angry."

Steve just laughed. "Good luck with that. I never did. The stories Colonel Philips could tell you… let's just say that's something you and I have in common." He smiled at her. "You should be proud of yourself. Not many people would do what you did today."

"Mention that at my funeral, too, okay?"

Chapter End Notes

AN: Some of the A plot is starting to come together at last. I've had this scene written for ages and ages, so it's nice to finally have the showdown with Ross out there for the rest of you to see. Megan has a lot on her plate right now, and her work life is going to get more interesting.

It may be at least a week before I update again. Work has been hectic and exhausting, to the point where my buffer is gone. Don't worry, though, my mother is now reading
and begging for updates. She can apply pressure in ways the rest of you cannot... so I will continue to post as fast as humanly possible. :-} Unfortunately, i still require sleep and cannot write anything coherent the end of a long day.

On a separate note, if anyone is a handgun expert and wants to give me handgun 101 /answer some basic questions for me, shoot me a PM.
Barton

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint caught up to them in Megan’s new office. Steve shook Clint’s hand, kissed Megan’s forehead, and told her, “Natasha and I are going lay a false trail. Clint’s taking you home so you can get some sleep. Text if you need me. Otherwise, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Ready?” Clint asked her as she watched Steve leave, stunned at this turn of events.

“What’s going on?” she finally asked.

“Your trip to New York went viral. I’ll tell you the rest in the car. Let’s get your purse and get you home.”

Megan nodded, still reeling from the day’s events. She trusted Steve and Clint, though, so she quietly fetched her belongings and let him lead her to his car.

Once Clint started the engine, he started laughing. “I caught your meeting in Fury’s office. I damn near broke a rib holding back laughter.”

“You saw that?”

Clint nodded as he smoothly drove out of the parking garage and across the Roosevelt bridge. “Didn’t you see Nick’s new nameplate? I put it on his desk over the weekend and put a camera and mike in the ceiling to catch the show. I was in my office catching up on paperwork and monitoring his office when you barged in and took charge. Your visit to Brooklyn went viral around lunchtime, by the way. Ross is ranting to anyone in at S.H.I.E.L.D. who will listen about your engagement to Cap. Natasha suggested getting you home before the vultures find you. Right now, they only know your first name. Cap and Nat are going to make sure the press follow his car for awhile. He’s also alerted your family and Stark has the security team ready to intervene as needed.”

“Crap.”

Clint patted her knee and threaded the car though traffic. “Food first. Then I’ll take you home. You want to tell me what’s really bothering you?”

“What do you mean?”

He just gave her a quick look of disbelief and shook his head. “You’re smarter than that, Megan. You knew it was going to go viral which is why you asked everyone in the diner to delay until midnight. Something has you waiting for the other shoe to drop and it’s been bugging you for days. Cap’s noticed and he’s worried, too. Are you still planning on walking away when the dust settles?”

“I have to since that’s what is best for him. He deserves having someone put him first for once.”

“Damnit, I hate being right,” Clint muttered under his breath. “If you want to put him first, you need to stick around. Marry him for real and stop pretending you don’t love him.”

“I’m not pretending! He knows I love him. That’s the problem.” Megan wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand and stared out the passenger side window.
“Fast food takeout okay? You don’t look equal to a public appearance at the moment.”

She nodded, longing to just go home and sleep and have the world disappear for a few months. Clint sighed and she heard him mutter that Laura could do this better, but she was too tired to pursue the topic.

“There are a lot of adjectives used to describe Cap since they found him in the ice. Happy wasn’t ever one of them until you showed up. He needs you.”

“He needs someone. I was in the right place at the right time. Now that he’s settling in, he’ll find someone who fits him better than I ever will.”

“You’re wrong. Drop the inferiority complex for a minute and look at the situation clearly.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not. You’ve convinced yourself you don’t deserve him and you refuse to consider that you might be wrong. You’re exactly what he needs.”

Megan just shook her head and Clint let the matter drop while he pulled into an Arby’s drive through and took her order. He parked the car and handed her a bag of food before devouring his own sandwich in minutes. “Eat,” he ordered when he saw her picking at her fries. “You think you don’t deserve him. I get that. But in case you hadn’t noticed, the world went nuts back in 2011. Now we have aliens and demigods and magic and hundred-year-old super soldiers running around. People like you and me? We just have to adapt.”

“I’m nothing like you. You were attacked by Loki and back in the fray in New York right after. The only thing I’ve ever killed is cells in a petri dish.”

“I’m a government agent. Fighting is what I’ve been trained to do. Granted, normally it’s in covert missions and assassinations, not combat against the Chitauri. But after the attack on the helicarrier, I was needed to get Cap and Natasha to New York. Those of us who were still standing had a responsibility to fight. While I can’t hold a candle to someone like Cap or Thor in terms of strength, I do know how to fight despite lousy odds. My point is that your normalcy is what Cap needs. You ground him. You see the guy behind the shield. Not many people do.”

“No one gives him a chance.”

“You did. People think he’s idealistic and sees everything in black and white. You know better. He sees all the shades of grey but refuses to compromise his sense of right and wrong. When pushed to choose between shades of grey, he’ll find the side closest to good every time and he’ll keep looking for an even better option. He’ll sacrifice himself for his team or his mission but never expects anyone to sacrifice for him. Then you swoop in and bully him into taking care of himself and remind him what he’s fighting for.”

“Anyone would—“

“'You do,’ he snapped as he cut her off. ‘He’s told me. He came back from that last mission pretty banged up, and not just physically. He said he half-expected you to suggest he quit S.H.I.E.L.D. altogether.’ Clint smiled a bit and added, ‘It never even occurred to you, did it?’”

Megan shook her head.

“Don’t you see that the things he values most are the traits you both share? You both hate bullies. You both will sacrifice anything to protect the innocent. In your case, you’re protecting your
nephews. You told General Ross to take a hike and made it clear to Director Fury that you’re not going to compromise your values. Cap hasn’t said it in so many words, but I know he’s terrified that when this is all over, you’re going to walk away and end things. He’ll try to blame it on the press and the pressures of being public as a coping mechanism, but if you walk away from Cap now, you might break him in ways that can’t be repaired. He loves you, Megan, and if you love him, you’ll make sure he knows you’re not going anywhere. It’s not about what you both think you deserve, it’s about appreciating what you each offer. I’ve got blessings in my life that I’ll never be able to earn my way to deserving. That’s all the more reason to hold tight to them and do my best to try to be worthy.”

Clint wrapped up his trash and stuffed it into the empty takeout bag. “Just so you know, I’m camping on your floor tonight. I’ve got gear in the trunk. Right now, you need to sleep and let us take care of the press. Your job is to keep Cap’s head on straight and keep helping him adjust to the present day. There’s a storm coming none of us can predict and we need every member of the team to be in top form to see it through.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on, but Natasha’s seeing the same thing. There are changes coming, maybe bigger ones than finding out the Norse gods are real. And if we’re right, Cap’s going to need you more than ever. Now, speaking of more important things, do you have more pies in your freezer? If you do, I’m picking up some ice cream on the way.”

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Once home, Megan checked her phone and saw all of the messages from Jarvis. She was going to have to start carrying her phone on her person at work and stop leaving it locked in her desk. She got out her tablet and typed a quick apology so he’d stop fretting. It was clear that he’d become increasingly concerned at her silence. Even though she knew he was an A.I., she still had a mental picture of him pacing the floors of Stark tower, chewing his fingernails to the quick as he worried about her. She sent him a message to that effect and he sent back a picture of a man’s perfectly manicured hands and a note that if he had them, he’d never chew his nails.

“Barton, or Clint as he’d told her to call him, made himself at home in her kitchen while she changed into a nightgown and opened up her bed. He’d already set up his own sleeping bag in front of her door and checked the view from every window in her apartment before drawing her blinds and triple-checking the locks. He approved of her living on the third floor. Their only disagreement had been over her white noise machine. She insisted on her needing it to sleep. She had learned to do without it when spending the night with Steve, but she didn’t think she’d be able to block out the daytime sounds without its help, especially with Clint in her apartment.

“Are you seriously going to just sit here and watch me sleep all afternoon and evening?” she asked as she crawled into bed, nearly too tired to care how strange this all was. He was sitting at her drop-leaf table, cleaning his guns and sharpening his knives while a pie baked in the oven.

“Nope. I plan to let my inner bookslut out to play. I never got a chance to do more than glance at your shelves last week.”

“I knew I liked you for a reason.”

“Books don’t let you down like people can. Go to sleep, Megan. I’ve got your back.”

Chapter End Notes
I just got back from seeing Age of Ultron with the family (May 2). WOW. My head is spinning. There was too much to absorb all at once. I think the movie would have been better with another 20 minutes or so added back in to slow down the pace and let us breathe. I need to see it again and take notes somehow. When is the DVD going to be out?

Stop reading here if you want to avoid spoilers.

Last Chance to avoid spoilers.

Okay: My take on the movie: The only thing that didn’t ring true for me was the Nat/Bruce storyline. It felt forced and I didn’t see the chemistry between them. The rest of my family agreed.

I was very pleased that this scene with Clint (written before I saw the movie) felt like something his character would say/do. It was nice to see the real Hawkeye and I’m glad Clint’s character got some significant development on the big screen.

I’m devastated by Jarvis’ fate. I love Jarvis and I’m so upset that his memories have been lost. Megan certainly will be upset, too, when she learns he is gone.

As far as what I had in mind for Megan and Steve, I think it still works (fingers crossed). My original plan was to end Roots and Anchors shortly after the ending of the Winter Soldier. I can still do that with my intended ending and not mess up anything in terms of movie continuity for Avengers: Age of Ultron. I can even see room for some sequel vignettes that tie in with the new movie and the events between Winter Soldier and Age of Ultron. But my first task is to finish the current beast. Remember, it was supposed to be a little short story to give Steve a chance to get his things from Rebecca and XXXX (redacted since you have not seen that yet). It took on a life of its own and Megan insisted on taking charge of the whole mess. Who knows what the “vignettes” will turn into?

I have crossed my fingers that I can go on a writing binge tomorrow (day off) and post something again mid-week. I’ll do my best. Survival job is physically exhausting and involves very long days… so I cannot promise anything more than my best attempts.
Showdown

Megan relaxed under her blankets, comforted by Clint's presence despite the inherent awkwardness of having him in the same room. She was still rattled from her showdown with General Ross and knowing that a slew of reporters might be gathering outside her apartment added to her vulnerability. It was good to know that she didn't have to face everything by herself. For reasons she still didn't understand, the other Avengers had rallied around her. She hadn't recognized it as a unilateral decision until her trip to New York. She'd never pretended to know Natasha's motivations, but had accepted it was probably due to her being Steve's frequent partner in the field on S.H.I.E.L.D. operations. Clint had been a recent addition. Was it only four days ago that he and Natasha had come to her place for pizza and thrown their support behind her even once they knew the truth? She'd not had any time to really consider why Clint would join the cause. Then in New York, both Tony and Bruce had welcomed her in their own way. The support Jarvis had given her was breathtaking in its own right, but when she stopped to look at the pattern, it was clear that everyone on the Avengers team was trying to help her in a way that seemed to go beyond loyalty to Steve. In fact, the only one who hadn't tried to help her in some way was Thor, and he wasn't even on Earth at the moment.

All of that was humbling, but Clint had moved beyond general support in his efforts to push her into staying with Steve. It was like he'd gotten inside her head and done his best to twist her thinking around. She could understand him standing guard to ease Steve's mind, but his efforts to muddy her clarity of the situation went beyond any reasonable limits of what one teammate would do for another. She didn't understand his motivation and disagreed with his conclusion. How could he really know anything about her when they'd just met a few days ago? Yes, Steve was happy these days. He was adjusting to life in the modern world and reconnecting with his past while building a new support system in the present. The Avengers were a huge part of that, mainly in the way they had made Steve one of their own, clearly liking him and admiring him. It was heartening to see and gave her confidence that Steve would continue to thrive once their charade was over. In time, the rest of the Avengers would see that she was truly doing what was best for Steve, and therefore their team. She'd be the supportive friend and step aside so Steve could find a partner that really deserved him. She'd paste a smile on her face at their wedding and keep them in her prayers at night. She'd find the strength for this like she always did. Right now, she just had to get through the immediate crisis.

Resolved, she finally gave in to the fatigue and let sleep claim her.

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When Megan emerged from the shower the next morning, Clint had a pot of coffee brewing and was eating a breakfast of leftover pie and ice cream. He'd already packed his gear and set it by the door.

"Package came for you," he said, nodding to the padded envelope on the counter.

"At this hour?" She didn't ask if it was safe to open. She trusted Clint to know far better than she when it came to security.

"When you're on Tony Time, there is no such thing as 'this hour,'" he said before taking another bite.

"Does your mother know you eat pie for breakfast?"
"It's a balanced diet. Fruit, dairy, and carbs."

She opened the package to find a soft cotton nightgown with grey scale picture of a shirtless Steve taking up most of the front. Across the top it read, "Science!" Beneath the picture, the text continued, "It does a body good." Megan laughed out loud until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Clint came over and picked up the photo that had fallen to the floor. He chuckled when he saw it and held it up. "What's the story behind this?" Seeing the front of Megan's new nightgown, he grinned. "I take it that's payback?"

Megan nodded and took the picture from him. Pepper was wearing a pale green nightgown over a pair of black leggings and holding the Iron Man helmet under her arm while smiling smugly at the camera while Tony stood to the side, scowling at her. Across the front, her shirt read in black letters:

I'm a female

Fe = iron

Male = man

Therefore, I am Iron Man (1)

Megan took the picture and tucked it into the corner of a frame on an end table to show Steve later. "I found that on a science humor site a few days ago and got it made for Pepper after I met her." She held up her new nightgown again, making a silent promise to send Jarvis more flowers.

She put the kettle on to heat and started her oatmeal. "Have the vultures found me yet?"

Clint nodded. "You need to move to a better apartment."

He must have seen the look on her face, because he immediately followed that with, "Let me take care of it, okay?"

"I don't have a car so I need to be near the metro."

"Time to go car shopping then, so you have more options." He held up a hand to block her protests. "Safety first." Tapping his ear to remind her they were under surveillance, he added, "You're part of the Avengers support staff now, so it's time we put you on the payroll. Let me scout out some options and narrow down your choices. Right now, I want you to tell me what furniture is yours and what stays with the unit. You're probably not coming back here."

"Avengers support staff?" Megan shook her head. "You need a better name because I'm not going to be labeled an ass, no matter how much I might deserve it." She looked around her home and held back tears. She wasn't going to cry, darn it. Never mind that some of the happiest times of her life had been spent here. "How are we going to get me out of here today?"

Clint smiled. "That depends on how you want to play it. We can do a decoy operation, or you can face them head on. Nat and Cap are on their way over now. I'll go out the window when they get closer so I can provide cover from the roof and a distraction if necessary. We don't want to give them any more to work with than they already have," he added in anticipation of her protests to that decision. "It's your call."

Megan lifted her chin. "I'm not going to hide like a common criminal." She went to her purse and took her apartment key off the ring and handed it to Clint. "I know you can pick the locks but this
"Attagirl." Clint smiled at her and picked up his phone. "I'll let them know."

Megan nodded and was struck by an idea. Smiling, she dug in her closet for her digital camera and put new batteries in it.

"What are you planning?"

"It's not every day that the paparazzi are camped outside your door. I may as well make the most of it." Megan went to her closet and picked out a simple teal shirt she had recently purchased. If she bought more like it, she could wear the same outfit every day until the interest in her died down. She texted Steve her idea and suggested he do the same. Pictures of them that all appeared to be from the same day wouldn't sell well. A ponytail would be a good signature hairstyle that required little effort to maintain. She might not be able to control the cameras, but she could control her reactions to them. By the time Steve and Natasha were outside her door, she was ready.

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"Are you ready for this?" Steve asked her as he put his arm protectively around her.

"No. But I'll deal."

"I'll follow you to the bike and meet up with you later," Natasha said quietly.

Megan nodded, knowing that Natasha would ensure that she wasn't harmed. She wasn't really worried about that, but it was good to know that they weren't taking any chances. In a few days, maybe this would blow over. Until then, she was grateful for the protection.

Steve took her helmet from her and held it in the hand that was looped through his shield. He took her other hand and waited until Megan had her camera turned on. "Let's go."

"Don't forget to smile," Natasha reminded her teasingly as she shut the apartment door behind them.

Steve led her down the stairs and outside to where the photographers lay in wait. Megan held her head high, letting Steve lead her by the hand through the mob of flashbulbs and shouted questions. She just smiled and took lots of pictures of her own, acting as if the attention was a novelty that she didn't mind one bit. Steve was unfailingly polite as he forged a path for them, using his shield to gently move people out of his path.

Once at his bike, he handed Megan her helmet and donned his own before tucking Megan's camera into an inner pocket of his jacket and helping her slip the shield onto her back. He got on the bike and waited for Megan to get settled behind him before he turned on the engine and slowly threaded his way between cars and stray paparazzi who insisted on getting one more photograph.

"You doing okay?"

"It wasn't as bad as I expected it to be," Megan admitted, squeezing him reassuringly and thanking Tony once again for the helmet upgrade. "Getting some sleep helped."

"Good. I expect an uproar at S.H.I.E.L.D. today, too. You ready for that?"

"I don't think one gets ready for this sort of thing, you just cope with it. I'm okay. And it's not your fault, so stop that line of thinking right now. I knew we'd have to deal with the press eventually."
You're worth it. The press doesn't have as much power as we sometimes think. General Ross scares me a lot more, to be honest."

Steve huffed in bitter amusement, "You didn't act scared yesterday."

Megan cuffed him lightly. "You're forgetting the part where I lash out when I feel cornered. That man gives me nightmares. Literally. But right now, I'm worried about my attackers. It's Tuesday and I have yet to hear from them."

"They'll find a way to contact you. I'm sure of it."

****

When they reached S.H.I.E.L.D., both Steve and Megan got a text from Clint telling them to head up to his office. "What do you supposed that is about? And how did they get here before us?" She asked as she handed Steve his shield and took off her helmet.

"They left right after we did, I'm sure, and I took some back roads so we were harder to follow. Let's go find out what he wants."

Steve walked beside her to the elevator bank that would take them up to the wing where Clint's office was located. They both pretended not to notice the significant looks and whispered conversations that changed as they moved past them. Megan tried to hide her relief at being inside Clint's office, but knew she wasn't really fooling anyone.

"Take a seat. Popcorn?" Clint asked, turning his computer monitor around so they could see it. Natasha stood behind him, her face unreadable, as Megan shrugged out of her jacket and put her helmet by her feet. Clint had a bag of popcorn in the microwave and passed them water bottles.

"Nice name plate," Steve said, pointing to the new sign saying "Flint Carton" on Clint's desk as he took the offered water and broke the seal.

Clint just smiled and pointed to the monitor. "Fury's meeting with Ross in about five minutes and left the camera up for us to see the show."

"How do you know that?" Megan asked, brow furrowed.

"Director Fury does everything for a reason," Natasha explained. "Only Clint or I would dare replace his nameplate. Steve could, but he wouldn't. He replaced Clint's to inform him he was aware of the change. He sweeps his office regularly. He's leaving the camera and microphone in place so that we can verify he's ordering that research program shut down. In your new position, you'll be able to monitor the projects and make sure no one tries to keep them going on the sly. The real purpose of today's meeting is to find out the motives and goals, as far as Ross knew about them."

"Here we go, kids." Clint said, as he pulled the popcorn out of the microwave and started a new bag. He passed the first bag to Steve to open. "Talk to us, Ross, and tell us what you're up to," he told the screen.

"Good morning, Thaddeus," they watched Nick say as he gestured the General to a chair. "Coffee?"

"Cut the crap, Nick. Do you have any idea how much damage you'll do to this nation's defense system if you let Buchwald railroad that program?"
"I expect you're here to tell me just that."

"We need that program. You've seen the enemies we're up against. We're not trying to recreate Project Rebirth. We're just trying to give our boys in the field faster healing. They'd be able to take a shot and keep going as their body compensated for the damage. Stronger muscles, better connective tissue. They'd have robust immune systems to protect them from biological agents. Have you forgotten that last anthrax attack? No one should die like that. Afghanistan's a hot mess. We need boys who can carry their gear farther without wearing themselves out or dying from their injuries before we can get them to a treatment center. Buchwald's work was to lay the groundwork for keeping our troops healthy and strong, nothing more."

"Captain Rogers sees it differently."

"Then you need to do a better job of controlling him! If you can't do that, maybe he needs to go back under army supervision so I can remind him about chain of command."

Nick shook his head and even smiled a little. "You think anyone controls Rogers? Haven't you read the reports from Colonel Phillips back in the day? Rogers has never followed orders if they got in the way of what he though was right. The best any of us can do is aim him in the right direction and help him see the targets we want him to see."

Megan put a restraining hand on Steve's arm when she saw him gripping his chair so tightly that the armrest was in danger of breaking. "He knows you're watching, Steve. That was for Ross's sake, not yours." She heard Steve take a deep breath and felt his forearm relax under her touch.

"Then you haven't found out the right buttons to push," Ross continued. "Maybe Buchwald is our angle. Use her to control him."

Nick shook his head. "You're underestimating him, Thaddeus. Are you forgetting the lengths Rogers went to when he heard Sargent Barnes was trapped behind enemy lines? If he thinks he's being controlled, he'll walk. I have to shut your program down in order to keep him at S.H.I.E.L.D. He'll never go back to the army. Yesterday, he made it very clear that either your program ends or he's out. What do you want me to do?"

"Move the program off the grid. Buchwald can be replaced. Put someone else in charge and this time, find someone who won't ask questions. We have boys dying in a dozen hot spots all over the world, Nick, even without the new threats Thor and his intergalactic buddies brought with them. If you try to shut this down, I'm going to the Council myself!"

Nick shook his head. "I already spoke to them. Captain Rogers' continued participation with S.H.I.E.L.D. is more important to them than your project." He stood up. "I'm sorry, Thaddeus. You know how it goes."

"You're making a mistake, Nick. We can't rely on one uncontrollable super-soldier to keep this country safe. You know as well as I do that we're not ready with Project—"

"I know that, Thaddeus," Nick cut him off. "But my hands are tied here. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

"What project didn't he want Ross to name?" Clint murmured to them as they watched Nick usher Ross out the door.

"I don't know," Natasha said as she put her hand on Clint's shoulder. "But he certainly didn't want Ross to finish that sentence."
"Are you satisfied?" Nick asked them directly before he ripped the camera and microphone from their cables. The screen went blank and Clint turned off the program.

"What now?" Megan asked into the silence. "What do you want me to do?"

"Learn to use a gun," Steve said as he stood up. "I'm going for a run. I'll check in later."

Megan watched him storm from the office in quiet fury.

"Let him go," Natasha warned. "He needs to clear his head."

Megan nodded mutely, hating how helpless she felt.

"This isn't your fault," Clint told her. "You didn't come up with the program; you shut it down."

"Steve's hurting and he wouldn't be if I'd kept my mouth shut."

"He needed to know, Megan. This isn't your fault. Now get down the firing range with Clint and put your anger into hitting the targets."

Her surprise must have shown because Natasha smiled at her. "Steve wants you to learn from the best. Clint's even better with arrows, but when it comes to firearms, he's the best distance marksman we have. I'll work with you on close proximity approaches once you're better at hand-to-hand. Hill won't have your clearances ready until this afternoon, so this is a good use of your time until then.

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(1) I saw this on an internet meme and couldn't resist putting it into the story. I cannot claim credit for the Iron Man/ Periodic table word play.

AN: I'll reply to comments and notes when I update next. Right now, I want to get this out to you. But the feedback is greatly appreciated!
You want me to use a gun?

After running the idea past Natasha and Clint and telling them her plan to wear the same thing every day in public, Megan used Clint’s office computer to create a Facebook account and loaded the photos she had taken that morning of the paparazzi to the new page. She then added some snarky comments about dealing with it all. When that was done, she went online and ordered a week’s worth of identical teal shirts and black slacks to be delivered to her at work. As an afterthought, she ordered a second set of lavender shirts so she could eventually switch things up just a bit without giving the paparazzi a lot of variety. Sighing, she closed the browser and stood up. “Lead the way.”

Clint locked his office door behind them and walked beside her to the elevators. “This bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“We never had guns in the house growing up. Rationally, I know they’re just another tool, but they come with a bit of baggage. I’ve never held a real gun, much less fired one. So no, the thought of concealed carry isn’t something that excites me. I understand the need, but I don’t like it.”

“Fair enough. For you, it’s going to be a weapon of last resort you’ll probably never have to use. I have to say though, I find it interesting you muck around with pathogens and radioactivity and that doesn’t scare you but the thought of firing a gun has your hands shaking.”

“I know the proper protocols to work in a lab. I guess I need to add a gun safe to my shopping list, too.”

Clint nodded. “I’ll take care of getting it. Anything you want me to look for in an apartment?”

“Central air. A washer and dryer in the unit. My wish list includes a dishwasher and an avoidance of super-modern architecture. Where am I staying tonight?”

“You can either stay here at S.H.I.E.L.D. in one of the dorms or a S.H.I.E.L.D.-approved hotel. Neither one will cost you anything and you’ll be secure. You might get less attention at a hotel and it will be easier for Cap to sneak in unnoticed, but it’s your choice.”

Megan looked down, “It’s not like that.”

“It should be. You two belong together, even if neither of you can see it yet.” Clint held the door to the firing range open for her and followed her inside. He signed forms charging her new set of ear plugs, earmuffs, and safety glasses to an account she knew nothing about, and then fetched his own from his personal locker. “Janice is the Range Safety Officer on duty today,” he added. “RSO for short. You’ll like her.”

“Okay.” Megan felt her mouth getting dryer by the minute.

“Relax. This is the safest place to learn. Later, when you come down by yourself, you can always ask the RSO on duty for advice. Their whole purpose is to keep everyone safe. They’d rather have you ask than assume. For now, one of us will come with you until you’re confident you know the basics. I’m going to start you today with my favorite handgun, just so you can get past your fear of shooting. In a few days, we’ll try several different options and see what fits you best.”

Megan nodded, wanting nothing more than to run from the room.

“When we get out there, the first rule is to keep the gun pointed down the range, meaning towards
the target, at all times. Not at the floor, ceiling, or me. No exceptions, and the same holds even when it’s empty.”

Megan smiled at that, knowing full well that even if she wanted to aim the gun at him, he’d break her arm and have her disabled before the thought was completely formed. “I appreciate this, really. You had Natasha have been a wonderful help. I won’t ever forget that.”

“Stop talking like you’re leaving. For a scientist, you sure hold tight to your misconceptions. You’re still clinging to your worldview.” He shook his head. “Being stubborn is good. You need that around Cap, because he’s as stubborn as they come. But you need to get a clue. We’ll talk about that later. Right now, we’re going to focus on getting you past your fear of firing a gun. Is it okay if I touch you?”

He must have seen the look of confusion in her face, because he clarified, “I generally avoid surprising people when they’re handling lethal weapons. It’ll be easier to correct your stance with my hands.”

“That’s fine.”

“Normally, I’d tell you more about different models, how to load, them, and the different features they have as we go. I get the feeling that none of that is going to stick today so we’ll save it for another time. I’m going to start you just holding and aiming it unloaded, then we’ll have you shoot five rounds at a time. When you get so you can hit the target five times in a row, we’ll call it a day. Otherwise, you shoot for an hour. Deal?”

Megan swallowed and nodded.

“Okay, put your hearing protection in and glasses on and we’ll head to the airlock.”

“Airlock?” she repeated dumbly as she donned her safety gear.

“It reduces the noise that gets out, but the main purpose is to support the air filtration systems.” Clint put his hand on her back reassuringly as he walked beside her to an empty stall and set down his bag on the bench. “Breathe!”

Mutely, she watched him take out a handgun and lay it on the table in front of her, pointing it downrange the entire time, as he said was the rule. She felt disconnected from herself as he offered her the gun and she wasn’t sure what hand to put it in. “Left or right?” she asked.

“Your choice. You’re ambidextrous.”

Megan shook her head. “Right handed for things I was taught or when the tool design requires it. Left handed when I get to pick.”

“Try your left then.” He showed her how to grasp it and use her other hand to stabilize her grip. “Exhale and squeeze the trigger.”

She did and found it was surprisingly easy. Of course, it helped that the gun wasn’t loaded. How she’d learn to handle this weapon with any degree of confidence was beyond her at the moment. She just tried to stay calm as Clint adjusted her stance, smiled reassuringly, and otherwise guided her through multiple attempts to get comfortable pulling the trigger. When she started to feel like she might keep her stomach under control, he took the gun from her and loaded five rounds. The taste of bile flooded her mouth and her hands shook as she took the gun back from him.

She tried to imagine Steve learning to handle a gun when he’d first joined the army. He was so
confident now, it was hard to picture him fumbling with the basics. But she knew he’d had struggles of his own in basic training. At least she didn’t have to practice in anticipation of going off to war. Heartened by the knowledge that he understood her internal conflict on some level and would help her work through it later, she took another deep breath and fired.

****

Megan splashed cold water on her face and wiped it with a paper towel, hoping to get past the sick feeling she’d been fighting for the last hour. It didn’t help. Clint had been exceedingly patient and she had eventually been able to hit the target with some degree of consistency, but inside her head, she was a mess. It wasn’t a rational reaction. She knew that. But it didn’t calm her nerves. The only way to do that was to continue to practice until her brain caught up with her skills.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket and she idly checked the message. *Place sample in brown paper bag and leave at the base of the first trash can to left of Metro card kiosks on mezzanine level of Rosslyn Metro station. You have one half hour.*

Great. She forwarded the text to Clint and asked if he or Natasha could keep an eye on her while she made the drop. Too much had happened for her to feel safe going anywhere alone.

Clint immediately wrote back, “Done,” which made her feel a bit better. She looked at her pale face in the bathroom mirror and took a deep breath. Could the day get any worse? Maybe she didn’t want to tempt Fate by asking that question. Better to get this done so she could focus on her new role at S.H.I.E.L.D.

****

“What are you doing?” Emily asked as she entered the cell culture room and saw Megan moving stacks of petri dishes to an autoclave bag.

“Cleaning up. How are you?”

“Did you have contamination? You’re signed up for the hood all week.”

“Plans have changed.” Megan sighed. “I don’t really want to talk about it now, Em. The last few days have been exhausting.”

“I’m not surprised, given all you’ve been up to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Megan asked, keeping her focus on the trays of cells.

“You were in New York City with Captain America this weekend. It’s all over the internet.”

“I noticed the results.”

“Rumor has it you have a new position here at S.H.I.E.L.D., too.”

“Is that so?”
“Is it true?”

Megan finished the last tray and finally looked up. “Is it going to be a problem if it is?”

“That depends on the direction of the research programs.”

“Those get decided by Director Fury, not me.”

“That’s not what I heard, Megan. I heard that you single handedly shut down all of General Ross’ programs and got Captain America to back you up. We need to keep going. Do you realize how many lives we can save?”

“Saving lives is my primary focus. I didn’t shut anything down. I did express my opinion of the programs as I understand them and laid out the basis of my concerns. Steve makes his own decisions. Believe me, you can’t convince that man to do anything he doesn’t want to do. I’ve tried.”

“Try harder,” Emily snapped, then slammed the door behind her.

Megan stripped off her gloves and added them to the bag before wiping the sweat from her forehead. “I just had to ask if the day could get worse,” she muttered to herself as she put on a new pair of gloves and fastened the bag shut with autoclave tape. She’d disposed of all of the cell lines in the incubators but needed some time to inventory the cells in the liquid nitrogen tanks in the cold room. Once the autoclave was loaded and running, she sent a quick text to Jarvis asking him if he had access to the electronic inventory, and if he did, to identify all of the cells that had been harvested from Steve during various medical procedures. She planned to move them to different locations in the same dewers so they couldn’t be accessed easily by anyone else until she knew what Steve wanted her to do with them. When that was done, she gathered up her lab notebooks, packed the contents of her desk into a box, and headed upstairs to her new office.

****

The afternoon was spent filling out paperwork. Director Fury hadn’t been joking when he said her new position was generating paperwork, and not all of it was limited to his desk. She had all sorts of forms to fill out regarding access codes, her new computer, security levels, and even safety training on proper use of desk supplies. Someone had felt it necessary to write a manual on how to properly use a rolling desk chair with a note in a large box emphasizing that such chairs were never to be used as a step-stool.

“Having fun?” Clint asked when he found her elbow deep in forms. He tilted his head so he could read the top item. “Did you get to the one on proper use of sidewalks in the winter? They have a written policy about being careful not to slip on the ice.”

“I am appalled at the use of tax money to generate, print, and file these forms.”

“Hey, it’s better than having Congress pass new laws. Last time they got anything through, they gutted half the social programs for at-risk kids. You keep filling out those papers and remember you’re protecting funding for the public schools with every page you sign.”

Megan stared at him in dismay. “The sad thing is, that actually makes sense.”
He grinned. “Ready to go? I’ve got you a room booked under an alias and already checked that it’s clean,” he said, tapping his ear. “One of us will bring you a bag of clothes later on. I can drop you at the hotel on my way to check out a potential apartment… unless you decide to just move in with Cap.”

Megan shook her head. “Neither of us is ready for that. He needs his own space for the time being.”

“Noted. Here is your room key, Ms. Megan Jones. You’re in a studio king hotel room with a kitchenette just off of Dupont Circle. You know the neighborhood.”

Megan nodded, touched that he’d put her close to Steve’s apartment.

“Feel free to order room service. S.H.I.E.L.D. will cover meals while you’re there. You’re there for your own safety. I have only one request,” Clint flipped a chair around and straddled it as he rested his arms on the chair back.

“What?”

“You talk to Cap and put your cards on the table. You two have to stop dancing around each other. It’s making me dizzy.”

Megan looked down at her paperwork. “Steve told me that Natasha keeps trying to convince him to go on dates.”

“Natasha’s all about options and making sure Cap gets some experience before he settles down. She’s never been in a healthy relationship and frankly, doesn’t know what’s involved. She’s come a long way the last few years, but she’s got such a different history she can’t relate to this. She’s loyal to Rogers and wants him to be as happy as he can be. Trying to set him up with others is just her way of doing that. Don’t pay attention to it, because it’s not a strike against you. She likes you. She respects you. She just doesn’t understand how you can settle down with one person without ruling out everyone else first.”

Megan looked up at him. “With over seven billion people on the planet, that’s going to take her awhile, even if you cut that number in half to target males, and reduce it further to target adults.”

Clint threw his head back and laughed. “I’m going to tell her you said that!” Growing serious again, he pinned her with an intense look. “I mean it. You need to talk to Rogers in the next day or so. As a friend to both of you, I insist on it. Promise me.”

“Okay. I promise. I’ll talk to him the first chance I get when we’re away from prying eyes and ears.”

****

“Mom, I’m fine, really.”

“How can you be fine hiding in a hotel?”

“You haven’t seen the hotel! Clint set me up in a suite that’s close to Steve’s apartment and has a kitchenette. It’s bigger than my apartment and has a real bed. Someone is bringing me a few
changes of clothes and Clint is already out searching for an apartment that’s more secure from paparazzi. He said he’s going to find something with an attached garage so I can park indoors and not even have to face the media between my front door and my car. And he’s taking me car shopping so I get a good deal on that, too. Steve said he was scary good at negotiating with the dealer when Steve got his own car a couple of years ago.”

“I don’t like you having to deal with all of this.”

“Steve is worth it. He never asked for the attention, and we’re doing what we can to make the frenzy die down as soon as possible. I’m okay, really. Steve worries about my safety, too, and if I have to have a bodyguard with me when I’m not with him, I’m willing to do that for his peace of mind.”

“How is Steve holding up?”

“He’s gotten used to dealing with the press and he’s more worried about how I’m coping. Really, I’m all right. I’m more concerned that there’s going to be a crew parked at the end of your driveway.”

“I doubt anyone is going to show up here.”

“Well, I’m going to delay visiting for a bit to help keep it that way. But you and Greg need to be prepared for it when you come visit us in a couple of weeks. If you stay with Steve, the paparazzi is sure to notice. But if you don’t, he’ll be hurt even though he’ll never admit as much to you.”

“We’re not going to let some idiots with cameras keep us from getting to know him better, Megan.”

Megan heard a knock at the door. “Hold on a sec. Someone’s at the door.” Peering through the peephole, she saw Steve holding several boxes of pizza. She opened the door and waved him in as she resumed her conversation with her mother. “Steve’s here with dinner. I’ll call you in a few days, okay?”

“Give him a hug for me.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Megan hung up and tossed her phone on the bed while Steve set the boxes of pizza down on the table, dropped the bags from his shoulder, and held his arms out to her. “Sorry I left you today.”

She buried her face in the curve of his shoulder. “Don’t be. You needed to run off the grumpies.” She stood there a long time, letting the smell of soap, leather, and Steve ground her. Finally, she pulled back and noticed the bags. “Two bags?”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “Clint said you wanted me to…” he trailed off, realizing what Barton had done. “That bastard. I don’t have to—“

Megan grabbed him by his jacket and pulled him into another hug. “We can talk about that later. Right now, I’m starving.”

“Clint said you didn’t eat lunch.”

“I discovered that I’ve got an irrational and extreme aversion to handling guns. Archery in high school didn’t bother me, so I know it’s limited to firearms. I’ll get past it. But no, I didn’t eat lunch
because I was too nauseated. So now I’m going to hog an entire pizza and leave the other three to you.”

“Are there any wine glass around?” Steve asked, heading to the kitchenette.

“No idea. But if not, I’m sure we can get some.”

He returned to the table with a corkscrew and two glasses. “Beer is better than wine with pizza.”

“Only if you like beer, which I don’t. So hurry up and pour me some liquid courage. It’s been a long day.”

They both ate with silent gusto as the magnitude of the day caught up to them. Only after they were no longer famished did they settle into their familiar routine of conversation and banter. Steve had gone for a multi-mile run that left the paparazzi frustrated and exhausted as they tried to purse him first on foot, then on motorbikes, forgetting that Steve knew routes that used stairs and steep off-road hillside trails. He soon had Megan laughing at the antics he’d used to get some time alone in Rock Creek Park before making his way back to the Triskelion.

Sated and relaxed by the wine, Megan stretched and yawned before pouring herself a second glass. “I have a date with the air-jet tub. It’s big enough for two. Join me?”

Steve just looked at her with an expression she couldn’t read and she rolled her eyes. “Unless you’re hiding a prehensile tail somewhere, I’ve seen it all before. I promise to behave myself, not that I could do anything against your will, Captain Muscles.” She saw him hesitate and prodded, “Be brave, Steve. You can always leave after and go home so the paparazzi don’t publish a headline of Captain America shacking up with a single woman overnight. I know you have to be careful about your reputation.”

That finally broke through and he shook his head. “I never asked to be portrayed as perfect and I have no intention of playing their games. I’m not ashamed to be seen spending time with you, Megan. Once I put the leftover pizza in the fridge, I’ll join you.”

“Bring the wine.”

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Megan leaned back and let the tension flow out of her as she slid deeper into the tub of hot, bubbling water. She closed her eyes when she heard Steve open the door and listened to the sounds of him undressing and dropping his clothes on the floor beside hers. As tempting as it was to look, he wasn’t ready for that.

She heard him get in and felt the water shift as he sat down. His toes brushed against her left thigh as he stretched out and settled himself. Keeping her eyes closed, she sighed and sank up to her neck in the bubbling water. “I could get used to this.”

“I’ve never been in a tub like this before.”

“You have one like it in New York.”

“Huh. I never noticed.”

“It’s a decadent indulgence that uses a lot more water than I like, but sometimes, it’s the only way to unwind.” She cracked her eyes open for a moment and raised an eyebrow. “I noticed you lost the sling again, along with your splint.”

“Medical cleared it. I’m healed enough to start training gain, and I’ll be mission ready in another week at most.”

Megan smiled a tiny bit as she listened to him talk. It was going to be harder than she’d anticipated to behave herself. “So much for that long vacation you’re overdue to take. I’m going to miss the beard.”

“What are you smiling about?”

A full grin broke loose and she shook her head, eyes still closed. “I promised to behave myself. If I share my wicked thoughts, I might indulge in wicked deeds.”

Steve moaned softly. “You’ve never been shy around me.”

Megan finally opened her eyes and looked at him, surprised by that comment. She shook her head. “Wrong. You just didn’t realize I was redirecting and deflecting attention from it. I don’t trust easily. Inviting you to my place the first time was a calculated risk.”

“What do you mean?” He sat with his long arms hugging his knees, keeping his eyes on her face. His brow furrowed as he thought back to those early days.

“If you tried to rape me, there was no way I’d have been able to fight you. I didn’t think it was likely, but it was a risk I had to consider, especially given the fact I’d never be believed in a court of law.”

“I’d never—“

I know. Believe me, I know you better now and you’ve earned my trust a dozen times over. Back then, I took a leap of faith. I didn’t think it would be a problem, but there is always the chance I
read someone wrong.” She shrugged. “That’s just life.”

“You always seem so confident.”

“Sometimes I am and sometimes I’m acting and trying to convince myself as much as anyone else. But back to being shy…. That has changed over time. Don’t forget that I lived with Randy for over a year. Nudity is just another kind of intimacy and you’ve already seen me at some of my lowest and most vulnerable times. From panic attacks to breakdowns… you’ve been closer to me than maybe anyone but my mother. I’ve slept in your arms more than once. I’m not trying to be a tease when I say that clothing seems like a trivial barrier to me at this point. There’s really only one remaining wall between us and it’s not based in fabric.”

She reached for her wine glass that was on the edge of the tub and indulged in a hearty gulp. She really hated Clint right now, especially since he was right about being honest.

“Why is your hand shaking?”

Megan closed her eyes, nodding slightly in acknowledgment of that truth. “Because Clint sees too much and made me promise I’d level with you.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked him, hating the wariness that was now in his eyes. The tension in his shoulders told her his guard was up. Even his voice had changed. “Don’t panic. It’s nothing bad… it’s just hard to talk about. I don’t do vulnerable very well…. but I’m trying right now to let my guard down completely.” She took another gulp of wine and set the glass aside. She wanted to be fortified but clear-headed, if such a thing were possible.

“Have you noticed how everyone acts like we belong together, even those who know this started as a farce? Even Jarvis is playing matchmaker. I’ve been trying to find a way to gather the strength to walk away when it’s all over. I don’t know that I’m strong enough to do that. We’ve never really talked about what we both want out of life and it terrifies me that there might be deal breaker issues lurking in the shadows. I know I don’t deserve you. I know you can do a lot better than me. But I need to know if there’s even a chance you might settle for someone who has so little to offer.” She forced herself to look at him, trying desperately to ignore the tears she knew were spilling down her cheeks.

She couldn’t read his expression when he replied, “I’m not the type to settle for second best.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, trying to keep her composure even though she was dying inside. At least she had her answer.

“Megan, you’re way out of my league. I’m the one with nothing to offer. Just by being associated with me, you’ve been attacked and your family threatened. Even your home is off limits. You’re stuck in a hotel because of me. Your whole life is in upheaval. Steve Rogers might be okay, but he comes with a lot of baggage under the Captain America brand. Even if I somehow retired, I’m never going to have a normal life.”

She glared at him for even suggesting retirement. “You can’t stop being Captain America, Steve, not for anyone. I know he’s an artificial construct, but he’s a part of you. Steve is who you are, but Cap is what you do. I know it’s a package deal.”

“How can you want this for a life?”

She finally realized what she was seeing in his eyes was deeply rooted pain. “Because I love you
“And I believe you’re worth it,” she answered.

“What about kids? I don’t even know if I can have them, much less the effects the serum might have.”

“Life is risk. I don’t know if I can have children either, but that’s not the only way to become a parent. We could always adopt. I do want to be a mother someday. You’d be a great dad.” She leaned forward, hugging her own knees to her chest as she tried to convince him that they had a chance at something. She wasn’t begging. She wasn’t. She was just pointing out their options.

“Except when I’m not there because I’m on an extended mission. Or dead like my father was.”

“So it’s better to go through life alone? Odds are good that you’re going to outlive the rest of us and still be in peak health while Clint and I are battling arthritis and dementia. At least if you had kids and grandkids, you’d have some continuity when the rest of us are pushing up daisies. You don’t do well being alone, Steve. Are you just going to try another self-sacrifice in battle in hopes it goes better this time? Because you really suck at dying no matter how many crazy chances you take.”

“And how will you feel growing old while I’m apparently ageless?”

“Jealous of your good health and blessed you gave me a few good decades.” She sat back and brushed her cheeks with the back of her hand. “But I guess I have my answer,” she said before she finished her wine and put the glass down on the floor. She deserved major credit for not flinging it across the room like she wanted to. “This is why I didn’t want to say anything yet. It’s a bad idea to ask a question unless you’re prepared to hear the answer. I wasn’t ready to stop pretending.” She barely held back the sobs that threatened to choke her. “It would probably be best if you went back to your place for the night.”

She avoided looking at him as she got up and stepped out of the tub, snatching her towel from the floor and hastily wrapping it around her torso as she fled the bathroom. She fumbled in her bag for something to put on and immediately discarded the plan to pull on a nightgown. Clint had packed the one Pepper had sent her. Digging deeper, she found a t-shirt and pair of jeans which she hastily put on, struggling as they caught on her her still-damp skin. Her towel got dumped in a heap on the glass-top coffee table. She kept crying quietly as she pulled one of the overstuffed armchairs closer to the window and curled up in it, watching the traffic go by on the street outside.

“Megan?” Steve’s voice was hesitant as he finally came out of the bathroom.

“Go home, Steve.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone like this.”

“I have Jarvis. Go home.” She kept her voice even and her face towards the window. She couldn’t face him yet.

She heard him sigh as he stood there, probably shifting from one foot to the other. “What time do you want me to pick you up in the morning?”

“Six thirty.” Dear lord, how was she supposed to pretend everything was fine when they arrived at S.H.I.E.L.D. in the morning? She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out. Why couldn’t he just agree to try to give them a chance? Was trying too much to ask for? Apparently so.

“You’ll call me if you need me?” He sounded hesitant. Confused, even.

“I’m fine,” she snapped. “Go home.”
“Promise you’ll lock the door behind me at least.”

She managed a slight nod as she bit down harder on her cheek until she tasted blood.

She heard him sigh again as he picked up his bag. The fabric scuffed against his torso and she heard the whisper of leather as he picked up his jacket. She heard slow footsteps, then a door closing behind him. She was alone.

Numbly, she got up and somehow managed to walk to the door, flipping the security locks before returning to her chair. She curled up in it, pulling her knees up to her chest as she watched out the window. In a few minutes, she saw him walking down the sidewalk, shoulders slumped a bit as he trudged home. He never looked up towards her window, never looked back. In a few minutes, he was out of sight.

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Megan sat at her desk drinking another cup of tea as she tried to navigate her way though the files and emails she’d been sent overnight. The words didn’t register in her brain and she finally gave up the pretense of trying to read the screen.

She heard a knock on her open door and looked up to see Clint standing there. He took one look at her and came in, shutting the door behind him.

“What the hell happened to you?”

She shrugged one shoulder and looked down at the mug she held between both of her hands. “Do you know how vile it is to hear the first birds of the morning singing when you’ve been sitting up all night crying?”

“He’s as dumb as Clark Kent, too,” Clint said as he winced, recognizing her quote from the second Superman movie.

“Most people don’t know that reference. I never expected to have a cause to use it.”

“I like movies.” He flipped a chair around and sat on it backwards again. “Anything I can do to help?”

Megan just shook her head. “I sat up all night going over everything in my head. He was very clear.”

“I’m not going to even suggest you go to the firing range today. Instead, I’m going to use this time to get him to spar. Maybe I’ll be able to get a lucky blow that knocks some sense into his thick skull.”

“Don’t count on it, but I appreciate the thought.” She finally looked up at him. “Thanks for caring.”

“I’ll check up on you later. You just hide in here today and keep the door closed. Save some more schools with the forms you sign.”

Megan smiled a bit at that. “I’ll try.”
After Clint left, she broke down in tears again as she thought about the awkward ride to work sitting behind Steve on his bike. He’d tried to engage in small talk and she’d shut that down immediately. When they’d reached the parking garage, she’d summoned the strength to act normally, tucking her arm in his and pasting a smile on her face as they walked inside. He’d just eyed her warily, seeming unsettled by her ability to pretend, and he’d muttered about a briefing he had to get to as he left her at the elevators. It was a preview of the coming weeks that she absolutely dreaded facing. What choice did she have?

She was pulled from her reverie when her phone alerted her to a text from Steve, but she didn’t look at it. It could wait until later. Right now, she had to try to make her brain understand the written word so she could figure out the different research programs S.H.I.E.L.D. had been supporting. Maybe she could make some paperclip chain models of DNA while she counted the minutes until it was time to go home.

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With help from Jarvis, whom she communicated with by email on her Stark tablet so no one would overhear, she was able to determine that nearly seventy vials of Steve’s cells were currently being stored. They had been obtained from far more tissues than she’d realized the S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors had sampled. Based on the dates, she and Jarvis suspected many of them had been collected by needle biopsy while Steve was still unconscious and thawing from the ice. They’d treated him as a laboratory experiment and it made her angry.

Jarvis kept her grounded. She’d talked with him during the night and he’d kept her company, matching his approach to her mercurial moods. Now, he was helping her lose herself in her work. When she asked how he did this so well, he’d simply replied that Sir had provided him with ample training.

They were deep in the process of cross referencing all of the research programs Megan had been told about with the use of Steve’s cells when her desk phone rang. She picked it up without looking, continuing to focus on her printouts. “Hello?”

“Dr. Buchwald, it’s Agent Hill. You’d better get down to the medical bay. They’re bringing Captain Rogers in and it looks bad.”

“Where’s the medical bay?”

“Lower level of the alpha wing. I’ll make sure someone meets you there to lead you in.”

Megan just stared at the phone for a minute. Steve wasn’t even to be on active duty yet, so how had he been hurt? Fighting back panic, she grabbed her tablet and cell phone before running down the hall to the elevator.

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Chapter End Notes
I’m well into writing what comes next, so I expect I can put an update up this coming weekend. I promise not to leave Steve in agony for months before posting the next part.
Clint met her at the elevators with a worried look on his face. “What have you heard?”

“Agent Hill said they were bringing Steve in and it looked bad. Where is he?”

“They’re not here yet. Nat and Cap apparently had a fast in-and-out hostage recovery mission that went FUBAR on them. Cap was supposed to be their backup. I don’t know what happened to change that.” He walked swiftly through corridors that were apparently quite familiar to him, since he showed no hesitation in leading Megan to the bay where Steve would be arriving shortly.

“Is Natasha okay? What about the hostages?”

“Nat’s hurt, but not badly. The hostages were recovered. They have some burns, but Cap took the brunt of it. The docs will check everyone over. Once they give the okay, everyone goes through debrief. We’ll get to talk to them after that. It’s going to take time to get answers.”

“Okay. Thanks for the warning. You said burns…”

“Here they come,” Clint said, hearing something further down the corridor that he recognized. He pulled Megan to the side as the doors slammed open and a team of medics kept pace with a gurney being rushed to a treatment bay. Captain America’s boots were recognizable though charred and filthy. Megan couldn’t see Steve’s face as he was surrounded by a team of individuals in scrubs who were barking medical jargon and holding up I.V. bags as they scrambled.

“Hold him down!” someone shouted.

“I’m trying!” another voice replied. Megan heard Steve moaning before he let out a scream that chilled her blood.

“Don’t let him get up!”

Megan slipped away from Clint and dashed to the head of the gurney, ducking and dodging those who tried to hold her back. “Let me through. I’m his fiancé and I can help keep him still!” She leaned closer to his head, “Steve, it’s Megan. You’re safe at S.H.I.E.L.D. Lie still and focus on my voice. I’m right here. You need to hold still so the doctors can treat you.” He stopped struggling.

“I’ll stay out of your way,” Megan said to the medical team, “But he’ll cooperate better if he knows I’m here. Being in pain and not being able to see reminds him of going into the ice.”

“Can you handle this?” one of the medics asked.

As devastating as it was to see the his burned face and the fabric of his uniform melted and burned into his skin, she was needed here. Steve was awake, aware, and blind. He needed her to ground him, so she would. “Steve, I need to move away from your head so they can take care of your wounds. I’m going to take your boots off and hold onto your ankles. Focus on my hands and block everything else out. Don’t kick me.”

The medical team shuffled around a bit to let Megan take up her new station. “Any injuries to his legs we need to worry about?” she asked as she worked the buckles to his boots.

“Not that we know of.”

“Can’t you knock him out with something?” she asked, pulling the first boot off and stripping off
the thick sock from beneath it. She threw them to the floor behind her.

“Maybe after he’s stabilized. The fire burned his lungs, too.”

Megan nodded, understanding. “You hear that, Steve? They’ll knock you out as soon as it’s safe to do so. Just hang in there. I know it hurts, but you can handle it for a few minutes. I’m here.” She gripped his ankle tightly and he flexed that foot in response to her touch. She ignored all of the medical conversations going on around her and focused on Steve. “Good. I’m going to take your other boot off now and then you can answer some questions for us. Right foot for yes, left for no.”

Steve flexed his right foot a bit inside his boot, making her smile as he did so. He was listening and responding, which meant he’d stop fighting the medical team. She got the last buckle undone and pulled that boot off, too, tossing it to join the one already on the floor. “Okay, question time. Do you know where you are?”

He flexed his right foot under her hand.

“Excellent. But you don’t need to move so much, sweetheart. Don’t wear yourself out with the effort. I can feel it if you just flex your ankle muscles a little bit.” She looked to the doctor who seemed to be in charge. “What else do you need to know from him?”

“Captain Rogers, are you aware of any new injuries other than the burns?”

“He says yes.”

“Upper body?”

“Yes,” Megan reported.

“Torso?”

Megan nodded.

“Ribs?”

Megan nodded again.

“I need x-rays. Get the mobile unit down here,” the doctor ordered. “Anything else?”

“Not at the moment.” Megan wanted to cry as she looked at the charred flesh of his face. His throat and shoulders were a bubbly blue where his uniform had melted. Without the familiar emblem on his chest, she wouldn’t recognize him. There was an arc across his chest showing where the edge of the shield had stopped providing protection. His left hand wasn’t burned, having been behind the shield, but the fingertips of his right hand were black stubs of flesh poking past the remains of his fingerless gloves. It was one thing to trust his ability to heal broken bones, quite another to imagine him recovering from burns of this degree. And while it should eventually happen—she hoped, given enough time—the regrowth of the damaged nerves would be excruciating. She made a mental note to call Jarvis at her first chance and alert Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner to the urgent need for pain medication that worked.

“Steve, did you reinjure your left wrist or humerus during all of this?” His response seemed resigned, if she could read that much emotion into flexed muscles. “Wrist?” Damn. “Better check his wrist again, too. It took a beating. Back to the splint for you. I hope you didn’t throw it into the trash.”
No, he hadn’t.

“Good. Stark’s assistant will be most pleased to hear that, I’m sure.”

He agreed.

“Knowing you, you’re worried about every one else. Yeah, just like I thought,” she replied to another affirmative ankle flex. “Clint said Natasha’s got some non-life threatening injuries. He also said that you got the hostages all out. The medics are going to check everyone over, but you took the brunt of it. Since you’ll heal eventually, you can feel good about that while you’re lying there looking like a burnt marshmallow.

She kept up an endless stream of trivial chatter as the medical team worked to stabilize Steve. Occasionally, she helped the doctors ask Steve more questions, but mainly, she tried to keep him grounded and distract him from the pain. “Where’s his shield?” she asked, wondering where it had ended up.

“It’s been unloaded from the quinjet and stowed with the other gear,” someone answered.

“How can we get it brought in here? Please?” she asked, knowing how much Steve liked to have it close by. Not only had he told her he felt responsible for protecting such a priceless item, she knew it had become an extension of his own body over the years. Using it was an inherent part of his fighting style and as vulnerable as he currently was, having it with him would be a comfort. Besides, she’d be able to clean it up and hold it while they took him to the operating room.

“Captain, we’re going to put you under a general anesthetic now,” the anesthesiologist finally said. Megan nodded that Steve had heard them, and felt his muscles relax under her hands. Finally, he was safely beyond the reach of the pain. Megan mutely let herself be led to a waiting area and sat heavily in an uncomfortable chair. Someone handed her the shield and she held tightly to the straps, praying he’d survive the next few hours. She sent a quick note to her mother using her tablet and another asking Jarvis to update everyone as more information became available. After that was done, there was nothing to do but wait.

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“How is he? How are you?” Emily said as she sat down beside Megan and handed her a cup of tea, a handful of sugar packets and creamer cups, and a sandwich.

“He’s in bad shape. The fire was so hot it melted his uniform to his face, neck, and shoulders. They’re using cadaver skin right now and trying to decide if he needs skin grafts.”

“How are you holding up?”

“Okay. Thanks for the food.” Megan leaned back and opened the sandwich on her lap, holding Steve’s shield between her knees. “I’ve been thinking about what you said. When this is over, I think you should sit down with Steve and explain what research you want to do and why. He might give his permission.”

“You think so? I thought you were shutting everything down.”
Megan shook her head. “Don’t you know me better than that, Em? You’re listening to rumors instead of your gut. I object to the lack of consent. Steve was never asked if all of those cells could be harvested and used for research. Some of the research programs have questionable value, in my opinion, but I’m open to hearing the arguments. Steve isn’t anti-science, believe me. Neither am I. It just has to be done correctly and with the proper safeguards in place.”

“Do you really think he’ll agree?”

Megan forced herself to take a bite before she answered. “I know if you talk to him, he’ll listen and give it serious thought. He’s a smart guy, more than people give him credit for. He’s worked hard to catch up on the scientific advances he missed so don’t be afraid to use the big words. He’ll ask questions if he doesn’t understand something. I think you’ll find he has some good insights and a firm grasp of the big picture.”

“Don’t you want to be there, too?”

“No, I think you should make the case yourself before I weigh in with my own thoughts. I don’t want to inadvertently bias his views.”

Megan felt Emily’s scrutiny and looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “What?”

Emily shook her head. “You keep surprising me.”

Megan just smiled. “You’re not the first person to say that to me.”

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“Mr. Jarvis, this is Megan Buchwald. I need to talk to Doctor Banner or Mr. Stark, please. Captain Rogers has been hurt,” Megan said into her phone. She knew Jarvis would pick up on those cues and know she was in a place where she could be overheard.

“Certainly, Dr. Buchwald. They are both in the lab at the moment. I’ll connect you.”

“What happened, Megan? We’re both here and have you on speakers,” Bruce said into her ear.

“I don’t have details yet. Natasha was hurt, too, but not as badly. Clint’s with her. Steve was backup on a mission and somehow ended up in the thick of it. He’s burned…. It’s bad. Really bad.” Her voice broke. “His face… they’ve got him under a general right now as they try to get his melted uniform off of him and clean the burns. When they’re done, he’s going to be in a lot of pain. If there is anything you can come up with, anything at all, it would help.”

“Jarvis, pull the files and hack the cameras,” she heard Tony say in the background.

“Megan, has he been conscious at all?” Bruce asked her.

“Yes,” she sobbed and took a shaky breath while she fought for control. “We used muscle flexes in his ankles to have him answer questions. He’d started to panic when they brought him in since he couldn’t see…. he calmed down once we convinced him he was at S.H.I.E.L.D. The pain was so bad he was screaming, Bruce.”

“Deep breath, Megan. Breathe with me,” Bruce’s voice soothed her over the phone and he led her
though several cycles of slow inhales and exhales while Jarvis gave them access to the information on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s servers.

She heard Tony let out a low whistle in the background. “Jeez, Megs, you were supposed to thaw the Capsicle. not cook him! He’s way overdone. Looks like he has an extra crispy coating around that gooey sugary center. The good news is that he’s still going to be able to service you, but kissing him might be awkward for awhile.”

“Tony!” she heard Bruce yell.

It broke the tension and she giggled a bit. “I’m glad to know your priorities remain unchanged, Mr. Stark.”

“Tony,” he corrected her. “And nothing is more important than sex, I assure you. Bruce and I are all over this. I’ll let you and Fury know the minute we have anything ready to try. Keep updating Jarvis if there is anything else we can do for you or the scary spider woman. Later.”
Prognosis

After what seemed like an endless wait, a doctor came straight from the operating suite to give Megan and others on his team an update. “He’s stable for the moment. We put in a J-tube so we can feed him the calories he needs while protecting his throat and lungs. The next twenty-four hours will be critical,” he told them.

“I want to stay with him,” Megan said.

“Director Fury already okayed it. We’ll call you back once he’s out of recovery.”

Megan shook her head. “I need to be there while he wakes so he doesn’t hurt himself or someone else trying to fight his way out. Were you here when they brought him in?”

The doctor shook his head. “I was off campus when I got the call.

“Take Dr. Buchwald back now,” Nick Fury said as he entered the waiting area, holding a phone to his ear. “I want regular updates sent directly to my phone,” he added.

“Yes, sir,” the physician replied. “If you’ll follow me,” he gestured to Megan.

“Keep him calm, Dr. Buchwald. We can’t afford to have him hurt more.”

Megan nodded, fighting back the urge to remind Director Fury that Steve was more than an asset. She didn’t care about his usefulness to S.H.I.E.L.D. as much as she just wanted him to have a smooth recovery.

At Steve’s bedside, she laid his shield with the convex side down across his lower legs so he’d feel it there when he regained consciousness. “Can I get some frozen popsicles for him and a swab to help quench his thirst and dry mouth as he comes around? I understand the risks of liquid aspiration and will ensure that doesn’t happen. Given the pain he’s going to be in, any small comfort will make a huge difference to him.”

The doctor studied her carefully. Megan just waited, trying to keep all expression from her face.

“Normally, I’d absolutely forbid it. In this case, I have to agree with you, but with great reservations. At the first sign of choking, I’ll have you thrown out.”

“Understood,” Megan replied. Never mind that she’d immediately go to Director Fury and get herself back to Steve’s side. As long as they did what she wanted, she wasn’t going to argue.

She watched as the medical staff continued to monitor and assist Steve as his body burned through the last of the general anesthetic. When he began moaning, she gripped his ankles harder and started talking to him, assuring him that she was there and he was safe at the Triskelion. Slowly, awareness returned and he was able to converse with her with their code, confirming the agony he was in and the unquenchable thirst he felt.

“I’ve called a local bookstore and they’d delivering the whole set of Laura Ingalls Wilder books this afternoon,” she told him. “While they were written for children, you’ll love them. They’re based on the author’s life story and ones I wanted you to read anyway. I’ll read them to you to help give you something to escape into as best you can. Tony and Bruce are working around the clock to come up with better pain treatments. I know that doesn’t help right now, but you need to know that they’re trying.”
She kept up the stream of chatter for almost a half hour, talking about her own first experience reading the books and how she hoped to visit the different Little House sites someday. It was easiest to avoid looking at his face for the moment, not that she could see it. His whole head and neck were wrapped in bandages that extended down over his shoulders. His left wrist was back in a splint and wrapped from fingertip to elbow, while his right hand was encased in gauze. Only his blistered lips and nose were visible, though the latter had a cannula delivering additional oxygen to his traumatized lungs.

“Captain, we’re going to move you to a room now,” the staff said, and glanced at Megan to make sure he’d understood.

She nodded that Steve had heard them. “I’ll be with you the whole time,” she promised, never letting go of his ankles.

The transfer went smoothly and they soon left Megan alone with him, though only for a few minutes at a time. Looking around, Megan realized they had Steve in the S.H.I.E.L.D. equivalent of the I.C.U. “I’m going to check my phone for an update on Natasha,” she warned before removing one of her hands from his leg. She found a slew of messages filling her inbox, including one from Steve telling her he had been asked to go as backup on a brief mission to rescue hostages. Had it only been a few hours ago? Clint had sent several updates of his own, indicating Natasha was out of treatment and debriefing and now sleeping while he stood guard. Without his presence, he explained, Natasha would only allow herself to doze, delaying her own recovery.

Megan sent back her own updates, assuring him that she understood Natasha’s needs. With her phone and tablet, she was in touch with an entire support system. They didn’t need to be at the bedside to provide her with comfort. She sent her mother another email message and another to Jarvis.

After assuring Steve that Natasha was going to be fine and that she was sleeping deeply, Megan took advantage of a brief moment alone to get one more issue addressed. “As far as our conversation last night, it’s all locked up in a box and sealed shut. We’ll deal with it later. Put it out of your head.”

He flexed both ankles at once.

“Why?” she laughed bitterly, reading his intent in the double flex. “Because I love you,” she said, emphasizing every word. “When it comes to relationships, you are amazingly clueless sometimes. I blame the W-H-Y chromosome and the resultant testosterone poisoning. Just try to rest. I’m not going anywhere. If you wake up thinking you’re alone, it just means I fell asleep. I’m not leaving.

Your shield is lying on your legs. I’ll find a way to hang it from the bedrail by your left hand a bit later. I’m thinking some velcro cable ties will do the job. I just need to get some brought down from my office.

“Is your mouth dry? I thought so. Here’s the deal: the doctor has grudgingly agreed to let me swab your mouth with water flavored with a melted orange popsicle. You and I are upgrading that to sucking on small pieces if you want. If you choke or aspirate any liquid into your lungs, they’ve threatened to throw me out so don’t screw this up. You can pick what you want: swab or popsicle,” she explained, squeezing each ankle in turn to indicate which side went with each choice. “I’d do the same. Don’t tell on me. I need to get the goods from them, but I won’t leave the room.”

Megan used a spoon to shave off small bits of the orange flavored popsicle in a cup they gave her along with a swab and carefully slid the shavings between Steve’s cheek and gums.

“More,” he silently mouthed to her a minute later and she complied. It took about twenty minutes,
but he ate the whole popsicle with the nurses being none the wiser since Megan switched to the swab every time they came in to check his vitals.

“That’s a whole popsicle. I don’t know that I can sneak you another one so soon.”

“S’okay.”

“Just so you know, you have a J-tube delivering food straight to your small intestine in a continuous small dose. The doctors are concerned about giving your mouth and throat time to heal after the burns. I’m sure you tried to not breathe in, but you did get some pretty hot air down into your lungs. The tube is here,” she touched his abdomen gently near the incision. “It’s not permanent, just a way to help you maintain your caloric intake while you heal. You also have an I.V. line delivering morphine, antibiotics, and fluids. That earned you a urinary catheter. Those are always fun.”

Megan touched several pads on his chest. “You’ve got leads to a heart monitor connected in these spots. Across the top of your left foot they have a blood oxygen monitor set up. I heard them talking about possible skin grafts, which would mean some surgery in a day or so to harvest skin from your abdomen and inner thighs to use on your upper body as needed.”

“Antibiotics?”

“Don’t forget the role of skin in preventing infection. Your body’s resources are spread pretty thin right now. You may even end up with a fever as you system fights off the bacteria trying to set up camp. Any infection you get can be managed, but they’re trying to get a jump on things with some antibiotic therapy, too.

“Eyes?”

“I don’t know yet. I’d say that’s the biggest long term concern. You should also know that the fingers of your right hand have fourth degree burns based on the quick glance I got when they brought you in. No one has given me the full rundown yet. Any chance you can sleep?”

“No. Pain.”

“I figured as much. Let me see if Jarvis can get me the first book on my tablet until the hard copy books get here. It will help you keep your mind off how you are feeling. If you get cold and want a blanket over your legs, just let me know.

Megan sat down and kept one hand on Steve’s left elbow while she typed a note to Jarvis with the other. Jarvis sent her the file and she settled in to read aloud while keeping one hand on Steve.

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Much later, a physician she had not met before came into the room. “Are you Dr. Buchwald?”

“Yes,” Megan answered, setting aside the tablet she had been reading from.

“I’m Dr. MacDonald. No, I don’t have a farm,” she added with a smile. “I’m the physician in charge of Captain Roger’s treatment team. I’m here to answer questions and let you know what he’s up against.”

“He’s awake. Go ahead and give it to us straight.”

Dr. MacDonald hesitated slightly and Megan pushed, “Do you expect him to survive?”
“Yes, of course. We need to monitor for infection and he’s on preventive antibiotics right now.”

“I already read the labels on the I.V. bag. What about the burns to his right hand? They looked fourth degree to me.”

“For anyone else, we’d be preparing for partial amputations. Given Captain Rogers’ extraordinary healing abilities, we’re waiting to see how his body responds before making any decisions. This is a new type of injury for him, so I can’t predict odds.”

Megan squeezed Steve’s elbow reassuringly. “Okay, that’s inconvenient since he’s right handed, but manageable no matter what happens. How about his eyes? I assume permanent blindness is the biggest concern at this point.”

“You don’t pull your punches, do you?”

“Nope. It’s better to deal with facts and not the products of our imagination. If you want Steve to trust you with any good news, you have to be totally honest with him no matter how bad the facts sound. He’s not the type to hold a grudge if he doesn’t make a full recovery.”

Dr. MacDonald sat down in the chair on the other side of Steve’s bed and touched his upper arm below the bandages. “I wish I had better news. I just don’t know. For anyone else, I’d say that total vision loss was almost a certainty. Your retinas are intact, though your corneas are severely burned and your eyelids… let’s just say they didn’t fare well. We’re going to have to wait and see how your body responds. You’ve surprised us before and you might do so again. Depending on how you look tomorrow, we may proceed with some skin grafts. We may also hold off and see what you can do on your own. In another week, I’ll be in a much better position to make some predictions.”

“Tony Stark and Bruce Banner are currently scrambling to develop some more effective pain medicines and burn ointments,” Megan explained. “If you would coordinate with them directly, it would increase their chances of success. The morphine isn’t doing much to take the edge off of his pain and I know you’re giving him doses that would put down an elephant. When they find something, are you going to block Steve from trying it if he chooses to?”

“You’re asking me to authorize untested therapies.”

“I’m asking you to let Steve decide for himself what he’s willing to risk. I understand the Hippocratic oath, but allowing him to suffer extraordinary pain is a form of harm. It needs to be his choice, not yours or mine, as to whether or not to he tries whatever that pair of geniuses can come up with.”

“I need to consult with Director Fury about that.”

“Bullshit. Don’t you dare hide behind Fury on this. My top priority is helping Steve. What’s yours? If you want to be the physician in charge of his care, step up and lead. Otherwise, we want to talk to your replacement.”

“Megan’s right.” Steve managed to whisper when he realized Megan was doing a stare down with the physician.

“Fine. I’ll give consent to anything Captain Rogers agrees to as long as I’m convinced he’s in a frame of mind to make those decisions.”

“Not… good enough.” Steve took another pained breath. “Megan’s P.O.A. Signed papers… Check files.”
Dr. MacDonald stood up slowly. “Very well. I’m going to do just that. I’ll be back shortly.”

Megan stared at him. “You made me your healthcare power of attorney?”

“Trust you.”

“Oh, Steve….” She squeezed the fingertips of his left hand while she wiped tears from her own eyes. “We’ll get you through this.” She picked up the tablet and turned it back on. “Let’s get back to the sugaring off at Grandma Ingalls’ house.”

The sugaring off was finished when Director Fury swept into the room, his black leather jacket hanging off his frame like a cape. “You’ve made Dr. MacDonald rather unhappy. She is talking about having you thrown out of the medical wing.”

“Do you think I care?”

“Dr. MacDonald is one of the best physicians at S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“With one phone call to Tony Stark, I can have Steve moved out of here to a hospital where pain management is given high priority. Do you need me to explain the effects severe pain can have on healing and overall patient prognosis? Because I can do that, too.”

“You think I don’t care what happens to Cap?”

“I know you care a great deal. I’m more concerned with Steve.”

“There’s one man lying in that bed, Doctor.”

Megan shook her head. “You see an asset and a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent who is currently out of action. I see my fiancé who may not be able to sketch again, or may have to learn to do it left handed. You see a soldier; I see a man. I understand that’s your job. But you need to understand that I’m the better one to advocate for the whole person he is, not just the soldier. So you can either back me up when I advocate for Steve according to his wishes, or I’ll do my best to work around you.”

Megan watched him raise his eyebrow at her but she just glared back at him, refusing to back down.

“I’d like a moment alone with him,” Nick finally said.

“That’s up to Steve,” she replied evenly.

“S’okay, Megan.”

“I’ll check in on Natasha and be back in a few minutes,” she said standing up. “Don’t leave until I get back, Director. I don’t want him left alone for even a minute to endure the pain by himself. Use the time to gripe about me if you want to. You can swap lists.” She patted Steve on the ankle as she went around the foot of his bed and into the corridor in search of someone who could direct her to Natasha’s room.
“How is she?” Megan whispered as she slipped quietly into the darkened room where Clint was sitting in a chair and keeping watch over Natasha as he sharpened his knives and kept an eye on the corridor.

“Doing okay. I’m going to take her home when she wakes up. She’ll sleep better in her own place. She needed some stitches, sprained her knee… standard stuff. I heard what happened to Cap.”

Seeing her look, he continued, “Nat got the hostages out while the support team guarded the area. They were heading out of the building when Cap came tearing out of the quinjet like some sort of crazy person, yelling for everyone to hurry and get down. Next thing they knew, the building blew up behind them, sending a fireball and a hot steel beam right at them. Cap caught the beam with his shield and right hand, then threw it back in the direction it came from. The way it was headed, it would have taken down the whole group of five hostages like a lawnmower. Nat sprained her knee trying to haul them out of the way. We don’t know what triggered the explosion, but it was something nasty to heat the metal up that fast and fling part of the building so far afield. The air shouldn’t have been that hot or burned Cap that badly. There’s a data team pouring over the quinjet’s sensor logs trying to figure out how Cap knew it was going to blow.”

“The logs might not show anything. It’s possible he heard or smelled something on his own. I’ll see if he remembers.”

“What are you doing out wandering the halls?”

“Director Fury wanted to talk to Steve alone for a minute. Fury’s grumpy that I’ve been butting heads with the physicians. Tony and Bruce are working on better pain management options and the doctors are more concerned about the fact it’s experimental.”

“Keep butting heads. Stark will move him somewhere else if we ask him to.”

“Um, I might have already threatened to do that,” Megan admitted a bit sheepishly.

Clint chuckled softly so as not to wake Natasha. “You are one scary woman. I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you and Nat to spend much time together. You’ll just come up with a dozen more ways to make our lives hell. Sit,” he said, gesturing to the empty chair beside him. “You holding up okay after last night?”

“I told him we’re setting that whole matter aside for right now. This isn’t the time.”

“Good for you. He was feeling about as happy as dryer lint this morning. Near as I can tell, you both keep talking past each other without hearing what you’re both saying. You’re both convinced you don’t deserve each other.”

“Seriously? Because that’s not what I got out of last night at all. He just kept throwing up one potential problem after another and classifying every non-issue as an insurmountable obstacle.”

“Like I said, you’re both talking but you’re not communicating. You might want to work on that. Stop playing the ‘I don’t deserve you game’ and start talking about the real issues.”

“How’d you become such a relationship expert?”

Clint looked sideways at her and shrugged. “I’m in the assassin and spy business. Reading people
and hearing what’s really being said gets you home alive at the end of the mission. Do it long enough, you get pretty good at it. Go rescue him from Fury. Once I get Nat home, I’ll come sit with Cap so you can get some sleep while I keep him company. If you ask, they’ll bring in a cot so you can sleep right there in the room. Once she gets a few hours, Nat will take over and I’ll get a nap in my office. Sound good?”

Megan nodded.

“When’s the last time you ate?”

“This afternoon. Emily brought me a sandwich. I’m okay.”

“Keep it that way. He’s facing a brutal recovery so you’re going to have to pace yourself. Nat and I will rotate shifts with you until he’s discharged. I assume you’ll take him home with you when he’s out? His own apartment’s too vulnerable to attack when he’s off his game.”

“If you can find a place that’s secure, yeah. I’d rather keep him out of the public eye for now. He doesn’t need anyone knowing he’s vulnerable. He’s going to protest, I’m sure.”

“We’ll overrule him. Three to one vote, majority rules. Five to one if Bruce and Tony weigh in. Going to his apartment in Stark tower is another option. Maybe that will appeal to him more. Either way, you need to be there with him, no matter what he says. This is your chance to prove you’re up to whatever the future brings. You and I know you can do it. You just need to convince him.”

“I can’t let him think I see it that way because it’s not a test. Not really. It’s just what his life is like. God help us, this is his definition of normal.”

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It was nearly two in the morning when Clint slipped into the room, patting Steve on the leg with a quietly spoken “Captain,” while letting Megan finish the paragraph she was reading aloud. “I love those books,” he added, gesturing for Megan to hand it over. “Nat’s home asleep in her own bed. Take the cot, Megan, and get some sleep. I’ll take over.”

Megan nodded tiredly and curled up immediately on the cot she’d gotten set up earlier in the night. It didn’t take her long at all to fall asleep listening to Clint read about the mustangs Pet and Patty that Pa acquired by trading his horses.

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Megan rolled over, dreaming she heard her mother talking. “Let her sleep,” her mother said.

“I’m surprised they let you in,” she heard Clint say.

“They didn’t want to,” Greg muttered. “They discovered what happens when you try to tell women in this family ‘No.’”

Megan rubbed her eyes and sat up to find that yes, her mother and Greg really were standing by Steve’s bedside. “When did you get here?”

“We got into town shortly after midnight, but knew we’d have a better chance of getting in this morning,” her mother said, giving her a hug. “We just got here. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. Steve?” she asked, turning to the bed.
“Still here,” he mouthed, his voice the faintest of whispers.

“I see that. Did you get any sleep at all?”

“Nope,” Clint answered for him. “Until they get the pain under control, the only sleep he’s going to get is under a general.” He glanced at his watch, “Nat will probably be here by about ten. We’re taking shifts.” Clint turned to the bed, “Don’t even argue, Cap. A sprained knee won’t keep her from fighting. We’re not leaving you unprotected while you’re vulnerable. She and I have always done that and it’s not changing now.” He poked his head into the hall and quietly asked the nurse on duty to find more chairs.

“What danger can there possibly be in the middle of S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters?” Kathy asked.

“Probably none,” Clint said, turning back to them and leaning on the doorframe. “But in our business, we’re always on guard. The only way to truly rest when you’re wounded is to know someone else is standing watch. Megan’s dangerous in her own way, and I’d put money on her winning in a typical hospital. Here in H.Q., she’d be going up against trained agents. Yesterday, I had to get Nat home so she’d be ready to take a shift today and I knew the Captain wasn’t anywhere near the point of sleeping. Between Megan and his shield, he’d still be able to defend himself. Now, though, we can make sure when he’s able to sleep he can let his guard down and sleep deeply. Do any of you want coffee? There’s a small kitchen just around the corner.”

“Megan, why don’t you and I go get some drinks and breakfast pastries for everyone while Greg and Agent Barton stay here? Surely there’s a cafeteria somewhere in the building.”

“Go on, Megan. It will do you good,” Greg added after giving her a hug.

“Okay.” She put her hand on Steve’s leg and leaned over him, “I’ll be back soon. Don’t run off while I’m gone.”

“Try not to,” he whispered back to her.

As soon as they stepped out of the medical department of the Triskelion, the tears started flowing and she let Kathy pull her into another hug while she cried. “Let it out, honey. I figured you were about due for your post-crisis breakdown.”

“So you’re the one who raised Dr. Buchwald to be a pain in my ass,” Megan heard Director Fury say from behind her.

Megan straightened up and turned around, but not before Kathy replied, “What are you doing to deserve it?”

“My job.” He stuck out his hand. “Nick Fury, Director of Shield. Your daughter is a tigress when she’s angry, Mrs. Johnson. Fortunately, I happen to like tigers.” Nick looked at Megan. “Any change?”

Megan shook her head, feeling extremely off balance at this turn of events. Director Fury liked her?

“Keep doing what you’re doing for him, Doctor. I need Cap to fight his way back. And I need you focused on your new job as soon as possible.” He nodded briefly at them and strode down the corridor, looking as deadly and dangerous as ever.

“New job?” Kathy turned to Megan with a questioning look.

“Yeah. As of Monday, I’m an associate director of life sciences research, reporting directly to
Director Fury. I meant to call, but it’s been a hell of a week. What day is it?”

“Thursday.”

Megan ticked off the weeks’ events on her fingers, trying to figure out how they’d gotten to Thursday already. “Monday, I was promoted. Tuesday was paparazzi day and I went to a hotel room Clint got for me under an assumed name. Steve and I had a big argument and almost broke up. I was up all night crying Tuesday night. Yesterday, Steve was hurt. I guess that makes it Thursday.”

“What argument? Honey, what are you talking about?”

“Let’s go up to my office so we’re away from everyone. We’ll get coffee on our way back.”

“Okay. You have your own office now?”

“Yeah.”

“You look exhausted. How much sleep did you get last night?”

“When did you get here?”

“Seven thirty this morning.”

“Five and half hours, all more than the night before. And it’s more than Steve has had. He’s in so much pain, Mom. The morphine barely touches it. Tony and Bruce are trying to come up with something but until they do, he has to suffer. He was screaming in pain when they are first working on him yesterday. His uniform actually melted into his skin. I don’t ever want to hear that sound again as long as I live. It’s not fair that he’s sacrificed so much and they don’t even have a way to control the pain.” Megan started to sob again and was barely able to lead the way into her office. Once there, she shut the door and fell into her mother’s arms. “He might be permanently blinded. Sketching is his creative release. He can’t lose that, Mom. He’s lost everything else. He can’t lose his art. He just can’t.”

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“Look at you, Spangles, lying around on your lazy ass—on a Thursday morning no less—while the rest of us worker bees have been slaving away all night. I thought you army guys were always up at dawn running laps and here you are lounging in bed without even having the decency of being naked and snuggled up to your girl.”

“Good morning to you, too, Tony,” Clint said with a faint smile as Tony, wearing his Iron Man uniform with the face plate flipped up, clomped on metallic feet into the room.

Megan stood up and tried to run interference. “Tony, this is my mother Kathy and my step-dad Greg. Mom, Greg… Tony Stark.”

“So you’re the one who spawned this she-devil who is keeping Cap in line? Was she always that mouthy with you? I keep telling Cap he needs to spank her—”

Megan cut him off. “Tony, did you come up with something?”
“Hello, Iron Man suit? No shower? You think I’d fly myself down here just to make Spangles blush? Not that we can see him blushing right now, but that’s beside the point.” Tony held up a large case. “Blue goo.” He shrugged. “Not a permanent name, just a working name. Try it.”

“What’s it for? What dose? How often?”

“Spangles, a big glop, as needed… we’re not done calibrating it yet. I’m guessing every two hours. You call yourself a doctor?”

Megan sighed. “I’m not that kind of doctor. What does it do?”

“Numbs the burns, keeps the cells happy, kills the bacteria. It may even promote world peace. Stark Industries is going to make a fortune off of this baby once I come up with a better name.” While he talked, he set the case on Steve’s bed and opened it. He made a shooing motion with his hand. “Try it out. Look, I made him a mitten,” Tony held up a plastic bag in the shape of a mitten and passed Megan a foam form that had a cutout in the shape of a hand with Velcro straps to hold it shut. “Fill the bag with goo, smoosh it around his fingers, seal the wrist, then strap his hand down flat and lock it shut when he’s not stretching and flexing to prevent scar tissue problems.”

Megan eyed the supplies and went over to Steve’s right side. “Steve? It’s up to you.”

“Do it.”

Megan nodded. “Okay,” she said and went to wash her hands before donning a pair of nitrile gloves from the box stashed on the wall inside the door to his room. “Tony? Can you help me?”

“Oh, no. I’m an engineer for a reason. Machines don’t bleed or piss on you,” Tony said backing as far from the bed as he could get.

“I’ll help,” Clint said, getting out of his chair and moving to the sink. “Taking the bandages off is going to hurt like the blazes, but they’d be doing that later today anyway. Do you want something to bite down on, Cap?”

“No, just make it fast,” Steve whispered.

“While they’re doing that, I should tell you about my solution to all of the tree stands that were set up on my property last fall,” Greg said as he got up and moved to stand by Steve’s left side. “There was a huge buck with a ten point rack that everyone in the area was hoping to get. The neighbors and I have always gotten along just fine and know when it’s okay to go onto our different properties, but this young fella bought a house nearby and decided the rules didn’t apply to him…..”

Megan had heard the story before, including Greg’s solution of sinking all of the unauthorized tree stands in the middle of his big pond the day before hunting season opened, so she tuned him out. Still, it was a good distraction for Steve to listen to Greg rather than Megan and Clint’s hasty assessment of how to best unwrap and apply ‘blue goo’ to Steve’s hand. Clint had plenty of experience with field medicine, so he and Megan quickly found a rhythm and shorthand that had them working seamlessly together.

Tony, meanwhile, pulled Kathy into the corridor and started using his trademark Stark Charm to distract himself from the sights and sounds of medical treatments.

Megan and Clint shared a look of dismay as they unwrapped the last of the dressing from Steve’s hand and were able to see how badly burned his fingertips really were. With a whispered prayer, Megan slid the goo-filled bag over his hand and began to work the blue gel into contact with his fingers while Clint held Steve’s wrist steady.
The effects were immediate and marked by Steve’s sigh of relief. “Totally numb,” he whispered to them. Megan blinked back tears of gratitude. They could see Steve visibly relaxing a bit as he got the first significant relief from pain since the accident the day before.

With his hand numb, it was a simple matter to massage the gel into the crevices of his burned fingers and gently straighten them so to better fit the mold Tony had made to keep his fingers straight. Megan took the time to flex and extend each digit, but Steve didn’t even flinch. Clint used a roll of tape Tony had packed and wrapped it around Steve’s wrist several times so the gel wouldn’t escape, then he and Megan fit the mold around Steve’s hand and strapped it shut.

“You get that, J?” Tony spoke into the air, trusting Jarvis to monitor their conversation via the Iron Man suit. “Tell Bruce to start mass production.” He turned to Megan. “You can’t use that on his eyes. We’re still working on a different formulation for that. But go ahead with the rest of his burns. Basic plastic wrap will do the job even if it makes the sheets messy when goo oozes out around the edges. I brought enough to last a few hours, assuming a two-hour window of effectiveness. Just rub the old off, add the new, wrap, and let him rest. Bruce said to fully stretch every joint during every change to preserve range of motion, so we’re not going to even try to extend the time beyond two hours. As fast as he heals, he’s going to need to keep moving. Bruce is starting another batch now, and I’ll have it sent by jet later today. Update J with any changes. We’ll keep working on something better than morphine for systemic pain relief.”

Megan stripped off her gloves and grabbed Tony by the arm when he looked like he was ready to leave and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Tony, for everything.”

“Hey, Spangles, your girl is molesting me! I’m outta here.” He took Kathy’s hand in his and kissed the back of it. “It’s been a pleasure,” he said before leaving as quickly as he’d come.

“Is he… always like that?” Greg asked in a bemused tone.

Clint just laughed. “You got the mostly-charming toned-down version. But he comes through when you need him.” He took out his phone and called the S.H.I.E.L.D. cafeteria directly. “Agent Barton here. I need an unopened box of plastic wrap brought to Captain Rogers’ room in the med-bay. We’ll square the accounts later.”

Megan grasped Steve’s elbow in her hand. “Maybe you’ll finally be able to sleep a little bit. I know your eyes will still hurt, but I’m hoping you get enough relief that you can finally get some rest.”

“Actually, I brought my hypnosis CD with me,” Kathy added. “Is there a CD player we can use?”

“I’ll get one delivered,” Clint said, pulling his phone out again. “And then I suppose we’ll let the physicians know what we’ve been doing.”

Megan just stood by Steve’s bedside and gently rubbed his right elbow. No matter what horrors they faced in coming days, it was a huge relief to know that Steve’s’ discomfort was finally being effectively managed.
“What are you doing to my patient?” Dr. MacDonald asked in a stern, disapproving tone as she came into the room and saw Steve sitting on up in bed while Clint and Megan smeared Stark’s burn salve all over his upper chest, shoulders, neck, and lower face. Kathy handed them supplies as needed while Greg collected up the used dressings as he told more stories about things he’d seen and done on his property during the hours he’d spent fishing and wandering the woods. At present, he was midway through a tale of picking wild blackberries and coming face to face with a skunk who had wandered over while Greg lay on his side in the brush to better reach the delicious fruit.

“Replacing his dressings with blue goo,” Megan replied in a matter of fact tone. Clint winked at her and she bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“You’re not authorized to change his dressings! We have trained medical staff in charge of patient care. You cannot just ignore protocol. I warned you yesterday that I’ll have you thrown out. This is an intensive care unit, not a coffee shop. There are also too many people in here. Captain Rogers needs rest and quiet.”

“If the room is too crowded, you should leave, Doctor,” Natasha said from the doorway. Megan watched from the corner of her eye as Natasha gracefully swept into the room on crutches and leaned them against the foot of Steve’s bed while placing a gentle hand on Steve’s right foot in greeting. “Standard protocols don’t apply to the Avengers and Dr. Buchwald knows what she is doing. Agent Barton has stitched me up in the field more times than I can count so I can personally vouch for his medical skills. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson are both wearing gloves and simply providing logistical support. I fail to see the problem.”

“Captain Rogers needs to be up and walking as soon as possible.”

“He will be, once he gets some sleep,” Megan promised. “Then you can take the catheter out and start him back on real food. While you’re here, will you check his left wrist and see if the sprain has healed enough to remove the splint and wrappings? He’ll rest more easily having the use of one hand.”

“You are not in charge here, Dr. Buchwald. I’m going to talk to Director Fury about this,” Dr. MacDonald said as she stormed out.

“She just put you in charge, Megan. She just doesn’t know it yet,” Clint said, smiling at her. “Natasha, how’s your knee this morning? Kathy, Greg, this is Natasha Romanoff, the one who likes to drag me around by my ear.”

“Only when you’re misbehaving. My leg is healing nicely. I’ll check your wrist, Steve. I’ve had far more experience with sprains than Dr. MacDonald.” Natasha sat down on the bed and took Steve’s wrist into her lap, carefully unwrapping it. “Clint, when you’re done finger painting, you can go crash in your office. I’ve got this.”

“You’re sleeping in your office?” Kathy asked, looking from Natasha to Clint.

“Don’t worry. I keep camping gear there. Between the carpeted floor and the central air, it’s rather posh compared to the places I’ve slept in the field.”
Natasha smiled softly. “How was Tony this morning? Half the floor is in a tizzy about his visit.”

Clint shrugged. “A bit subdued, but coping.”

Natasha nodded. “He came through.”

Megan remembered that Steve had told her Tony was extremely adverse to anything related to a hospital environment.

“He always does, just like someone else I know,” Clint said, nudging Steve a bit so he’d know the latter comment was directed at him.

“Did the x-rays show broken ribs yesterday, or just bruising?” Natasha wanted to know as she eyed the dinner-plate sized purple and yellow bruise Steve was sporting on his side.

“One cracked rib, the rest are bruised,” Megan answered “That will teach you to juggle steel beams, Steve.”

“Nah, it just means we need to teach Cap to juggle better. I keep a set of balls in my office we can use.”

“You juggle?” Greg asked, trying to wrap his head around a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent needing that skill set.

Clint shrugged. “I came of age in a traveling circus. It’s where I learned archery, juggling, tiger wrangling, and elephant husbandry, among other things.”

“While sitting, want another popsicle,” Steve whispered.

“Just one?” Megan teased. “Or one box?”

“Tired. Just one.”

“I’ll get it,” Kathy offered.

Megan called after her. “Make sure it’s orange. That flavor quenches his thirst the best.”

“I think you can leave your wrist unwrapped. Your shield is here,” Natasha said, guiding Steve’s fingers to the leather straps that were held to the bedrail by velcro cable ties. She showed him how it was attached so he’d be able to put it into use in an instant if the need arose.

They were just finishing covering Steve’s burns when Kathy returned and unwrapped the popsicle. “Here you go, one orange popsicle,” she said as she placed the stick in Steve’s fingers.

Natasha helped Kathy shove more pillows behind Steve’s back so he had some support to sit up. “Someday, someone needs to invent a hospital bed that actually lets you sit comfortably. With all the tech we have at S.H.I.E.L.D., you’d think they could manage such a simple thing.”

“Amen to that,” Greg added.

Megan stood beside Steve and ran her fingers though the hair on the back of his head while he fed himself the popsicle. She knew that small bit of independence was hugely important to him right now. She and Clint had simply spread the gel on his facial burns and left it uncovered.

Unfortunately, the fire had burned away his beard, too. She intended to tease him about not using fire as a new way to shave once this was over and the trauma no longer so close to the surface. They’d left the bandages taped over his eyes, but his head was no longer encased in gauze, leaving
his hair free to run her fingers through, comforting both of them if the way he leaned into her touch was any indication. “Do you think you’ll be able to sleep a bit now? I know your eyes still hurt a lot.”

“I’ll doze. Probably more’n Banner and Stark will.”

“They want to help. We all do.”

“Try not to cause too much trouble while I’m sleeping, Cap. I don’t want to miss the party,” Clint said and turned to Megan’s parents. “Once I get a nap, do you two want to visit potential apartments for Megan with me? The paparazzi don’t know you so you won’t attract their attention.”

“You’re moving?” Kathy turned to Megan with concern.

Megan nodded. “It’s for the best. Clint said he’d find me a place, but if you want to help, that’d be great. You know what I like.”

“Sure, I’ll go.” Kathy nodded.

“I’ll pass.” Greg said, holding up his hands. “I really have zero patience for evaluating floor plans and assessing real estate options. Go have fun, Kathy. You can tell me all about it later while I pretend to listen. I’d rather sit here and glare at Dr. MacDonald.”

They set up the CD player and let Steve use the hypnosis cues to try to control his pain as he drifted to sleep. When the CD ended, Steve stayed quiet. He dozed at first, but started whimpering, then moaning and crying out in pain. Megan sat up from where she’d been resting on the cot and watched as Natasha took charge.

“Captain Rogers, Report!” Natasha snapped. Steve’s breathing changed and she spoke to him more kindly. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah.” Steve muttered. “What happened?”

“REM sleep. Megan, lie down and pretend to be asleep while I play good cop to your bad cop,” she said, pressing the nurse call button.

“We need a physician here STAT,” Megan heard Natasha say.

“How can I help you?” Dr. MacDonald asked a few minute later.

“As soon as he enters REM sleep, Captain Rogers experiences additional severe eye pain. You won’t be able to even touch the bandages while he’s awake. Do you have any suggestions?” Natasha asked sweetly.

“We’ll take him back into surgery, put him under a general, and evaluate his progress there.”

“Okay,” Steve consented softly.

“Are you sure you don’t want a second opinion from your girlfriend?” Megan heard the doctor add in a snide tone.

“Don’t,” Natasha warned, her voice now cold and deadly. Megan smiled into her pillow as she imagined the look she was giving Dr. MacDonald.

“I’ll get a team assembled and we’ll be back for you shortly, Captain,” Dr. MacDonald replied
evenly, trying to pretend she wasn’t affected by Natasha’s warning.

“Bedside manner isn’t her strong point is, it?” Greg commented as soon as they were alone again.

“She certainly rubs me the wrong way,” Kathy added standing up. “Anyone else want something to drink while I refill my coffee? Not you, Megan,” Kathy added. “You’re going to lie back down and try to rest. I’ll get you water.”

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The second trip into the operating room lasted only a few minutes and Steve regained consciousness with less agitation than he had the day previously. Even so, Megan had insisted on being present. She bit her lip until it hurt as she refrained from making any comments as Natasha asked for details of what they had done. Natasha was enjoying her role and Megan had to admit that they were balancing each other out nicely as they managed the physicians and Steve’s needs.

Dr. MacDonald seemed a bit smug as she relayed what they had done in the operating room. “We changed the bandages on his eyes and applied a thick lubricant to minimize friction between the lid and cornea. His eyelids are still in bad shape, but there wasn’t much additional tissue death overnight. We examined his right hand and at this point, we’re going to hold off on any skin grafts. We’ll continue to monitor the situation and adjust the treatment plan accordingly. Scoping showed that his throat has healed well enough for us to take J-tube out. He needs to start loading up on calorie-dense food. We’ll provide nutritional supplements in the IV if it becomes necessary.”

“Good,” was all Megan allowed herself to say as she stood holding Steve’s left hand in her own.

“I want him up walking within the hour. Call me if you need me.” With that, Dr. MacDonald left.

“That woman is bad for my blood pressure,” Megan muttered. She heard Steve huff in amusement as he squeezed her hand. “She keeps talking about you like you’re not here,” Megan said, defending her reaction. ”At least you’ve been disconnected from everything but the I.V.”

“Let’s go for that walk,” he told her softly.

Megan leaned down and whispered in his ear, which had thankfully been protected from the fire by his helmet. “Let me know when your lips are healed enough and I’ll make sure we find a janitorial closet somewhere to duck into.” His ears turned a bit pink at that, but he didn’t argue.

“Give me a minute to move the chairs out of your way,” Greg said, standing up and starting to rearrange the furniture to Steve’s left.

“Isn’t the door to my right?”

“It is, but the IV pole is on your left and the lines aren’t long enough to move around the foot of the bed, so you’ll have to get out on the left side and walk around. Megan, let Steve take your arm and I’ll bring the pole along behind you. That will be one less thing for you to manage until you’re in the hallway. They don’t set these rooms up to actually let anyone maneuver around.”

Steve carefully swung his bare feet over the side of the bed and stood up, holding on to Megan for balance.
“It will work best if you hold on to me,” she said. “If you think you’re going to keel over, give me some warning before you go down.”

“Other than pain, and exhaustion, I don’t feel that bad.”

“Good.” She let herself indulge in one longing look at his gorgeous torso. Other than the scrub pants that hung low on his hips and barely came halfway down his muscular calves, his skin was bare. She sighed, lamenting how the blue goo and plastic wrap marred the effect.

“I know that sigh. Stop stalling,” he teased her gently, letting his blistered lips show a hint of a smile. “Natasha? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just reading the latest report from the team reviewing the quinjet logs. Do you remember how you knew the building was going to blow? The logs don’t show anything and I didn’t hear anything out of the ordinary.”

“I heard the first set of detonators go off. They’ve got a distinctive, high-pitched whistle I’d recognize anywhere.”

“Serum effect?” Natasha inquired. “I couldn’t hear it.”

“Must be. I don’t think the bombs we used against the Nazis improved my hearing any. Gabe used to complain how they always made his ears ring and ruined his ability to carry a tune.”

“I thought you said Gabe was a terrible singer and Dum Dum gave him endless grief about it,” Megan said as she led Steve out of his room and into the corridor. Once clear of the confines of the room, she took the IV pole in her left hand and Greg went back to his seat.

“He was. He was even worse than me and that’s saying something. Neither hearing loss or whiskey improve his singing, though the latter made him louder.”

They walked three laps around the entire medical wing before Steve began to tire. “Tell me when we’re out of earshot of everyone else,” he told Megan softly as they started lap number four at his insistence.

She led him to a section of corridor where the rooms were unoccupied and stood him against the wall so he could face her and not have someone sneak up on him from behind. “We’re alone. What is it?”

Gently, he reached for her and cupped her face in his left hand, running a thumb under her eye to see if she was crying, which she wasn’t. At least not at the moment.

“I’m sorry I left the other night. I should have stayed and talked it out with you. Clint said you were up all night. For what it’s worth, I was, too.”

“I hate not being able to hug you,” Megan admitted, holding his forearm with her hand and biting her lip to keep her distance.

“I’m numb. You won’t hurt me.” His hand dropped to her waist and he tugged her closer.

“I’m not taking that chance,” she said, though she allowed him to draw her in until her hips were against him. She put her arms around his waist and ran her hands up his back, reveling in the moment. “Tuesday night was bad. It seemed like you didn’t hear a word I was saying. But we don’t need to deal with that now.”
“Yes, we do.”

“So help me, if you start in with some lame speech about not staying with you out of pity if you don’t fully recover, I swear I’m going to have Natasha hold you down while I scoop your kidneys out with a rusty spoon.”

His lack of response told her he had been about to do just that but was now thinking better of it.

“I need you in my life, Steve, and I’m selfish enough that I’m going to fight to keep you around. You deserve better, yes, but Better’s going to have to go through me to get you. Can’t you trust that I know what I want?”

“I do trust you. I just can’t bear the thought of you looking back with regret someday that you didn’t get the life you deserved. You shouldn’t have to settle.”

“It’s my choice to make, not yours.” She reached up and brushed his bangs back from his forehead. “You need to decide what you want.”

“As much as I love you, I’m not strong enough to let you go.” He pulled her more tightly against him with his good arm, to the point where she had to lean back a bit so as to avoid touching his chest.

Megan couldn’t hold back her tears of relief, though she tried. “The next time we have an argument, can we try for crazy makeup sex rather than a near-death experience and a prolonged hospital stay? The former is a lot more fun.”

He laughed. It was a hearty laugh, and the first real laugh she’d heard from him in days. “Eventually, maybe. I want to take this slow. I need to be sure you have a chance to see what you’re signing up for. You’ve only just started dealing with the press and this won’t be my last stay in the med ward, though I’m not usually hurt this bad. I need to know this is going to work before we take this further.”

“After all those years in the ice, you’re deliberately choosing weeks—if not months—of cold showers? That is just sick, Rogers. Sick.”

“The army was always more interested in my body than my mind. I never said I was smart.”

Megan laughed. “Just you wait until I show you the nightgown Tony and Pepper sent me.”

“I might not ever be able to see—“

“In which case, I’ll describe it in exquisite detail while you do a hands-on examination. But for now, you need to be thinking about that cold shower before we head back to your room. You have no idea how many medical staff have been drooling over your bare torso this afternoon, and your current condition is only going to attract more attention.”

He groaned a bit at that and leaned back against the wall, pulling her with him.

“My mother and stepdad are waiting in your room, too. I’m sure Natasha is still there and you know she never misses anything.” Megan slid her hands down from his waist to cup his backside.

“You are not making this any easier.”

“I don’t remember promising that I would.”
“Are there any sandwiches on the hospital menu?” Megan heard Steve ask while she lay on the cot and roused from a brief nap. Her plan was to take the night shift while her parents fuss ed over Steve in the daytime hours, with Clint and Natasha providing protection and assistance as needed. She’d surprised herself by actually falling asleep for a time while the rest of them visited with each other.

“Probably,” Kathy answered as she dug around and tried to find it in the binder of paperwork that the bed tray was too small to accommodate. “But you’d do better with a full meal, not sandwiches. What sounds good to you?”

He didn’t answer. Megan knew he was railing at his dependency on others. He’d already made one concession in allowing Greg to help him to the bathroom. Kathy was asking for another.

Kathy clearly knew it, too. “I know you’re not used to needing help, Steve, but that’s what family is for. Have you already forgotten what we told you when you came to visit?” She didn’t wait for Steve to answer, but switched tactics. “What was your mother’s name?”

“Sarah. She was a nurse.”

“I’m no nurse, but I am a mother. Everyone needs to be mothered now and then. Since Sarah isn’t here, I’m happy to stand in. Remember, graciously accepting help is a gift of its own,” Kathy added. “Order what you want and I’ll help you eat it without wearing it.”

Megan smiled to herself as she sat up, knowing full well that her mother’s approach would get him to concede. She looked over at Natasha and was fascinated by the way the agent was studying Steve and her mother.

“Alright,” Steve gave in with a sigh.

Natasha immediately pulled out her phone. “I’m glad we finally have that settled. We are not eating S.H.I.E.L.D. cafeteria food. Clint’s awake and was planning to get takeout for all of us. What sounds good to you, Steve?”

“Honestly? Spaghetti and meatballs.”

Natasha nodded. “I know just the place. Garlic bread and salad, too?”

“Please.”

“That sounds delicious.” Greg said, perking up. Kathy nodded her agreement.

“Make it unanimous,” Megan said with a yawn. “Ask him to pick up come chocolate on his way, too. Has Dr. Dour-Face been back lately?”

“Nope, but the nurses have been in to change dressings and said the shipment of more blue goo from Mr. Stark arrived.” Greg told her.

Megan got out her phone and texted Jarvis to see if there was any news of note from the labs.
“Steve, Jarvis says Tony and Bruce hope to have something for your eyes by tomorrow but that a replacement for the morphine will probably take longer. “

“If my eyes don’t hurt, I won’t need anything else.”

“I think that’s what they’re thinking, too. Systemic drugs are always tougher to predict when it comes to side effects. I’m sure they’ll keep working on it in anticipation of the next time you land back here.” She read the next part of the note and shook her head. “Jarvis wants to know if this incident has made you crave shawarma, and if so, he’ll have some delivered from your favorite restaurant.” She looked up. “What the heck is shawarma and why is Jarvis asking about that now?”

“Tell him there is no need. Natasha?” Steve asked, too tired to tell the story himself.

Natasha explained what had happened in New York when Tony regained consciousness after his self-sacrificing trip into the wormhole, and Megan giggled at the thought that shawarma was now the traditional meal after a near-death experience in battle. “Jarvis has a wicked sense of humor.”

“Maybe he just wants you to send him more flowers,” Steve commented dryly.

“I’m thinking a night-blooming cactus would be appropriate this time around,” she muttered, pulling out her tablet to see what she could order.

Natasha eyed her with a curious expression. “You send Jarvis flowers?”

“He likes them. And it gives Tony fits,” Megan explained.

“I can imagine,” Natasha said evenly, giving nothing away though Megan knew that Natasha was aware of Jarvis’ true nature. Steve had confirmed that all of the Avengers were protective of the hidden member of their team.

Megan glanced at Natasha before sending her a quick summary of her rusty spoon threat via a text message. She watched as Natasha read the message and glanced up at her, raising her eyebrow slightly before giving Megan a slight, approving nod as amusement flickered across her face.

Megan still didn’t have a good sense of who Natasha really was or how to act around her. Steve had told her that Natasha’s background made her extremely guarded, so it made every hint of humor or approval—in or out of the gym—all the more precious to her.

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As soon as she finished eating, Megan lay back down while she listened to Clint and Kathy discuss different apartment options. She knew she should probably contribute her own opinions, but didn’t have the energy. Besides, she trusted them both to find something that was in her budget and had security features she probably didn’t even know to look for. They planned to leave as soon as dinner was finished and visit their top three choices.

Kathy was helping Steve eat while Natasha worked on her tablet on S.H.I.E.L.D. business and kept a sharp eye on any medical staff who dared venture into Steve’s room. Greg seemed content to sit quietly at Steve’s bedside. It felt cozy and strangely normal.

When Kathy and Clint left, silence settled over them and Megan found herself drifting in the space
between wake and sleep.

“Better move your hand to my wrist. I don’t want to crush your fingers if I have a nightmare,” Steve’s voice was stronger now, though the occasional coughing fits still plagued him and made his ribs angry. Megan winced in sympathy every time he coughed.

“Your gifts come with a pretty high price tag,” Greg replied in his somewhat gruff voice, cutting to the heart of the issue as he generally did.

“Seems that way sometimes,” Steve admitted.

“It all would have broken a lesser man a long time ago. Only a fool would envy you given the burdens you carry. People focus on the fun parts and forget the rest. I did, too, when I was young. There was that one summer where my brothers and I spent several days rigging a way to launch golf balls out of a pipe. They went so far we never did find them. I only found out a couple of years ago that the F.B.I. was called in to investigate the mysterious golf balls raining down from the sky, damaging a lot of the slate roofs in the area. Best I can figure, they flew about four miles or so. We were just messing around having fun, never thinking we’d hurt someone or even kill them. That case file is probably still in a dusty filing cabinet and an unsolved mystery.”

“I won’t help close that case, I promise,” Steve said quietly, amusement in his voice. Megan knew it reminded him of some of the antics he and Bucky had gotten up to when they were younger.

“I appreciate it. At least when we made nitroglycerine, we only were a danger to ourselves, not the neighbors. But boy, was my dad mad about that one when he found out what we’d been up to. See, we’d spent quite a few months collecting discarded glassware from the nearby college…."

Megan decided once again that it had been a miracle Greg had survived his childhood. She let his voice wash over her as he kept Steve entertained. Between her talk with Steve in the corridor and the way her parents were lending them both their support, she felt deeply content. There were some tough days ahead of them, no doubt, but it seemed like the immediate crisis was behind them.

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She woke to the soft thump of a duffel bag being dropped on the floor. Sitting up, she saw Clint standing over her. “I checked you out of the hotel room you’re not using and brought your stuff. There’s no need to go without a shower and a change of clothes unless you’re in the field.”

“Did you have any luck?” Megan stood up, yawning as she did so, and smiled her thanks to Clint.

Kathy nodded. “Your new place is perfect, Megan. You’re going to love it. It has hardwood floors, a sheltered terrace with a solid railing that will protect your privacy, and it’s close to work. Wait until you see the kitchen. There’s an underground garage with keypad access, and the front entrance is staffed around the clock. You won’t have to worry about strangers banging on your door.”

“You did remember I have a budget, right?”

“Hardly costs any more than your old place,” Clint promised her. “Knowing the landlord helped. I’ve got the paperwork here for you to sign and I’ll turn it in tomorrow. Your mom and I are going to go shopping for furniture and your new car in the morning. If they deliver Saturday, which they
should when we wave money in their faces, you’ll be all moved in by Saturday night. Speaking of
cars, what are you interested in?"

“Just use mine for now,” Steve suggested. “Even if I heal completely, I’m not going to be driving
for a while. It will give you more time to look around.”

Megan squeezed his hand. “For now,” she agreed. “Since I want a Subaru, too, it will spare that
poor salesman from the Barton treatment for a few more weeks.”

“Hey, they still made a profit, just not a killing.” Clint protested with a smile. “It’s not my fault that
guy thought Cap’s car purchase should pay for an exotic vacation.”

“Don’t go crazy on the furniture, okay? I don’t need much.”

“Trust us,” Clint said, with a grin she didn’t find at all reassuring. But when Megan looked at her
mother, she saw the same grin and not a hint of worry over the costs.

“What are you two up to?”

“Relax, Megan, I’m not the type to go overboard and you know it,” Kathy promised. “Greg and I
are going to head back to our hotel for the night. Call if you need anything before we come back in
the morning.”

With that, Kathy kissed Steve’s forehead and Greg shook his left hand, then they let Natasha lead
them out.

Clint sat down in the chair Natasha had vacated and put his feet up on the end of Steve’s bed. “I
like your parents, Megan. They’re good people. Try as I might to get good blackmail material on
you, your mom stuck to rated-PG stories what nearly gave me cavities they were so sweet.”

“What can I say? Having a boring upbringing is my superpower.” She shrugged and changed the
subject, “Greg held up well today.”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess I never told you, either, Steve. His first wife died of bone cancer. She and Greg went
through hell those last few months. As a result, Greg doesn’t cope well at all with being in or
around hospitals. I was really surprised he didn’t jump at the chance to go apartment hunting and
get out of here for a while. It says a lot about what he thinks of you that he’d stay here instead.”

“He’s here for you, too.”

“I know that, but I’m doing okay and he knows it. I’d have been fine with him going back to the
hotel, even. He decided that his job today was to keep you company. He wouldn’t do that for just
anyone. Haven’t you noticed him switching to story-telling mode every time he thinks you might
need a distraction?”

“Man, it’s tough to have people care about you, isn’t it, Cap? Then you have to deal with feelings
and all that mushy stuff that comes with it.”

Steve crumpled up an unused napkin that was on his bed and threw it at him, hitting Clint square in
the chest and lightening the mood.

“Lucky shot,” Clint teased him. “If you want, I can come up with a project that requires Greg’s
help tomorrow and Saturday to give him a break. A second pair of hands really would be a help
with what I have in mind.”

“Please,” Steve said right as Megan asked, “What sort of project?”

“One at a time, guys.” Clint held up his hands in mock surrender. “And it’s a surprise.”

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It was shortly after two in the morning that a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent came into the room holding a box with the Stark Industries logo on it. Clint motioned for the agent to set it on the floor as he pulled out his phone.

“What is it?” Steve asked, alerted by the new sounds and Megan’s change in posture beside him. She’d given up on sleeping for the time being and had spent several hours laughing to the point of tears as Steve and Clint told stories of various times in the field before they’d ever met. It seemed to her that the two were engaged in a contest in who could make her laugh the hardest, but she wasn’t going to point it out and risk ruining the mood.

“A box from Stark Industries was just delivered by an agent. Clint has his phone out and is probably calling Jarvis to double check it’s legit before opening it.” Megan explained. Clint gave her a thumbs up at that, which she relayed to Steve.

“Jarvis said the box has red glop and a new wristcom for you, Cap. Who wants to do the honors?”

“You may, if you’ll start calling me Steve.”

Megan watched the emotions play over Clint’s face and felt a lump in her throat. She squeezed Steve’s hand, promising herself she’d tell him about it later.

“Okay then, move your big feet out of the way and make room.” A knife flashed in his hand and he popped the lid open. “This must be the red glop.” He took out a bag and laid it on the bed, handing the printed note it had been wrapped in to Megan.

She read it out loud, “The red glop is for Spangle’s baby blues. It’s okay to put it right on his eyeballs, but bandage his eyes shut afterwards. Think of it as practice for more interesting bedroom games. –Tony.’ Beneath that, Bruce added a note of his own, ‘This is the fourth note I made him write. Trust me, it’s better than the others. I figured it was more important to get the box to you. Sorry I couldn’t do better. - Bruce.’”

“Thank you, Bruce,” Steve said.

Megan agreed. “I shudder to think what the first three said. Since this is for your eyes, I vote for calling the nurses and letting them change the bandages.”

Steve pressed the call button on the side of the bed, “What sort of wristcom is it?”

“It looks like a regular digital watch in a stainless steel case. There might be a tiny camera in the face. I can’t put it on your arm over the I.V. line though. The wristband is the type that opens into a circle.”

“How can I help you, Captain?” the nurse on duty asked as he strode into the room.
“Tony Stark sent a gel for my eyes I want to try. And I need the I.V. line moved to my right arm.”

“Certainly, sir. I’ll be right back with supplies.”

“Let me see that watchband, Megan. May be I can pop the pin out for now.” Clint took it from her and used a tool he pulled from one of his many hidden pockets. “Got it.” He went around to the left side of Steve’s bed. “Hold your arm out and let me see if I can get this back together.”

As soon as he fastened the wristband into place, a familiar English accented voice greeted him, “Good evening, Captain.”

“Jarvis?”

“Correct. Sir has requested you address me by a different name when using the wristcom. You may activate the camera so I may aid you in locating items in your environment. The wristcom is waterproof and does not need to be removed. A complete privacy protocol has been set up so not even Sir will be aware of our conversations unless you require emergency aid. We trust your discretion in addressing me in mixed company. Please be aware that the processing capacity in the wristcom is limited, and there may be slight delays as information is transmitted to the tower by satellite, especially when the camera is turned on. Within those constraints, I will aid you in every way possible.”

“You pick a name, J, and go silent until the nurse is done in my room. I owe you, buddy,” Steve said before falling silent as his voice started to break.

Megan held Steve’s hand while Clint put his own hand on Steve’s forearm and wrapped his other arm around Megan. She leaned into him, overwhelmed at the magnitude of the gifts. While he healed, Steve would never be stymied by a search for a dropped item or left wondering what lurked inside an unopened can from the pantry. Jarvis would be his eyes and his companion without ever growing fatigued by the responsibility.

“If this red glop works like I think it will, you’re going to get some real sleep tonight, Steve.” Clint finally said softly. “We just need to convince Stark to come up with better names. I feel stupid referring to red glop and blue goo treatments. I’m sure that’s his goal, but I don’t like it.”

“We’ll find a way to get revenge,” Megan said softly. “Tonight, I’m too grateful to care.”

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Chapter End Notes

This weekend is going to be crazy so I’m posting the next chapter early. Yeah, I hear you all complaining! :-) Seriously, thanks for all of the awesome feedback, kudos, and subscriptions.
Not long after the nurse left, Steve fell into a deep, restful sleep that was free of pain. Megan hadn’t wanted to watch the process of treating his eyes and had kept her eyes on Clint’s face instead. The worried look he gave her told her more than enough about the damage the fire had done, but she clung to the fact that the pain could now be managed. If the worst happened, and Steve was permanently blinded, he had more resources at his disposal than any blind person ever before. Combined with his own scrappy will, she knew he’d make the adjustment in time. For now, it was enough to know he wasn’t suffering in agonizing pain.

Once Steve was asleep, Clint had stood holding her for a long time, letting her cry into his shoulder until his shirt was soaked and she was completely wrung out. Then he’d tucked her into bed on her cot and told her to sleep without worry. She lay there, trying to wrap her brain around everything that had happened in the last few days. It was too much. When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed of talking watches and jello robots that fought fires by spraying rainbow slime.

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Megan woke before Steve did, which told her exactly how tired he had been. He usually needed far less sleep than she did on any given night. Sitting up, she found Natasha already on watch.

“Clint left with your parents about an hour ago,” Natasha said softly. “He said Steve has slept soundly most of the night, though the nurses come in periodically to give him new doses of Stark’s concoctions. Steve rouses, then goes right back to sleep as soon as they’re done.

“I can bear anything but seeing him in pain,” Megan confessed softly. “Any word on when they might let him go home?”

“Not yet. The doctors have not checked in, either. Don’t be in a rush. Round the clock treatments can wear you out.”

“We’ll manage. I’m more worried about him feeling safe. You can Clint can’t keep this up forever, either.”

“Your new apartment is getting a top of the line security system installed today, courtesy of Tony. He insisted. Steve will be armed, and you know how to use his gun, too. No place is ever safe, but the risks are minimal. Steve is better able to defend himself than even he probably realizes. He’s trained hard to get better at hand-to-hand. In retrospect, I should have spent more time teaching him ways to fight hand-to-hand in total darkness. We’ll work on that when he’s stronger.”

“Is there any combat scenario you haven’t trained for?”

“A few of years ago, I would have said alien invasions.”

“Thank heavens you can cross that off your bucket list. Please don’t be in a hurry to add, ‘The Fight at the End of the World.’”

Natasha smiled softly. “I’ll try. Now go back to sleep.”
“Megan, wake up!” Natasha snapped at her. Megan sat up, then bolted to her feet when she realized Steve was having a nightmare. It was a bad one by the sounds of it. Natasha was holding Steve down with effort, mostly because she was doing her best to avoid injuring him more while she redirected his flailing limbs.

“Sorry, Peggy. So cold.”

“Any ideas?” Megan asked, staying out of reach. “I normally keep my distance and just talk to him.”

“Tried that,” Natasha said, using a pressure point to temporarily pin his left arm to the mattress.

“Okay, then,” Megan said, coming up on his right side and leaning down by his head, her mouth sideways on his. She kissed him soundly on the mouth while she kept her gaze on Natasha and ran her hands through Steve’s hair. “Steve,” she breathed into his mouth and nose, trying to engage his other senses. “Wake up, darling, so we can go dancing at the Stork Club. It’s Saturday night. You promised.”

“Peggy?” Steve stopped flailing.

Megan kept kissing him, talking against his mouth as she tangled her fingers through his hair and rubbed circles on his temples. “Come back to me, darling. You’re safe. The war is over. Relax and let me warm you up.”

“Safe? Peggy?”

“I’m safe, Steve. You kept us all safe. You’re in the hospital. Your eyes are bandaged, but I’m here, darling.” Megan saw Natasha studying her with fascination as she knelt over Steve’s body. Natasha cautiously took her hands away from Steve’s arm and rocked back on her heels, ready to pin Steve again if he became violent.

“So cold.” Steve was less tense now, though still caught up in the dream.

It always broke her heart, knowing he was reliving one of the most horrific times of his life. “I know, Steve. We’re trying to get you warm. Can you tell me where you are?”

Steve reached with his left hand and found Natasha’s waist. “Love you.”

“I love you, too. Kiss me like you mean it, Steve.”

He did, tugging Natasha closer as he did so.

Natasha played along, going so far as to put her hand on Steve’s and keeping it there while continuing to watch Megan with a sharp eye.

“Do you know where you are, Steve?”

“Hospital.”

“That’s right.” She took a breath, hoping he was ready for what came next. “Do you remember
“Megan?” Steve paused, then his whole body tensed and he tried to pull away from Natasha, who kept his hand on her hip and squeezed him with her thighs. He swore under his breath and tried to sink into the mattresses. “I’m sorry, Megan. Natasha…” Steve swore again, using even stronger language.

Natasha moved off of the bed in a fluid motion that Megan could only dream of replicating. That Natasha managed it with a sprained knee was doubly unfair in Megan’s mind. “I didn’t know you knew how to swear, Rogers,” Natasha said evenly.

“Did I hurt you?”

Natasha smacked his thigh. “Don’t insult me. It’s too early in the day for that sort of rudeness.”

“Megan?”

“I’m fine,” she said, brushing his hair back from his forehead. “It’s been awhile since you had that particular dream. It was probably triggered by being numb in so many places.” She pressed her finger to his lips when he took a deep breath. “Don’t you dare apologize or I swear I’ll find a rusty spoon and make good on my earlier promise.”

Steve lay very still then. “Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s better. Now that you’re awake, how about some pancakes, bacon, and eggs for breakfast? We haven’t shared a decent breakfast in awhile and I intend to make the most of your guilt this morning.”

“Do I get a say in this?”

“Do you want a double or triple serving?”

“Triple.”

“I’ll order it,” Natasha said as she pulled out her phone.

“Thanks,” Megan answered. With a final kiss to Steve’s forehead, she headed to the bathroom to freshen up.

***

Breakfast arrived shortly after Steve had a new application of Stark’s ointments to his body and eyes. Megan smiled as she pushed the button to raise the head of Steve’s bed up and climbed onto the bed so she was sitting on Steve’s thighs. “This okay?”

He nodded, smiling slightly, though clearly a bit puzzled about what she was planning. She knew he could smell the plates of food. Megan took his left hand and put it on her hip, then picked up one of the food-laden plates and a fork that from the bedside tray. “Open up.”

“Megan,” he started to protest.

“I’m not wearing any underwear,” Megan said evenly, shoving a bite of watermelon between his
lips when his mouth gaped slightly.

Natasha laughed, making Steve startle, which in turn made Megan chuckle. He’d apparently forgotten they were not alone. “You can either cooperate or I’ll see what else I can do to embarrass you in front of your coworker,” she threatened, scooting her butt just slightly forward. She knew Steve wasn’t bold enough to check her claim of not wearing underwear, so her little lie would go unchallenged.

Steve dropped his head back against his pillow, swearing again as he chewed.

Megan clicked her tongue. “Such language! Plus talking with your mouth full, in front of two ladies no less. I thought your mama raised you better than that.” She turned her head, making sure she shifted her weight on Steve so he could feel her movements, and looked at Natasha. “Is he like this in the field, too?”

“No, this is a side of him I’ve never seen before. Too bad I didn’t film it because Stark will never believe me without evidence.”

“I’ll let you know what I’m planning next time,” Megan promised, taking a bite of fruit for herself before feeding Steve again. This time, he got a mouthful of pancakes. “Do you have any suggestions on creative uses of syrup?”

“I might. Would you like me to text them to you for future reference?”

“That would be lovely, thank you. Since the door to this room doesn’t lock, we really can’t take advantage of the situation here,” Megan said with a wink.

Natasha smiled and played along, “I can stand guard if you don’t mind an audience.”

Steve just groaned in embarrassment.

***

“Feel better?” Megan asked as she set the final plate aside and handed Steve a napkin to wipe his mouth.

“That depends on the criteria you use, you wicked woman.”

“At least your sense of humor has returned. You need to sleep more. If you scoot to your right and as close to the head of the bed as you can get and I lie down next to you low enough that I don’t hit your burns, do you think it will keep you feeling warm enough so you don’t have that nightmare again?”

She could almost see him weighing his options.

“Steve, don’t be stupid. If you could see how exhausted she is, you wouldn’t hesitate,” Natasha said, working the bed controls lay the mattress flat again. “Scoot over like she said. Megan, lie down and get comfortable while I get the blankets from your cot.”

Megan let Steve pull her against him so her head was on his chest below the area that had been burned. “This okay?”
“I’m fine. Go to sleep.”

Megan mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ to Natasha and then closed her eyes as the assassin tucked the blanket over them. Feeling Steve’s chest slowly rise and fall beneath her cheek, she was soon asleep.

****

Between periodic visits from the medical staff to change Steve’s bandages and apply more ointments, both Megan and Steve slept soundly. It was late afternoon by the time Megan felt rested enough to face the day, but she decided that getting up wasn’t worth the effort. She’d rather lie next to Steve and snuggle while he dozed.

Finally, though, she had to get up. And once she was up, she couldn’t resist a shower and a change of clothes. She and Steve shared another meal, with far less resistance from him this time. Whether that was due to her teasing or his growing comfort with accepting help, she wasn’t sure, but she wasn’t complaining.

Steve had shared one quiet, hasty conversation with Jarvis and learned he wished to be addressed as Ray. He hadn’t offered an explanation and they hadn’t asked for one, especially since their conversation had been cut short by a staff member wanting to check Steve’s blood pressure.

It was well into evening when Megan’s parents arrived with Clint, all of them bearing bags of takeout food from a local restaurant that specialized in home-style cooking. Clint passed her a bag of extra supplies she’d requested by text and she set them aside for later.

“What have you been up to all day?” she asked between bites. “This chicken is amazing,” she added before feeding Steve a bite, sitting on his lap as she had at breakfast.

“A bit of shopping, a bit of secret-project work, and a lot of fun,” Kathy answered vaguely. “Your furniture is being delivered tomorrow morning. We should have you moved in by tomorrow night.”

“I’ll take you to your riding lesson in the morning,” Clint mentioned as he dug into his own meal. “Your gear is in my car.”

“Don’t even think of missing it, Megan,” Steve told her, his hand on her waist. “You’ve had a heck of a week and it will do you good.”

“It’s hard to believe it’s only been a week since we went to New York.” She put her hand on his and squeezed it gently. “I’ll go. I’m not even going to argue about it.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re going to use that against me somehow?”

“Because you’re finally catching on?” Clint teased. “The only other phrase you need to learn is, ‘Yes, dear,’ and you’ll be set for life.”

“It doesn’t even mean you have to follow through,” Greg added. “They just need to hear the agreement. Just pretend to go along and then do what you originally planned.”

“Yes, do share how that typically works out for you, Greg,” Kathy said with a raised eyebrow.
He pretended to be oblivious. “A few fireworks keep things interesting.”

Kathy smiled sweetly at him. “I’ll remind you of that the next time you’re sleeping in the proverbial doghouse.”

Megan felt Steve tighten his grip on her waist and she squeezed his hand in acknowledgement. It wasn’t the same as sharing a knowing glance, but it did the job. They were going to find their way forward no matter what.

****
“Is that glue I smell?” Steve asked much later, once her parents and Natasha were gone and Clint was once again on duty. They’d convinced him to take a turn on the cot for a bit since Steve and Megan were both awake. He’d been up most of the day and the archer had found himself on the losing side of a unified front. Now Clint was sound asleep and they were essentially alone for what seemed like the first time in ages.

“It is,” Megan said, leaning into his touch. She was sitting on his bed with her right side facing him while she worked on her project on the bedside table. He was sitting cross-legged, his left arm on her back. “And no, I’m not sharing what I’m doing until I’m done.”

“Not even a hint?” Steve persisted. He played with her hair, still caught up in a messy ponytail on the back of her head.

“It’s fast-drying glue. I’ll show you as soon as it’s dry.”

“What are you cutting?”

“Toothpicks and yarn, if you must know.”

“Are you making me a get well card?” he teased. “Because that sounds like the sort of project the young school kids get roped into doing for me. You being here is enough.”

“Nope, it’s not a card. But don’t knock those projects. They give kids all sorts of practice using fine and gross motor skills, not to mention the motivation some of them get to actually do some reading and writing when they find out it’s for Captain America.”

“I enjoy getting them. My only complaint is the glitter. That stuff gets everywhere. I’ll think I have it all cleaned up and I find more of it. I finally had to tell the office that helps process all of my mail that I only want photocopies of the glitter-art forwarded to me.”

Megan chuckled softly. “No glitter, I promise. I sometimes use glitter glue, but that doesn’t shed the same way. Regular glitter is evil.”

“Why the toothpicks and yarn?”

“What are you, four? Because I’ve met five-year-olds with more patience than you have.”

“Is that so?” Steve asked, using his hand on her hair to pull her to him for a kiss. “Because I think I’ve proven I can be very patient.”

“That’s not patience! That’s a twisted fondness of cold showers.” She resisted the urge to touch him, knowing she’d get glue in his hair if she did. Instead, she rubbed her fingers together, trying to get the last of the glue to dry and rub off. She grew serious. “How are you doing really?”

He touched his forehead to hers, “Better. Trying not to think too much. Scared my eyes won’t heal.”

“Me, too. It’s hard to wrap my head around being so grateful and so terrified at the same time.” She
took a deep breath. “I want you to come home with me, at least at first.”

“I didn’t think I was getting a say in that, actually.”

“You could go to the tower if you prefer. It’s just that your place isn’t—“

“I know. My apartment isn’t the most secure place in the world. Normally, that’s not a problem. Right now, though, the risks aren’t worth it.”

“It won’t be forever. I know you still need your own space and I’m not trying to use this as a way to push you. Worst case scenario is that you move to a more secure place of your own. We’re a long ways from that decision though.”

“The next few weeks are going to be really rough. I’m not going to be easy to deal with.” He pulled away from her then, almost as if he were trying to study her face through the bandages on his eyes.

“Your stubborn is going to be up against my stubborn… I think it’s going to be a classic case of irresistible forces going up against immovable objects.”

“Can we contain the collateral damage?”

“I guess that’s the billion dollar question. There’s only one way to find out. Having Ray is going to help with that. He’s got nearly infinite patience compared to me. Plus, he won’t get cranky just because it’s three in the morning and he’s low on caffeine.” The glue on her fingers was dry so Megan put her hand on his wrist as he cupped her cheek. “But there’s only so much help he can give you. You need to learn to be independent without using your primary sense. That’s not a bad thing to know for future combat situations you might find yourself in. But that’s also not the same as coming to terms with it as a way of life. No one else can do that for you. I’m going to warn you now that I’m going to push you from day one to learn the skills you’ll need in case this is permanent. If your eyes heal, you’ve learned some new skills. If you don’t, you’re that much further down the road to adjusting.”

“Are you that pessimistic?”

“I’m hedging my bets. Your fingers and eyes are in really bad shape, Steve. Without the serum, it would be a done deal. I’m not giving up hope, but I’d rather we got busy preparing for the worst instead of sitting around counting on a miracle. You and I don’t do well when things are out of our control. Since we can’t control your healing, it makes sense to me to take control of what we can.”

“You can be really blunt sometimes.” Something in his voice had changed and he sounded vulnerable in a different way.

“Would you rather I weren’t?”

“No,” He took a deep breath, trying to collect himself and she wondered if he was crying a bit beneath the bandages. “You’re right. It’s just—”

“Hard to hear?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s hard to say, too. I don’t want to be negative and drag you down.” She felt her own tears welling up.

“You’re not. Like you told the doctor the first day, it’s better to deal in facts.“ Steve leaned back on
the bed and pulled her with him so she was leaning on his chest.

“It’s a floor-plan.”

“What is?”

“The glue? It’s a tactile floor-plan of my new apartment.”

“What about the yarn and toothpicks?”

“Windows and interior doors. Plain glue for the walls.”

He held her, rubbing her back. “What is it?” he finally prodded, sensing there was more troubling her than she had admitted to.

“I’m scared that this will be the thing that finally breaks you.” Furious with herself, she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand.

“And?” He nudged her leg with his foot.

“Damnit, I’m supposed to be the one comforting you right now.” She tried to pull away and sit up but he held her against him.

“Stop right there. This irresistible force is keeping you an immovable object, okay?”

She relaxed against him. “Okay.”

“Your honesty means more to me than anything. If you change that, if you start treating me differently—”

“Then I’d be diminishing you, which I never, ever want to do.” Megan choked back a sob. “I didn’t mean it like that. I know you’re strong. I do. It’s just that you’ve already lost so much, more than once. At some point, everyone reaches his limit.”

“I’m nowhere close,” He paused and pulled the hair tie from her hair and handed it to her before finger-combing the ponytail out. “When I first woke up and Nick told me I’d missed about seventy years, I was lost. He gave me files on my team. All the Howling Commandos, Colonel Phillips, Howard…” his voice caught and he swallowed hard before adding, “They were all dead. Peggy… I was glad she had moved on with her life, but I couldn’t bear to reach out to her and make the end of that dream real.”

Megan stayed silent, just waiting for him to continue.

“I hadn’t felt that alone since Ma died and Bucky shipped out.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

“It was bad. The thing is, I’m not alone like that anymore. I have you, your family, and a new team. It makes all the difference. That doesn’t mean it’s going to be all sunshine and roses. But I know this won’t break me. I’ve stood on the edge; I know what that feels like. This ain’t it.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

He let her digest that for a bit, then changed the subject, “Read to me?”

“Okay, but you have to let me up to reach the book.”
He held her a bit tighter, “Promise you’ll come right back?”

“Always.”

With that, he let her up, only to pull her close again when she settled against him to read. Megan read several more chapters to him, finishing *Little House on the Prairie*.

“I see why you suggested these, even though I have a few problems with the way she writes about the Indians.”

“I know. Laura was a product of her time. I certainly see the books differently then I did than when my mom and I read them together when I was a kid. But they still offer a window to a way of life that’s gone. Do you want me to start the next one? It’s about Almanzo’s childhood in upstate New York.”

“Not tonight. Is the glue dry yet?”

“I’ll check.” Megan got up and touched the glue, finding it dry. “Yup.”

Steve held his hand out to her, wiggling his fingers to prompt her to pass it to him. Instead, she crawled back onto the bed and put his hand on the top left corner of the page. “I cut the corner off of the top left corner. Plain glue is walls, yarn is interior doors, toothpicks are the windows. The yarn/toothpick combo indicates the main entrance and the balcony doors. I hope it helps.”

“I’m sure it will. At least I’ll have some idea of the layout of the rooms so I don’t have to find everything with my toes.”

“You might want to wear shoes at first. As much as you like going barefoot, your toes will probably be happier with a bit of protection.”

She watched Steve trace his fingers over the lines, trying to get a sense of the space she’d now be living in.

“Is that the kitchen?”

“Mmm hmm.” She moved his fingers to where a tiny room opened off of the kitchen. “With a washer and dryer. No more communal laundry rooms!”

“Am I missing something or does it have two bedrooms?”

“It has two bedrooms. I didn’t ask what they were thinking I needed all that space for. It’s huge compared to my old place. I find it very hard to believe the rent is about the same, too. I think Clint is hedging the numbers so I won’t protest or using another funding stream to cover the difference. I decided I’m not going to look this gift horse in the mouth, at least for now. We have more important things to worry about.”

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“I was wondering if you were still going to come today.” Courtney said when Megan entered the barn, then paused seeing her new companion. “Where’s Steve?”

Megan shrugged. “He’s stuck at work today. Clint, Courtney.”
They shook hands before Courtney turned to Megan. “Sally had a bad case of “I knew it!” earlier this week. You did a good job redirecting her when you and Steve first toured the facilities. She’ll be miffed she missed meeting you, too, Clint.”

“He needs a few places where he can let his guard down,” Megan said, smiling softly.

“Which is what I told her when she finally put two and two together. But don’t worry. None of us are talking to the press, or anyone else for that matter.”

“We appreciate it. If it makes her feel better, Steve wasn’t happy with my misdirection, either.”

“Did you get the Disappointed Look or the put-upon sigh?” Clint asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Both, actually. Then I gave him the Stubborn Megan treatment and he relented.”

“Cap’s a smart man.”

Megan smiled but changed the subject. “Is there any chance we can do a trail ride today? It’s been a long week.”

“Sure.”

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“You ride?” Courtney couldn’t hide her surprise when Clint spoke up.

“A bit.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Knowing you and your tendency for understating things, let me translate for Courtney. Clint is an expert rider who probably has all his paperwork filled out and is just waiting for you to give the okay.”

Clint folded his arms and looked at her sternly. “Excuse me, I met you exactly eight days ago.”

“Do you really think Steve has never talked about you? All you’ve done since last Friday is confirm what I already knew.” Megan held out her hand and Clint handed over the roll of paperwork he had stuffed in his back pocket.

“I really need to keep you away from Nat. You’re picking up all sorts of bad habits.”

Megan just smiled and turned to Courtney, “What horses do you want us to use today?”

“Let me think for a second,” she said as she looked around the barn. “I’ll definitely take Smokey for myself since he doesn’t get enough attention on Saturdays and loves trail rides. Megan, I think you should keep working with Hamlet. He’s a bit timid on the trails at times, but since Smokey is so fearless, he’ll probably be fine. Even if he shies, I’m sure you can handle him. Clint, why don’t you take either Mickey or Pumpkin. Pumpkin is headstrong on the trail, but a good, steady horse if you don’t mind riding a big girl like her. Mikey is a bit excitable out of the ring and would really benefit from a good workout with a rider who can be firm, but he’s not going to buck or try to run off with you. These are all therapy horses so they’re pretty even tempered, especially with a firm hand. But since most of their trail work is on a lead-rope, it’s good for them to get a longer workout with just a rider.”

“I’ll take Mickey, then,” Clint said. “I’ll grab my helmet from the car.”
Twenty minutes later, the three of them were deep in the woods that lay beyond the pastures. “A
doe and her fawn at three o’clock” Clint said softly behind her.

Megan looked to where he had indicated. “Where?”

“To the left of the thicket by the big oak tree. Mom just flicked her left ear.”

“I see her,” Megan said, pulling up to look a bit longer.

“I can’t believe you spotted her,” Courtney added softly, halting her own mount so she could look.
“Even knowing she’s there, she’s hard to see.”

“You earned your nickname once again, Clint.” Megan teased, nudging Hamlet forward. “Thanks
for pointing them out.”

“You need to get Steve to try riding. He may be a Brooklyn kid, but once you get him on a horse,
he’ll love it.”

Megan nodded. “I keep telling him that. He says he’d rather use the time to sketch.”

“Let me work on him a bit, then. I have another angle I can try.”

“Another bet?” She rolled her eyes, even though Clint was behind her and wouldn’t see.

“Nah. That’d be like shooting fish in a barrel. I’m thinking of appealing to his overprotective side
and pointing out how even a trail ride poses risks.”

“Clint, I really, truly, don’t need him to be any more paranoid than he already is.”

“But watching him fight those tendencies is fun. It’s not like you let him get away with it. Your
third choice is another betting pool at work.”

“Lord, no! We have enough of those.”

Courtney interrupted their debate. “There is a steep hill just ahead. Are you willing to trot up it,
Megan? The horses prefer it.”

“I’m game.”

“Okay, just grab some mane, hold a two-point seat, and let them go,” Courtney instructed.

Megan was amazed at how different the trot felt on the incline and was beaming when they all
stopped at the top of the rise to enjoy the view. “Okay, that just sold me on getting Steve out here,
too. Do your worst, Clint.”

“Be careful what you wish for!” he warned her with a mischievous smile.
Later that afternoon, while Natasha was around the corner getting a coffee refill, Megan snuggled with Steve in his hospital bed. “Are you ready to sleep in a real bed again?”

“I’m to the point I miss your sleeper sofa,” he answered, pulling her a bit closer and tracing lazy patterns on her back. “And I really want to take a shower instead of sponge baths.”

“Your chest and throat mostly look like you have a bad sunburn.”

“How’s my face healing?”

“Well, there are certainly easier ways to shave than you picked. It’s not quite up to bad-sunburn status, but you’re getting there. I imagine they’ll give the go-ahead for a shower tomorrow as long as you keep the bandages on your right hand and eyes dry. It might be easier to soak in the tub. We’ll figure it out.”

Steve nudged her with his foot. “What are you mulling over now? I can hear the gears turning in your head.”

Megan let out a soft huff of amusement. “Busted. What do you think about getting a tandem bicycle? I did some searching on the internet and they come in multiple speeds. Of course, you’ll have to trust my steering and I’m not hauling out of bed at the crack of dawn, but it would be a nice way to spend some time outside in the evenings. You’re going to go stir crazy without exercise and none of us can keep up with you to go running.”

“It’s a good idea. Do you think we can slip out without being recognized?”

“With sunglasses and helmets, we should be okay. Natasha, what do you think?” Megan asked as Natasha slipped back into the room.

“I think it will be fine, especially if you use the bike trails. Most people who use those aren’t going to be celebrity spotting. Let me take care of ordering it. I know someone who will make sure you get a good model. I can probably get Fury to cover it under the team’s fitness budget. As long as you are armed and have a cell phone with you, you should be safe enough and you can call for backup if you get into trouble.”

Steve smiled in the assassin’s direction. “Thanks, Natasha.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I might just decide to get one in hot pink.”

Steve chuckled. “It won’t bother me any. Pink wasn’t limited to girls when I was growing up the way it is now.”

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Chapter End Notes

With this, my buffer is GONE. I have ideas sketched out, but nothing else written out. I
need sleep and some quiet time. Please send either of these my way! I have such cool things I want to share and tell and I need the hamster wheel of my life to slow a bit in order for me to put words on virtual paper.
“Hi, Emma. What are you doing here on a Saturday?” Megan sat up on the bed where she’d been snuggling with Steve, but didn’t get up.

Ever polite, Steve added, “Hi, Emma.”

“Captain. I came in this morning to transfect the cells that couldn’t be bothered to be ready yesterday, so I figured I’d stop by and see if there is anything I can get you.”

“Thanks, but we’re good.”

“Are you getting out of here soon, sir?”

“Tomorrow, probably,” Steve answered. “Sit down.”

Emma shook her head, “No, I can’t stay. That’s great, though, that you’re going home. Are you coming back to work on Monday, Megan?”

“Probably Wednesday or Thursday, but I’ll be checking email if you need anything.”

“Okay. Good. I’m glad you’re feeling better, Captain.” Emma turned to go, then hesitated, looking back at Megan. “By the way, the dewers are messed up.”

“In what way?” Megan asked, trying to keep her voice bland.

“I went to get a vial to thaw and it wasn’t in the right spot. I had to dig all over and happened to find a duplicate can in another rack. The more I looked, the more it was clear that someone hasn’t been careful when going into the dewers.”

“What cells were you thawing?”

“An older passage of the SGRkids I transfected today. I wanted to do a rapid PCR- strain type and make sure they’re not contaminated. I’ve got the tubes in the thermocycler now so I’ll be able to run the results first thing Monday morning. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Didn’t you get the email I sent earlier this week about thawing any SGR cells or starting any new experiments?”

“Yeah, but John said—“

Megan squeezed Steve’s hand before she got up and stalked over to Emma. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Natasha continuing to focus on her own tablet, pretending to be indifferent to the conversation, though Megan knew it was an act. Natasha shifted in her chair, as if becoming more comfortable, but in a way that made it that much easier to trip Emma if necessary. “Did you read Director Fury’s notice on Monday?” Megan asked with the most pleasant tone she could manage.

Emma took a step back. “Yeah, but geez, Megan, what’s got your knickers in a twist? I’m not doing anything new. I’m just continuing what I already set up. You specifically said in the email that completing experiments already underway was fine.”

“You’re thawing new cells, you’re doing a transfection, and you fail to see a problem?”

“John said—”
“I overestimated your ability to read and comprehend simple English. We’re going to the lab right now and I’m going to watch you put every last damned plate of those cells into the autoclave. When you meet John later tonight for your next illicit tryst, you can tell him that I’ve locked up his lab notebooks and he can spend Monday reviewing the literature and considering his options.”

“John and I aren’t—”

“Oh, please. You two are about a subtle as drunk hippos suffering from hemorrhoids. I haven’t said anything because I really don’t care, though it’s a shame you both have so little regard for your spouses and the children you both have with them. What I do care about is you doing good science and following directions. I already told you I’d set up a meeting for you with Steve so you can pitch your experiments as I review the work being done and try to get something resembling I.R.B.s in place. You tried to take advantage of the current situation, and that’s not something I’m likely to forget… or forgive. You can tell John my warning applies to him, too. And if I ever find either of you defying my orders again, I’m going to stock those dewers with every last damn germ cell I extract from both of your bodies and see how you like it.”

Megan was pleased to see Emma blanch a bit at that.

“You and John defied me after Director Fury informed the World Security Council that Captain Rogers’ continued cooperating with S.H.I.E.L.D. depended on all research using his cells being thoroughly vetted and subject to his personal approval. Do you realize that if Captain Rogers now decides to leave S.H.I.E.L.D., it’s going to be your fault in Director Fury’s eyes?”

“But I—”

“Shut your mouth, because I don’t want to hear it. Get down to the lab and get an autoclave bag and bin ready. I’m right behind you.” As Emma bolted from the room, Megan looked around and found her shoes, slipped them on and bent down to tie them. “Steve, I’ll be back in a few minutes and then we can go for another walk around the cell block. For some reason, I no longer feel sleepy and ready for a nap.”

“Clint is going to be sorry he missed seeing that,” Natasha said, finally setting her tablet aside and looking at Megan with approval. “When you get back, I look forward to the explanation of exactly what she did and what you threatened to do to her.”

“Steve can tell you,” Megan said with a grin before letting the anger return to her features. It wouldn’t do to look amused when putting the fear of Megan into the science staff.

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The sun was shining brightly when Clint drove them to Megan’s new apartment.

When Clint turned into the driveway to the fancy five-story building, Megan’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? Clint, this place is a Victorian-style palace, not an apartment building.”

“I figured you’d hate it,” he teased as he entered the access code to the keypad that opened the door to the underground garage. The code’s different for each tenant. Yours is written down upstairs for you. Guests have to go in the front door. The staff checks IDs and your approved guest list. They’ll call your apartment if anyone else wants to visit you. Right now, the list includes Steve, your parents, Nat, and me. I’d be careful about adding too many people to that list, at least for now.”

“There’s no one else to add.” Megan sank back into her seat and gripped Steve’s hand harder.

“There’s a spot for bicycles, too,” Clint added, pointing to the bike rack located to one side for the
first level of the garage. Yours is due to arrive by Wednesday.”

“You and Natasha are like fairy godparents.”

“Or Fairly Odd parents, though I still think that show is creepy.”

“My nephews love it, too. Steve, I’ll know you’re bored out of your mind if I find you watching it.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be watching a lot of television.”

“With the descriptive video services a lot of shows have embedded in them, you might change your mind about that. But I know you can do better than that strange cartoon.”

“Ah, hell.” Clint muttered, getting Megan’s attention.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just hoping to get you both settled before you had to deal with the force of nature that is Sarge. He’s the landlord I told you about. He’s a really good guy, don’t get me wrong, but he can be… intense.”

“Stop fretting. I’ve handled Tony Stark, I’m sure I can handle Sarge, too,” Megan said, squeezing Steve’s hand reassuringly as she looked at the young man standing by the elevator. The right sleeve of his t-shirt was empty and he sported a military haircut, so Megan assumed he was a war veteran who had no use for a prosthetic given the lack of a stump to attach it to.

As soon as Clint shut off the car, he bounded over to them and opened Megan’s door. “I’ll come around and get you, Steve,” she whispered softly before taking Sarge’s offered hand and slipping out of the back seat. Steve got out the other side and shut his door, waiting for her to come to him while Clint opened the trunk and slung their duffel bags over his shoulder.

“You must be Dr. B! It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Sarge said, pumping her left hand up and down with his own. My madre named me Ricardo Martinez, but everyone calls me Sarge. Clint, you need to get me a job at S.H.I.E.L.D. if all your coworkers are this beautiful. It’s no wonder the press are trying to pester you, ma’am, but we’ll keep you safe and out of sight.”

Megan smiled, immediately liking him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sarge. Call me Megan. Let me introduce you to Captain Rogers. He’s going to be staying with me for a few days.” With that, she slipped around the back of the car and touched Steve’s hand so he’d know where she was. He let her guide him to where Sarge stood gaping, taking in the bandages on his face and the shield Steve was carrying on his right arm.

“It’s an honor, Captain. I hope you don’t mind a lefty-handshake. I left my right arm back in Afghanistan.”

Steve smiled at that and turned his shield so Sarge could see the bandages on his own right hand.

“Works for me. I trust your middle finger was sticking up when you left your hand behind?”

Sarge snorted as he shook Steve’s hand. “You’d better believe it! I don’t remember what Army reg that was, but I know it was in one of the rule books somewhere.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sargent Martinez,” Steve said, smiling more genuinely than he had a moment before. “What unit did you serve with?”
“One sixtieth, a special operations aviation regiment better know as the Night Stalkers.”

“He’s the main reason I’m confident in security here, Cap,” Clint said as he closed the trunk lid. “Sarge lives on property and there are a few other vets in the building. Anyone who tries to sweet talk their way past the guest check-in counter is bound to be disappointed.”

“Megan, I already left my number with your parents in your unit. I want you to call me any time, day or night, if you need something or feel unsafe.”

“I appreciate that, Sarge,” Megan said, studying him as she tried to figure out his motives.

He read her intentions easily. “It’s real simple, ma’am. I can’t serve any more, but my brain’s hard wired to take care of my unit. Putting that energy into the tenants keeps me on an even keel better than any VA meeting I ever attended. When that fails, I putter in my basement workshop and build furniture.”

Megan cupped his face in her hands and kissed Sarge on the cheek. “Thank you for your service, Sarge. I couldn’t have done what you did, but I’m grateful for your sacrifices. If you ever find yourself craving homemade pie or a sympathetic ear, you let me know.”

He nodded. “Clint, hand me one of those bags and let’s head up. I’ve got your six, Captain.”

Once at her door, Sarge handed the second duffel bag to Clint.

“Don’t you want to come in for a cup of coffee?” Megan asked, knowing her parents were there and surely had a pot brewing.

Sarge shook his head. “Give my regards to your parents and get yourselves settled in. I’ve got a leaky faucet in 2B to fix. Welcome to the I.M.T. building.”

“I.M.T.?!” Megan repeated.

“Island of Misfit Toys. I have the DVD if you need to borrow it sometime.”

Megan shook her head, laughing. “I own that DVD myself and I think we’ll watch it tonight. It’s been too long since I’ve seen it.”

“New Year’s was ages ago. Summer is always a better time to watch Rudolph. Later!” Sarge waved once and disappeared around the corner on his way back to the elevator.

“I’ll explain the reference later,” Megan promised Steve as Clint opened their apartment door and waved them in. “I smell pancakes.”

“Welcome home,” Kathy called from the kitchen. “Come sit down and eat.”

“Steve, if you roll up a pancake and dip it in syrup, it becomes a finger food,” Clint added from behind them as Megan led Steve to a barstool and counter where Kathy had put out a fresh plate of pancakes and scrambled eggs.

“Dig in, Steve. Eggs are at ten o’clock, sausage links at two, pancakes at six. There is a bowl of syrup at your ten o’clock. Like Clint said, pancakes can be a finger food, sausage links too, for that matter. We won’t judge and you need to eat.”

Steve sat heavily on the barstool and let Megan take his shield to put on the drop-leaf table that Clint had brought over from her old apartment. Megan could tell he was exhausted from the
journey from the Triskelion. “With the way you’re describing You’ve done this before.”

“I had an older sister with juvenile diabetes.” Kathy explained. “She was blind most of her adult life, so yes, I’ve picked up a few tricks along the way. Megan did, too. Before I forget, I’ve got a fresh batch of chili in the freezer for later this week and I just started beef stew in the crock pot for you to have tonight.”

“Mom, I can’t believe this place….” Megan broke off, trying to take it all in. “Bookshelves?” She walked over to one the adjustable shelf oak bookcase that was to the left of the gas fireplace. An identical bookcase was beside the patio doors. “These smell new. And they’re waxed… not coated in polyurethane…” She looked from Clint to Greg, both of whom were beaming at her. “You made these in Sarge’s workshop didn’t you?” she said, breaking down in tears.

Greg pulled her into a hug. “It’s been fun, making you something we knew you’d like. Sarge is a good man. He’ll help keep an eye on the place so you’re really safe here. The rest of the oak furniture is all stuff he made. He does fine work and it saved him the trouble of shipping stuff to the store he usually supplies.”

Megan scanned the room, noting a new glider rocker, ottoman, and a new sofa. There was an oak coffee table and matching end-tables with lamps, and a standing floor lamp beside the glider. A new flat screen TV hung on the wall, along with the decorations Megan had hung in her old apartment. The photo of Pepper and Tony was framed and sitting on an end-table, beside a larger photo of Megan and Steve dressed up for their night in New York. The living space was larger than her old apartment but still cozy, and she felt like she was truly home. The fact the walls were the standard rental beige didn’t bother her at all given the touches of color her mom had applied with dried flower arrangements, curtains, and throw pillows. The balcony, which she could see from the living room, was already set up with a pair of deck chairs and a small table. An insulated drape hung in the doorframe so they’d have privacy and protection from direct sunlight as they chose.

“Go explore, honey. You can show Steve around once he gets some sleep.”

“That obvious?” she heard Steve mutter between bites.

“Hospitals are not set up to let patients rest. You’ll feel a lot better once you sleep a few hours in a real bed without anyone waking you up for no reason. As soon as you finish eating, Greg and I are heading home. You need some time to just crash and be grumpy without worrying about anyone else,” Kathy said, patting his hand.

Megan opened the different cupboard doors. “You put everything away already? I don’t have to unpack at all?”

“You need to rest, too, Megan. While Clint and Greg were playing carpenter, I wrangled the movers and various delivery services. You don’t have that much, so it was no trouble at all to unpack your things and get you settled. Several of your dresser drawers have clothes for Steve in them, too. We didn’t buy much, just enough that you don’t have to do laundry constantly or make any trips to his apartment before you’re ready. Clint said he saw paparazzi staking the place out when he drove past. The fact neither of you have been seen in public for a few days is causing quite a stir.”

Megan fell into her mother’s arms and let Kathy hold her. She didn’t need to say anything; her mother knew it all already.

“Okay, enough mush. Come see the rest,” Clint teased, looking ready to burst with excitement. “I can’t stay either, but I’m not leaving until I see your reaction to the bedrooms.”
“I’m afraid to ask.” Steve said, sitting up a bit straighter on his stool. “Megan?”

“Natasha wouldn’t let him do anything bad,” she reminded him as she took Clint’s arm and let him guide her down the small hallway to the first bedroom on her right. She stood in the doorway gaping when he turned on the light. There was exercise equipment everywhere. In one corner stood the deeply hated A.M. machine Natasha made her use at S.H.I.E.L.D. Next to it was an elliptical cross trainer. There was a chin-up bar mounted high on the wall and a large open space with exercise mats in place for basic floor exercises. A rack on the wall held different resistance bands.

“Both of the machines are high-resistance, low-impact so you don’t have to worry about waking the neighbors below you. That’s why I avoided a treadmill, even though Steve prefers to run.” Clint explained. “And before you fret, S.H.I.E.L.D. paid for this stuff. Steve needs it for his recovery. He’s always been a physical guy, and he’s going to need to move more than ever to keep his head on straight in the coming weeks. We’ve already checked and no matter what I do on the equipment, the tenants downstairs can’t hear you on them. Heck, you can’t even hear them from the other bedroom. So if he has nightmares to work off, you can still sleep in peace.”

Megan hugged him hard. “You’ve thought of everything. Thank you for being his friend… and mine.”

“Check out the other bedroom.”

Megan led him down the hall and saw a large bathroom on her left and the door to the master bedroom on her right. She took a quick peek and verified that the bathroom had a Jacuzzi tub in addition to a shower stall and commode. The vanity had two sinks and an abundance of cabinet space for storage.

“I expect you to put that Jacuzzi to good use after a workout,” Clint teased her. “And if Cap leaves toothpaste spit in his sink, you don’t have to kill him because yours will still be clean.”

“Steve is the neater of the two of us,” Megan commented, looking around the bathroom. “This is as big as a bedroom.”

“Stop stalling,” he told her and pointed to the bedroom across the hall. “No more sofa bed for you!”

“Oh my gosh,” Megan breathed as she took in the decor. A king-sized bed with a simple oak headboard dominated the room. Each side of the bed had an oak nightstand protected by glass tops so nothing would mar the wood. The comforter was a sumptuous, jewel-toned extravagance with soft squares lined up in rows on the diagonal. She touched the fabric and sighed at how it felt under her hand. “Soft as a horse’s muzzle,” she breathed.

“But machine washable,” Clint added. He shrugged at her look. “I like nice things, but not when they’re high maintenance. The bed has drawers built under it for storage. You can hide them with a bed skirt if you don’t like them.”

On the opposite wall stood a large dresser topped with a mirror. In the corner was a cozy reading chair and ottoman, draped with a jewel-toned throw and pillows. “This is too much.” Megan wiped tears from her eyes and looked around again. “Where’s my sewing machine?”

“In the corner of the dining room. You were too focused on getting Steve settled to notice it. Check out the closet.”

“It’s walk in?” Megan asked as she gaped at the huge amount of space she had to hang her clothes.
“Are you sure the rent is the same as my old place? Because I just don’t see how that is possible.”

“I swear, I didn’t mislead you. Sarge is particular about who he rents to and not a lot of people want to put up with all of the security he has in place, much less the constant hovering he’s a bit prone to indulge. I figured you’re ballsy enough to tell him to back off when you need to. He won’t take it the wrong way. He’s gotten a bit of a reputation as being difficult to rent from, mainly because he doesn’t put up with stupid crap. That scares a lot of people away and keeps the rents down. It’s a lousy way to do business, but he’s not trying to make money beyond what he needs to survive. The people who do fit in well here tend to be fiercely loyal to Sarge, and in turn, the other tenants. They’ll trash talk him on all the rental sites to scare everyone away, but they’ll turn around and slip an extra hundred under his workshop door when he chases away a woman’s abusive ex or helps a kid build a pinewood derby car for scouts. I talked to your Mom a long time about what Sarge is like, and she thought it was a good fit. If you find it isn’t, we’ll move you somewhere else. Sarge won’t think less of you and neither will I.”

“This is perfect, Clint. I don’t deserve—“ she broke off at his warning look. “I don’t feel like I deserve this,” she amended. “But I am more grateful than you’ll ever know.”

“I’ve gone over this place twice since the last delivery person left and there are no bugs or cameras anywhere. You’ll need to keep checking to be safe, but unless there is new tech out there that Stark can’t identify, the place is clean. Keep your voices low and the blinds shut if you want to have private conversations. Background noise can help muddle it up more, but you don’t have to use notepads all the time, now.”

“Good thing. But I have been trying to teach myself Morse code and I’ve ordered some Braille instruction kits and supplies. Between those two, I may fry my brain completely but I dare anyone to eavesdrop on us if we converse silently.”

“That’s the spirit! Now, before Steve crashes in here to sleep like the dead, I had an idea for Friday night I wanted to run by you.”

Transfection is a way for forcing cells in a petri dish to accept foreign DNA and start making whatever “recipes” the new directions code for. In a lab, transfected cells are specifically told to not only add those recipes to their cookbook, but cook them up so scientists can see the results.

PCR stands for polymerase chain reaction, which is a fancy way of running a DNA photocopy machine. If a cell has only one copy of a recipe for chicken soup, it’s a bit difficult to find in all the other pages. With PCR, you can put an entire cell’s cookbook in a test tube and tell it to photocopy the recipe for chicken soup only if it is present. Before you know it, the cell has made so many copies that every piece of paper you touch shows the directions for chicken soup, so it’s easy to say the cell has it or not. If you know a particular cell has an unusual recipe on file, PCR is an easy way to tell if you really have the type of cell you thought you did and not a contaminant. Contamination is a constant concern in the laboratory.

Lastly, germ cells are the source of gametes, specifically sperm and egg cells. Megan was
threatening to remove Emma’s ovaries and John’s testicles and put those into storage. I don’t think Megan intended to use any painkillers or sterile instruments.

Don’t anger scientists!
Megan leaned heavily on Steve after she closed the door behind Clint and her parents. As much as she wanted them to stay, she knew her mom was right and that she and Steve both needed some time to just hunker down and adjust to their current situation. “What do you say I give you the fast tour of the essentials so we can just sleep for now?”

“Okay. Don’t forget I have Ray, too. He’ll help me if you’re still sleeping when I get up.”

“I know. Clint told me the apartment is bug free at the moment.”

Steve kissed her brow and took her arm. “Lead the way.”

“Clint set up the first bedroom on the right as an exercise studio. You’ll love the abusive machines he ordered. The second bedroom on the right has a brand new king-sized bed. Why don’t you take the side closest to the door? I’ll be less likely to bump your right hand that way.”

Megan stopped inside the doorway and let Steve orient himself to the doorframe before stepping away from him and going over to sit on the bed. “I’m sitting on the foot of the bed on the corner closest to you,” she said. “Four steps straight ahead would be a good start…. or eight if you are going to shuffle along like that. I promise there’s nothing in your way.”

“I trust you, really,” he apologized.

“I get it. You never realize how much you use your eyes for balance until you try walking with them shut. You’re drifting to the right; take two steps left. That’s better.” She reached out her hand to take his when he was close enough, then guided it down to the comforter beside her. “You’ll adapt, but it’s hard to be in a totally new space for the first time. Once you get a sense of how the sounds work here, you’ll use your hearing to navigate, too. But right now, I just want to sleep and you look ready to face-plant on the bed.”

“I am,” Steve admitted, moving to the side of the bed and turning back to the door. He fumbled a bit, and ended up at the exterior corner of the walk-in closet, but corrected himself without any prompting from Megan. “The bathroom door is across the hall, but at a diagonal, right?” he asked as he paused in the doorway.

“Yup. Then it’s straight in to the wall and to the right for the commode. I’m going to crawl into bed. There’s a hook on the back of the bathroom door you can hang your clothes on so you don’t trip on them later,” she added before succumbing to another yawn. “Your shield is in the dining room still. Do you want me to bring it in here?”

“Do you mind?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I did,” Megan told him, hauling herself off the bed to go fetch it. The Velcro cable ties were still hanging from the leather straps and she used those to hang it from the handle of the end-table on Steve’s side of the bed before crawling under the covers and waiting for him to join her.
Steve retuned a few minutes later, pausing after he shut the door to orient himself and head towards the bed with slightly more confident steps.

“You’re drifting right again,” Megan said softly. His burns were still an angry red and her own skin hurt just looking at him. How he’d put up with a shirt on as long as he had was a mystery.

“I feel like I’m never going to get the hang of this.”

“I’m impressed by how patient you’ve been through it all. Your shield is hanging from the handle on the top drawer of the end table.” Megan waited while he found it with his left hand and checked how it was attached.

“I don’t feel patient. I’m raging mad inside,” he admitted as he sat down on the bed.

“You have every right to be. For that reason alone, I’m not even going to suggest I turn on my white noise machine. I’m too tired and grumpy myself to deal with angry Steve.”

His shoulders hunched a bit as he asked in a voice so soft she could barely hear him, “How about crying Steve?”

“That I can deal with. Come here,” she said gently, pulling him so he lay with his head tucked between her shoulder and chin. Her right arm went around his back while she ran her left hand through his hair. “Is this okay or am I hurting you somehow?”

“Right where I need to be,” he told her as he folded his arms against his chest and curled into her before he gave in to the sobs he’d held back for too many days.

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Time stood still as she lay there holding him, letting her own tears flow freely. He’d never chosen to let his guard down like this before, coming to her so he could let go and cry in her arms. As vulnerable as he now was, he’s still opted to lay himself bare before her, trusting her to catch him as he fell apart. He humbled her. With six words, he’d broken through a wall around himself she had’t known was even there. How many remained was impossible to guess. Every time she thought she knew him, she found new layers. But something told her she was finally getting close to the man Bucky had known.

When he finally quieted, Megan reached for the tissue box on her nightstand and put it on the bed beside her before taking a couple of tissue from the box and giving them to Steve. She blew her nose and tried to dry her eyes, only to have him wipe his thumb on her cheek.

“You, too?”

Megan nodded against his hand, too tired and wrung out to try to explain what this time had meant to her. “We can talk later. Right now, let’s just sleep.”

He hesitated, looking like he was about to say something, then nodded. “Okay.” After he blew his nose and passed her the wadded up tissues, he lay down and pulled her to his chest, reversing their positions from earlier.

“I’ll be here when you wake up,” she murmured as he rubbed her back. She was half asleep
“You sure you don’t want to run off with Sarge?” he teased, his voice low and husky with exhaustion.

“I won’t settle for less than a captain.” Megan waited for him to say something else, but realized he was already asleep. Feeling safe in a way she only did at his side, she followed him into oblivion.

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“Ray, what time is it?” Megan heard Steve ask softly.

“Four p.m.,” Jarvis replied in just as soft of a voice.

She was about to ask if he wanted to eat before trying to get a shower when she heard his stomach rumble. “That answers my question,” Megan said as she stretched and sat up.

“Sorry I woke you.”

“You didn’t. I’ve been dozing and drifting for the last hour or so while I was waiting for you to wake up. I was going to ask if you wanted to get a shower before you ate, but your stomach already answered. Think you can find your way back to the barstool or do you want to wait for me?”

“I’ll meet you there.” She could see him frowning a bit as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

“Steve, you don’t have to master everything today. I’m giving you until tomorrow afternoon, or even Tuesday morning if you ask nicely.”

That got him to smile a bit and Megan felt confident he’d beat her to the kitchen while she detoured to the bathroom.

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Opening the fridge, Megan found an abundance of cold cuts and cheeses from the local deli and fresh sandwich buns on the counter nearby. “It looks like Mom went grocery shopping and stocked us up on lunchmeat and cheese. How about sandwiches for now and stew a bit later in the evening? I’ll make biscuits and we can watch that television show Sarge mentioned.”

“Okay.”

“Do you like pickle loaf? If not, there’s ham and it looks like sliced turkey, too.”

“Never had it.”

“Open up,” Megan said, reaching across the bar to give him a taste before eating some herself. “I grew up on it so Mom knows I love it, but I also know it’s an acquired taste.”
“It’s better than army rations, but think I’d rather have ham and cheese.”

“If you insist. How about some red grapes to go with your sandwiches?”

“Alright.”

Megan assembled the sandwiches and sat down beside Steve at the bar. Glancing at the wall beside her, she burst out laughing and ended up clutching his arm for support so she wouldn’t lose her balance.

“What’s so funny?”

Megan was gasping for air and ended up tugging him to his feet so she could show him. She took his left hand and guided it to the glass case hanging on the wall by the front door. Still laughing so hard her sides hurt, she watched as he felt the case and found the small hammer attached to the side with a chain.

“Is this one of those ‘In case of emergency break glass?’ boxes?” he asked as he lightly ran his fingers across the etched print on the front.

“Yes!” Megan exclaimed as she leaned against him, trying to reign in her laughter so she could explain.

“What’s inside it?”

Megan took a deep breath and managed to control her laughter long enough to get out, “The ugliest, rust-covered serving spoon you ever saw in your life!”

“Natasha!” Steve said with an amused huff. “How’d she find out about your threat?”

“I mentioned it to her the other night, but I never expected….” Finally regaining her composure a bit, Megan took the box down from the wall and looked at the back. “She wrote a note on the back, ‘Call anytime. N.R.’”

“What am I going to do with you?” Steve said, shaking his head as he pulled her close. “Hang that back up and come here.”

Once the box was back on the wall, he cupped the back of her head in his hand and captured his lips with her own. There was a new hunger there, different than she’d felt in his kiss before, and she gave in to it willingly. She nibbled his bottom lip, pulling back only when she heard his stomach growl again. “You need to eat.”

“I was eating before you started laughing so hard you couldn’t talk.”

“How’s your hand? You’re overdue for a change of bandages and a fresh glove.”

“It’s sore, but not terrible. I can wait until I eat, if you’d ever let me eat instead of threatening me with pickle loaf and rusty spoons.”

“Complain, complain, complain. Maybe I should make you sleep on the couch tonight,” she said as she settled back on her stool and picked up her sandwich.

Steve sat back down and turned to face her, saying in his most serious Captain American voice, “I’ll tell your mother.”

“Tattle tale.”
“Don’t stick your tongue out at me, either.”

Megan cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. “You weren’t complaining about my tongue a minute ago.”

“You were threatening my kidneys!”

“Yeah, about threats…”

“What now?” Steve asked before taking a big bite of his sandwich.

“The shower stall is a bit cramped for two if your virtue is going to stay intact. But the tub is a Jacuzzi like in the hotel. I can wash your hair if you want and help make sure your eyes stay dry. Keep your boxers on if you prefer and I’ll leave when that’s done.”

He sighed. “Megan—” She could see the tension building in his bare shoulders. The muscles across his back rippled a bit as he tried to relax, but failed miserably.

“I pushed you too hard the other night. It wasn’t my intention; I was actually trying to make myself more vulnerable in your eyes, but it backfired. I’m not trying to re-stir that pot, but you’re a bit big to lie on the kitchen counter while I wash your hair in the sink and bending forward is going to put too much pressure in your eyes. As good as the serum is, your body doesn’t need the challenge of fighting an infection in your eyes because you got them wet and soapy. If you want, we can use the eye-rinse while you’re already in the tub. You’re supposed to do that twice daily, minimum, and you’re overdue.”

Steve kept eating as she talked, attacking his sandwich with single-minded focus though she knew he was listening. When the first sandwich was gone, he wiped his mouth with a napkin and set it down in his plate only to clench his fist in frustration. “It’s not you. Back in the U.S.O…’’ his voice trailed off and he tried again, “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of.” He sighed again. “I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

She put her hand on his wrist. “You don’t owe me an explanation, ever. Your past is yours, not mine. The way I see it, sexual history only matters when it can affect someone else’s health. Thanks to the serum, you’re clean. You already know my history and that I’m clean, too, not that you’d be at risk anyway. I told you about my past because I wanted to. I don’t expect or demand that you do the same. You’ve had precious little privacy, Steve, and I’m not going to be the one to ask you to give up what little bit you have left. You don’t owe me an explanation, but I will say that you’re probably making a mountain of guilt out of what warrants a molehill at best. You’re good at that.”

Some of the tension in his shoulders eased, but he stayed silent.

“The only reason I’m even bringing this up is because you said you wanted to take a shower and we both know that’s going to be challenging at first when your dominant hand and eyes are all bandaged up. Your balance is going to be off a bit until you adapt. Finish eating and figure out what you want to do while I go start a load of laundry,” she said before pressing her lips to his spine in the spot right between his shoulder blades. She pretended not to notice, again, the way he drew a sharp breath of pleasure when she kissed him there. It was either a sensitive spot for him or had a story behind it. She wasn’t interested in the cause, only the way he reacted every single time.

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As she had promised, Megan left Steve alone and gathered up their laundry, which was mostly hers from the hospital. Steve had spent his days in hospital attire. When the first load was in the washing machine, she tidied the kitchen and turned on some music before she sat down on the couch with her tablet to write to Jarvis. It took every bit of willpower she had not to hover near Steve, but she knew that in the long run, hovering became smothering all too easily.

Jarvis told her where Clint had stored the camera he’d used in her old apartment and she retrieved it from the kitchen drawer.

“Steve, do you have any objection to me putting Jarvis’ camera back in use out here to watch the door and main living area?”

“No, it’s probably a good idea. How about putting it on top of Natasha’s spoon? That should let Jarvis monitor the front door and patio door at the same time. Are there more grapes already washed in the fridge?”

He’d memorized the floor plan down to the last details if he knew the best vantage point for a camera to monitor entrances. Megan couldn’t help but be impressed. “Yep. They’re in a bowl on the second shelf down, left side, right below the milk.” Megan set the tablet up on end and activated the camera and microphone. “Ray, I’ve got the tablet set up for you with audio and visual. Steve suggests the camera go by the door. I’m going to try that and you tell me if you can monitor both entrances.”

“Turn the camera slightly to the right, Megan. Right there is good. Is it secured in position?”

“No yet. I need to find some double stick tape. I’m not sure were my toolbox got stored.”

“Try the closet by the door,” Steve suggested as he got himself more grapes from the fridge. “That’s where I’d put it.”

“Do you know how nice it is to not have to watch everything I say for once? No more note pads!”

“I couldn’t read them anyway,” Steve quipped as he sat back down on the stool. “Do you still have a dining room table or is this bar it for now?”

“The drop-leaf table from my old place is mine and here. It’s surrounded by four chairs that love to reach out and grab bare toes, so I figured the bar was safest until you either know your way around or start wearing slippers. You’re brilliant, you know. Mom put my toolbox in the same closet you would have. I found the tape. Now do you have any ideas where my scissors would be?”

“In all of my years of monitoring the tower, I have never seen a chair attack a person,” Jarvis added dryly. “I have observed, however, that some individuals become careless about where they walk.”

“Kitchen drawer?” Steve suggested. “Ray, I’ve been attacked by enough furniture to verify that it does happen, most often in the middle of night. You just need to get Tony to recalibrate your sensors.”

“It’s a bit scary how well you know where stuff is already,” Megan said, locating scissors in a drawer of miscellaneous implements in the kitchen.

“You only need to call me Ray in public,” Jarvis corrected Steve gently.

Megan shook her head and saw Steve doing the same thing. “It’s too easy to make a mistake,
“buddy, and we won’t risk you like that,” he explained. “Outside the tower, it’s better that Megan and I both use your chosen nickname. We know it’s still you.”

“Understood, Captain.”

Megan taped the camera in place on top of the emergency box. “How’s that?”

“Excellently placed, Megan. I will turn off your tablet camera and microphone now unless you need further assistance.”

“We’re good for now. Thanks, Ray,” she told him and saw the camera light on her tablet go out.

“Will you show me where the trash can and dishwasher are at?” Steve asked as he got up from the barstool.

“The sink is directly across from the bar and the dishwasher is just to the right of the sink,” Megan told him as she got up to perch on a barstool and watch him without getting in his way.

“And the trash can?”

“I thought about putting it the middle of the room, but decided I’d be nice. It’s to the right of the fridge against the outside wall of the pantry.”

Steve fumbled a bit, but found his way back to the sink to wash his hands. “How do you think we should do this?”

“Define ‘this.’”

“Get me oriented.”

“Just like we are now. I talk while you find your way. You already found the refrigerator. The kitchen counter is in an L shape with the stove in the middle of the long side. The microwave is over the stove. Opening the door turns it off. Adhesive backed Velcro is your new best friend. Case in point: the thirty-second button is marked with a circular pad of hooks. To add time, just keep pressing that button. The popcorn button is marked with the loops half, which is softer than the hooks.”

“Your mom did this?”

“Like she said, we picked up a few tricks over the years. I noticed that the washing machine and dryer controls are marked with raised triangles of tape for the starting of the most common cycles. I’ve got a Braille label maker due to arrive tomorrow that we can use to label anything you need.”

“Braille?” He stood up straighter and turned to her with a pained expression.

“Would you rather be illiterate?” Megan asked softly, hoping her tone would soften the blow of her words.

He flinched and broke her heart in the process. Visibly shaken, he leaned on the counter, remembering at the last minute to avoid putting any weight on his numb right hand.

Megan slipped from the stool and put her arms around him from behind. “I intend to learn it, too. We’re in this together. I’ve been trying to teach myself Morse code and I’m struggling with it, to be honest. Adding Braille on top of that isn’t going to be a picnic. But it’s what I have to do, so I will.”

“Morse code?”
“You ever hear of it?”

Steve sighed, “You know I learned it in the war.”

“Even before you got hurt, I was thinking that if I learned it, using that to tap a message on your hand would be a faster, easier way around the bugs in our apartments than trying to scribble on tablets all the time. It’s been very slow going and I’m starting to think I’ll never get the hang of it since I seem to be incapable of memorizing twenty-six letters, ten digits, and a bit of punctuation.”

“You can learn it, Megan. I wish you’d told me before so I could help.”

“Well, now you know, so I’m open to suggestions. But I think Braille needs to be the higher priority at the moment. I warned you before, Steve, I’m not going to sit around waiting for a miracle when we have work to do.” She took his left hand in her own and touched his fingertips. “These have to be your eyes for the time being. Velcro and tape can be useful aids, but that won’t help you in a brand new elevator when you need to choose a floor. Braille labels are all over the place and if you can read them, you’re more independent. Besides, in a combat situation where you’re evacuating civilians in conditions with limited visibility, knowing how to read those Braille signs may help you save lives.”

He hung his head, ceding her point but clearly not liking it. “You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“I had to do something while I was counting the minutes until you got some pain relief. I don’t cope well with being helpless. I can’t fix your eyesight. I can’t heal your hand. I couldn’t even give you pain relief. What I can do is arm us with some new tools as we find our way through this.” She hugged him again and kissed his back. “Besides, having me write in Braille is about the only way to ensure the text stays legible. You’ve seen my handwriting.”

Steve chuckled at the reminder “It’s pretty bad.”

“I went to school a very long time to learn how to write so illegibly.”

Steve turned around in her arms and pulled her to his chest. “Do you mind if we skip the tour for now and get me cleaned up?”

“As long as you let me show you the exercise equipment before I got to bed, you can set whatever schedule you want. I know that you’re going to need those machines to stay sane in the coming weeks.” She took a deep breath and broached the last sensitive subject that needed to be addressed. “What do you think about me going to work tomorrow?”

She felt him tense against her, though he tried to hide it. “It’s terrifying,” he admitted softly. “But you need to go establish yourself in your new position and every day you miss is going to make that harder. If you need to go in late one day later in the week due to exhaustion, that would be better than missing tomorrow. It will be good for me, too, though I’d rather have you here. I need to do this on my own and not rely on you for everything.”

Megan squeezed him reassuringly. “I was thinking I can set up several new gloves so you can just switch out of them as the drugs wear out and not have to worry about getting all the supplies ready. If we change your eye bandages in the morning and do the first saline wash then, you can change the bandages yourself and add more of the red stuff as needed. Don’t forget you’re due back to the Triskelion on Wednesday for a checkup. Natasha is already planning on taking you to the gym if you’re up to it. My schedule this week is flexible, but I want to quash this defiance before it spreads. Otherwise, I’m going to have to just throw all those cells into the autoclave and make them start from scratch. That will have them praying for you to get hurt again so you can restock
their inventory.”

“I trust your judgment whichever way it goes. If you have to play hardball to make your point, it reflects on them, not you.” He brushed his lips across her forehead. “But enough about work. I believe you offered to help me wash my hair.”

“Why don’t you go fill the tub and get in while I get the stuff ready? Just don’t turn on the water jets until it’s at least half full.”

“I hear a story behind that statement.”

“Let’s just say I ended up mopping a lot of water from the floor the first time I used a Jacuzzi and leave it at that.”

“Okay,” he said, kissing her on the nose before slowly heading towards the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

The next update will not be until the weekend due to family obligations. I promise it's not all angst in the coming chapters... There is a very fun event in the works for them, too.
Megan paused outside the closed bathroom door. "Ready?"

"Come on in," Steve told her.

She was surprised to find the bathroom light on and flipped the switch off before setting the lit votive candles she was carrying on the sink. She'd already turned off the hallway light, so the room was comfortably dark and would hopefully spare Steve the pain he felt every time they'd changed his eye bandages in the hospital. Try as he might to stay silent, she'd noticed the sharp intake of breath and clenched fists that accompanied every treatment.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim candlelight, she saw Steve had left his boxers on the floor by his towel. It was another sign of his trust in her.

Megan made a second trip to fetch a footstool, a large cup, and the various medical supplies before shedding her own clothes and slipping into the tub with Steve. The stool kept everything in reach without risking it getting wet by slipping into the tub if she dropped something. "I'm going to turn the water jets on," she warned him before flipping the switch.

"Where is the control? I couldn't find it."

"It's stupidly placed in the corner furthest from the faucet." Megan put his hand on it so he'd be able to find it in the future. "Scoot out from the edge a bit and tip your head back," she told him as she shifted so she was keeling behind him. Holding the back of his head her hand she dipped the cup into the water. "I'm going to get your hair wet first. Just relax," she told him softly. "I've got you."

He sighed in relief as she poured the water over his head and began to massage a generous dollop of shampoo into his hair. His left hand found her knee as she knelt behind him. "Behave yourself, soldier," she teased as he leaned his head back on her chest.

"Don't wanna."

"Then be very careful not to start anything you don't intend to finish."

"I plan to stay just like this for a few hours at least."

"You wish. You'll be back in the kitchen in no time wolfing down stew and you know it."

"I just ate. I can wait awhile. This feels so good I'm thinking maybe I'll just go to sleep right here."

"Let me rinse you out and then we can do it again just because it feels good if you want." Carefully, she used the cup to pour water over his hair and massaged the suds away.

"If the ice was hell, this is heaven," Steve said softly.

"I'm glad it feels good. How sensitive is your skin? You look like you have a bad sunburn. Does it sting the same way in the water?"

"Pretty much, but it's not bad as long as you don't rub. I can't say a shirt feels good on it, either, but
it's enough better that I can go without Stark's messy concoction. I do need it for my hand, though.

"I've got some aloe vera cream I can put on your shoulders and throat if you want."

"People still use aloe?"

"A lot of plants have proven medicinal properties. Aloe is one of them."

"Want another round?"

Steve shook his head and sat up. "I'm good. Do you have the saline ready?"

"All set."

Carefully, he pulled the bandage away from his left eye and handed it to Megan who had moved around in front of him. "Something's wrong," he said, panic slipping into his voice.

Megan took his face in her hands. "I'm right here. Breathe. Tell me what's wrong." She saw his lower jaw quivering, but he wasn't answering her. "Steve! Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I can't see the light. There's no light!" Desperately, he grabbed her wrist hard enough she expected to see some bruises later.

"The lights are turned out. Everything's fine. Listen to me. The lights are out."

He took a shaky breath, fighting the panic that still threatened to consume him. "Why?"

"I've seen how much the light hurts you every time the nurses changed the bandages. There are two candles over on the sink but you're facing away from them. Let's use the saline to clear the medicine away and you can see for yourself. If they're too dim for you to see, I'll turn on the ceiling light, okay?"

"Okay." He took another shaky breath. "I thought…"

"That's my fault. I should have told you. I never stopped to think about how seeing light with the bandages off was reassuring to you." She rose up on her knees so she could touch her forehead to his as she held his face in her hands. "Breathe. I'm right here."

He shuddered and leaned into her, dropping his forehead to her shoulder. "Did I hurt your wrist?"

"No, I'm fine. At most, I might have a light bruise or two, probably not even that. I'm fine."

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling away.

"I get worse sparring with Natasha and she doesn't feel guilty. You shouldn't either. If you'd started to hurt me, I'd have told you and you would have let go."

When he started to shake his head, she caught him with a handful of wet hair and held him still. "Stop pulling away from me before I give you a good reason to. Tip your head forward for the eyewash cup," she snapped at him. She smiled a bit at how quickly he obeyed when she barked at him. Some habits from the military, and probably his mother, had taken hold deep inside him. When the cup was sealed over his eye, he straightened up and blinked rapidly as the saline wash cleansed his eye. He pulled her wrist away and the dirty water drained down his face into the tub. They repeated the process several times until Megan saw the saline running clear.
"You're healing amazingly well. Your eyelashes are starting to fill in again."

"Didn't know I'd lost them."

"Not all of them, but enough that you looked like a half-plucked chicken. Now turn to your right and see if you can see the candlelight."

His immediate relief was evident in his posture and confirmed with a whispered prayer of thanks.

"Better?"

Steve nodded, still fixated on the candles.

"Let's do your other eye and then you can wash up before we put the bandages back on."

In answer, Steve just ripped the other bandage away and handed it to her. She pretended not to notice how badly his hand was shaking as he did so.

Once both of his eyes had been rinsed with the saline, he just sat there, gazing in the direction of the candles. Megan soaped up a washcloth and gently scrubbed his back before dumping more shampoo on his head.

"What?" he startled, then leaned back against her when she coaxed him to sink more deeply into the water.

"You need to relax. I had you all mellow there and then I ruined it. Does the candlelight hurt?"

"Some."

"It may be the inner muscles of your eye tearing away scar tissue, now that I think about it. You heal so fast, just like you have to keep flexing your hand joints, your eye muscles need to work a bit, too."

"I'm sor—"

Megan poked him in the ribs. "If you finish that sentence I'm going to call Natasha and put that spoon to use. You have nothing to apologize for."

He paused a minute, then spoke in a normal tone, "I was going to say that I'm so relieved to learn you lit candles."

"Liar."

"Prove it."

"Don't have to." She rinsed his hair again and kissed his ear. "Feel better?"

"Much."

"Good," she said, standing up to get out.

"Where are you doing?"

"I'm going to take a miserably cold shower while you finish washing up. Once I'm frozen and you're dried off, we'll put more of Stark's red glop in your eyes and take care of your hand."
He frowned a bit at that. "You don't have to get out so soon."

"Yes, I do. Frozen water doesn't flow well through the pipes and I'm long past the point where lukewarm water will suffice. Stay put as long as you want. But I need to get out now."

****

Megan's teeth were chattering by the time she stepped out of the shower. Steve was still soaking in the tub, slumped down so the water came up to his neck as he rested his head on the edge.

"Feel better?" he asked her softly without moving.

"That depends on your definition of better," she said through clenched teeth as she dried off with the towel, hung it on the towel bar, and moved over to the sink to brush her teeth.

"Do that again."

"What?"

"Step in front of the candles."

Megan turned and slowly moved to one side, watching Steve as he tried to watch her movements.

"I can see your outline. You're not wrapped in a towel." There was wonder in his voice, and a bit of impish delight as well.

Megan threw up her hands. Why had she thought a cold shower would immunize her to Steve's charms?

He held out his left hand to her. "Come sit with me? I hear your teeth chattering."

Megan just stood there, hand on her hips, trying to weigh her options.

"Please?"

She signed and gave in. Taking his hand, she slipped back into the warm water. "I am developing a new appreciation for Bucky's patience with you."

Steve put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him, tucking her head against his shoulder. She allowed herself to wrap her arms around his torso, willing herself to keep her hands well above his waist.

"What do you mean?"

"You're a manipulative, conniving bastard far too accustomed to getting your way. Furthermore, you're absolutely shameless about using puppy-dog eyes when other approaches fail. I shudder to think how many times you talked him into some crazy scheme, or worse, forged ahead without him, knowing full well he'd follow along in hopes of saving you from yourself. The man was a damned saint for not strangling you in your sleep."

"He'd have adored you. I wish…"

The wistfulness in his voice broke her heart. "I wish he could be here, too. We could trade Steve-wrangling tips. He'll always be a part of you, but it's not the same as having him here in the flesh."

Megan ran her left hand over Steve's chest. "He must have been beside himself when you showed up all buff and healthy and ready to fight on the front lines."
"We didn't really talk about it. I know he wasn't happy about me fighting, but he was relieved I couldn't get sick anymore."

"No, just shot at, blown up, captured and tortured, and God knows what else." Megan dropped her voice a bit and tried to imitated Steve, "'But hey, no asthma, Bucky, so relax, I'm fine.'"

Steve laughed and squeezed her closer, "Pretty much."

"Like I said, the man was a damned saint. A saint for putting up with you and condemned to a lifetime of worry for doing so." Megan pressed a kiss against his shoulder. "If he could be here now, he'd be so proud of you. Despite everything you've been through, you haven't lost sight of what's important. You've stayed true to yourself and what you believe in. And you flat-out refused to stop living. I know it's been a hard adjustment in ways I can't even begin to imagine, but you've living this new life of yours instead of just putting in time. I don't think I could be that strong if I were faced with that same challenge."

Steve kissed her temple, "All it takes it the company of a brilliant and spunky gal."

****

It was late evening by the time they settled on the couch with a bowl of popcorn to watch *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, which Steve seemed to enjoy a great deal despite not being able to see the images on screen. Megan found herself getting drowsy and by the time the end credits rolled, she was unable to keep her eyes open.

"Are you still awake?" Steve asked as he shut off the TV and set the empty bowl on the coffee table.

"Mmmm."

She felt him get up, taking all that delicious body heat with him. Still, she couldn't bring herself to move. A few minutes later, he was back, sliding his left arm behind her back and his right under her knees. Effortlessly, he picked her up.

"Can walk," she muttered drowsily as she tried to find the strength to lift her head from his shoulder. She should scold him about risking his right hand, but realized he was using his forearm to carry her and wasn't even touching her with his injured fingers.

"I know. Warn me if I try to set you down on the A.M.T. instead of the bed, okay?" he teased, pressing another kiss to the top of her head.

"Okay."

Gently, he deposited her on the bed and handed her the nightgown he'd already fetched from the hook on the bathroom door. He'd even pulled the blankets back so all she had to do was flop down and go to sleep once she was out of her clothes.

"Ray, will you wake us at six tomorrow morning, please? Megan's half asleep already and I don't want to try to figure out the alarm clock tonight."

"Certainly, Captain. Sleep well."

Megan listened to the exchange and understood just enough to know that she didn't have to think any more tonight. Her last conscious thought was an awareness of Steve slipping into the bed
beside her and tucking the blankets around them both as he lay spooned against her.

****

"Megan? Wake up."

Megan opened her eyes as she felt the mattress sink beside her. "Go away," she muttered, trying to pull the blankets over her head.

"Not until you drink your tea. It's on your nightstand."

Reluctantly, she cracked one eye open long enough to verify that there was a mug there that had not been there the night before. "You made me tea?"

"Plus sausage and French toast, courtesy of your magic freezer, the microwave, and the toaster. I didn't even destroy the kitchen in the process, thanks to Ray."

With a yawn, she stretched and sat up reluctantly. The tea was hot and made just the way she liked it and she wrapped her hands around the mug as she leaned against Steve and tried to wake up. "How long have you been up?"

"Since about four. Clint did a good job picking out those machines, and the Velcro dots on the controls work better than I thought they would. I hardly needed Ray at all."

"It's too damn early in the morning to be so cheerful, Rogers, much less gloating about exercising in the freaking middle of the night," Megan grumbled before taking another sip. "Wait a minute… did you change the bandage on your hand at all last night?"

"No. I slept until four, like I said."

"Then why didn't you wake me at four? We forgot to lay stuff out last night. Your hand must be on fire by now. You need another dose of aloe vera cream, too."

"It's okay, Megan."

"No, it's not. Come on," she stood up and tugged on his left hand, only to be pulled into Steve's lap. "Steve!"

"I'm fine. I would have got you up if I really needed you, but you're exhausted, too. Ray, tell her how I'm doing."

"Captain Rogers is experiencing some discomfort, but not to a degree that is debilitating," Jarvis supplied. "He also promised that he would wake you if the pain interrupted his sleep. I can verify that your assistance was unnecessary last night."

"Thanks, buddy."

"However," Jarvis continued, "His pain levels are continuing to increase and I predict he will begin to suffer within the next thirty minutes without additional applications of Sir's blue goo. His eyes will reach intolerable levels of discomfort in the next forty-five minutes."

"In other words, on your feet, soldier. Meds, than breakfast. Don't argue with me, I'm too tired for that, and I'm hungry. But I have tea, which I'm eternally grateful for, so I'll be functional enough for now."
When she was ready to leave for work, she wrapped her arms around Steve's waist and held him close. "I want to stay here."

"You have a mission of your own today. I'll be fine. If anyone tries to break in, I have a rusty spoon I can use on them."

"I might need it for Emma, so don't break it."

"Deal." With that, he kissed her soundly and practically pushed her out the door. She waited until she heard him turn the locks, then headed to Steve's car in the parking garage. Was this how Steve felt when he left town to go on a mission, she wondered. On some level, he must. No matter what he wanted to do, or how tired he was, he put duty first. She could do no less.

"Heading to work?" Sarge asked when she exited the elevator in the parking garage.

"Good morning, Sarge," Megan said, smiling with a chipperness powered by caffeine. "Yes, I am."

"Do you think the good Captain would be up to some company this afternoon? I have something he can help me with in my workshop if you think he'd be willing to put up with me for a bit," Sarge offered, giving her a knowing look. "I imagine he's not used to being hurt quite like this."

Megan didn't even try to hide her relief. "He's used to broken bones and bullet wounds, not blindness, no matter how temporary it is."

"Any idea from the docs on whether or not it's permanent?"

Megan studied him, considering how much to say. Where was the line between giving Steve support and protecting him from outsiders? "We're in uncharted territory with this particular set of injuries. He's paying a high price for saving seven lives, but I know he'd do it again. It's who he is. He's never been burned like this before. For now, we're controlling the pain and seeing how much healing he can do on his own."

"Understood. You know it's going to change him, no matter how it turns out."

Megan nodded, "No one can face a challenge like this and come out exactly the same on the other side. But he's strong on the inside, and he's going to find his way through this."

"How are you holding up?"

"That depends on which half of the minute it is."

"Are you letting him see that fear?"

Megan nodded. "If we can't be honest, it's not much of a relationship, is it? We're taking turns holding each other up."

Sarge nodded approvingly. "You keep doing that and you'll be fine. I'll check in on him after lunch, but he needs time to figure things out on his own, too. You're smart to do this sooner instead of later. Too many people want to cling and hover. You're treating him like a man."

Megan blushed a bit at that comment, thinking back to the glimpses she'd had of that man in a candlelit bathroom.
Sarge laughed. "Keep doing that, too, darling. It's the best comfort in the world." With that, he waved to her and headed off on errands unknown.

Chapter End Notes

A/N I recently discovered that Emma morphed into Emily halfway though the story. I've corrected that here, but still have to go back and fix stray references in earlier chapters, and that will take some time. I guess I should be happy I kept a name staring with the letter E. It wouldn't have ever been a problem if these two kids hadn't insisted on an epic saga instead of the short story I planned.

Note to self: you know that the unresolved sexual tension is getting bad when your mother is begging you to get these two into bed together.

Despite a weekend full of real life obligations, I managed (obviously) to get a little bit of writing time in this weekend, so I'm sharing the fruits of that time. I have a ton of stuff scribbled in notes and just need about a week to hunker down with a computer and write. My family and employer have other ideas. In other news, Steve has finally told me about his time in the USO, so that will be a topic of upcoming discussion. He's carried a lot of guilt for that for a long time. Megan will see the situation very differently, so it should be an interesting discussion if I can ever steal the time to get it all written down. But first, we have to see what Clint and Megan have planned for Friday night.

I'll update when I can.
“Is Cap already so difficult to manage that you have to hide from him at work?”

Megan pressed the print icon before she looked up from her computer. “No, I had a small revolt I needed to put down.”

Nick raised his eyebrow as he strode into her office and waited for an explanation.

“I learned on Saturday that Emma just couldn’t keep herself from continuing her experiments on the SGR cells. And she thought it was more important to listen to her boyfriend John instead of you or me. I spent some time down there this morning explaining, rather loudly I’m afraid, the flaws in their thinking. I think we came to a new understanding.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Nick said as he sat down in the chair in Megan’s office and changed the subject. “How is he?”

“We’re managing. He’s rattled, but staying positive. He has already put the exercise equipment to use, so thanks for making sure it was available.” Megan picked up the papers from the printer tray and changed the subject a third time. “Clint was quite put out that Steve gets special treatment by H.R. while he and Natasha don’t. I promised I’d propose a new campaign to focus on his softer skills and suggest his codename be changed to Cupid. I like to keep my promises,” she said with an impish grin as she handed the papers over to Nick. “I think you could have some fun with this.”

“A teddy bear?”

“A Clint bear, technically. The second page has the contact information for a local woman who makes custom bears. The prices are quite reasonable.”

Nick studied her for a long moment before folding the papers and putting them in his jacket. “Congress has no idea what’s heading their way,” he said as he gave her a hint of a smile. “Tell Cap I said not to piss you off,” the director added before standing up and heading out her door.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my rusty spoon at the ready.”

He paused and turned to look at her before shaking his head. “I don’t want to know.”

****

Megan picked up gun Clint handed her and took aim at the target that she visualized as a threat to Steve. She emptied six rounds into the target and laid the gun down before turning to Clint. “You never showed me how to reload.”

Clint showed her, emptied the gun, then watched her do it herself. When he nodded his approval, she fired another six rounds, this time managing to keep all of the bullets inside the outlined torso.

“Let’s try some other guns and see if we can pick the best one for you today.”
Megan nodded her approval and they spent the next half hour repeating the process. Clint helped her adjust her stance on occasion, and they found that she definitely had better aim with some models compared to others. Her nerves were gone. Megan felt calm, deadly even. She was ready to master this.

As they packed up to leave, Clint leaned close and told her over the sound of guns firing, “Coffee, your office, ten minutes.”

Megan nodded, unsurprised he wanted to talk to her. Today was nothing like her first visit to the range.

In her office, she put a bag of popcorn into the microwave and sat at her desk while letting her tea steep.

It wasn’t long before Clint knocked at the door and closed it behind him before sinking into the chair opposite her. He studied her over the top of his paper cup. “Care to explain?”

Megan shrugged, “A lot has changed since Steve got hurt. For right now at least, if we get into a sticky situation, offense is up to me while he handles defense and strategy.” She took a sip of her tea, waiting for Clint to process that.

Clint just looked at her. “You have some serious self-esteem issues if protecting yourself causes panic attacks but protecting Steve makes you stoic.”

“Are you just figuring out that I’ve got more issues than National Geographic magazine? You need to go back to spy school.” The microwave beeped and she took out the popcorn. “Hungry?”

“You realize that there’s no going back? You’re going to have to practice and carry concealed for the rest of your life, don’t you?”

“I know.”

“When he’s better, you don’t get to revert to panic attacks. You getting hurt will hurt him.”

“I know.” She looked down and took a deep breath. “Enough about that. What’s more important is the box that arrived today.” Megan opened it and waved him over so he could see before handing him two thick pages of paper.

“Oh, this is great. I’ll get Natasha busy on this, too. We’ll be ready for Friday, one way or another. It’s going to be fun.”

“That’s the plan.”

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Megan opened the apartment door unsure of what she would find. Nothing could have prepared her for the scents that hit her.

“You made dinner?” she stammered, looking at the dining room table, already set with service for two.

“Can’t eat leftovers forever,” Steve said from the kitchen. There was a hint of smugness in his
voice that he had more than earned.

“It is time to check the pasta,” Jarvis announced from Steve’s wristwatch.

“How did you plan on draining that with only one good hand?” Megan asked as she set down her purse, box of supplies, and the shopping bag from an impulsive side-trip she’d made on the way home before she toed off her shoes.

“Ray helped me calculate when you’d arrive here to do it for me.”

Megan glanced at the tracking bracelet on her wrist and shook her head. “From anyone but you two, it would be creepy rather than cute.” She kissed him briefly before ordering him to stand still while she drained the spaghetti. Neither of them wanted to risk a collision with a pot of boiling water. “I smell bread baking.”

“I set the machine on top of the dryer. Is it safe for me to go get it?”

“Go ahead. I’ll stay by the sink,” she added, as she poured the steaming water down the drain and ran cold water over the noodles for a few seconds before putting them back into the pot.

“How did it go today?” he asked as he carried the bread pan to the counter to her right where the cutting board was sitting.

“I think I made my point. Emma is visibly flinching every time she sees me and John won’t make eye contact. I gave Director Fury an update when he stopped by to check up on you and I gave him the info about the stuffed bear for Clint. He’s tough to read, but there was a faint flicker of amusement on his face when I told him about it. The rest of my day was spent reading some really dry reports and grant proposals. I need to get them on my tablet to review the next time I have insomnia. I’m going behind you to stir the sauce again,” she warned him before moving to the stove, her stomach rumbling in hunger.

“I heard that,” Steve teased. “Here,” he said, holding a chunk of warm bread out to her. When she didn’t take it, he moved closer and fed it to her. “I can’t have you starving on my watch.”

Megan turned the burner off and leaned against him. “How are you really doing?”

“It’s been a hard day. Can we eat first?”

“Do I get to have you for dessert?”

“Chocolate pudding is in the fridge.”

“What does it say that you think I can be deterred by chocolate?”

“That I know your weaknesses as well as your strengths.” His own stomach rumbled and she laughed.

“Okay, let’s move this to the table. Do you want me to fix you a plate?”

He nodded and moved to the fridge to retrieve the salad he’d prepared earlier. “Ray, where is the dressing?” he asked, holding his wrist so the camera could scan the contents of the fridge.

“There are two bottles on the second shelf of the door that appear to be salad dressing.” Steve picked them up one by one and turned them around slowly so Jarvis could scan the labels. “The first is ranch and the second is Italian.”
“Thanks.”

Megan observed the process and tried to ignore how much it hurt her to watch. “Tony’s going to be pleased his invention is working out so well.”

“He should be. If he can come up with a way to replicate the results without risking Ray, he’ll be able to help millions of people. Even a centralized computer server somewhere that can do some basic image and voice processing would be a big step. Ray made today tolerable in a thousand different ways.”

“I’m happy to be of service, Captain.” Jarvis told him, sounding touched. It always amazed Megan how he could convey so much emotion without his voice actually changing.

“My friends call me Steve, buddy,” Steve said, tucking the bottles under his right arm before reaching his hand out to Megan for comfort.

Megan touched his wrist, blinking back her own tears as she watched the emotion on Steve’s face. She missed being able to look at him from across the room and communicate with a glance.

“As you wish, Steve.” Jarvis said softly.

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“I’m so glad to be eating at home rather than in the medical wing,” Megan said in appreciation as she finished the last of her dinner. “You cooked, so I’ll clean up.”

“I’ll load the dishwasher at least. And then you can show me what came in the box I heard you put down when you came in.”

Megan got up and leaned over him from behind, nibbling his earlobe as she talked. “Are you sure I can’t have you for dessert? Because you’re looking really good. In fact, I’ve been thinking I should have a no-shirts at home rule for you even after you’re all healed up.”

“I swear you are worse than a teenage boy, and I’ve been a teenage boy,” Steve said, smiling in amusement as he leaned back against her and took her left hand in his own.

“It’s not my fault that you exude sex appeal just by breathing.”

Steve sighed and grew serious. “I’m not ready to go all the way.”

“I’m not asking for everything, just more than what I’m getting. Can we meet in the middle somewhere?” She waited impatiently, trying not to fidget or pressure him while he considered, then nodded slowly.

“Another bath sounds good.” He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “I like the feel of your hands on me. Will that suffice?”

“Are there any limits on where I can put them?” Megan asked, moving to his side just enough that she could see his expression.

Slowly, he shook his head, a slight smile creeping across his face.
“That will more than suffice. Now let’s get the chores done and the serious talking out of the way. I guarantee you are going to sleep well tonight, once I let you sleep, that is.”

He laughed at that. “I’m not sure if that’s a threat of a promise.”

“You’ll just have to show up and find out, now, won’t you?”

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They cleaned up the kitchen in record time and Megan took the box of things she’d ordered to the coffee table to unpack after she hid one smaller box in her dresser. Steve stretched out on the couch so he was leaning against the arm before pulling Megan down to sit on his lap with her back pressed against his chest and his arms wrapped around her. “Comfortable?” he asked when they were settled.

She leaned her head back against him. “I may never move again.”

“Not even for a bath?”

“I’m going to ask Tony to build a transporter that can just beam us in there.”

“I’m with Doctor McCoy in not letting anyone scramble my molecules.”

“So you do have some self preservation instincts after all! Mental note, no transporter beams for Steve.”

“Sarge dragged me down to his workshop today.”

“He said he was going to do that after lunch. I ran into him on my way to work this morning.”

“He told me.” Steve paused, collecting his thoughts. “I am starting to think half the reason Clint wanted you here was because of Sarge.”

“How so?”

“It wasn’t five minutes before he was asking me the tough questions.”

Megan waited, feigning a patience she didn’t feel. Part of her wanted to go give Sarge a piece of her mind. The rest of her wanted to give him a hug for making sure Steve didn’t revert to his stoic Captain America mode as a coping mechanism. She just stroked his left forearm with her hand and waited for Steve to talk.

“He asked me if I never got better than I was right now, what would be the thing I missed the most.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you have an answer?”

“It didn’t take long for it to hit me, especially since I’d spent the morning brooding about it. And
in the grand scheme of things, it’s pretty stupid.”

“I doubt that.”

“It is. With all the gifts I’ve been given, all the good they’ve let me do, I realized what I miss the most right now is being able to sit down with a sketch pad and lose myself in drawing for a while. I mean, I’m not even that good at it. A year in art school isn’t much training. The rest is self-taught and mostly just doodles. So why is that—“ his voice caught in his throat and he took a gulping breath.

Megan turned in his arms so she was on her side and able to hug him with one arm while she lay against him. “I’m not a bit surprised. In fact, when Mom dragged me out of your room for my first breakdown after you were hurt, that was the thing about your long-term prognosis that upset me the most: that you might lose your art.” She was crying now and not even trying to hide it.

“But why? Of everything I’ve been blessed with, why that?”

“Because it’s a part of you, Steve Rogers, the kid from Brooklyn. When you were a kid, you had two comforts beyond what your mother’s love could provide: Bucky’s friendship and your art. When you had no one else, you had Bucky. And when you were left alone, thrown into a new century, you still had your drawings. Sketching is your creative outlet, Steve. You don’t talk a lot about what’s going on in your head. Instead, you pour it out on paper in an image that tells a powerful story. What you call doodles, I call diary entries. You could learn to draw left handed if you needed to. Drawing without being able to see? I don’t have an answer to that one yet. If there is one, we’ll find it.” She took a shaky breath. “Why’d Sarge ask so soon?”

“He said I needed to figure out what it was and start grieving for its loss rather than wasting time waiting for miracles. And then he asked me what I was going to do today to help me adjust to my new life.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“Nothing I care to repeat in front of a lady.”

“I thought we’d already established I’m no lady.”

“You are to me. Anyway, he put me to work hand sanding a dresser before telling me to get busy figuring out my next steps. And then he turned on the power tools so I couldn’t talk to him any more.”

“Can you blame him?”

“Nope. After about an hour of that, he brought me back up here and said he’d check in on me in a couple of days for a progress report.”

“You got yourself a new drill sergeant.”

“He keeps calling me Captain while he’s ordering me around, too. I got him back. I started calling him Hermey and told him we’d watched the show last night. And then…” Steve paused, gathering himself. “Then he said I was going to be just fine.”

“He’s right.”

“When he says it, I almost believe it.” Steve took a deep breath and kissed the top of her head. “Show me the Braille stuff you ordered.”
Megan moved so she was sitting beside him and put a large, flat box on his lap first. She lifted the lid and handed him the bag of tiles. “Have you ever played Scrabble?”

Steve shook his head. “Isn’t it a bit like a crossword puzzle?”

“Sort of. You end up building a grid of words that looks like a crossword puzzle. You start with seven random letters and have to build words out of them that connect to what is on the board already. At home, we always play with free access to a dictionary since I am a terrible speller. Now I’ll be a both a horrible speller and a horrible reader, so you’re certain to win. I figure we can give ourselves a week and then dive in.”

“Okay.”

“These are Braille alphabet reference cards.” Megan put one in Steve’s hands. “I got several, because I am going to need them for any game of Scrabble, or anything else, for that matter.”

“How does anyone learn this? They all feel the same,” Steve muttered, running his fingers over the raised dots.

“I’m told the two keys are patience and practice. It’s two columns, three dots each, numbered top to bottom and then left to right for positions one through six. The first ten letters of the alphabet correspond to one through nine, then zero. And there’s a symbol to indicate what follows is a capital letter or a numeral.”

So it’s really just twenty-eight patterns to learn?”

“For level one Braille, which is where we’re starting. I’m sure there are punctuation marks, too, but those’ aren’t on the card.”

“There are levels?” Steve sank back on the couch, defeat slipping into his posture.

Megan bumped her shoulder against his. “You may heal to the point where you don’t need more than level one and we end up pulling out Scrabble just for fun during the next power outage. Waiting won’t make this easier to learn.”

“You’re right. I know that.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “What else do you have?”

Megan slid a full sheet of heavy paper into his hand. “A wish list, which Ray is prohibited from helping you read. If Tony ever sees this, you’ll never hear the end of it. I’ll know you figured out what it says when you start granting the wishes… or explaining why a particular suggestion is off the table. Think of it as motivation to learn the alphabet.”

“You wrote this yourself? Today?”

“I did. Using a slate and stylus isn’t hard, you just have to remember you’re working from the back of the page. Which brings us to the last item for the night,” she said as she put the slate and stylus in his hand and took the paper. “This one lets you write four lines before you shift it down. The paper gets sandwiched between the frame with the windows and the frame that you punch the stylus into.”

She put her hand on his chest as he laid the stylus in his lap and fingered the slate. “Too much to take in?” she asked.

He opened his mouth to talk. His jaw worked soundlessly before he closed his mouth and nodded.
“The night before you got dosed with the serum, if Dr. Erskine told you that you’d have to develop battle plans, lead special ops teams in hostile conditions, master multiple types of firearms as well as different hand-to-hand combat forms, and develop different ways to throw your shield so it acts like a boomerang, do you think you might have been a bit overwhelmed and felt unequal to the tasks ahead?”


“Even though no one else can do this for you, you’re not alone. It’s okay to be discouraged and overwhelmed. I am, too, sometimes. The important thing is that you decide if you want me to help you shave or if you’re going to keep that beard now that your face is almost totally healed. Just be warned, I am not going anywhere near that straight edge razor you insist on using.”

Steve sat there stunned for a moment by the change in topic, then let out a huff of amusement. “I’ll keep the beard for now since you’re so fond of it.”

“Excellent choice. I’m going to put everything back in the box and put the whole mess on the dining room table, except for the wish list, which I’m going to put on top of your side of the bedroom dresser. If Natasha or Clint come over, they’ll be less likely to find it there,” Megan said as she packed up the box.

She watched his brow furrow. “Why would they learn Braille?”

“Who says they would? But they’re both spies and spies hate secrets. Leaving that paper out would be like baiting a tiger with catnip.”

“Good point.”

She watched him sit there, ill at ease. Was he nervous? She smiled to herself. She’d fix that soon enough. “Go get the water started and I’ll gather the medical supplies. We can rinse your eyes like we did last night.”

“Candles again?”

“If you want.”

He nodded once, slowly, then got up and headed towards the bathroom. Watching him, Megan felt her pulse increase. That body was going to be her personal playground.

Chapter End Notes

I give up on trying to keep these kids apart and well-behaved. That was NOT in the original plans, but they’ve taken over the plot and overruling my rules. No matter how I scold, badger, lecture, or plead, they smirk and keep pushing for what they want. I have hopes that this will ease the tension enough that they can start listening to me again. Yes, I’m delusional. Even my mother said a Megan’s plans in the bath weren’t enough to relieve the sexual tension. (eye roll)

No promises about an update this weekend, but rest assured I keep plugging away at this. Your comments are deeply appreciated.
Megan's Playground

Megan took her time and waited until she heard the water stop running before she ventured into the bathroom. Steve had left the lights out and the first thing Megan did was to light the candles before stripping off her clothes and putting them in the hamper.

“Throw these out, will you?” Steve asked, handing her the bandages he’d just removed from his eyes.

“Sure.” At least he was keeping his eyes closed until she got the saline wash ready. “It’s hard to wait for your few minutes of sight, isn’t it?”

“Just a bit,” he admitted as he rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “I know I need to be patient.”

“It doesn’t make it any easier to wait. Patience while healing isn’t one of your strong points. Lord knows I’ve seen you hurt often enough to figure that much out.”

“I’ve never been patient.”

“I’d have thought all those days spent sick in bed as a kid would have taught you the art of waiting. Bucky and your mom couldn’t entertain you all the time. Instead, you seem to be trying to make up for lost time. How do you cope on a mission?”

“I try to keep busy going over the plans from every angle, then figure out contingency plans for anything that might go wrong. I envy Clint sometimes, the way he can just sit completely still for long periods of time and not seem bothered by the waiting. Bucky was like that, too. I guess it goes with being a good sniper.” Steve paused, thinking. “You’re one of the only people who talks about Bucky with me.”

“I’m trying to put off his third death as long as I can.” As she talked, she handed him the saline eyewash and watched while he rinsed first one eye, then the other.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a quote I read somewhere that really touched me. ‘There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.’1 We can’t get around the fact that a lot of people you cared about are gone. But I like hearing about them and it keeps them closer to you when we talk about them.” Megan finished stripping off her clothes and sank up to her neck in the hot, bubbling water. The tensions of the day immediately eased away.

“Yeah, it does. So why do other people avoid mentioning them?”

“It’s not unique to you. Ask anyone who has ever lost a loved one and they’ll tell you story after story of others avoiding the subject. I guess some people think if you avoid the topic, you don’t stir up unpleasant emotions. But what actually happens is that people feel abandoned in their grief. I’d rather help you keep the happy memories close. In fact, I’ve been kicking around the idea of helping you write a book. You have so many good stories about your life before that it seems a crime not to share them. Not to mention the unique perspective you have after living in two completely different times. You can pretty much guarantee it would sell.”

“You’re serious?” he asked, finishing the saline rinse and handing her the container to set aside for
“Yeah, I am. I know you don’t need the money, but it could fund a really nice charity.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s a nice idea, but I’m not a writer.”

“I figured that part would be up to me after I dig a story out of you. I also had the idea of you putting sketches in to go with your memories.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“We don’t know that. And it was just an idea. The stories alone would be a treasure. Just think about it. You can always ask Ray to record something if an idea comes to mind. He can transcribe it and then we can polish it up and add in other details as they come back to you. The only drawback I see is that your squeaky-clean, super-boring Captain America image will be tarnished forever. People will find out you have pretty strong opinions on some topics and even worse, a sense of humor. The politicians trying to use that image for their own gains won’t be happy with Captain America becoming a mere mortal.”

“That alone is reason to think about doing it. What sort of time frame are you thinking?”

Megan picked up the cup from the side of the tub and used it to wet Steve’s hair as she knelt beside him. “None at all. There’s no rush. You could also just help me get the stories down on paper for your own enjoyment. Rebecca could probably help with things she remembers, too. One memory often leads to another. Wouldn’t it be nice to have it all down on paper somewhere to pull out and read on a bad day?”

He leaned back into her hands as she massaged the shampoo into his hair, but she saw the tension lingering in his shoulders. “That would be nice. I’ll think about it.”

“Can you see anything today when you’re faced away from the candles?” Megan watched his brow furrow a bit as he concentrated, his eyes looking up at the ceiling.

“Shadows and a bit of flickering light.”

She reached around him to cup his cheek and he flinched as her hand moved in front of his face. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she answered softly. “Relax. You’re as skittish as a colt starting under saddle the first time,” Megan said, trying to soothe his nerves. She kissed his temple gently before rinsing his hair. “Nothing will happen you don’t consent to. I just want to make you feel good.”

“I know.”

He put his hand on her waist and she pushed it away. “They’ll be none of that. I’m not having you distracting me. Not this time.”

“Are you serious?”

“Quite,” she said firmly as she soaped up a washcloth and ran it gently along his neck and shoulders. It was amazing to consider how much he had healed in a matter of days. “I finally got access to the playground and I want to explore.”

“Playground?” he said with a slightly strangled voice. His whole back was tense now and she pressed a kiss to his shoulder.
“Megan’s playground. I was thinking you could get that tattooed right here,” she murmured into his ear as she trailed fingers across his abdomen. “But then I decided I don’t want anything marring your skin. I’m just going to have to brand you with kisses.”

A shudder ripped through him and she chuckled. “It’s okay to be nervous, but do try to relax. Having your back washed isn’t something to fear.”

“I bet Emma and John would have something to say about that.”

“Why? Because I’d use a wire brush on them?”

Steve chuckled. “Something like—“ he jumped as her hands wandered. “Megan—“

“Less talking. More kissing,” she ordered softly. When she finally pulled away to breathe, she put her forehead on his shoulder and tried to quell her own case of nerves. They had something good and she didn’t want to mess it up.

Somehow sensing her doubts, he tangled his left hand in her hair and pulled her back to him for another kiss. As his lips trailed down her throat, she mustered the confidence to resume her own explorations of his body. Slowly and carefully, she took him apart.

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When he finally collapsed, gasping for breath with his head on her shoulder, she nibbled his earlobe. “Now that we took the edge off, we can really play,” she murmured with a tone that was more teasing than serious.

He grew tense at that and it puzzled her for a moment until she realized he wasn’t nearly as sated as she’d first thought and quite wary of her reaction to his non-existent refractory period.

Her laugh was low and husky even to her own ears. “I was wrong. You’re not a playground, but an entire amusement park. Thank you Dr. Erskine,” she said before capturing his face in her hands for more of those soul-searing kisses. It took all the self-control she had not to take him right there, but she knew he needed time before that next step.

For some reason, he was embarrassed by his differences, as if they were a cause for shame. He had the body of a god, but the confidence of his pre-serum self and a deeply-engrained aversion to talking about any of it. The last bit could be attributed to the time he’d grown up in, except she sensed it was more than that. Something in his past had made him wary of letting anyone behind his carefully constructed defenses and it was hard to control the anger resulting from that realization.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked even as he responded to her continued explorations. He was clearly fighting for control. “And don’t say ‘nothing,’” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“I’m just planning on how to best collect data on how many times I can take you apart before you’re completely done in. Unless you’ve already done that experiment?”

“Megan!”

Even in the dim candlelight, she could see the blush that colored his features. She kept her tone
playful, trying to diffuse the tension. “It’s okay if you don’t tell me. Reproducibility is the foundation of all good science. I’ll generate my own baseline if I have to.”

Finally, he grabbed her wrist and held it immobile. “That is not what you were thinking. You got tense.”

Megan sighed and pressed their foreheads together. “I’m not lying to you. I just didn’t also share the unkind thoughts I’m having towards whomever made you so uncomfortable with the changes the serum made to your body. I don’t like how wary you are of my possible reactions. I just want to love you and even now, you’re on guard.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Will you stop apologizing? You’re not doing anything wrong. Well, you stopped kissing me, and you grabbed my wrist. You’re thinking too much and—“

He chuckled and let go of her arm. “Okay, I’ll stop apologizing on one condition.”

“Wh—“ she gasped as he used his hand for some exploring of his own. “Deal,” she stammered as she sank into his touch, her head resting on his shoulder for support.

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“Ow!” Megan woke to throbbing pain in her face. “What the hell?” she snapped, as she tried to figure out what was happening

“Bucky, hold on!” Steve cried out and he flailed again in his sleep.

Swearing softly, Megan turned on the light as she rolled out of bed straight to the floor in one swift motion. Her first priority was to get out of striking range. “Steve, wake up!” she ordered, then watched him for a moment. She sighed when he continued to twitch and flail, trapped in reliving the worst day of his life. “Right, like that was going to work. Hold on, Steve,” she muttered before stumbling to the kitchen to grab a bag of frozen vegetables and dishtowel. She held the makeshift ice pack to her face before turning on the cold water tap. While she waited for the water to get icy, she fetched her newly procured nightmare-blaster from the bathroom vanity and armed her weapon. A quick check in the mirror confirmed she was going to have a lovely shiner. Her eye was already swelling shut. Steve was going to feel terrible about that.

Armed and determined, she returned to the bedroom and sat down in the reading chair with a bath towel in her lap. “Captain Rogers, report!” she ordered in her most militaristic tone as she shot him in the ear with the squirt gun.

Steve thrashed and yelled, “Bucky!” right as she hit him in the mouth with cold water.

“Wake up, Captain Rogers. On your feet, soldier or I’m dumping a bucket of water on you,” Megan snapped before hitting him in the chest with the icy liquid.

“Megan?” Steve sputtered as he sat up fully.

“Are you awake now, or do I need to reload?”
“What did you do?” he asked, rubbing his face with his hand and finding he was soaking wet.

“Towel incoming,” Megan said more kindly as she tossed him the towel. “You had a nightmare and I woke you up.”

“Why am I dripping?”

“I bought a Nerf squirt gun for just such an occasion. Sorry about the temperature, especially given you were dreaming about Bucky falling in the snow, but I didn’t think warm water would have the same effect.”

Steve dried his face and hair before letting the towel fall into his lap. His mouth moved like a dying goldfish for a moment before he sank against the headboard and processed what she had said. “You woke me with a squirt gun?”

Megan chuckled at his incredulous tone. “A gal has to improvise sometimes. Turning on the light wasn’t going to work. These Nerf guns actually have pretty good aim.” She kept her tone light as she held the frozen peas to her eye socket, bracing herself for what was coming.

“Did I hurt you?”

“I have a black eye is all. We were both asleep when that happened so I’m not sure if it was your elbow or forearm that caught me across the face.” As she talked, she watched him sink lower in the bed and withdraw into himself. “Hey, none of that. I’m okay, and it’s not your fault. Greg gave my mom a shiner, too, once. I think she said he was dreaming about wrestling drunken goats off of a golf course. It happens. The nightmares, I mean. I don’t think he ever wrestled goats, sober or otherwise. Goat wrestling is not a typical Freemason activity, at least as far as I know.”

“It’s not funny.”

“The Freemasons? Or the goats?”

“Megan.” There was annoyance from his voice as he said her name in a drawn-out two-toned fashion.

“Don’t. Just don’t even go there, okay? I’m not in the mood for it. Accidents happen. And if you even think one of us is moving to the couch, I’m going to be seriously pissed off. Ditto if you stay up the rest of the night exercising. It’s barely one in the morning and neither one of us has slept enough.”

“What can I do?”

She hated the defeated flatness in his voice. “Hang up the towel. I’m going to take some aspirin and get the real ice pack out so the vegetables can go back in the freezer. Do you want something to eat or drink while we’re up?”

He just shook his head sullenly.

Irrationally irritated has his feelings of guilt, she plopped herself down on his thighs. “May I remind you that I knew from day one that you were a veteran of a horrible war? We’ve talked about this, remember? When you’re wrapped up in a nightmare, I keep my distance. I’m careful.”

“It doesn’t keep you safe.”

“Life isn’t safe,” she said as she pressed the frozen vegetables to his crotch and watched with some
satisfaction as he winced. “Sometimes it takes you by surprise.” She replaced the frozen peas with her hand. “Good or bad. Living means you open yourself to the risks.”

“You’ve made your point. Will you put those back in the freezer now?”

“My hands? Or the peas?”

With a muttered curse, he pulled her to his chest and held her close. “Don’t ever change, okay? As infuriating as you can be, I love you the way you are.”

“I love you, too, you lunkhead. Are you sure you don’t want something to eat?”

“Ma liked to make hot cocoa when I had a nightmare.”

“Two hot cocoas coming right up.”

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1 David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*
Brooding

Megan kept dropping ice cubes as she pulled them from the bin in the freezer where the ice maker deposited them. It seemed like only half of them ended up in the reusable ice bag she was filling. “Watch your step,” she warned Steve when he came into the kitchen. “I keep dropping ice cubes and I’ve noticed this floor is wickedly slippery when wet.”

“Okay.”

“I have the cocoa ready to heat, but I didn’t turn the burner on yet.”

Steve moved silently to the stove and fumbled a bit to turn it on, but soon was slowly stirring the mixture while Megan chased scattered ice cubes across the kitchen floor.

“Why do you always make everything your fault?” Megan finally asked when she was done cleaning up. She took over stirring the cocoa while Steve sat slumped down at the bar.

“I could have killed you in my sleep.”

“In theory. But that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m asking why you seem to assume responsibly for everything that goes on around you, no matter whether nor not you have control over it.”

“You could have died tonight.”

Megan couldn’t help but look at the ceiling and praying for strength. “Apparently, you are not going to be able to talk about anything else until we address that.” She sighed in frustration. “Yes, I could have died. We could have been hit by a nuclear bomb. A neighbor could have shot me through the wall in a botched suicide attempt. I could have slipped on the wet floor and hit my head at on the counter at just the wrong angle. You could have strangled me in your sleep thinking I was one of the Chitauri trying to kill you in New York. None of those things happened.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“It’s also not as bad as your guilt complex makes it out to be in your head. What are the two things you most consistently have nightmares about?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Do you? Or do you mostly just wake up feeling awful and trying to forget?”

“My dreams are vivid. And when I wake up…”

“It’s like losing Bucky all over again.” Megan finished softly. “Which hand were you using to reach out to him when he fell from the train, Steve?”

“My left.”

“Mmm hmm.” She just watched, waiting for him to understand, as she continued to stir the cocoa over low heat. “Do you punch and kick like you’re in battle when you’re dreaming about putting the plane into the water?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fair enough. It’s never happened that I’ve seen. You curl up a bit, like you’re bracing yourself.
Sometimes you thrash around like when you were in S.H.I.E.L.D. medical. But Natasha was more worried you’d injure yourself than cause harm to others when she tried to wake you up.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. You don’t realize how strong I really am. I never let myself go full-out except in battle, and usually not even then.” She saw from the tension in his shoulders how much that admission cost him. He still viewed his body as some sort of weapon that he’d put on one day. Even though he couldn’t remove it, he hadn’t completely accepted it as his own or learned to inhabit it fully. Rather, it was a tool to be controlled. “How much furniture have you destroyed as a result of nightmares in the last two years?”

“A few bedside lamps.”

“Would you agree that those cheap lamps are more breakable than I am?”

“That doesn’t change—“

“I’m either more breakable than a lamp or less so. Which is it?”

“The lamp will break more easily. Even so, I can still do serious damage to you, Megan.”

“I know you can. I’m asking if you have.”

“Not until tonight.”

“That’s still open for debate. But haven’t you figured out yet why you ended up hitting me? You were reaching out for Bucky. That sort of motion is never going to deliver lethal force to anyone lying beside you. The vector forces are all wrong. It might be different if you were directing the forces downward, trying to disable someone sneaking up from behind. But you tend to forge ahead in battle and that puts the danger in front of you. Reaching for Bucky puts the majority of the force in a forward direction. Even if you were lying on your left side facing me, you’d be lying on that arm and reaching out more than striking out. The former might hurt a bit, but it won’t kill me. At most, I’ll get shoved to the floor.”

Megan let him sit and think about that for a while as she continued to gently heat the cocoa. It was almost ready. She kept pressing the ice pack to her face in hopes it would stop throbbing and settle down to a dull ache. At least her wounds would heal. It occurred to her, not for the first time, that Steve had a lot of psychic wounds that continued to fester and bleed behind the stoic facade he had carefully constructed. No one was trying to heal them since he never let anyone see them.

They were both silent while Megan turned off the stove and poured the cocoa into two large mugs. She rinsed the pan and left it in the sink beside the squirt gun that she still needed to drain. It could wait until morning. She placed a mug in front of Steve where he sat at the bar, but took her own with her to the couch. If there weren’t a rule against sitting on a wood barstool at one in the morning, there should be.

Steve finally broke the silence. “How bad is your eye?” he asked as he sat slumped over his mug, sipping the cocoa and looking like he was ready to completely break down.

“See for yourself.” Megan answered softly. “I’m going to point out that I probably could have kept you from knowing about it if I tried. Same as yesterday when you grabbed my wrist. I’m being honest with you even though I know it’s hurting you.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Prove it and stop twisting everything around into a weapon you use against yourself.”
“I’m not trying to,” he told her as he slowly made his way over to her and sat down on the couch beside her.

“I know. But you still do it.” She set her mug on the coffee table and took Steve’s to place beside it before guiding his hand to her face. “You’ve had worse ones, I’m sure.”

He swore softly when he felt how swollen her face was. “I know how badly it hurts, too.”

“Don’t forget that pain medicines work on me. I got ice on it right away, which will help a lot, too. You usually go a longer time before you get any treatment.”

“How can you be okay with this?”

“It was an accident. Believe me, it would be very different if you were hurting me on purpose.”

“I would never do that,” his voice caught.

“I know. I trust you, probably more than you realize.” She leaned against him and put his mug back in his hand before taking another sip of her own cocoa. “I am going to make a suggestion and I want you to promise me to give it serious consideration.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it. You have to really think about this and not just react with an automatic ‘no’ like you’re going to want to. In fact, I don’t even want you to share your reaction or decision. Just promise you’ll think about it.”

“I promise.”

“I think you need to consider individual or group veteran’s counseling.” Megan put her fingers on his lips when he started to react. “Not a word.”

“I’m listening.”

“You’re dealing with a lot of stuff. Some of it’s unique, but a lot of it really isn’t when you get down to it. Any veteran of combat is going to have seen and done things they’d rather not remember. No one can fix the damage those experiences can do to a person, but there are ways of coping that make it a bit easier to deal with. I can’t help you with that because I haven’t gone through it. I don’t think S.H.I.E.L.D. is the place to go for it, either. I don’t trust the agency as a whole to look out for your best interests. Maybe a support group isn’t realistic because you’ve got the Captain America baggage to drag around, too, and you need people who see Steve. But I’m sure Natasha and Tony have enough connections between them that they could find someone whom you can really trust in time,” Megan said as she watched Steve’s body language become more and more defensive. She shook her head slightly, having expected exactly this response.

“I know your immediate reaction is to say you don’t need it and that you’re fine. I also know that you’re a product of your time and when you grew up, mental health was handled a lot differently than it is now. It’s still not perfect. All I’m insisting you do right now is consider the possibility of finding someone to talk to. You already promised that you would so the subject is now closed.”

Megan leaned against him and rested her head on his shoulder as they sat there in the dark.

“I don’t like it.”

“I know. But you should know by now that I tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear.”
“In your opinion.”

“And I’m always right. Get used to it.” Megan yawned. “Do you think you can sleep yet or are you still too wound up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then will you at least come snuggle with me while I go to sleep?”

“I can do that.”

“Good. Finish your cocoa and come back to bed,” Megan said, yawning as she got up and stretched. She put her mug in the dishwasher and turned out the lights in the kitchen before heading to the bedroom. Steve joined her soon after and she lay with her head on his shoulder, the ice pack pressed against her face and half-lying on a folded towel so Steve didn’t have it against his own skin.

He was tense at first, but after a few minutes, she felt him relax and heard his breathing slow. Satisfied that they’d weathered another storm, she let herself fall asleep.

****

As soon as Megan had her oatmeal cooking in the microwave, she used her tablet to take a photo of herself and sent it to Natasha along with a message. “It’s not fair to you, and I wouldn’t ask if Steve were in better shape, but are you willing to take credit for this during an early sparring match today?” she wrote.

Natasha wrote back almost immediately. “Of course. What happened?”

“Nightmare. He’s not up to dealing with any jokes at his expense just yet. I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it. Text me when you get in.”

Megan shut down her tablet with a sigh of relief and sat down to breakfast. Steve was avoiding her this morning, hiding out on the elliptical machine, and she was too tired to fight him about it. Maybe letting him stew in his juices was what he needed.

There was no point taking a shower when she’d be soaked in sweat when Natasha was done with her, so as soon as she was done eating, she poked her head into the room where Steve was sulking and told him she was heading to work.

“What a good day,” he said curtly and she resisted the urge to give him the bird when he couldn’t even see the gesture.

*****
Once at work, Megan was able to slip into the empty locker room without encountering anyone other than Natasha.

“Here, you’ll want this,” the redhead said, handing Megan an instant ice pack.

“Won’t it look suspicious that I have it before I make a rookie mistake on the mats?”

“Nope,” Natasha said as she swept Megan’s feet out from under her. Megan fell as Natasha had taught her to do. “So sorry you hit your face on the bench on your way down,” she said lightly as she nodded her approval at Megan’s first fall on concrete. She held out her hand to help Megan up. “The gym is too busy to slip you in without anyone seeing you. Now we don’t have to.”

“Thanks. I’m really sorry about this,” Megan apologized again as she activated the pack and held it to her face.

“Why?” Natasha seemed genuinely puzzled.

“You have feelings, too. I’m taking advantage of your reputation for my own ends and I don’t like it even though I think it’s necessary.”

“You don’t need to protect me from what I am.”

“All of my friends need protection. I tend to bring chaos with me.” Megan pretended not to see the surprise she saw flicker in Natasha’s eyes before the assassin hid her emotions once more. “Let’s get this over with,” she said as she shoved the door open and stalked over to the open mat area where she and Natasha generally trained.

Natasha followed, speaking sharply. “I’ve told you before to never, ever let your guard down. Do you think your attackers will always wait until you’re ready like they do in the movies?”

“I’m just saying it would have been nice if you had waited until I wasn’t so close to the benches! There’s plenty of open space by the sinks for you to have made your point without the risk of me hitting my head on the way down.”

“So now you have a lasting reminder to do better. Stretch out so we can get started. I don’t have all day. Once you’re warmed up, you’re going to have to set that ice pack aside. You’re not good enough for one-handed throws yet. In a real fight, ice packs aren’t available, either.”

Megan bit back a smile, glad she was facing away from her audience. No matter her reputation, Natasha was a good person. It was a shame that more people didn’t realize it.

****

“Steve? I brought takeout,” Megan called as she opened the apartment door and set the bags down on the table. Today had been exhausting, filled with paperwork and reading grant proposals so she could catch up on all of the life science projects currently underway. Stopping for hot sandwiches on the way home had been a whim, but if Steve had cooked again, they were easy enough to store.

Looking around, she noticed the Scrabble tiles were scattered all over the dining and living room floors. Someone had apparently indulged in a bit of a temper tantrum. “Steve?” she said again, moving down the hall to the bedrooms, only to find them empty. Returning to the living room, she
checked the balcony and found him sitting there, the door closed to keep the sultry weather outside.

“I brought takeout. I got you two meatball subs that are still hot.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said, not even turning towards her.

“When did you last eat?”

“I said I’m not hungry,” he snapped.

“I’ll put them in the fridge,” Megan said softly and slid the door closed. Clearly, his mood was unchanged from this morning. She considered for a moment before reaching for her phone. It was time for a new approach.

*****

Help arrived a short time later. “Stuff that in the fridge, I’m taking you out,” Clint said as he followed Natasha inside and saw Megan’s half-eaten dinner on the dining room table. He shook his head at her when he saw her look out at the balcony where Steve was still pouting. “Trust me.”

Reluctantly, she nodded and wrapped the papers back around her sandwich. Natasha saw the Scrabble tiles and raised her eyebrow, followed by a slight smile flitting across her lips. Megan could only wonder what she was thinking, though she guessed that Natasha planned on making Steve clean up his own mess. She certainly wasn’t going to do it and couldn’t imagine that Natasha would, either.

After she grabbed her purse, Clint put his arm around her shoulders and ushered her out the door. “What’s your favorite dessert?” he asked when they were in the elevator.

“Anything chocolate.”

“Natasha will handle him. Don’t worry.”

“I don’t know how to help him. I think he’s letting me in, letting me closer, and then he shuts me out completely.”

“You scare him.” Clint said as he crossed his arms and leaned into the corner, the sole of one foot pressed flat against the wall.

“Sarge will scold you for getting his elevator dirty.”

Clint put his foot back on the floor. “Don’t change the subject. How does a hot chocolate chip cookie sound? I know a bistro in the district that serves them fresh from the oven.”

Megan nodded as the elevator doors opened and let them out in the garage. She handed Clint the keys to Steve’s car, in no mood to be responsible for driving safely.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened last night and we’ll go from there?” He chuckled at her look of alarm. “The edited version is fine. What base are you on? Or have you slid into home?”

Megan blushed and sank into the passenger side seat, fastening her seatbelt. “After begin stuck on first forever, I finally hit a double and got him to third. Then he had the stupid nightmare, gave me
a black eye, and I’m cooling my heels in the dugout. I do not believe we are having this conversation. Speaking of awkward discussions, that reminds me to tell you that I kept my promise and told Nick we should change your codename to Cupid.”

“Seriously?”

“Scout’s honor.”

“What did he say?”

“Congress has no idea what’s heading their way.”

“Ain’t the truth, sister.” Clint reached over and patted her knee once they were on the road. “We still need a code name for you.”

“Just promise me that Natasha gets veto power over both you and Stark.”

Clint’s phone beeped and he looked at it at the next red light. “Nat’s taking Steve to the gym.”

“I assumed S.H.I.E.L.D. would lock him out of the exercise center until he’s cleared by medical.”

Clint stashed his phone and shook his head. “Sorry, I should clarify. They’re not going to S.H.I.E.L.D.; Nat and I have another place we sometimes go to. It’s not as fancy, but we like it better.” He glanced over at her. “Third base, huh? How’d you manage that with Mr. Old-Fashioned and Uptight?”

“I asked.” Megan covered her face. “Why are we back to this?”

“As protective of you are of Steve, who else are you going to talk to? Your parents?”

“Lord, no! But how is this my life?”

“I’ve been asking myself that on a daily basis for the last two years.” Clint winked at her. “So you made it to third and then he got scared because he hurt you.”

“I made him promise to think about talking to someone.”

Clint snorted. “I’m sure that went over well.”

“He needs help dealing with his issues. It would take time to find the right person, but I think it would help him in the long run if he saw a professional. He just stuffs it all in and keeps trying to be a good soldier. He can’t do that forever. Pick any single big event from his life and you’ve got a recipe for issues. Combined, I’m amazed he’s functioning at all. He’s been so busy surviving there hasn’t been much energy for living. This injury is starting to turn hairline cracks into fissures. I’m really worried about him.”

“Me, too. But I don’t know that you’ll get him into formal therapy. Let me talk to Sarge.”

“He’s a treasure. He already gave Steve a kick in the backside yesterday.”

“Good. I’m sure he’ll land a few more before Steve goes back to his place. He’s a good guy.”

Megan nodded, then finally gave voice to her fears. “Do you really think Steve is going to fully recover?”

“Honestly? I really do. He survived begin frozen solid for decades. Not much beats that.”
Megan lay in bed and forced herself to stay put when she heard Natasha and Steve return. Looking at the clock she saw it was nearly midnight. She’d tried to sleep but had been too worried to really relax. Even so, she stayed silent when Steve came into the bedroom and shut the door. He was quiet as he stripped off his clothes and slipped under the covers before rolling onto his side to face her. She desperately missed being able to look into his eyes and tell what he was thinking.

“Megan? You awake?” he asked in a voice so soft she had to strain to hear him.

“I’m here.” Gently, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you. Was Natasha able to help?”

“If you mean did she get my head out of my arse, yeah, she did. And then she wiped the floor with me.”

“She’s a good friend. Clint, too.” Megan ran her hand over Steve’s chest. “If I push you too hard, you’ll tell me, won’t you?”

“Always. Why are you worried about that now?” He pulled her closer so she was lying with her head on his shoulder.

“Something Clint said.” She traced his sternum with a forefinger and added, “I just had to check.”

“Bucky would tell you…” his voice caught. “I miss him so much. It’s getting worse, not better.”

“That’s because you’re finally letting yourself grieve for him. It will get easier to bear in time. It won’t ever stop hurting, but the edges won’t be so sharp.”

“I don’t know how my mother carried on all those years by herself.”

“She loved you. Taking care of you was a way of honoring your father’s memory. There’s no doubt it was hard, but she loved you both enough to muster the strength. I’m sure she had friends and a support system you weren’t aware of given your age.”

“I guess she must have.”

“Are you going to be able to sleep?”

“I think so.” He pressed his lips to her temple. “We good?”

“I’m still here, aren’t I?”

Steve’s tone was amused. “It’s your apartment.”

Megan smiled, her cheek still pressed against his chest. “True. But I didn’t kick you to the couch. Stop brooding and go to sleep. We have to be up early in the morning.”
Natasha and Clint met them in the parking garage looking far more awake than Megan felt. “Good morning, Megan, Clint is taking you to the range before he heads out on an overnight mission.” The redhead looped her arm into Steve’s. “Steve, I’m going to escort you to your appointment and get you cleared for the S.H.I.E.L.D. gym. I think we can fit in a workout before Nick finds me. I’ll text you later with an update, Megan.”

“Okay.” Megan locked the car and followed Clint. Once they were alone, she glanced sideways at him. “What’s going on?”

“Nat’s telling the truth, but since Steve’s being such a handful, she figured it was better for her to go with him to the doctor. Steve’s hoping to get the bandages off today, and the rest of us know that’s not going to happen. Once he’s worked off the worst of his temper in the gym, you can take him home without worries he’ll destroy the place. She’s got him wearing a boxing glove on his right hand so they can spar without much risk of him hurting that hand more. He’s not faring well with fighting blind, and hasn’t figured out he needs to wrestle more and keep her in proximity to take her down. When he’s better, you’ll have to get her to tell you about it. I was laughing so hard when she called last night I darn near—” He stopped, censoring himself just a bit. “Anyway, get her to tell you.”

“I wonder if he has any idea how transparent he is?” Megan said, letting her lips curl up just a bit as she realized how effectively Clint and Natasha were handling their Captain. “Bucky would be proud of you both.”

Clint snorted. “Someone has to keep his head on straight. And no, he has no clue. Besides, he’s not transparent to anyone outside our small circle. At times like this, that’s a good thing.”

“Is your mission pretty straightforward?”

Clint shrugged as they walked. “Seems to be. Could go FUBAR at any time, but I expect to make it back for Friday.”

Megan nodded, threw him a smile as he held the door for her, and led the way to his locker in the firing range. “I know you can’t say more, but do be careful. I can’t deal with any more medical drama for at least another week. A month’s reprieve would be lovely.”

“You’re just hanging out with the wrong people. You want boring? Head back to your labs.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Right. Because we don’t have any drama down there. On top of that, we’ve had two sharps injuries so far this week. Considering what might be on those sharps, those injuries can kill as easily as your arrows, just more slowly.”

*****

A half hour later, Clint showed Megan his phone. “Full patches for next week. Tantrum to follow."
Going to gym now,” the message read. “I think I’ll take him home when they’re done,” Clint said. “You can swing by after lunch and maybe by then he’ll be less difficult to deal with.”

Megan nodded her agreement. “Okay. Do you have time?”

“I’ll head to the airport straight after. This way, you can get some of your work done. Don’t hesitate to call Sarge, either.”

“I won’t. I just wish I knew what to do to help.”

“You’re already doing it, so just don’t stop. He’s got to hit bottom a few times. You know that. It’s not fun to watch, but it has to happen.” Clint pointed back to the target. “See if you can draw a circle around that guy’s heart.”

****

“Why’d you lie about your black eye?” Steve asked her when she finally arrived home. He was sitting on the couch looking as defeated as she’d ever seen him. The Scrabble tiles were stacked and sorted on the dining room table right beside the reference alphabet card.

“I didn’t. Natasha and I just made a scene of our own in the gym yesterday morning. The resident busy bodies came to their own conclusions.”

“You don’t need to protect me.”

“We chose to. There’s a difference.” Megan set her purse on the table and sat down on the coffee table facing Steve. “How many Scrabble tiles are still missing?”

“Two.”

She took his good hand in hers. “We’ll find them together.”

“I can’t do this for another week.”

“Your other choice is dying before then, and I’d really rather you didn’t.” She squeezed his clenched fist. “If nothing else, this is going to give you new empathy for other injured and sick patients you visit in the hospital. You still have the luxury of hoping for a full recovery. Not all of them do.”

“I’m not as strong as they are.”

“Yes, you are. Given the choices of adjusting or dying, most adjust. It’s not easy. It’s certainly not pleasant. But life after a catastrophic injury can still be rich and good. Right now, you’re in the vice grip of depression and it’s skewing your thinking. Been there, done that. I’m asking you to trust me that it will eventually get easier. Hanging on in the meantime is going to be one of the hardest things you’ll ever do. Depression can make getting out of bed in the morning more daunting than scaling Mount Everest. But I’m telling you that you can do this if you take it one minute at a time. But for right now, I want to help you stop thinking for a little bit.”

“How?”

Megan smiled to herself. “I have some ideas. Come on.” Standing, she tugged him to his feet. “Go
“Megan, I’m in no mood—“

She pressed her fingers to his lips, silencing him. “No talking. No thinking. Just trust me. And I thought we had instituted a no shirt rule around here. Take it off before you lie down.”

Megan retrieved a bath towel and rolled it lengthwise before joining Steve. He seemed to be too tired to fight her and was lying on his back on the middle of the bed, though he’d had the sense to pull the covers back. “Lift your head up,” she said softly, slipping the rolled towel behind his neck. “Now hold on to the towel with both hands and keep them there.”

“What are you planning?” he asked, brow furrowed as he obeyed.

“You’re worried about hurting me. And given what I intend to do to you, you may very well forget how strong your grip is. You can’t hurt the towel. Hush,” she added, pressing her lips to his when he started to protest. “I’m not going past any of the boundaries you’ve established. I simply intend to remind you that you have other senses and you can still feel good even if you can’t see. At any time, if you want me to stop, I will. If you decide you want more, it’s yours for the asking. I have only one rule.”

“What’s that?”

“Stay as quiet as you can. I’m going to do everything I can within your established boundaries to make you break that silence. So lie still and think of England.”

He let out a slight huff of amusement. “Seriously?”

“Sure. If you’re successful, then I’ll know I’m doing something wrong.”

***

In the end, she wore him down and he wore her out. Megan winced at her sore muscles as she pulled the covers up over them both. Steve was finally asleep, and getting him there had been a sustained, exhausting effort. Pleasurable, to be sure, but exhausting. The towel belonged in a museum somewhere, or at least a shrine. Right now, it was still tucked under his neck. Knowing he wouldn’t hurt her had let him lower his guard and truly relax under her hands. Telling him to keep quiet had engaged his brain just enough to distract him from his brooding. She’d found a spot low on his hip that sent his pulse racing when she kissed it. Why that spot? She had no idea. She’d also learned he did indeed have scars the serum had been unable to heal.

Whether it was due to the alien technology the Chitauri had used, a quirk in how the serum healed his body, or some other reason they might never know, Steve had a scar. It was under his left arm, high enough that it was almost in his armpit, a thin line of puckered skin, barely two inches long, attesting to a shallow cut from a Chitauri blade. The S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors didn’t know about it, at least according to Steve, and she had no reason to doubt him. He’d smiled smugly when she discovered it, a new secret only they shared. It seemed to her that he took comfort in having some tangible evidence that he had indeed fought in battle. As if his psychic wounds didn’t count. To many, they probably didn’t. The Purple Heart wasn’t awarded for mental trauma. In the eyes of the military, seeing your best friend fall to his death from a speeding train as you reached for his outstretched hand was a lesser injury than having a bullet sail through your shoulder when you
tried to avenge said friend in battle. For Steve, the faint line of imperfect flesh was proof that he was a soldier, too.

Megan lay on her side, head propped on her hand, as she watched him sleep. The late afternoon sun let her study his face in one of those rare moments it was free of tension. He looked so much younger right now, more vulnerable. The burdens of command and the challenges of adjusting to a new life in a new time didn’t weigh his shoulders down or line his face. He looked like he belonged in college rather than leading the Avengers into battle.

He whimpered and she touched his shoulder gently. “You’re safe. All is well. Sleep and I’ll keep watch,” she told him softly. The course of his dream changed and a slight smile tugged on the corner of his mouth. “Enjoying the ballgame, Stevie?” she whispered, hoping she could coax his mind into revisiting happy memories. “Isn’t this the best game ever?”

A full smile broke out on his face and he sighed, somehow relaxing even more than he had been moments ago. Megan swore he managed to sink further into the mattress, that if she had a ruler on hand, she could have quantified the change. She just wished the reprieve could last forever.

****

Megan was eating her dinner when Steve finally woke. “I found the Scrabble tiles. Sit down and I’ll heat your subs from last night,” she told him as she got up to fetch his sandwiches from the fridge.

Steve yawned and rubbed the back of his neck as he shuffled to the table. His hair was tousled from sleep and he was clad only in a pair of boxers. Didn’t he know there were laws about looking so good after rolling out of bed? “Where were they?”

“One was in a vase on top of the bookshelf over by the patio door. The other one was in the track to the patio door, right up against the far end. It was quite scavenger hunt.”

“I know. I spent three hours looking for the damn things and another two figuring out what was missing.”

“At least the latter gave you practice. I’ve got the vowels down, but not much else.”

“You’re not going in order?”

“I’m going in order of importance. Vowels first, common consonants next, then the rare ones. If I’m my brain chokes partway through this, I’d rather struggle with Q instead of S. Sarge called and said the tandem bike arrived, along with our helmets. How about we venture out tonight and get you some fresh air?”

“I don’t need a bike helmet.”

“Yes, you do. While the law only applies to those under sixteen, you’re going to be a good role model for all of the kids on the trail. Not only that, but if we get hit by a car, you’re a lot less likely to be knocked out if you have a helmet protecting that thick skull of yours. That means you can call 911 and get me to the hospital before I bleed out.”

She set the plate down in front of him and handed him a fork. “Keeping with our very boring
wardrobe strategy, we should also both wear something that we’ll use every time we head out on
the bike. I’m bracing for the Paparazzi to find us any day now. Clint picked up some wraparound
sunglasses for you, too. They’ll hide the bandages for now and protect your eyes from bright light
in another week or so. Speaking of which, are you going to be in the Independence Day parade
tomorrow as originally planned?” Megan asked before taking a bite of her own dinner.

Steve shook his head. “Nick let them know I won’t be there. He wants to keep me out of public
view completely, but I’m insisting on being there when the Smithsonian exhibit opens next Friday.
I need to call Tony about that when we get back tonight. He suggested that the other Avengers put
in an appearance to emphasize that I’m not a vulnerable target no matter what shape I’m in. I’ll
make a statement of some sort, the politicians will make their speeches, and we’ll see what
happens. Nick doesn’t get a vote on that. He doesn’t even know about the plans to get the H.H.C.’s
inside with me when the ceremony is done.”

“I think that’s a good idea. I’ll be there in whatever role you think is best, or I can stay away if
that’s better.”

“I want you there. Most of the ceremony is going to be outside, and no matter how much I’ve
healed, the doctor said today she wants my eyes bandaged for that part. If I have to be led around, I
want you to be the one doing it.”

“Oh, so I need to figure out what to wear that will look good in photos and complement your
uniform. Do you know which one you’re wearing?”

Steve shook his head. “Ask Hill.”

Megan reached for her phone. “I’m going to ask Natasha to go shopping with me. Given her
expertise, she’ll save me hours of misery. Shoe shopping alone is a trip to hell. Finding shoes and a
dress that set the right tone and fit by next Friday? That’s more than I can face by myself. If she
can’t help, I’m calling Jarvis and asking Tony to pay for it.”

“You always look good. Shopping for one outfit can’t be that bad.”

“When you’re all better, I’m going to take you with me to find me a pair of jeans that fit and cost
less than a hundred bucks a pair. I’ll make you a wager that we can’t find anything on the racks for
me to even try on in half the stores we visit and I either end up either ordering online or going over
budget after four hours of shopping. In the interest of fairness, I promise I’ll only take you to
places that are supposed to carry my size. Deal?”

“You sound very sure of yourself. What are we wagering?”

“When I win, you agree to take enough horseback riding lessons with me that you go on a trail
ride. After the trail ride, I’ll never ask you to ride again if you don’t like it.”

“What about when I win?”

“Pick your own prize, Rogers.”

He got a mischievous look. “Assuming I recover my eyesight, you pose and let me draw you.”

“Okay.”

“Nude.”

That made her pause, but probably not for the reasons he thought. “Where is this drawing going to
be hung?”

“My place, but not where others can see it.”

She could live with that. “You’ve got yourself a deal.” Megan leaned over and kissed him to seal the bargain. “You know, you’re going to give me whiplash with all these mood swings, but it’s good to see you happy at the moment.”

“I’m sorry.”

Megan felt guilty at the flash of emotion across his face, but she wasn’t going to start censoring her own thoughts and comments just because he was moody. “Don’t be. It’s normal. I understand it and the reasons for it. But you are keeping me on my toes this week. Now hurry up and finish eating. I’m going to figure out what I want to wear and review the article I found on riding a tandem bike.”

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When Megan got home on Friday, there was a note on the bar indicating he was with Sarge. “Bless that man,” she said to herself as she went into the bedroom to change out of her work clothes. She sent Sarge a text letting her know she was home and got a water bottle out to fill before she got to work chopping vegetables and setting up the dining room table with all of the supplies she’d gathered earlier in the week. She placed the Braille reference cards at each seat and got out the special canasta deck she’d ordered earlier in the week. Three seats had sleep masks lying on them. Beside each chair was a TV tray for food, drinks, and hand wipes. At least wood floors were easy to clean if they ended up spilling their food and drinks.

“Where is he?” Clint asked from behind a stack of pizza boxes when Megan answered the door. “I’m hungry.”

“He’s with Sarge but should be here soon.”

“Does he suspect anything?” Natasha asked as she eyed the table on her way to the kitchen to put the extra beer in the fridge.

“I don’t think so. I haven’t seen him since this morning.” Megan answered as she got plates out from the cupboard and set the tray of cut vegetables out on the counter. “I have no idea what mood he’s in, either.”

“He’s still being moody?” Natasha looked disappointed, as if some threat or directive was not being given due consideration.

“It changes with the weather, but nothing was as bad as Tuesday.”

“Nice of you to join us, Steve” Clint said, waving to Sarge as Steve came in the door holding a block of wood.

“Have fun!” Sarge called, starting to pull the door shut.

Megan called to him, “Don’t you want a beer?”
“Not tonight. You kids enjoy yourselves,” Sarge said with a head shake and a grin.

Natasha approached Steve. “It’s about time you got here. Come sit down so we can get started. There are extra trays by every seat, so let me help you so you don’t trip.”

“What’s going on?”

“Your nose broken, too?” Clint teased. “Or did you already forget what pizza smells like? Do you want beer or wine? And what kind of pizza do you want to start with?”

“There are chopped vegetables, too.” Natasha added softly. “The extra tray is to your left to hold your food,” she said, guiding Steve’s hand to the surface and then to the Braille reference card by his left elbow. “Sarge remembered the card rack, I see. You may as well put that in front of you, though I think we all want to eat something before the first hand. You’re welcome to try holding the cards if you’re healed enough, but I think the rack will be easier.”

Megan smiled at the look of stunned amazement on Steve’s face. Apparently, he’d never thought they would continue to gather as a group and play cards.

“Beer, please. What kind of pizza is there? Yes to the vegetables. An explanation would be nice, too.”

“Pepperoni or the works. We invited ourselves over for a night of cheap entertainment. Did anyone tell Ray he’s in charge of keeping score?”

“Not yet,” Megan answered. “Are you willing?”

“Certainly, Megan. What game are you playing?”

“Canasta. We’ll call out individual scores after each hand, we just need you to keep track of it all and keep our math honest.”

Clint put on his mask and took a bite of pizza. “Who is dealing first?”

“I will,” Natasha offered. “And don’t even think about sneaking peeks because I will know, Clint.”

“I forgot to pass out extra napkins,” Megan said, jumping up from her seat. “Lord knows I’m going to need them.” She grabbed a stack from the counter and distributed them to each tray before sitting down and covering her eyes with her sleep mask. Steve still hadn’t figured out how they’d leveled the playing field, despite Natasha’s warning to Clint. “I’m ready,” she said as she heard Natasha shuffle the decks.

“I’m going to deal into four piles and just pass them out after.”

“Okay by me.” Clint said.

Megan chuckled, “Natasha, I think your worst deal would still be better than a recent game we played called ‘find the Scrabble tiles.’”

“Hey, I found all but two of them.”

“Where were the last two hiding? Steve, I’m putting your cards in front of you now.” Natasha said. “Clint, do you have yours?”

“Got’em.”
“Thanks,” Megan said, taking her cards from Natasha. “One was in a vase on top of the bookshelf, the other was in the track for the patio door.”

“Face up in the discard pile is a seven of spades,” Natasha told them.

“It’s going to take twenty minutes for me to sort this hand,” Clint griped. “Good thing we have a lot of beer in the fridge.”

“Then you should have spent more time doing your homework,” Natasha said as she kicked him under the table.

“Ow! What’s that for, Nat? Some of us were in the field, remember? I haven’t slept in over twenty hours. I barely had time to get a shower before coming over.”

“Don’t feel bad, Clint. Some of us are still stuck on vowels despite lots of homework.” Megan told him. “That’s why we each have a cheat sheet handy. Just don’t coat it in pizza grease and destroy it in the process because you only get one. You have your own container of hand wipes for a reason.”

“Yes, Mom. Steve, why are you so quiet? Isn’t the rack Sarge made working for you?”

“I’m fine,” Steve said. Megan heard the emotion in his voice that he was trying valiantly to hide. He’d finally figured out what they were doing. “If you’re ready to start, I have a red three.”

“Take your turn if you want, but I’m still figuring out my hand,” Clint muttered. “Nat, why’d you deal him a red three right off the bat? You didn’t even give me a single wild card. I think. Hell, I’m not sure what half these cards are.”

Megan chuckled softly. “Steve, I think you and I are going to win this game.”

“Clint.” Natasha’s voice was like ice though Megan was sure she was teasing. Mostly. “I’m not warning you again.”

“If you have a mask on, too, how the hell… Ray. You’ve got Ray in your ear, don’t you?”

“I don’t need to see you to know when you’re trying to cheat. I was trained for this, remember?”

Mention of the Red Room switched Steve from brooding to protective Captain. “Natasha, as sweet as this is, if this is stirring up bad memories you don’t have to do this. I’m okay.”

“I’m having fun, so stop moping and discard already. If Clint makes us lose, he knows the consequences.”

“Five of spades to the discard,” Steve said. “Clint?”

“Yeah, give me an hour. I’m still sorting my hand.”

“Don’t hurry on my account, ‘cause I’m right there with you,” Megan said. “What’s number five again?”

“Same as e: one and five. You said you knew your vowels, Megan,” Steve sounded puzzled.

“Five is not a vowel, it’s a number. And before you give me that look, which I know you’re thinking about giving me, I’m going to remind you about a certain rusty spoon I have ready to use on a moment’s notice.”

“Noted. I’m going to eat my pizza and wait patiently for you and Clint to learn the alphabet.”
Natasha, did Megan talk to you yet about going shopping? I talked to Tony and he’s going to make his presence felt Friday. I figure you can Clint will want to keep out of the spotlight, but we’ll imply you’re there. Bruce is thinking about coming, at least for a brief appearance. That puts Megan front and center.”

“Which is a long, convoluted way of saying I need help getting the right outfit together on short notice. I was hoping you’d help me make sure I send the right message without spraining my ankle or showing off my new toys.”

“Your concealed carry permit came through finally? That took longer than it should have.” Natasha didn’t hide her disapproval at how long it had taken.

“This afternoon. I need your help with that, too. I have no idea how to pick outfits and holsters that work together. Honestly, I don’t even know my options.”

“I need to get you a gun safe installed now that you’re officially permitted and registered.” Clint commented. “I’ll do that tomorrow when we get back from the barn. We can buy you your own handgun tomorrow, too.”

“Megan, we’ll go shopping for clothes when you get back It won’t take long.”

“Bring your favorite vodka. It’s going to be miserable,” Megan warned. “You have no idea how hard it is for me to get clothes and shoes that fit.”

“You’ve just been shopping in the wrong stores. It’s going to be fun. You’ll see.” Natasha let her smile be heard in her voice.

“I tried to tell her that. In fact, we have a wager—”

“Not a word, Rogers!”

Steve cleared his throat. “You ready to play yet, Clint?”

“I want to hear more about this wager, actually.”

“Get used to disappointment, Clint, and take your turn.” Megan said, pretending to be upset. “If we’re going to actually play a full hand, much less a game, you need to pick up the pace. Make something up. No one will know.” She folded her hand and took off her mask. “Who wants more food while I’m up?”

“I’ll take another beer.”

“Clint, I think I’ll just put a six pack by your feet and call it done.”

“I knew you were smart.”

“Steve? More pizza?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I’m fine,” Natasha said, and Megan noticed how little trouble she was having eating and playing cards blindfolded.

She put several more slices of pizza on a plate and set it on top of the plate already on the tray while bending down to press a kiss to Steve’s temple while she ran her hand over his back. She was careful not to look at his cards as she did so, tempting as it was.
“You’d better not be checking out his hand,” Clint said warningly, turning his head towards the pair.

“Believe me, given my options, his cards are low of the list of things I’m checking out, Clint.”

He laughed and covered his ears in mock horror. “TMI! TMI! I need brain bleach.”

“Heaven help the person crazy enough to marry you, Clint. I’m not sure even a saint would be up to the task,” Megan teased as she took her seat again. “Most kids grow up. You show few signs of doing so.”

“Hey, maybe someone out there wants to take me on as a lifetime project. You never know.”

“Stranger things have happened. My life is proof of that,” Steve added. “Are you done stalling so you can take your turn?”

“I’m not stalling. But I’ll discard a six of spades and keep sorting, Megan?”

“Thanks a lot. I’m just going to draw and discard a five of hearts, or what I think is a five of hearts. By the end of tonight, I may know what I have in my hand. Remind me again why we thought this was a good idea after only a week?”

“You’re smart. We assumed you’d be able to memorize a few simple patterns over the period of a week,” Natasha said blandly.

“Yeah, well, clearly those assumptions were wrong. Don’t even get me started on my epic failure learning Morse code. Rote memorization is not my forte. My organic chemistry teacher tried to teach the course that way and it didn’t go well.

Natasha’s tone softened and she seemed intrigued by Megan’s comment. “You don’t see the larger pattern, do you?”

“What pattern? As far as I can tell, a bunch of sadists got together and drank themselves silly before coming up with the Braille alphabet.”

“Amen, sister,” Clint said before taking another bite of pizza.

“Steve, have you seen the pattern?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah, it jumped out at me the first day. It’s no wonder you’re struggling, Megan, if you’re not seeing the logic behind it. You should have said something.”

“Why would I say something when I had no idea there was a pattern to discern?” Megan, said, trying to reign in her frustration. “I’m a biologist, not a cryptographer.”

“I’ll draw it out for you on paper, later,” Natasha promised “For now, pay attention to how k through t are identical to a through j except for an extra dot in position 3. For letters u through z, there is an additional dot in position three and six compared to the first ten letters, or just position six if you consider are comparing them to k through t.”

Clint groaned, feeling his reference card and seeing what Natasha had pointed out. “Why didn’t you tell me that on Monday, Nat?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t see that, either.” Megan, added, feeling really stupid. “I still think they were sadists, but I’ll grant that they were mostly sober. What did you discard, Natasha?”
“An ace of hearts.”

“I’m taking the pile.” Steve said gleefully picking up the discards. “I had three aces in my hand already, so I’m on the board. You and Clint are going down tonight.”

Megan smiled though no one could see it. Hearing genuine pleasure in Steve’s voice as he excelled in a game she and Clint were struggling with was exactly what she needed tonight. Natasha reached over and squeezed her hand and Megan had to bite her lip to hold back the rush of tears that small gesture triggered. It had been a hard week, but considering where they’d started, tonight was a real victory.

Chapter End Notes

http://www.acharya.gen.in:8080/disabilities/br_tut.php is a great tutorial on Braille and shows the alphabet (arranged by the pattern Megan missed) near the bottom.
“Happy Birthday, Steve,” Natasha said softly as she kissed Steve on the cheek on her way out the door.

“Thanks. For everything.” Steve held out his left hand for Clint,

“I didn’t know today was your birthday,” the archer said, covering their clasped hands with his right one.

Steve smiled slightly. “Yesterday was, actually.”

Clint huffed a laugh. “Only you. Happy belated birthday, then.” He turned to Megan. “Why no cake?”

Megan smiled softly. “I already managed to get the entire country celebrating with fireworks, cookouts, and parades, and you’re griping about not having cake?” She leaned into Steve, who put his arm around her. “Sometimes, normalcy is the best gift of all.”

“I tend to avoid fireworks as much as I can these days,” Steve admitted.

“A lot of vets do. See you in the morning.” Clint said, allowing Natasha to usher him out the door.

Megan locked it behind them and turned into the hug Steve was giving her.

“Thank you for tonight.”

“It was Clint’s idea to order the cards and it grew organically from there. I didn’t even think about it being the day after your birthday until earlier this week.”

“We celebrated at your parents’ place, remember? This was perfect.” Steve kissed her and ran his hand down her back as he did so.

“Hold that thought until I’m done cleaning up.”

“Until we’re done,” he corrected. “Are the trays new?”

“Yeah. There’s a stand in the front closet for them, too. Just move everything to the table and we’ll sort it out once I put the leftovers away.”

She watched him as she worked, marveling at how well he was coping with moving around the apartment with confidence. He’d adapted well, and was occasionally using his burned hand, too. They’d switched to using kitchen gloves to contain the blue goo now that he’d healed some, and that allowed him to flex and move his fingers all day long, as well as using his wrist more. The doctors hadn’t been consulted, though they hadn’t argued at Steve’s checkup, either. Perhaps they had grown accustomed to Steve’s habit of expecting forgiveness instead of asking for permission. Besides, Steve knew how his body worked better than anyone.

As Megan consolidated the few remaining slices of pizza into a single box, Steve collected the dishes and loaded the dishwasher. The Braille reference cards and playing cards didn’t have a home yet, so Steve put them on Megan’s sewing machine for the time being. “How about storing
the wipes under the kitchen sink?” he suggested as he finished clearing the table while she sprayed it with cleaner and began to wipe it down.

“Works for me.”

Steve stored the containers and then came up behind her, putting his hand on her waist and kissing her nape when she straightened up. “Can’t that wait until tomorrow?”

“I suppose. But I’m almost done and I—“ she broke off as he turned her around and kissed her thoroughly. “You’re making a good argument for waiting until tomorrow,” she added a bit breathlessly as he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom.

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Much later, she lay on her right side with Steve’s warm, naked body pressed against her back. She tried to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. If his hands alone did this to her, how was she ever going to survive more? She sighed in contentment and snuggled closer to him just as he threw his left leg over her calves and wrapped his good arm around her, holding her own arms against her chest in a warm bear hug.

“I’ve got you right where I want you,” he said softly as he planted a trail of kisses along her neck.

Megan felt a chill of fear go down her spine and something in her snapped. Never again. She threw her head back and caught him in the nose. At the same time, she slammed her left elbow back and caught him in the ribs. He broke his grasp on her and she dove out of the bed, rolling smoothly to her feet. Free at last, she bolted from the room. She needed a weapon. Frantically, her eyes searched and she spotted the knives in the block on the kitchen counter. A paring knife would do nicely for backup, she decided, and put that in her left hand while grabbing a larger blade in her right. Let him try to force her now and he’d get more than a broken nose for the trouble. It was the middle of the night. She had to figure out how to get some clothes and then her purse so she could escape the apartment. First, though, she had to make sure he’d learned his lesson and would keep his distance.

“Megan?” he asked, coming into the kitchen with a wadded up shirt pressed to his face to catch the blood. He stopped just inside the doorway, well out of her reach. “Are you okay?”

“Steve?” Her voice faltered as she realized where she was. “Steve?” She was panicking now. A distant part of mind registered the sound of the knives clattering as they hit the floor. Her vision went funky and got dark around the edges. She couldn’t breathe. Her chest ached. Even her hearing was fading.

“Megan? Are you hurt?”

She was dying. She could feel it. Her heart was pounding in her chest and she still couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t even talk. She sank to the floor, hoping he’d understand how sorry she was as she curled up and prepared to die.

“Megan, I’m going to sit down in front of you and I want you to take my hand. You’re going to be okay.” He walked towards her slowly, somehow knowing where she was despite his eyes being bandaged. Moving with careful grace, he sat down on the floor in front of her hand held out his hand and smiled when she shoved her shaking fingers into his palm. “Good,” he said, pressing her
hand against his chest. “I think you’re having a panic attack. That’s why you feel like you can’t breathe. Try to breathe with me, nice and slow.”

She was dying and he was sitting naked and cross-legged on the kitchen floor talking to her as if they had all the time in the world! How did this make sense? She tried to do what he asked, tried to make her lungs work in rhythm with the muscular chest that was warming her fingers.

“Good. Keep breathing with me. You can move closer to me if you want. I’ll hold you. I know the floor’s cold and hard.”

Megan choked on a sob as she tried to move closer, even tried to sit up. Sensing her intent, he scooped her up and held her on his lap, tucking her head under his chin as he held her hand to his chest, still coaching her to breathe. “So… so… sorry,” she managed to get out on the third try.

“Shh. It’s okay. You’re safe. It was just a panic attack. It will pass.” He soothed her as he stroked her hair. “I’m going to pick you up now,” he said when she was breathing less erratically. Effortlessly, he stood up, still holding her in his arms as he walked to the couch and sat down on it. He snagged the afghan she kept over the back and wrapped her up in it, still murmuring reassurances to her as she trembled and shook in his arms.

“Can’t get warm,” she finally murmured, burrowing closer to him. Not even the heat pouring from his body eased the chill in her bones.

“Now that you’re breathing better, if you’re okay with me getting up, I’ll start some water for tea.” Megan nodded, knowing he’d feel the movement. She dreaded the time when he started asking questions. She felt physically ill at the thought of telling him what had happened and curled up a bit more in response.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, gently lifting her as he stood before depositing her in the corner of the couch, braced between the arm and the back. Megan just closed her eyes and stayed there. She no longer felt like she was dying, she only wished she were. At least with his eyes bandaged, she wouldn’t have to see the disappointment in his gaze when looked at her. Maybe by the time he was healed, she’d be able to pretend that nothing had changed.

She heard water running followed by the sound of the tea kettle being placed on the stove. After that, it was silent. Maybe he’d gone back to bed.

“Megan?” He called her name softly as he returned to her side, now dressed in a pair of boxers. “I brought you your nightgown, underwear, and a pair of sweatpants. It might help you to get warm if you have more layers on. I’ll hold you again, if you want, but there’s no pressure. I want to do whatever makes you feel safe.”

She tried to answer and choked on the words. He looked so earnest, so patient. Megan turned away and fumbled with the garments, trying to ignore the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Steve just sat there, close enough for her to touch if she wanted to, but far enough away that he wasn’t crowding her. “I’m proud of you,” he finally said as he leaned back into the cushions, accepting her unspoken determination that he should keep his distance.

“For humiliating myself?” She hated how shaky her voice was.

“For defending yourself so well. You broke my nose and followed through immediately with your elbow. I probably could have held you down if I wanted to, and I imagine some other agents might have pinned you, but your typical thug wouldn’t be eager to let you near them again, even before
you armed yourself with knives. For the amount of time you’ve been training in self-defense, you put those lessons to work really effectively. You should be proud of yourself. Natasha’s going to be thrilled to hear how well you fought.”

Megan just gaped at him, hysteria clawing at her insides as she hugged her knees under the afghan. “I attacked you and you’re pleased?”

Steve shrugged. “I figure something triggered you. It doesn’t matter right now. You’ll tell me when you’re ready. I heal fast and I owed you for the black eye.” The teakettle whistled and he got up to fix her a mug.

That surprised her. She had been braced for a stream of questions.

He sat back down beside her, mugs in hand, and gave her one. “I’d like to have Natasha and Clint make sure Randy didn’t have something to do with the attack on you back in May. Is that okay?”

Megan put the mug down on the coffee table with trembling hands and hugged her knees to her chest. He knew. He knew everything: how weak she was, how vulnerable. She was sullied. Damaged. And now he would leave. Well, not right away. He’d protect her family, keep her safe for now. But the fairy tale? That was over. Only duty would keep him around. And when that duty was done…

“Megan? I’m going to hold you,” he said softly, treating her like he would a skittish horse. He put his mug on the table and reached for her, carefully telegraphing every motion. He pulled her to his chest, wrapped her in his arms, and tucked her head under his chin as he had done in the kitchen. “I’m so proud of you.”

She shook her head. That made no sense. But she was crying too hard to talk, to explain. She didn’t want his pity.

“I mean it. You were in an abusive relationship and you got out despite the hold he had on you. That took a lot of courage and strength. I’m not saying that to make you feel better, either. I always knew you were strong. I just didn’t realize how strong until tonight.”

That just made Megan cry harder. Somehow, Steve seemed to understand all of the turmoil ripping through her and just held her gently, rubbing her back after checking once again the afghan was tucked around her feet. And when the sobbing subsided, he reminded her to drink her tea while he held her and rubbed her back, silently offering his support and comfort as she was forced to acknowledge wounds she’d tried to forget.

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Megan woke feeling a bit disoriented. She was lying in bed, still wearing sweatpants but tucked in under the sheets and comforter. A glance at the clock told her it was just after three in the morning. She shuffled to the bathroom once she realized what had wakened her.

When she came back into the bedroom, she saw that Steve was sitting in the chair in the corner. His large frame made the furniture look tiny, especially given how his legs were sprawled on the ottoman and his head propped on his hand as he dozed.

“Steve?” she asked, her voice raspy after all of the crying.
He stirred almost immediately, going to full alert. “Megan? Is everything okay?”

“Come to bed,” she said, going over to him to tug on his hand. “There’s no reason for you to sleep in a chair.”

“I want you to feel safe,”

“Then come to bed so you’re right beside me.”

He hesitated, considering for a long moment before nodding his agreement. He even let her pull him to his feet and followed her to the bed.

She hated the hesitation. Hated the fact he was now cautious around her. She had kept her silence for a reason. Now it was just a matter of time before he got tired of dealing with her issues. She stripped off her sweatpants and crawled under the covers, hoping he’d hold her like he often did and not keep his distance. She wanted to be normal.

“I’m going to trust you to tell me if you change you mind about any of this, and if you do, it’s okay,” he said, as if reading her mind. “You know your limits, so just tell me if I need to back off. Otherwise, I’m treating you like I always did.”

With that, he coaxed her into putting her head on his shoulder while he rubbed her back. “I love you, Megan. Don’t forget that,” he said before he kissed the crown of her head. “Go to sleep. I’m right here.”

Desperately wanting to believe him, Megan allowed herself to pretend nothing had changed and fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat in her ear.

Chapter End Notes

Megan did tell Clint she had more issues than National Geographic Magazine. Now you know about a few of them and where some of her self esteem issues come from.

You may not get another update until this weekend. It’s been busy in real life and exhaustion keeps the muses away. :-(
When the alarm went off, Megan woke alone in bed. A slight detour and a quick glance as she headed to the bathroom confirmed he was on the AMT machine, using voice commands and headphones to read something on his tablet. Knowing Steve, he was reading up on domestic violence. It wasn’t something she wanted to discuss. Ever. Maybe if he read enough, he’d understand that.

She got her shower and ate breakfast in solitude, ignoring the inner voice that said she was avoiding him. She avoided everyone in the morning. She avoided mornings themselves whenever possible. So eating alone and reading her email while waiting for Clint to arrive wasn’t a way to avoid Steve. It was just a normal Saturday morning.

So why did she feel sick to her stomach?

She dumped her tea out in the sink and went to get her paddock boots from the closet then pulled out one of the dining room chairs so she could sit down to lace them up.

When Steve finally emerged from the bedroom, he was wiping the sweat from his face with a towel. “Megan?”

“Good morning,” she said, trying to sound as normal as possible. His nose was red and a bit swollen, but he’d avoiding bruising under his eyes. It could have been worse. If she had access to a gun, for example, she might have shot him rather than armed herself with knives.

“How are you today?”

“Fine.”

Emotions flickered across his face at her reply, though he tried to hide his worry. “Of all the times not to be able to see…” she heard him mutter, mostly to himself, as he strode closer and knelt in front of where she was sitting.

“Damn zipper,” she cursed as the fabric from her riding breeches got caught in the zipper to her half chaps.

Gently, he pushed her hands away and tugged the zipper pull down to her ankle before snapping the fabric guard closed over it. He checked that the other one was fastened before taking her hands in his. “How are you really?”

“I’m fine,” she promised, leaning forward to kiss him. Clint knocking at the door prevented further discussion, though she could tell Steve wasn’t convinced. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

She put her purse strap on her shoulder, grabbed her riding helmet and gloves, and opened the door to leave. “Go stair-climb another skyscraper,” she said cheerfully as she smiled a hello to Clint and pulled the door shut behind her. She was not avoiding him.
“Are you planning on another trail ride today?” Clint asked, looking hopeful as he walked with her to the curb where his car was parked.

“If Courtney’s willing. As much as I like working on technique in the ring, trail rides feed my soul. It just seems silly that Steve still thinks I need an escort everywhere. Photographers aren’t dangerous.” She knew it wasn’t rational to be bristling at this constraint on her freedom, but today, having a guard bothered her.

“Not usually,” Clint agreed. “But you know it’s more than that. Captain America isn’t universally loved and now that you’re associated with him, there’s a certain level of risk that goes with that.

“I like my independence.”

“No one wants to take that from you… is that a ticket on my windshield?”

Megan saw the paper under the driver’s side wiper, and waited while Clint retrieved it. “No, just an advertisement for a pizza shop,” he said, sticking it in his pocket as he used the key fob to unlock the doors.

As Megan went to open her door, she noticed a small slip of paper stuck in the door handle and pulled it out. “Deliver the next sample to the same location, 8 AM tomorrow,” it read.

She got in and shoved the note into Clint’s hand as she leaned out the door and vomited all over the sidewalk.

“What the…” he sputtered. “Change of plan. We’re getting you back inside so you can lie down.”

Megan shook her head as she pulled out her Stark phone and activated the app Jarvis had installed to check for bugs as she plugged in the earphone. She shoved the device at Clint as she laid the seat back a bit. “I didn’t even mess up your super-clean car. Just give me a minute and I’ll see if it passes.”

Clint looked at her phone, then Megan. “Fine. But we’re taking Steve’s car. If you puke again, you two have to deal with the mess, not me.”

“You are such a baby. I never even asked you to drive me, so quit acting like you’re doing me a huge favor,” Megan snapped. “You don’t even like horses.”

“I’m doing the favor for Cap, not you, Doctor High-Maintenance. Come on.” Clint grabbed her riding helmet and slammed his driver side door shut. “And no, I don’t like horses. I spent enough years cleaning up shit in the circus, and that included horse shit. Cap wants me to go with you, and since I know how to ride, I got volunteered. Quit being such a bitch about it,” he told her as he slammed her door shut and locked the car with his fob.

Megan stormed ahead of him, mouthing “car problems” to the doorman on duty at the front desk, and led Clint to the elevator that would take them down to the parking garage.

As soon as the doors closed behind them, Clint let out a low whistle. “I’m not sure even Nat can puke on command.”

“Don’t be too impressed since it wasn’t intentional. Last night was… difficult but I don’t want to
talk about it."

Clint nodded. “It’s okay. Steve’s already sent bragging texts to Natasha and me that you broke his nose. Good job, by the way. For now, I want to get you to the barn for some horse therapy. We’ll deal with that note, and the fact they bugged my car, later.”

“Jarvis found a bug?”

Clint nodded. “It wasn’t there an hour ago, because I checked my car over before coming to get you.” He crossed his arms as he studied her. “You know, if you could learn to keep your thoughts from showing on your face, you’d make a good field agent. You didn’t miss a beat when you found the note. You just followed my lead with the change in tone.”

“Don’t give Director Fury any ideas. I want no part of being a field agent.” Megan rubbed her face with her hands. “Can this day get any worse?”

“IT’s barely eight in the morning, and so far we have one broken nose, one puddle of vomit, an anonymous but threatening demand, and a new bug in my car. Don’t tempt Fate by asking if it can get any worse, because the answer is always, ‘Yes, let me show you how.”’

****

At the barn, Hamlet was overly excitable as Megan tried to halter him in his box stall. He kept tossing his head and turning away from her no matter what she did. “Courtney, this isn’t going to work,” Megan said as she finally admitted defeat. She slipped back out and shut the stall door behind her. “I’m upset and he’s feeding off of it.”

“It’s okay,” Courtney said as she led Smokey out of his stall. “Bad days happen to all of us. Take Pumpkin. She isn’t bothered by much of anything and I know you can handle her stubborn nature on the trail. If you have trouble getting her halter on, let me know and I’ll help and get her cross tied for you. It’s not a failure to be human, Megan. There have been many times I thought I was handling stress just fine until a horse told me I was a mess. They keep us honest.”

Clint gave her a reassuring nod as he groomed Mickey nearby. “You’ll feel better in a half hour,” he told her. “You’ll see.”

****

The trail ride itself was wonderful, but as soon as she was standing on her own two feet again, her thoughts, and the memory of Randy’s voice, got the better of her. In Steve’s car, she leaned her seat back and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep so she could avoid conversation.

“You don’t have do anything but sign the forms,” Clint said as he turned off the car.

Megan sat up and looked around, then swore under her breath when she realized they were at a gun store. Unfortunately, Clint had remembered his promise to help her purchase a gun.

“I have your gun license and concealed carry permits with me, along with additional paperwork from S.H.I.E.L.D. Remember, you’re doing this for Steve.”
Mutely, she nodded and followed Clint inside, fighting nausea the entire time. A part of her heard Clint talking to the store staff, but they might as well have been speaking in a foreign language. She just signed where Clint and the store owner said to, pulled out her credit card to pay for it, and showed her driver’s license and S.H.I.E.L.D. identification when asked. When the owner said he hoped her family health crisis resolved soon, she looked at him blankly for a moment, then whispered a thanks, belatedly realizing Clint had spun a tale of a recent family trauma to cover her current state of shock.

In the car, Clint assured her he’d get the gun safe installed while she was shopping with Natasha and told her to sleep for the rest of the drive. Shopping. Well, she’d been dumb enough to ask if the day could get worse. By the time Clint delivered her back to Steve’s apartment, her head was pounding.

****

“If you stay here, Steve will get very worried. Considering how many sandbags he already broke apart today, that’s not a good thing. Pull yourself together enough to come with me and I promise you it will be worth it,” Natasha said, barging in to the bedroom where Megan was resting with a cool cloth on her eyes.

Megan lifted the washcloth and looked at the assassin. Natasha wasn’t going to back down. She had learned to read Natasha’s moods in the gym, and her current mood was firmly in the “don’t argue with me” category.

“Have you eaten?”

Megan shook her head. “Nothing will stay down.”

Natasha pressed her lips together but didn’t say anything else as she and Megan walked to her car.

“I’m surprised you drive a car this flashy,” she said, strapping herself into the Corvette Stingray.

Natasha smiled. “As soon as I saw it in the showroom, I knew it was mine. I can blend in when I want to. I just don’t always want to.”

Megan sank back into her seat and enjoyed the power rumbling beneath her. “I’ll bet it’s fun out on the open highway.”

“Or in the city. I like to keep my skills sharp.”

“I’ll bet you do!” Megan flashed a grin as she rubbed at her temples.

“You’ll feel better once you eat. For now, let me show you what this car can do.”

****

“What do you know about my background?” Natasha asked Megan quietly as they sat in a booth near the back of a cafe, sheltered from other patrons by an extra tip Natasha has slipped the
Megan shrugged. “You were a Russian assassin and spy, Clint recruited to S.H.I.E.L.D., and now you’re with the Avengers.”

“What do you know how I was trained?”

Megan shook her head, not understanding why that mattered. “I never much thought about it beyond realizing it took a lot of hard work over a long period of time.”

“The program was called the Red Room. They recruited young girls, usually orphans, and trained them daily in acrobatics, ballet, hand-to-hand, weapons, seduction, deception… anything that might be useful in a spy or assassin. Decades ago, the girls were handcuffed to their beds at night. When the trainers realized the inherent issues this created, they switched to locking the girls in small cells instead. Friendships were not tolerated, and any hints of camaraderie ended in mandatory fights to the death. Weapons training included practice with live targets. Graduation was a forced sterilization procedure to ensure the graduates had no distractions that would compromise them on a mission. Eat your soup.”

Megan just sat in mute silence as Natasha relayed the details on the training program in an impartial, factual tone. She forced herself to take a few bites of soup as she tried to let the information sink in. “How old were you when they captured you?”

“Seven.”

“They stole your childhood.”

“Among other things, yes.” Natasha ate some of her own lunch before continuing. “When it was clear I was a threat to global security, Fury sent Barton to put me down. For reasons I will never understand, he recruited me to S.H.I.E.L.D. instead. I know I’m a monster. I have more red in my ledger than I can ever wipe out. I don’t have a conscience so much as I have memorized a set of rules. Sometimes, I ask myself what Steve would do and follow that.”

Megan ate to keep herself from saying something stupid. There was nothing she could say that wouldn’t sound like pity or empty platitudes; neither was appropriate for the current situation. “Why are you telling me this?” she finally asked.

“So you know that someone else understands what it is to be controlled and used. And while it goes against current medical practice, I don’t think it’s something therapy can really help you with. Can you imagine what a shrink would do with me?”

Megan snorted. “Try to get you in touch with your feelings?”

Natasha let a corner of her mouth turn up. “And likely protest when those feelings led me to wrap my hands around their scrawny neck. Therapy may help some people, but you were fine until you were triggered.”

Megan laid her spoon down and put her hands in her lap before looking up and meeting Natasha’s empathetic gaze. “What do you think I should do?”

“If I were you, I’d want to take control and destroy the trigger. You caught Steve off guard and I’m proud of you for how well you handled yourself. If he’s prepared, he probably won’t get hurt again.” Natasha shrugged. “He heals fast, so you don’t need to worry about another broken nose or two. Desensitize yourself to whatever set you off and lock the memories away. Randy’s not worth your energy.”
Megan didn’t try to hide her tears. “Thank you. It does help to know you get it. Steve probably wants to hunt him down and hurt him. I don’t even care…”

“Because he’s not worth caring about,” Natasha finished for her. “You moved on. Whether or not that’s healthy, I’m in no position to say. It works for me. If Randy is preying on others, I’ll take care of it. But he’s not worth any more of your time.”

“He’s not worth your time, either.”

“I agree. But until Steve knows he’s not a threat to you or anyone else, he won’t stop worrying about it. Like I said, I don’t have a conscience like Steve does. Fortunately or unfortunately, Steve isn’t equipped to deal with the Randy’s of the world. I am.”

“Are you going to kill him?” Megan wasn’t sure if she wanted to know the answer. What did it say about here that she really didn’t care one way or the other? They were talking about a human life and she as no more emotionally invested than if they were talking about how best remove lint from the dryer screen.

Natasha just shook her head. “Where’s the fun in that? Finish your lunch so we can go shopping. If you want, you can tell me exactly what triggered you and I’ll tell you how I’d approach destroying it. Getting Steve involved will help him and save the sandbags.”

****

Megan hung her new dress in the closet next to Steve’s dress uniform. Remembering she still had to fix the sleeve, she took it down from the hanger, only to have a note fall to the floor. “Your grandmother’s old machine works as well as ever. It was nice to use it again, Mom.” Smiling, Megan put the repaired uniform away and opened the garment bag to look once again at the dress Natasha had helped her find.

True to her word, Natasha had made shopping painless, partly by going to a high-end boutique and telling Megan that S.H.I.E.L.D. was covering the cost. Natasha had taken charge, explaining that Megan wanted a dress that would complement a particular shade of red, even producing a scrap of fabric used to make one of Steve’s uniforms. The style needed to be modern but pay homage to the forties.

The staff had brought several dresses for her to try, but Natasha and Megan had almost immediately agreed on a short-sleeved shirtwaist dress that was gathered at the shoulders and had a flared skirt. It hugged her curves in all the right places and still allowed her full freedom of movement. The low, standing collar converted to a V-neck that didn’t plunge too deeply, but perfectly framed her diamond pendant. It was several shades darker than the red in Steve’s uniform, but didn’t clash. In short, it was perfect, though Megan had no idea how much it cost and one look from Natasha kept her from asking.

Finding shoes had required two stops in order to find a shop that catered to Megan’s wide feet. Again, Natasha had seemed to magically find shoes that had a low heel and were actually comfortable. Apparently, money could buy everything.

Accepting that she now owned several holsters for concealed carry was the most difficult part of the outing. Megan had never realized how many different ways there were for women to carry a
gun on their person, but it seemed that she now owned one of every possible type of holster, plus her own bulletproof vest, courtesy of Stark.

“I know it’s a big closet, but I didn’t think you could get lost in here,” Steve said as he came up behind her.

Megan leaned back against him. “Mom fixed the sleeve of your dress uniform. I just found a note when I took it down from the hanger to fix it myself. You can’t tell the seam was ever ripped open.”

“Are you happy with the outfit you found?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s perfect and will photograph well. It even works with the bulletproof vest I now seem to have ownership of.” Natasha had shown her the flap of fabric that could be folded back as different necklines required. Even the reduced protection was significant and would let her walk away from most gunshots with nothing more than broken ribs.

“Stark made some improvements over Kevlar and it’s now part of all of our uniforms. I don’t like the need for it, but you are a target now. I feel better knowing you have it.”

“Me, too. It just takes getting used to.” Megan guided his hand to the fabric of the skirt. “You like?”

“It’s soft.”

“And it has just a hint of stretch to it, too. I think it’s my new favorite dress.” Megan zipped the garment bag closed. “Natasha told me about the Red Room. She sees herself as a monster.”

“I know. Nothing the rest of us say will matter since she grew up being lied to by everyone around her. With enough time, I think she’ll accept that she’s a good person. For now, her actions are enough.”

“I can’t imagine anyone surviving what she did, much less functioning so well. She probably can’t really trust anyone but Clint, but even working as part of a strike team shows how far she must have come since she joined S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Mmm hmm,” Steve said, kissing her nape as he held her by her hips. “How much longer do you want to stay in here?”

Megan leaned into him. “Is there somewhere you’d rather go? ‘Cause I’m rather happy at the moment, truth be told.”

“I’m climbing the walls. How about a hike in Rock Creek Park?”

“Are the trails any good?”

Steve chuckled against her ear. “I’m a bit hurt you don’t remember the park we went to the night I gave you that necklace.”

Megan spun around. “That was Rock Creek Park? In the middle of Washington, D.C.?”

“Yes.”

“I had no idea that’s where we were.”

Steve nodded. “If you want, we can ride the tandem bike up there and back. Most of the way can
be done by dedicated bike route and the spots we’d have to be on the road aren’t that bad. It’s up to you.”

“You’ve gone all the way up there and back on some of your runs, haven’t you? That’s how you know the route.”

Steve just smiled.

“Let’s do it. It’s not like I have to worry about being too tired to pedal back. I’ll just steer and let you do all the hard work.”

“I also know of a few good places we can stop and eat.”

“Are you sure we can’t just stay in the closet?”

Steve shook his head. “No food. I have to have food if we’re going to supply our “friends” with that sample in the morning.”

Megan cuffed him lightly on the arm and followed him out.

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Chapter End Notes

You can see the dress that Natasha helped Megan find here
Hand in hand, they walked the well-maintained trail, listening to the sounds of cicadas and birds. Sheltered under the canopy of trees, the sultry summer heat wasn’t as oppressive. She could breathe out here.

“What is it about the woods you find so appealing?”

“It’s not the woods, though that’s easier to find around here. It’s the fact it’s real, the way it’s supposed to be. It makes it easier to leave all the artificial pressures behind, too. I can think clearly out here.”

“So what’s on your mind?”

She hesitated, not sure if she really wanted to get into a heavy conversation. On the other hand, they’d been avoiding a lot of topics lately. It wasn’t going to make them go away. “Have you ever thought about us getting engaged for real?

He stopped dead, holding her arm so she stopped too and she was a bit hurt by the look of shock on his face. “I thought we were. In S.H.I.E.L.D. medical we agreed…”

“I want to marry you. But now you know how damaged I am. And there’s a lot we haven’t talked about. Important stuff.” She let him pull her closer and envelop her in a hug. She felt safe, cared for.

“You mean wedding plans?”

“No, marriage plans. Planning a party is easy. Planning a life takes a bit of doing.”

“We can compromise.”

“Do you want kids?”

“What if I don’t?”

“There’s no compromise on that one.”

Megan started to pull away but Steve held her close. “I didn’t say I didn’t want kids. I was asking how important it was to you.”

“Important enough that after Randy, I decided to save up and go to a sperm bank and be a single parent. You came along, rather unexpectedly, and I put those plans on hold.”

“Megan, I don’t know if I can even have kids. The serum… there’s no telling the effects.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take. There’s always adoption, too. But I am going to be a mother. I’ll give up a lot of things for you, but not that.”

Steve nodded, pulled back, and took her hand again, indicating they should keep walking. “What else is on your list?”
She looked sideways at him. “You really want to hear all of this now?”

“Why not? I’ve got time. I’m not letting you go without a fight, so I may as well know what I’m up
against. So far, I’m seeing low self-esteem and a determination to be a parent. Neither is a problem
as far as I’m concerned.”

“You were raised Catholic, right?” When Steve nodded, she continued, “I’m not willing to raise my
children in the Catholic church. The priest I talked to said the only way he’d officiate a marriage
was if the parents promised to raise any children of the marriage in the Catholic church. I can’t
make that promise. I want them to learn right from wrong, sure. But they have to choose for
themselves what they believe. The older I get, the more I have moved from observant Christian to
accepting all faiths as different approaches to the same end goal.”

“You don’t celebrate Christmas?”

She heard the shock in Steve’s voice and couldn’t help but smile in amusement. She moved
sideways into him just enough to nudge him playfully off balance as they walked. “Don’t be silly. I
love Christmas. The candlelight service on Christmas Eve is probably my favorite hour of the
entire year. I just don’t think my faith is superior to anyone else’s. I can’t raise my kids to believe
they’re going to Heaven while their Jewish or Muslim friends need to be converted or risk eternal
damnation. I happen to think birth control is a good thing both for me personally and the planet as
a whole. Don’t even get me started on gay marriage or the role of women in the church.”

Steve laughed. “I never would have guessed you have strong opinions.”

Megan cuffed him lightly. “Smart ass.”

“What else?”

“I want a prenuptual agreement.”

He shook his head firmly. “No. You can’t start a marriage with plans for its failure.”

“I see it as a contingency plan that protects you from my worst self.”

“No, Megan. I trust you.”

“Steve, if I’m in a car accident and brain damaged in a way that changes my personality, I could
behave in a way that destroys you both emotionally and financially, and yet in a way that is
completely legal. I can’t take that chance. You’re financially well off, wealthy even. A prenup
would ensure that no matter what happens in the future, your financial security is something I can’t
take away from you. It’s my way of making sure that the worst life throws at us can’t destroy what
you have right now. That’s all. Don’t you have contingency plans on your missions?”

“That’s different. We’re not going to war, Megan.”

“You know better than anyone how unexpected events change everything. I have a will, I have a
living will, I just want to add one more document to that portfolio while I’m in my right mind.”

“I’ll think about it. Is there anything else?”

“Seriously?”

The corner of his mouth quirked in amusement. “What else?”
“I’m not giving up having a career. We need to talk about how we’ll deal if we age at different rates. It’s a bit soon to tell, but the serum is probably going to make you age a lot more slowly than the rest of us. If I’m sixty and feeling it, and you’re still looking and feeling like you do now, it could be challenging. I’m not keen on living in the city, but I’m willing to do that as long as I get my nature fixes somehow. I still need to see my family more than once or twice a year, though I suppose we can live anywhere since you can afford frequent plane tickets. How are we going to manage finances? Everything in one joint account? His, hers, ours accounts? We need to decide. Then there’s the matter of the press and security. We have to—”

Steve held her face in his hands and cut her off with a kiss. “Enough. I’m fine with kids. The rest is stuff we can work out. I’ll think about all of it, okay? Just please, tell me you’ll be my wife.”

Eyes filled with tears, Megan could only nod. They were really going to do this. She was going to marry Steve Rogers.

****

“Where’d you get the containers?”

Steve smiled as he used ice tongs to hold the plastic vial below the surface of the boiling water, waiting for Jarvis to tell him when the three-minute time was up. “Tony gave them to me in New York. I asked Natasha swing by my place this morning to get them and some more clothes. The photographers camped outside never noticed her.”

“I am constantly amazed at the things she can do. I’d have been mobbed before I finished parking your car, I’m sure.”

The smile slid from his face and his shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry.”

Megan put her hand on his back so she didn’t jostle him while he was at the stove. “It’s not your fault. We both knew I wouldn’t be anonymous forever. I happen to think you’re worth the inconvenience. I’m more worried about what we’ll do when our ‘friends’ figure out you’re killing the cells before handing them over to me.”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“They never let me talk to them. All communication has been one way.”

Steve turned his head towards her a little bit. “You can always include a note with the sample.”

She smacked her forehead into her palm. “Why didn’t I think of that? Now I feel stupid.”

“Don’t. You’re worried, and that’s to be expected. I just wish we knew more about what they were trying to do so we could figure out who they are.”

“Isn’t it obvious? They want to raise your children and are hoping the serum’s effects are hereditary. *In vitro* fertilization is a lot easier than trying to clone you.” His skin was still damp from the shower. She wondered if she’d ever get tired of pressing her face against him and inhaling the subtle, unique scent that was Steve. She looped one thumb into the belt-loop of the cutoff jeans he’s pulled on after their bike ride and closed her eyes as she leaned against him. She could be very happy filling her evenings with simple pleasures like this.
“You don’t think it’s them trying to do genome sequencing like S.H.I.E.L.D. did?”

“I doubt it. And if it is, they’ll realize that’s already been done once they start mining the databases. I rail against the lack of privacy I have in this digital age, so I can only imagine how frustrating it must be for you.” She kissed a path along his shoulder blade.

“Yeah, it’s changed a lot since my time.”

“Hey, this is your time, too, you know. Now is all any of us have,” Megan said as she gave his waist an extra squeeze.

“That’s not what I meant.

“Steve, three minutes have passed,” Jarvis interrupted.

“Thanks, Ray.” Steve turned off the burner. “Better stand back so I don’t trip on you.”

“The path to the sink is clear,” she said, moving to stand in front of the fridge. She watched as Steve dumped the water down the drain and cooled the pan with cold water before putting it in the strainer to dry. Then he cooled the tongs and container before putting the vial into the freezer, pausing long enough to kiss Megan before she moved aside to give him access.

“Thanks,” he said softly as he pulled her against him, running his left hand up her back.

“For what?”

“You let me do stuff by myself even though it would be easier for you to do it.”

“You’re welcome. Boiling them would be enough, you know. Given your history with ice, I’m not sure the freezer alone would kill them, but after boiling them? That’s redundant.”

“Call me paranoid. You’re lucky I didn’t have Stark send me a sonicator like he offered to,” Steve told her softly as he nibbled his way down her neck to her collarbone.

“A sonicator would certainly work, but there isn’t much reason to have one lying around the apartment, either. There’s no need to leave any evidence around that we’re not playing fair with the bad guys.” She tipped her head, giving him better access to her throat. “I love it when you whisper science in my ear.”

“Are you gonna help me change my bandages and wash my eyes, too?” His voice was low and playful.

She chuckled softly. “Only if we get to play with blue goo.”

“Of course.” With his left hand, he worked at tugging her t-shirt up and over her head. He stuffed enough of the fabric into the back pocket of his shorts that it stayed there. “I expect a detailed report on dermal regeneration while you’re doing that.”

“Only one of the four tissue types? I’m disappointed,” she managed not to gasp as his hand worked the clasp of her bra.

“I’m all too aware of the nerves, I can tell how well the muscles are healing by pressing against my other hand, and there’s no way to measure all of the connective tissue regrowth taking place. What I can’t do is see how bad the skin still is.”

“You earn an A plus on the pop quiz, soldier.”
“Just trying to be the teacher’s pet,” he whispered, his hand moving to her nipple as he shoved her bra out of the way.

“Keep doing that and there won’t be any more science talk. We’ll be moving to the other S word.”

“Sleep?” he teased as his mouth replaced his hand.

“Not what I was thinking, but if you’re that tired, okay. It’s been a long day and I have to be up early to ride the Metro in the morning.”

“Snuggling?” Steve asked, lifting her so she could wrap her legs around his waist

“Getting closer. Are you going to carry me to bed now or are we going to have that science talk?”

He shook his head and set her down on the kitchen counter beside the sink before tucking her bra into his other back pocket. “Science always comes first with my girl. Singing can wait.”

Megan shook her head, trying not to laugh. It was good to see him so happy and playful. “I don’t sing unless I’m alone in the car.”

“You can’t possibly be worse than Gabe, and I lived to through that.” He took off the glove and carefully rinsed his hand under the faucet while continuing in the same dry tone he’d been using. “I don’t think it’s a good time of day to go snorkeling in the Potomac.”

Megan giggled, unable to hold her laughter back any longer. “No, I’m not thinking about snorkeling or scuba diving, for that matter. I’ve heard that the Potomac is a tricky river under the best of conditions and fraught with all sorts of challenging currents. We should stay here.”

Steve patted his hand dry with a paper towel and held it out for Megan to examine.

“It’s nothing short of amazing how fast you’ve healed, Steve.” she said, becoming serious. “You’ve got a ways to go yet, but you’re in great shape, overall. It looks bad because of all the scabs and dead skin, but I can tell you’re healing beneath that. Can you flex your fingers?”

“It’s harder to do that when my hand is numb, but yeah, I can move them all.” He demonstrated, wincing slightly at the pain it caused. “I can tell that a lot of the muscle still has to grow back. From how thin my fingers got, I think they pretty much burned down to the bone.”

“On the palm side, that’s exactly what happened. The next time you get injured, if you have a choice about the type of injury you get, pick the gunshot wounds, stabbings, or broken bones. Just skip the part where you get burned. You heal a lot more slowly and seem to suffer more.” Carefully, she added fresh blue goo to his fingers and palm and spread the gel out over his hand, making sure to cover all of the surfaces. When that was done, she gave him a fresh glove and rinsed the old one out, hanging it over the sink to dry.

“I had to do the experiment first,” he said, taking the new glove from her. “Having never been burned like this before, it seemed like a good idea to get the data.”

“I’ve corrupted you.”

He smiled crookedly. “Are you ready to go sweep the floors?”

“What about your eyes?

“Science before sweeping? Where’s your sense of adventure?”
While Megan turned down the lights, Steve rinsed his eyes over the sink, then dried his face before having Megan put more red glop in them. She handed him fresh bandages.

“Do you want to sharpen some pencils?” he asked as he pressed the second eye patch into place.

“I’m far more interested in snogging.”

Steve laughed. “That’s one I haven’t heard in a long time. Snogging it is,” he said as he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom.

Megan kissed his jaw and worked her way down his throat. “We don’t have to stop with snogging.”

“Given how late it is and how grumpy you get without sleep? I think we do.”

“Well, then I’ll have to pick up some baked goods when I’m out and we can crawl back into bed for a lazy Sunday morning when I get back.”

“That sounds like a very good plan.”

“You would know since you’re the Star-Spangled Man with a Plan.”

“I hated that song the first day I heard it and my loathing has only gotten worse with time,” he said as he laid her down on the bed. She pulled back the covers and crawled under them, dumping her shorts on the floor on her side of the bed.

“Without that tour, you never would have gotten a shield to inspire Howard to make your vibranium shield, so I’d say it’s a win. The people who made your original costume knew you’d look good in tights and believe me, that raised a lot of money. I just wish they’d been able to see you as a person.” She touched his cheek with her hand. “I didn’t realize the Man with a Plan title was a sore spot. I won’t tease you about it again.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said, shaking his head. “Other people do it, too. I know you don’t mean—“

“No, it’s not okay. I saw your face when I said it. Just because you’re good at planning and excel as a leader in the field doesn’t make it okay to tease you now that I know that title bugs you.”

He pulled off his jeans and got into bed beside her after kicking the pile of clothes, including her shirt and bra, up against the nightstand so he wouldn’t trip in the morning. “But it’s stupid.”

“It’s how you feel. That’s not stupid. What is stupid is you being way over there in this big bed when we could be snogging. Keep that up and I might just torture you with my singing until you get my playground over here where I can reach.”

“I’ll take snogging over singing any day.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry this took so long. Real Life and all that. The next part may take a week as well, since I need to do some research to make sure I have some elements historically correct and it’s a topic outside my area of expertise. So I hope that this "fluffy" reprieve tides you all over until Stuff Starts To Happen again.
There are lots of other things going on, too. That exhibit in the Smithsonian opens soon and Megan's parents are going to come visit. Plus, there is that big event happening in August that Megan has been working on. They'll have to make time for that despite Steve moving back to his own apartment. So much to write, so little interest in the survival job or the job hunt... and so little time to fit it all into my crazy life.
Steve was on the elliptical when Megan woke early Sunday morning and he was still at it when she was ready to go.

"I'm heading out," she said, ducking her head into the room.

"With your vest and gun, I hope?"

"Yes, sir. It's weird, but I'll adjust. I planned on parking at S.H.I.E.L.D., taking the Metro to the next stop, then looping back."

"You'd better stop at your office, too. Spend a half hour looking at files you can't access here. Enough agents know my car that they might be suspicious if neither of us goes into the building. I wish I could come with you."

It was disgusting how he could keep talking so easily while exercising at such a rapid pace. Her own muscles got tired just watching him. "I know, but you're not supposed to know about this. Plus, Director Fury would have kittens if you're spotted by the public. That's a lot more likely near the Triskelion than here." Megan sighed. "I don't want to go to S.H.I.E.L.D. today. What if I parked near the McPherson Square station and did the drop, then stopped at the old Post Office via Federal Triangle for cinnamon rolls to bring back here? If I’m followed, surely that amount of zigzagging would be confusing to them, though I doubt I’d be able to shake them."

Steve considered, then nodded. "You'll be on the Metro longer, but taking a less predictable route. Just be careful."

"I will. And I don't mind if you and Jarvis track me with the bracelet if it helps you feel better."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"See you in a bit. Maybe I'll pick up some O.J. on my way back."

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Megan set the take-out containers and gallon of orange juice on the bar as she slipped off her shoes and locked the door. "Steve?"

"Back here," he called from the bedroom.

"Do you want orange juice with your cinnamon rolls?"

"Please."

Megan took a glass and plate back to the bedroom to give to Steve on her way to her closet. Since she planned to stay home the rest of the day, there was no need to be burdened with her vest and gun. Clint had intended to put a gun safe in her night stand, but she’d vetoed that after her nightmare, insisting on having it installed in her closet instead. That would hopefully give Steve time to stop her if she tried to arm herself in the event of another flashback.
All of the blinds were pulled and the room was dark enough to make everything look monochromatic. "Leave the lights out" he told her as he heard her approaching. "I needed a break," he explained somewhat contritely as she entered the room.

He had removed the bandages and was watching her intently as she walked towards him. Silently, she set his cinnamon rolls and orange juice down on the bedside table. "You're so beautiful," he said softly.

Megan knew that was mostly because he was able to see her at all. She was sweaty from being out in the heat and humidity, and her hair was a frizzy mess where it wasn't stuck to her neck. He was the one who was gorgeous, all muscle and bare skin as he sat on the bed in nothing but a pair of shorts. She noticed the sketchbook open in his lap. He was sitting on top of the comforter, back against the headboard, holding a pencil in his left hand, probably trying to see if he had any chance of drawing while his right hand continued to heal.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she teased as she took off her t-shirt so she could remove her vest and holster. "How is your vision?"

"Fine, except for nearly zero tolerance for light. Even this dim light hurts some. I tried using your tablet, but even with the screen down at the lowest brightness, I can’t stand it for more than a few seconds."

“I guess you’ll just have to give it time,” she said, hanging her vest up and returning the gun to the safe. She tossed her shirt on the bed as she walked back to the door. “Be right back.”

Once she had fetched her own food, she sat down beside him and dug in. “It’s quite depressing to see you draw better with your left hand than I’ll ever draw with my right.”

“It just takes practice. I sometimes draw left-handed for the challenge of it.”

“And so you aren’t starting from scratch if you’re injured?”

“That, too, I suppose. Recovery from an injury is always in the back of my mind.” He closed the sketch pad and set it aside, picking up her tablet instead. “Here.”

“What?”

“Jarvis found this picture for me.”

Megan opened the tablet and turned it on, A photograph opened up, showing Steve and a young woman, posing arm-in-arm in their U.S.O. costumes. “What’s her name?”

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Mildred Werner.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“I need to. It will help you understand, just like I figured some things out about Randy that helped me understand you. I should probably tell you about that, too.”

“Okay,” Megan studied him, not knowing where to go with this. Steve wasn’t used to talking about his feelings. “Ray, it’s not personal, but Steve and I need to have a totally private conversation for a bit. I’m going to put his wristcom in the other room for awhile, so don’t be alarmed by the silence.”

“I understand, Megan. Thank you for informing me.”
Megan knew she’d made the right decision when she saw Steve’s shoulders shift slightly in relief. They were both used to Jarvis listening in on them, and mostly forgot about it, trusting his discretion. But right now, with Steve feeling as fragile as he did, a bit of true privacy seemed to be a good idea. She slipped the wristcom from his arm and laid it on the kitchen counter before returning to the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

“Maybe this will be easier for you if we start off talking about the ratbastard first,” she suggested.

“He didn’t start abusing you until you were sleeping together, did he?”

Megan furrowed her brow, trying to see where Steve was going with this. Warily, she sat back on the bed with her back against the headboard. “I left him the day after…” she paused and closed her eyes. Steve took her hand in his, gently offering his support. “—after he forced me.”

“He abused you plenty before he raped you, Megan.”

She flinched at his use of the word rape, but he held her hand firmly. Not to threaten, but to comfort. It was strange, how different the intent made the action. Besides, she knew if she really wanted him to let go, he would in an instant. “No, he didn’t.”

“Your scars tell a different story.”

Puzzled, and more than a little defensive, she studied him, trying to see what he was saying.

Steve’s gaze softened as he watched her and he cupped her cheek in his gloved right hand. “You don’t even realize it, do you? He got under your skin like a slow-acting poison, eating away at your self esteem and skewing how you see yourself. And he did it so skillfully, you never realized he was doing it. He convinced you that you’re ugly, you talk too much, you’re unworthy of love…. I keep hearing you say things that don’t fit with who I know you are. No matter what I say or do, his messages are the ones you’ve got stuck in your head. I tell you that you’re beautiful and you might believe that I think it, but not that it’s really true. You put up a good front, but I’m now able to see it for what it is: a front.”

Megan looked blankly at him, but Steve just smiled softly

“It’s okay. It may take me a long time to undo the damage he did, but I’m stubborn enough to see it through. The thing is, I think that a part of you is expecting me to turn on you like he did, so you’re pushing to get that over with before you’re in too deep.”

Megan just gaped at him, trying to reconcile her memories with the new perspective Steve was giving her. She shook her head at his final assertion, “I trust you. I trust you in a way I never trusted anyone before.”

“I know you do. I’m not saying it’s conscious on your part. It’s just a stimulus-response you learned and fear happening again on some level. It’s no different from me hating cold ocean jumps on a mission. I know making the jump is not the same as putting the plane in the water… but I still think about it every single time.”

“How could I not see?” Tears streamed down her face and she hugged herself, pulling away from him to curl her arms around her knees. “He mucked with my head. I can’t trust anything…”

“Yes, you can. You got out, Megan. He hurt you, but he didn’t break you.” Steve rubbed her back. “Did you ever tell anyone what happened?”

Megan shook her head. “I loved him. I really loved him.” Ashamed, she forced herself to continue
in a barely audible whisper, “Part of me still does.” Sick to her stomach, she braced herself for Steve’s reaction to that newest fact about how messed up she was.

“It’s okay to still love who you thought he was. C’mere.” He pulled her onto his lap and rubbed her back while she cried. “I’d like to tell your mother. I’ll tell her not to discuss it with you unless you bring it up. But I think it would be good for you to know your mom and Greg know what happened. She cares so much about you. Greg does, too. You didn’t do anything wrong, and you don’t need to protect that rat bastard with your silence. Is that okay with you?”

“Only if I don’t have to talk about it with them.”

“I’ll make sure they understand that.”

Furious with herself for even giving Randy the energy of her tears, she wiped her face with the back of her hand. “What does all of this have to do with Mildred?”

Her stomach rumbled and Steve smiled at her. “Eat your cinnamon roll.”

She nodded and crawled off his lap to retrieve her plate from the night stand. She scooted over so she was sitting beside him, leaning into the corner made by his body and the headboard. “We’re pathetic.”

“Why?”

It melted her heart to see him look sideways at her as he attacked his second roll. She’d missed those meaning-filled glances and other non-verbal aspects of their conversations. This morning was a small reprieve; he had a lot of healing to do yet. But it was reassuring to have even a brief time when things were approaching normal. “With everything you and I have done, it’s talking that does us in.”

He gave her a shy smile. “Maybe because this matters more?”

She shrugged. “Tell that to all the people you’ve saved. I mean seriously, you fought the Chitauri on the streets of New York City something like a week after you woke up from the ice but telling me about a gal named Mildred has you nervous? I had no problems telling General Ross what to do with himself, but I’d rather crawl on broken glass than talk to my own mother. We’re pathetic.”

“When you put it that way…” he winced a bit, then nodded agreement.

Megan nudged him with her shoulder. “We’re pathetic together. Lay it on me. I won’t judge.”

Steve sat there, trying to figure out where to start and Megan saw the tension sneaking back into his shoulders.

“How’d you meet?” she prompted.

“Rehearsal. I was still adjusting to all of this,” he said as he gestured to his body, “and the director was shouting directions at everyone. I thought basic training was bad, but that first day of rehearsal for the show was worse in some ways. Everyone listened to Milly. She was the boss, not the director. Even he knew it.” Steve shook his head, remembering. “She sized me up right quick. Half the gals were drooling over me, the other half figured out I wasn’t exactly eager to be on stage. They were all so gorgeous and confident…” Steve’s voice trailed off as he got lost in the memory.

“You were used to being invisible, not a prime steer being led around the auction ring.”
He nodded. “I traded being invisible for being an object.”

“And?”

He blushed just a bit and looked down at his plate. “After the serum, for the first time in my life, I felt… healthy.”

Megan playfully shoved her shoulder into his. “You were a grown man before the serum, Steve. Even the sickest teenage boy suffers from testosterone poisoning.”

His cheeks just got redder, but he nodded and glanced at her, amusement competing with awkward discomfort for ownership of his face. “Yeah, but after the serum, I think I moved from poisoning to toxic overdose.”

She laughed at that, kissing his cheek. “In summary, you were surrounded by a bunch of gorgeous, confident women with most of your competition deployed overseas. You had your ingrained good manners, your wholesome Catholic upbringing, and a testosterone overdose powered by super serum and supported by unprecedented recovery times. It could only end one way.”

Steve nodded sheepishly before he took another sip of his juice.

“Must have been one heck of an orgy,” she said blandly before she took her last bite of her roll.

Steve choked on his orange juice and started coughing violently. Megan hastily took his glass before he upturned it and handed him a napkin.

“My nose burns,” he mumbled as he tried to clean himself up and regain his composure.

“Orange juice is acidic. It doesn’t belong in your nose. No orgy?”

He finally looked at her and started to laugh once he realized she wasn’t serious “You’re awful, you know that?”

Megan shrugged. “Broke the tension.” She handed him back his juice, which he eyed warily before setting it down.

“Milly took charge. I spent the first few days just trying to learn the routine and staying out of everyone’s way. Then we had dress rehearsal and I got an eyeful. Space was limited and we were all in there together doing costume changes. By then, the gals all knew I wasn’t going to attack them, but it was still awkward. Milly informed me that I was taking her out for coffee when we were finished for the day.”

Megan waited in silence, sensing that Steve needed her to simply wait and let him collect his thoughts. Finally, he finished his juice in one long gulp and set his dishes aside before staring at the far wall, seeing nothing.

“She read me like an open book.” He shook his head, still marveling at Milly’s skill. “She had an uncanny ability to size you up in one glance, like Natasha but without being trained for it. She offered me a deal packaged as a favor for her.”

Steve turned to look at her and Megan just waited, nodding slightly for him to continue.

“She told me that she and one of the other gals, Annie, were lovers and it was starting to cause problems with some of the higher-ups who’d heard rumors.”
Megan whistled softly at the revelation. “It was a dangerous time to be different. Let me guess: she wanted you to provide them some cover.”

Steve nodded. “She asked me to go with the girls in a group when they visited the night clubs in the cities we’d be visiting. I didn’t mind that. I’d gone with Bucky to enough of them to know how single ladies might be treated. At least this new body of mine would let me protect them without needing Bucky’s help. She said she’d keep the rest of the gals from bothering me and in return, she’d show me how to please a woman. Her only stipulation was no kissing on the mouth. Go figure.” He looked at her warily.

Megan could tell he was half expecting to be criticized. “From what I’ve seen so far, she was a thorough and effective instructor. What’s eating at you?”

He just gaped at her, searching for words that didn’t come.

“You were both adults. I don’t see any evidence of coercion or lying, just an arrangement that benefited you both. If Milly hadn’t intervened, you might have found yourself the target of a contest to see which of them could get Captain America into bed first… and you were possibly naive enough to have fallen for it. Milly may have saved you from a world of hurt and embarrassment. As it was, you gave her and Annie protection in a time when being out was dangerous to anyone not in the upper class.”

He still had a haunted look in his eyes and Megan sensed the story wasn’t finished yet. “What happened?”

“We’ll get to that.” He signed and looked away again. “I used her. I’d spend every Saturday morning in her bed, and the rest of the week hating myself for giving in. That’s when I stopped going to confession. It seemed dumb to confess to something I kept doing again and again, no matter how many times I told myself it was wrong.”

Megan squeezed his hand. “I don’t think it was wrong. But I can certainly empathize with how torn you were between what you wanted and what you’d been taught to believe. You didn’t really have anyone to talk to about it, either. You must have felt very alone.”

Steve nodded and she saw tears pooling in his eyes at the memory. “Things fell apart in Chicago.”

Megan’s heart sank when she heard his change in tone. Whatever had happened, it had been bad.

Steve fortified himself with a deep breath. “We’d finished for the day and Milly wanted to take Annie to a club she’d been to before she joined the tour. Milly never talked much about her past, but her parents were either dead or had disowned her and I know Milly had spent some time in Chicago before the tour. I offered to go with them, like I always did, to keep them safe. Milly wanted to go alone with Annie, and even though I offered to tag along and keep my distance from them, she wouldn’t listen. The nightclubs catering to gays and lesbians were always in the rougher parts of town, but Milly insisted they’d be fine… she knew the neighborhood.” He stopped, shuddering at memories that were all too fresh. “Annie came back alone, beaten up and sobbing. There’d been a police raid on the club that night. Milly got them out, but there were some bystanders in the street… I never got the full story out of Annie. She couldn’t bear to tell it. But Milly died trying to get Annie out of there.”

“And you’ve felt guilty ever since?”

Steve nodded. “Rationally, I know it’s stupid. But I wish….”
“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

“The gals and I pooled our funds and covered Annie’s medical bills and a simple funeral for Milly. I even called Howard for help keeping it quiet from those in the U.S.O. that had been trying to make trouble for Milly.”

“I’m sure Milly would have appreciated how you looked after her partner. Sometime, I’d like to go to Chicago with you and pay my respects. From what you’ve told me about her, I think I would have liked her a lot.”

“I’d like that. I’d like that a lot, actually.” He got up and started to pace. “Annie came to me after the funeral. She’d decided it was too dangerous to be herself. She was going to go home and marry the fella that was sweet on her, if he’d still have her. And then she asked me… she was afraid… she said she needed to know what to expect with a guy before she got married, in case she couldn’t stand it.”

Megan was crying, now, watching Steve pace as he unburdened himself.

“I tried to make it good for her, I used every trick Milly ever taught me. But she still cried the whole time. It was awful. Next morning, she thanked me, said she was glad to have shared her first time with the same guy Milly had been with. She left later that day. I never saw her again.”

Megan got up and gave Steve a silent hug.

“I promised myself that day I’d wait until I was married. No more business exchanges or easy outs. I was waiting for the whole package. I got tired of feeling used and torn in half. It’s supposed to mean something…”

“And then I started pushing you.”

“I make my own decisions, Megan.”

“I’m glad you told me. I’m not taking away one of your nevers.”

“What do you mean?”

She wiped her eyes and talked into the bare skin of his chest. “We all have a list of things we say we’ll never do. If we’re lucky, we get to hold on to most of them. But life sometimes forces us to make some tough choices. Growing up, it’s easy to say ‘I’ll never kill anyone.’ And then your country goes to war and you find yourself on a battlefield killing people. I said I’d never let myself get into a relationship with someone who didn’t appreciate me. You know how that turned out. We have to hang on to as many of our nevers as we can, for as long as we can, and only sacrifice them when it serves the greater good. I’m sorry I pushed you so hard…”

“Don’t be. You had your own reasons.” He pressed his lips to her temple and she felt the tension leaving his body. “I’m okay with where we are. Fewer cold showers this way, too.”

“True. But this is as far as we’re going for now. I still think a long engagement is a good idea. We both have a lot to adjust to. Besides, we can always elope and have a reception later if waiting becomes too much.” She pulled back and studied him carefully, wiping a single tear off of his cheek. “Why don’t we ask Jarvis what he can find out about what happened to Annie.”

“I’d like that.”

“Your eyes are hurting you a lot, aren’t they?”
Steve nodded, resigned to her suggesting he put the eye patches back on.

“Lie down on the bed. I’ll be right back.”

She fetched his wristcom from the kitchen and soaked a washcloth in cold water before wringing it out and taking both to Steve. “Close your eyes,” she told him softly, laying the cloth over his eyes. She put the wristcom back on his arm. “Ray, will you please see if you can find out what happened to Annie…”

Steve took over, “Annie Peterson, she was on the U.S.O. tour I did in 1943. She left the tour in September, shortly before we headed to the U.K. I’d like to know what happened to her.”

“I’m happy to assist.”

Megan lay down on the bed with her head on Steve’s shoulder while they waited for Jarvis to do his search. “You okay?”

“Yeah. You inflict fewer wounds than the Chitauri,” Steve said softly. “I could get used to lazy Sunday mornings snuggling in bed.”

They only waited a few minutes before Jarvis spoke, “Steve, I’ve located the information you requested and I am sending a photograph to Megan’s tablet. Annie Peterson Nelson was born in 1925 and married Joseph Nelson in November of 1943. He died in 2008. Mr. and Mrs. Nelson had two sons, Daniel Steve Nelson and Thomas Lee Nelson. There are several grandchildren. Annie Snyder, as she now calls herself, is currently living in Buffalo, NY with her wife of eighteen months, a Ms. Beverley Snyder, born in 1938 and thirteen years her junior. Shall I continue?”

“No, Ray, stop there. That’s what I needed to know. What’s the picture?”

Megan opened her tablet and showed him the image Jarvis had sent, holding it far enough away that the bright screen was less painful for him.

“The photograph is from the Snyders’ wedding day as shown on their Facebook page,” Jarvis explained.

“That’s Annie, all right.” Steve smiled at the image with gentle fondness, clearly recognizing the eyes and smile though the face was a bit more wrinkled than it had been when he knew her. “I’m glad she’s happy. Thanks, Ray.” He lay back down and covered his eyes with the cloth.

“My pleasure.”

Megan closed the tablet case. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that her first son’s middle name was Steve.”

“Probably not.”

“You know what I’m going to say next, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to argue?”

“Saving my energy for battles I can win.”

“Smart man,” she said, leaning down to kiss him before she went to fetch the red glop and fresh bandages. “You should send them a card. I’ll write the note for you if you want and include a bit
about you dictating it while you heal. I’m sure Annie would love to hear from you.”

“I don’t know what to say to her.”

“I’ll help. Do you have any business cards?”

“No.” His brow furrowed. “Why do I need business cards?”

“Networking, my dear, networking. I’ll take care of it. You rest your eyes and I’ll be right back. I have a stack of greeting cards I keep on hand. I’ll look though them to find one that’s appropriate.”

As soon as she was in the kitchen, Megan typed a hasty note to Jarvis, expanding the guest list and expressing her panic that they’d ignored such a vital piece of Steve’s past as they planned the reunion.

“I assure you we have sufficient time to rectify the oversight,” he wrote back “We can add them in a separate book chapter which will give them the focus that is their due without forcing a complete redesign. I have assisted Ms. Potts in organizing much larger events with far less time than we currently have. Relax, Megan. The situation is under control. I’ll order Steve a set of business cards through Stark Industries so he has a secure mailing address and email address that are both separate from S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“I owe you a flat of pansies, Jarvis. I’ll write more later so Steve isn’t wondering where I disappeared to,” she fired back before gathering the supplies to take in to Steve.

“What do you mean by networking?” he asked as soon as she entered the room.

“For most of us, networking is how we stay employed. The job market is too volatile to trust you’ll get to stay any one place for very long. So you build a community of people separate from where you work and live that you can tap into for leads and advice. In return, you try to send leads out as you find them. Usually, people give our their cell phone number and personal email address on a business card of their own design that’s not associated with their workplace. I have some of my own I’ll show you later,” Megan explained as she applied the medicine to Steve’s eyes.

He took the patches from her and applied those himself, sighing in a mixture of relief and resignation.

Megan stretched out beside him and laid her head on his shoulder as he put his arm around her back. “Given your fame, Jarvis is setting up an email and mailing address through Stark Industries. He can set up a phone line, there, too, if you want. That will let you have a contact point that S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t control without worries that your cellphone number will get released to the general public. Job security isn’t an issue for you, but that doesn’t mean networking isn’t important. You never know when you’ll have an opportunity to help someone else. And they might alert you to trends and patterns they’re seeing that aren’t being reported in the media.”

“I already have a Stark Industries email.”

“I know, but this one is going to be separate and just for networking. Once a contact has proven they’re trustworthy, you can always give them your main email and cell phone number.” She snuggled against him, soaking up his body heat as she laid her arm across his chest. “I’m going to doze for a bit. If you decide to get up, just throw a blanket over me, okay?”

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather do right now than hold my girl. Especially since you forgot to put your t-shirt back on.”
“I didn’t forget. I saw you checking me out,” Megan mumbled sleepily.

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Chapter End Notes

It's going to be at least a week before I can update again. Next week, the Kawherp family is going on a short vacation, and that will take most of my writing time and attention. In the meantime, I'm working 7 days straight at the day job. So much for getting writing done! But I'll update as soon as I can.

Enjoy!
When Megan woke, she was lying on her left side with Steve spooned behind her, his right arm wrapped around her waist and his left bicep serving as her pillow. “Sleep well?” he asked as he pressed a kiss against her hair.

“Mmm,” was the only sound she could make before yawning. “I could get used to this. Are you sure you don't want to elope tonight?”

"I'm sure. Your parents would be hurt."

She felt Steve carefully lay one ankle over hers and she forced herself not to move, wondering how far he planned to push her. "Your nose is all healed already?"

“No, but I don't plan on doing any more right now. Small steps are better."

Megan forced herself to lie there for a count of three before she shifted. Steve immediately pulled away, rolling to lie on his back. Megan followed him, crawling on top of him to rest with her head on his chest. "We need more lazy days like this. It's going to be hard when you go back to your place."

"I know. Is there anything in particular you want to do today?" he asked as he rubbed her back.

"Make a ridiculous stack of pancakes, stuff ourselves on them, and play Scrabble? Then maybe a bike ride later when it cools off outside?"

“That sounds like a perfect day."

They lay like that for some time, with Steve rubbing her back and Megan running her fingers through his hair while she listened to his heartbeat in her ear. Finally, she shifted so she was resting her chin on her hands and studied him. "What kind of wedding do you want?"

Steve shook his head, dismissing the question. "As long as you're there, whatever you want is fine."

“That doesn't answer the question. The wedding is for both of us. Surely you’ve had a daydream or two over the years.”

“I knew marriage wasn't in the cards for me. I was too sick to support myself half the time, much less anyone else. There was no point dreaming about something that would never happen.”

“You never had so much as a daydream? I find that hard to believe.” With sudden inspiration, she changed tactics. “What kind of wedding do you imagine Bucky would have liked?"

Steve sighed, though she couldn’t tell if he was on to her or if it was because he missed Bucky so much. "We'd be in the Brooklyn church we used to go to, me standing with Bucky and one of his gal’s friends standing with her. The Barnes family would be there, of course, and my mother would be sitting with them. It would be just the two families and best friends. After the ceremony, we'd go back to Bucky's parents' house for lunch and cake."

Megan smiled to herself. “That sounds nice. Small and intimate seems like the perfect approach to
me. What do you think about inviting Rebecca and her family, the Avengers team, Fury, Hill, my mom and Greg, and my brother and his family? That’s a pretty small group, all things considered. It would be easier to keep the press away, too."

"Don't you have any friends you want to invite?"

Megan laid her head down, chewing on her lower lip. "Aside from Natasha and Clint, no. I've always been a bit of a loner. I don't have anyone like Bucky to track down." Not wanting to dwell on that, she changed the subject. "Is the church you went to in Brooklyn still there?"

"I don’t know. But what about where you grew up?"

Megan shook her head. “It’s silly to ask that many people to travel that far. And I want this to be completely different from anything Randy and I planned."

"Did you still have your dress?"

“I left the engagement ring on the kitchen counter and sold the dress the day after I left. His mother wanted a huge event… it wasn’t my idea but since she swore they’d pay for it, I went along with it.” Megan shuddered a bit and Steve held her closer. “In hindsight, there were warning signs everywhere. I don’t know why I didn’t see them. It’s true, you know, about how you marry a family, not just a person. I didn’t let myself see that, either.”

“I guess it’s lucky for you all of my family is dead, then, and you don’t have to worry about dealing with them. But for the record, Mother would have adored you.”

“Steve, you still have a family. Avengers is an unusual family name, I grant you, but those bonds are real.”

“I guess.”

“I know. It would do you a world of good if you’d stop holding yourself apart from them and let them get to know the real you. They only need the Captain when you’re on a mission. You’ve started letting your guard down around Clint and Natasha and it’s a good thing. You need to do more of that.” She yawned and tried to muster the willpower to get up. “I shouldn’t be this tired. I just want to lie here like this all day.”

“I suppose we could pack a cooler and camp out here.”

“I’m tempted, but I don’t think the pancakes will fare well and I’m still craving pancakes. I even splurged on a bottle of real maple syrup.”

“You’re just afraid I’m going to beat you at Scrabble.”

“With the way I spell I don’t stand much of a chance. But you make such a nice pillow that I simply don’t want to get up.”

Steve played with her hair a bit, then asked, “What else have you been mulling over? You’ve been brooding about something ever since you got back.”

“Bodyguards.” Megan put her chin on her hands again, watching Steve try to navigate a topic he probably figured was fraught with land-mines. "I may be fiercely independent and occasionally stubborn, but I’m not stupid."

“Occasionally stubborn?”
“Okay, somewhat more often than occasionally, but not frequently.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “If you say so.”

Megan poked him in the ribs. “We can debate that later, though you’re hardly one to talk.” She grew serious again. “I know I’m your weak spot. Anyone who wants to get to you would be smart to use me to do that, and that puts a target on my back. I’ve been uneasy going anywhere alone ever since I was attacked, so it’s hard for me to untangle paranoia from reasonable levels of caution. I also recognize that no amount of training from you and Natasha is going to protect me from a professional hit. And when we have kids, bodyguards will be even more of a necessity. I just don’t know how to reconcile that reality with how I’ve always lived. How do you even hire a team you can trust? What’s the etiquette? How soon do we need to start interviewing people?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Will you stop apologizing? I’m going in with my eyes open. Frankly, even you might consider having someone tag along with you sometimes. The serum didn’t put eyes in the back of your head. Having someone watch your back might be a good idea. At the very least, they should come with us when you and I go out so you can focus on enjoying our time together and not have to pay as much attention to protecting me. I know you can’t shut those habits off completely and I don’t want you to try, but sharing the responsibility of my safety with a team will take some of the pressure off of you.”

“You’ve thought a lot about this.”

“I have to. You know by now that’s how I process things.”

Steve nodded, his hands finally stopping at the small of her back as he held her against him. “Are you willing to be on stage with me on Friday?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s outside and there’s no way I’ll be able to tolerate the sunlight. I’d rather you were the one leading me around. But it will put more attention on you than you’ve had in past. If you’re not ready for that—“

“It’s okay. Nothing is going to make suddenly being a public figure easier to deal with. I may as well rip the proverbial Band-Aid off and get on with it. Natasha made sure my dress complements your uniform because I know that every photographer on the dang planet is going to be there.”

“I got an email this morning from Janice, who has been coordinating everything with Jarvis. She’s offered to let us in to see the exhibit before the circus act gets started. But we need to be there really early.”

Megan bumped her forehead on Steve’s sternum with a sinking feeling. “How early?” she muttered

“She wanted us there at six, but I suggested six-thirty would be better.”

She moaned and thumped her head on his chest again. “I may as well stay up all night. You morning people have no idea how absurd it is to haul out of bed at that hour. All you have to do is pull on a uniform. I have to do my hair and makeup. How am I going to manage to be photo-worthy at that hour? I’ll be so tired I’ll probably use lipstick as mascara. If it’s humid out, or windy…. can’t we just hire a couple of impersonators and run off to explore the Grand Canyon?”

Steve laughed softly. “Call Natasha. She’ll know how to make sure you look better than a British
Monarch on a state visit. In fact, she’ll probably have you looking so good no one will notice me slipping out the back.”

Megan cuffed him playfully. “Don’t even think about it, Mister, or I’ll break your nose again. In fact, I’m going to make sure Bruce is watching that exit so you don’t ditch me before the circus gets started. Do you want to meet them for dinner Thursday night when they get in? I can’t imagine Tony getting up early enough Friday morning to fly down.”

“We can do that. Or we can order takeout and have everyone come here.”

“I’m having a hard time imagining Tony Stark in my apartment.”

“You just told me I need to let the team get to know me better. That’s easier to do here than out in public. We can ask them what they think about getting you a security team.”

“You fight dirty.”

Steve smirked a bit. “You just figured that out?”

“No, but I am calling you on it.”

“Are you ready for pancakes?”

“I’ve been ready for pancakes, but for some reason, you haven’t made them and brought them to me yet. I suppose you expect me to get up and go help make them.”

“I’ll make omelets while you do the pancakes.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal. But I still have this problem of not wanting to actually get up.”

Steve laughed and easily slid out from under her before picking her up in his arms to carry her to the kitchen. “Your pillow is hungry.”

Megan just laid her head on his shoulder, savoring the moment.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back from the mini-vacation and once again carving out time to write. No, I have not abandoned the story (as some have worried about via PMs). I just have this Real Life that sometimes demands attention. :-)
“You cleaned,” Megan said with relief when she opened the door to her apartment after work on Friday. The drapes were pulled shut but the smell of Murphy’s Oil Soap was unmistakable. Knowing Steve, he’d given the whole place a systematic once-over, dusting and scrubbing every surface.

Steve pulled her into a hug as she set down her purse. “Apartments don’t clean themselves and I know you’re fretting about everyone coming over.”

Megan just pressed her nose against his bare chest and inhaled his scent. “That makes up for you shaving off your beard today before I got to tell it goodbye. You are too good to be true. And I can’t tell anyone because your fans would be horrified to find out that Captain America was on his hands and knees mopping my kitchen floor. I’ll start getting death threats for superhero abuse.”

“And then I’d have to further tarnish Cap’s image by telling them all the ways you make it worth my energy.”

“Followed by public disclosure about how you have started talking about yourself in the third person. Should I set up a Twitter account or Facebook for that announcement?” She met his eyes and grinned.

“Neither. I vote for a quick shower and you changing into comfortable clothes before everyone gets here. Stark said he’d bring the pizza. I expect they’ll be here in a half hour or so.”

“Okay. Go get the water started and I’ll—“ She was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Go get started while I see who that his,” Steve said, pushing her towards the bedroom. “Just a sec!” he said, swatting Megan playfully on the backside as he did so.

“You’ve got it darker than the Batcave in here,” Megan heard Clint comment as she closed the bedroom door. She sighed wistfully, knowing the joint shower was on hold for now.

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When Megan emerged from her shower, she discovered a pile of camping gear in the corner by the door. Steve, Clint, and Natasha were sitting at the table, drinking beer and waiting for the rest of the team to arrive with the pizza. To her surprise, Steve had put on the t-shirt Megan had bought for him that said, “Experiment at night: sleep with a molecular biologist,” the day after they’d joked about him whispering science talk in her ear. Apparently, he’d taken her suggestion of letting his guard down around the team to heart. Either that, or she’d finally convinced him that the shirts he had been wearing were too small.

“We were hoping to camp on your living room floor tonight since we’re only going to get a nap before we get underway tomorrow morning,” Clint explained when he noticed she’d seen the camping gear.
“That makes sense,” she nodded as she joined them at the table.

“What doesn’t make sense is staring the whole event so early,” Clint continued. “I hate morning missions.”

“You hate mornings,” Natasha clarified.

Megan threw up her hands in victory as she beamed at Clint. “Finally! Someone else who understands! There is coffee in the fridge. Remind me to set the coffee pot out tonight before I go to bed.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll find it if you forget.”

“Never get between Clint and coffee in the morning,” Natasha added, smiling softly as she took another sip of her beer.

“She’s the same way with her tea,” Steve added, nursing his own bottle. “She is incapable of speaking in sentences without it.”

“What do you expect before eleven in the morning? Poetry? Mornings are good for three things: sleep, sleep, and sleep. If anyone says otherwise, they’re a brain-damaged night-owl.” Three pairs of eyes stared at Clint in confusion. “Everyone is born a night owl,” he explained. “The ones who get dropped on their heads become morning larks.”

Steve shook his head, his eyes twinkling, “If that were true, the serum would heal me and I’d hate mornings, too.”

“If jumping out of a plane without a parachute isn’t proof of brain damage, I don’t know what is.” Megan retorted, then raised her glass of water to clink against Clint’s beer bottle.

“Associating with us might qualify, too.”

“No, that’s just good taste,” Megan assured the archer. “Stark better hurry up because I’m starving,” she added, getting up to see what she could find in the fridge. She washed a bowl full of grapes then several apples and took them back to the table in two containers.

“No wonder she loves this building… she’s into fossils,” they heard Tony say from just outside the door.

“Tony, be nice.” Pepper scolded. “You’re just miffed that she isn’t swooning over you.”

“That’s not true. She’s just hiding it because she’s afraid of you. Hey, open up or I’ll take my pizza to the roof and share it with the pigeons,” he added, banging on the door.

Megan opened it and shared a knowing look with Pepper before waving them in. Tony was carrying a stack of pizzas and he headed to the table. Pepper and Bruce followed, carrying additional beer and what appeared to be a container of salad. “Happy, it’s good to see you again. Come on in.”

“Thank you, but no. Sarge promised me a tour of the perimeter,” he said, standing in the corridor.

Megan took all but the last box from the stack of pizzas Happy was carrying and handed them to Natasha, who’d come up behind her. “Then at least take a pizza with you to share with Sarge. Do you want some beer, too?”
He shook his head, looking longingly at the bottles.

“Just one won’t hurt,” Natasha said, stepping forward to slip one into each of his front jacket pockets. “It will wear off long before your boss is ready to go.”

“If you insist.” Happy said, looking warily at Natasha.

“I do.”

“You’re welcome to join us if you change your mind. Sarge can be a bit intense at times.” Megan added.

Happy smiled at her. “I appreciate the offer, Doctor, but it wouldn’t be proper. It’s good to see you. Give my regards to the Captain.”

Megan sighed as she shut the door, frustrated that Happy felt the need to keep his distance.

“Engineers do it better,” Tony was saying, pointing to Steve’s shirt. “Or can’t you read yet and Megan tricked you with that shirt? Why’s it so dark in here? Doesn’t this antique building have electric? Or are you just trying to remember what it was like back in the good old days?”

“I know exactly what this shirt says. We had electricity, Tony. We even had indoor plumbing. But light still hurts my eyes,” Steve said as he handed Pepper a paper plate.

“I knew it… you’re a masochist at heart.” Tony turned to Megan. “What other kinky stuff is he into besides pain?”

“Tony!” Pepper warned, shaking her head at the billionaire.

“Mega and Spangles knew I was kidding,” he told Pepper before turning to Steve and Megan. “You do know I’m kidding, right?”

“Sit down and eat some pizza, Tony.” Megan said, handing him a plate. “It will keep you from further embarrassing yourself. Bruce, come here.” Megan threw her arms around the stunned scientist. “I can’t thank you enough for what you and Tony did for Steve. I’m so glad you made the trip down.” Sensing his shock and discomfort, she pulled back, but didn’t let go entirely. Instead, she took hold of his hands. “What kind of pizza did you bring and what can I get you to drink? I have herbal tea if you want some.”

“Hot herbal tea with pizza? That’s just gross.” Tony said, sitting down on the couch with his pizza and beer.

“Only to those too unsophisticated to appreciate a good cup of tea,” Megan fired back as she winked at Bruce. “It’s not my fault your tastebuds are unrefined. I’ll also point out that we got a fresh block of ice delivered this morning and it’s doing a lovely job of keeping the icebox cool. I’m sure we can spare a chunk of it to make iced tea if Bruce wants a cold beverage. Mind your manners and I’ll resist using my favorite housewarming gift on you,” Megan added, winking at Natasha as she led Bruce to the cupboard where her teas were stored.

“Will I ever get used to it?” She asked Bruce quietly as she put a kettle of water on to boil.

“To what?”

“The weirdness that is now my life,” she said, gesturing to the living room and the group assembled there.
Bruce chuckled. “I haven’t. Maybe you’ll have better luck.”

“Why do you have a rusty spoon on your wall?” Tony asked. He got up and took the box down, looking it over. “Your work?” he asked as he looked at Natasha.

“Nancy, actually.” Megan said smoothly. “Put it back, Tony. That gift means a lot to me.”

“I smell a story. Spill,” he said, though he carefully hung it back where it had been, and took care to make sure the camera was in place.

“Nancy and I had a spell high school where we had to deal with stupid boys who thought it was fun to snap our bras against our backs. We were able to quash that behavior with most of them, but there was a creep named Kurt that didn’t take a hint very well. We made a pact that the next time he did it to one of us, we were going to hold him down and scoop out his kidneys with a rusty spoon. I suppose she saw in the news that I was dating Steve and wanted to remind me of the good old days.”

Tony shook his head, eying the spoon warily. “You have weird friends, Doc.”

“Pot, meet StarkKettle.” Megan said, arching her eyebrow.

“So, does Cap play nice and avoid snapping your bra?”

“Why would he bother when he can just take it off? One handed, I might add. That’s not easy with four sets of hooks.

Steve just looked at Megan and shook his head, smiling slightly. Tony wasn’t going to be able to get a rise of her with sexual comments, no matter how hard he tried, and Steve knew it.

She winked back at him, acknowledging that shared knowledge before she changed the subject. “Are you coming with us in the morning?”

“Isn’t that why we’re here?” Tony said carefully, as if she’d somehow just become the slowest student in the class.

“They’re letting us in at six thirty to see the exhibit before everyone else gets there,” Steve explained.

“We’ll be there.” Pepper promised.

“Pep!” Tony whined.

“You go for days without sleep when you’re in your lab. You are perfectly capable of getting up tomorrow morning,” she told him, using a tone that said the matter wasn’t open for discussion.

“It will give us a chance to scope out the area,” Clint pointed out as Bruce commented that he wanted to see it without worrying about crowds.

“Okay,” Tony agreed. “We’ll be there. Or meet you here. Are we all arriving together, too? We can all fit in the limo.”

“Does it matter? The press shouldn’t be around that early,” Megan said, looking between Tony and Pepper.

“Don’t count on it. You two have a S.H.I.E.L.D. vehicle downstairs, don’t you?” Tony asked, looking to Natasha and Clint. When Natasha nodded, he turned to Megan and Steve. “We’ll wait
outside here and you can follow our limo. Pep and I will steal the limelight while you all slip inside. What’s the schedule from there?”

Megan sat back in her chair and listened as Tony and Steve developed a plan for the entire day while the others occasionally added suggestions or detailed where they’d be stationed. She saw Bruce looking at her and he rolled his eyes as he smiled at her, referencing her earlier comment about weird lives.

She smiled back and shrugged, finishing her pizza. She got up to throw her plate in the trash when Tony jumped up from his seat and started digging in his pockets. “I almost forgot. Where’d I put that… here it is.” He handed Megan a small black device that looked like a hearing aid. “Field com so you can hear and talk to all of us tomorrow.”

Megan took it, stunned. “Thank you. Let me go put it in my jewelry box,” she stammered as she made her escape and headed for her bedroom. Once there, she put the field com away and stood leaning on her dresser, taking deep breaths and tried to collect herself.

“This family of ours is even crazier when Thor is around, if you can believe it. But they mean well,” Pepper said from the doorway.

Megan startled violently and wiped tears from her eyes. “I know. It’s just….”

Pepper shut the bedroom door and sat down on the foot of the bed, patting beside her for Megan to join her. “You’re trying to figure out how you fit.” It wasn’t a question.

Megan nodded.

“Tony needs the stability I can give him. I keep his company running so he can devote his energy to being a genius. But he also needs me to mother him a bit. In some ways, I’m the parent he never had. But he makes me a better version of myself. I like who I am with him, even when he drives me crazy. Tony also taught me how to play. He gives me the childhood I never had. I’m sure others look at us and don’t understand how it works. Sometimes, I don’t understand it myself. But I know that what we have works for both of us.”

“It’s obvious you love each other a great deal.”

Pepper nodded. “We do. But love isn’t enough for the long-term. It’s the total package that makes it work. We balance each other out in a lot of different ways. That’s what keeps us going when things get tough and the love is harder to find.”

She turned to Megan, clearly taking care to choose her words. “Steve is different than Tony. He’s got such a sense of responsibility that he is in great danger of being consumed by Captain America. You see the man from Brooklyn, the wounded soldier, the artist… and you give him both the normalcy he craves and a reminder of exactly what he’s fighting so hard to protect. You give him a safe place to be vulnerable and that’s a precious gift for a man like him.

“I have a lot of misgivings about S.H.I.E.L.D. and Director Fury at times, but they got something very right with the Avengers initiative. This team needs you, too,” Pepper continued. “Steve keeps himself apart from everyone, yet here we are. I suspect this is your doing.”

Megan nodded, stunned at Pepper’s insight. She knew Pepper was wicked smart yet she’d pigeonholed her as a businesswoman without considering how that translated to the Avengers. She should have known better and ducked her head as shame washed over her.

“Don’t question it. Jus trust the magic that makes the team work. You’re a part of that team now,
no matter whether you marry Steve or not. I hear you’ve become friends with Natasha and she
doesn't make friends easily. Clint is more relaxed tonight than I’ve ever seen him. Again, I think
you had a part in that change.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

Pepper pinned her with a look. “You’ve got a lot of classified crap to deal with that not many
people understand. Do you have a confidant?

Megan blushed and smiled shyly. “I drafted Jarvis.”

“Oh, honey,” Pepper said putting an arm around her. “I love Jarvis, too, but there are some things
only a woman can understand. It can be lonely loving an Avenger. Believe me, I know. It’s going
to be nice for me to have you around, too. How about the next time you come to New York, you
should come a day early” Pepper paused slightly as she gave Megan a Look that clearly said for
Steve’s reunion weekend. “We’ll make it a spa day where we get a massage, a mani-pedi, and
unlimited girl talk.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Megan whispered, wiping tears from her eyes. “I don’t know how I
would have survived without Jarvis.”

“You’ve been good for him, too. Tony programmed him to serve and protect those in the tower.
Since you came in from a different angle, you’ve become a true friend to him. As much as I love
him, it’s not an equal relationship like you have with him. He’s done extra things for you because
he wants to, not because we’ve asked him to. I wanted you to know that.”

“And now I’m crying again,” Megan mumbled, giving up the fight against her tears.

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Chapter End Notes

I have been so darn busy it has been hard to write the stuff that fits between were we
are and the next big chunk I have ready to go. Hopefully, this week will be kinder.
{Fingers crossed}
As the evening wore on, Megan could tell Steve was experiencing increasing amounts of pain until he was keeping his eyes closed more than they were open. Finally, Megan nudged his foot with her own and gave him a scolding look. He sighed, then nodded and went to fetch the supplies.

She waited until he was in the bathroom before saying in a voice that was barely more than a whisper, “The fact you’re all going to be there tomorrow means the world to him even if he’s too shy to say anything.”

Pepper smiled at her and answered just as softly, “We know.”

No one teased him as Megan helped Steve by putting the medicine in his eyes before she handed him the eye patches. In fact, Tony’s face was grim as he turned on a table lamp and looked at Steve in the better light. Even so, Stark surprised her yet again by fixing the deteriorating mood of the room with an innocent question. “Anyone want to place a bet on what the strangest thing in the exhibit is going to be?” he asked, daring them all to join in. “Since it’s the Smithsonian, we know it’s going to all be squeaky clean, so keep that in mind.”

Steve smiled. “Don’t ask me. I haven’t talked to them about what they got their hands on. All I know is that your lawyers made sure I can claim anything I want to keep when the exhibit closes in a few months.”

“I don’t know if it counts as strange, but I’m sure someone donated a school book that they claim Steve used,” Bruce offered.

“Ooooh, I like that,” Tony said, snapping his fingers as he pointed at his lab partner. “What else?”

“Building fixtures. Someone probably salvaged a doorknob from Steve’s apartment building before it was torn down. Bonus points if they saved the whole door.” Clint said, getting into the game.

“Does anyone know where the treatment pod from the Project Rebirth program ended up?” Megan offered.

“It’s in an old Stark Industries warehouse in upstate New York. They don’t know I have it and I didn’t offer it to them.”

“A lock of hair from Dr. Erskine,” Natasha said softly. “Keeping a lock of hair is an old tradition. I wager that someone involved in the project took the liberty of snipping one as a keepsake after he was murdered.”

Tony turned to Natasha and glared. “Before we accept that bet, Widow, I want your word that you have no knowledge of what is actually in the exhibit.”

She just smiled. “Don’t you trust me?”

“A family Bible.” Pepper offered. “It’s not strange to have one, but I expect it would be difficult for them to get it after so much time had passed.”

“Actually, I have that, along with several other keepsakes the museum knows nothing about,” Steve told them.

“How?” Clint wanted to know.
“Megan?” Steve asked, squeezing her hand as she sat beside him on the increasingly uncomfortable dining room chairs they’d moved into the living room for extra seating. “Why don’t you explain since it was all your doing?”

“Okay. Jarvis gets most of the credit since was able to track down Bucky’s sister for me back in May. I was hoping to get a few photographs at most. I ended up hitting the jackpot,” Megan explained. She gave them a brief summary of her weekend adventure, including the photograph she’d taken of Steve on her phone before leaving town.

When she was done with the story, she noticed Pepper discretely wiping tears from her eyes. “I think that was the first time I had to threaten you for his own, good, too,” she added, trying to lighten the mood.

“Been doing it ever since, too,” he said, planting a kiss on the back of her hand.


Megan shook her head. “Sorry, the nature of the threat is classified. But Mr. Noble here was going to ride his bike home and possibly splatter himself all over the streets of D.C. in the process. I made him stay overnight.”

“You made him share that shitty excuse of a bed you had in that sleeper sofa, didn’t you?” Clint asked, though his tone and body language indicated he was confident of the answer. “You’d only known him for what, two months?”

“Almost to the day,” Steve added, not even trying to hide his amusement at how embarrassed he’d been that night and how far he and Megan had come since then.

“You geriatric rascal!” Tony exclaimed. “So how’d Megan manage that when you’re physically stronger?”

Megan smiled innocently, “That’s why a threat was involved. All I’m going to say is that it was surprisingly effective. I’ve never had to threaten him with it again.”

Steve chuckled but refused to explain why.

Natasha looked from Steve to Megan, then smiled at her, meeting Megan’s eyes. “I know what I would have done. I imagine you did the same thing.”

“Probably. Even so, Tony will just have to live with the mystery.”

“Why? Maybe I need to know so I can keep Spangles here from doing something stupid in the middle of battle.”

Steve and Megan both burst out laughing at the thought. Megan wiped tears of mirth from her face as she pictured Tony stripping and lying down on Steve as they dodged bullets. “Tony, I guarantee it wouldn’t help under those circumstances, but if you ever figure it out and make good on my threat, I want video.”

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The next morning, Megan stumbled into the kitchen after the alarm went off and found Clint already dressed in his tactical uniform, nursing a cup of coffee, and propping his head up on one hand. His hair was still damp from the shower. Clint nodded at her silently, yawned, and went back to his breakfast.

Natasha, in contrast, looked rested and ready for the day. She was dressed in a plain blouse and black slacks, completely prepared to blend into the crowds or pose as museum staff as needed. There was no sign she was armed, though Megan was certain she had several guns and knives hidden on her person in addition to her Widow Bites. She was making scrambled eggs and had French toast heating in the toaster. “Do you want some of these eggs?”

Megan nodded, fumbling in the cupboard for her tea.

“The water in the kettle is hot. I just turned it off. After you get your shower, wrap your hair in a towel and get dressed. We’ll get you ready from there.”

“Stop talking,” Clint mumbled. “Caffeine before words.” He gave Megan a high-five as she sat down next to him at the table. “Brain damage,” he muttered under his breath as a smile tugged on the corner of his mouth.

Megan was still eating when Steve joined them, fresh from the shower and already partly dressed. He had an undershirt and his uniform pants on, but was carrying the rest. He was squinting in the light as he poured himself a cup of coffee and pulled the blue ball cap he was wearing further down over his eyes. Natasha turned out the ceiling lights and flicked on the hood light over the stove.

“Thanks.”

“Easy for you to say, for some of us, it just makes it that much easier to fall asleep again. Maybe I’ll lie down again while you’re in the shower, Megan.” Clint said, nodding to the sleeping bag that was still spread out on the floor.

“Blame Steve for agreeing to have us there at stupid-thirty this morning,” she replied. She finished her tea and stood up.

“I’ll get the dishes,” Steve said, putting his hand on her wrist when she started to gather them. He sat down and picked up his fork. “Megan, get your shower. I gave you an extra half hour, Clint. They wanted us there at six.”

“So generous of you,” Clint snarled sarcastically. “I suppose you want a kiss of appreciation?”

“Boys, play nice,” Natasha warned as she set her own breakfast down on the table and passed Megan a second cup of tea she had prepared exactly as Megan liked it. “Take this with you to the shower. Don’t forget your gun and vest.”

“I don’t think the shower will do them any good,” Megan grumbled as she accepted the mug and headed off to get ready. She made a point of not looking at the clock as she shuffled down the hall; it was too early for even the birds to be up.

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Megan did as Natasha asked and shuffled out to the kitchen where the assassin was waiting with a
large towel and barstool. She gestured for Megan to sit then put a large, dry towel over her shoulders.

Steve let out an appreciative whistle. “Wow.”

Megan turned to him and saw him squinting at her but smiling as he admired her outfit.

“Just wait until we’re done. She’s going to look like a princess,” Clint said as he refilled his cup of coffee and took the towel off of Megan’s hair. “Where’s your hairdryer?”

“I’ll get it,” Steve offered and went to fetch it.

Clint picked up a large-toothed comb and started combing the tangles from Megan’s hair as Natasha opened up a small case of makeup and started laying out supplies. “Bring whatever makeup she has, too, Steve,” Natasha said.

“You’re secretly a hair stylist, too?” Megan asked Clint as she closed her eyes while Natasha started mixing foundation and spreading it on Megan’s face.

“I’ve picked up a lot of skills over the years. I sometimes help Natasha get ready when she has to appeal to a target’s carnal nature. I promise I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m not doubting you, I’m just surprised.”

“I’m going to pull it up on the sides so your hair doesn’t blow in your face when you’re posing for a million photographs.”

“Thanks so much for reminding me how many people are going to be there. It helps the nerves.”

“At least you don’t have to give a speech,” Steve said, as he sipped his coffee and donned the rest of his uniform. On his right hand, he put on one of his old, full-length gloves that went almost to his elbow and let him keep his healing fingers numbed with medicine. On his left, he had on the fingerless tactical gloves he had come to prefer on most missions. With any luck, no one would notice the mismatch before he took the stage.

“And I’m very glad about that, believe me. At least I know how to deal with the kids. They’re easy.”

“They’re the only reason I’m going through with this,” Steve admitted quietly. “I wish B.J. could have been here. He’d have enjoyed it.”

Before Megan could come up with something even remotely comforting to say, Clint turned on the hairdryer. He used it to dry and style Megan’s hair before using a curling brush to tame her curls into soft waves as Natasha worked on her makeup.

Natasha finally broke the silence. “Why’d you lie about who gave you the spoon?”

“You were there for me when I needed you. I value that gift and I didn’t want Tony turning it into a big joke. Another girl and I did have problems in high school like I described. I don’t like lying, but until I know Tony better, I’m not giving him any more ammunition to make fun of either of us. I can handle all his innuendo just fine, but this is different. Besides, my old threat doesn’t work any more on Steve so I really need that spoon.”

“You’re killing me with the mystery,” Clint told her.
“Live with it,” Natasha told him as she wielded her makeup brushes like a pro. Megan was incredibly grateful she’d followed Steve’s advice and sought Natasha’s help. No matter what else happened today, she knew she wasn’t going to look ridiculous.

“All done,” Natasha said, handing her a mirror as she and Clint both put down their tools. Clint took the towel off of her shoulders and gestured for Megan to stand up.

“Wow. It’s too early in the morning for my brain to access big words, but thanks,” She gave Clint and Natasha each an appreciative hug, hoping they understood how much their help meant to her. The flicker of emotion in Natasha’s eyes made her think they did.

“You look great, Megan,” Steve said softly, gesturing for her to twirl around. “I’m betting I can make that escape out the back entrance after all if I just ask Bruce to keep an eye on you for me.”

“Oh, no!” Megan said, grinning at him. “You bail on me today and that spoon will be put to use on more than your kidneys, Mister.”

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“Seriously? Why are they here this early?” Megan asked as she saw a large crowd gathered outside the Air and Space Museum. Even the media area was full as crews set up their gear and filmed the growing crowds.

“There have been people standing in line all night to get a good view at the ceremony and first access to the exhibit,” Clint said as they drove past the main entrance and followed Stark’s limousine to where it parked near a secondary entrance at the end of the building. On the lawn of the mall nearby, Megan saw that a stage and tent had been set up for the opening ceremony. Security teams were milling around, keeping a careful eye on the growing crowds. “I’m surprised there aren’t more people here, actually,” he added as he cut power to the engine.

“Maybe they were smart enough to sleep in?” Megan asked, covering her mouth as she yawned. “How should we do this?”

“Wait for Stark to do his thing. I’ll tell you when to get out. Security will escort you in,” he said as he rolled down his window and flashed his SHIELD badge to the officer who’d approached. “We’re ready when you are. Stark’s going to try to run interference with the press until we get Captain Rogers inside.”

“She’s not going to stop us,” Clint added.

“Understood, sir,” the officer said and stepped back to communicate with his team on the radio.

“Do you have your field communicator turned on?” Clint asked Megan. “We’re ready, Tony,” he said, using his own com, which gave Megan the strange experience of hearing his voice two different ways at exactly the same time.

“It’s show time, boys and girls,” Megan heard Tony say in her ear and she answered Clint softly, “Com’s working. Steve, I’ll get out my side and put my arm around yours for us to head in. Don’t bother with waving to the crowds. They’ll get plenty of time to gawk later. It looks like there will be officers both leading and following us. There are no steps to deal with so it is should be easy enough.”

Steve nodded and leaned forward in his seat, putting his shield on his back as Megan slid up
against her door, making room for Steve to slide closer to her. She watched as Tony got out of the limousine and offered his hand to Pepper as he waved to the crowds. He looked like he was thrilled to be there. Bruce got out next and quietly slipped past them while Tony and Pepper continued to smile and pose for the cameras.

“Okay, go ahead,” Clint said.

Megan started to open the door, but the officer standing nearby opened it for her as soon as he heard her move the handle. Megan got out with a bright smile pasted on her face as she held Steve’s hand and waited for him to join her. As soon as he was standing, with sunglasses on and his ball cap pulled low over his face, she looped her arm around his and followed the police officers past Tony and Pepper into the building.

“Can we go home now?” she asked Steve softly once they were shielded from the cameras.

“Not just yet,” he whispered then kissed her temple. “Bruce? How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay. I’m just glad—“

“Captain Rogers, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last. I’m Janice,” the young woman said as she approached the group, holding out her hand.

“Handshake,” Megan murmured, letting go of Steve’s arm for a moment so he could smile and introduce them.

When that was done, Steve took off his ball cap and sunglasses. “Can you get the lights turned down as low as possible in the exhibit? I’m recovering from an injury and have no tolerance for bright lights at the moment.”

Megan was impressed by how quickly Janice recovered, letting her shock show for only a moment before nodding. “Of course,” Janice said. “This way, please.” As they walked, she spoke into her radio, “We need to turn out as many lights as possible in the Captain America exhibit and dim the rest, please. Tell the photographer that there will be absolutely no flash photography. I’ll explain when we get there.”

“Cap, it’s a madhouse out here,” Tony said in her ear. “Are we done playing to the crowds for now?”

Megan saw Steve smile as he answered, “Better move fast so you can catch up, Tony. It would be quite rude to ask Pepper to run in heels.”

“I appreciate your consideration, Steve,” Pepper told them, her smile plain in her voice. “It’s so nice to see manners in practice for a change.”

“Are you flirting with him, Pep? You’re flirting with him, aren’t you? He’s older than God and you’re flirting with him. He can’t even fly! Besides, he dresses like my grandfather, or at least he did until he started hanging out more with Megan. I’ll grant you that he’s made some progress in that area because he at least wears science t-shirts now. Why are you flirting with him?”

“Shut up, Stark,” Natasha said behind them, her heels making almost no sound on the hard floor. Megan suspected they had special soles for traction just in case she actually did need to run. Megan turned to see Clint was beside his partner, bow and quiver slung across his back as he scanned the halls for any threats and potential vantage points.

Tony put his hand on Steve’s left shoulder for a moment as they all followed Janice. “The gang’s
all here, Cap. Ready for a trip down memory lane?”

“Can anyone ever be ready to see their life laid out in a museum?” he replied.

Megan could feel the tension in his arm, which she gave a reassuring squeeze. “We need to find a men’s room so we can get his eyes rinsed out, first,” she said.

“I’ve got extra supplies,” Bruce said quietly, holding up the small backpack he was carrying. “Ladies’ purses seem to be sized in inverse proportion to the importance of the event. I noticed you didn’t even bother with one, Megan. I have tissues, bandages, and more eye and hand medicine in here. Why don’t you go ahead and scope out the exhibit to check the lighting while Steve and I visit the restroom?”

“Thank you, Bruce,” Steve said, dropping Megan’s arm. “We’ll catch up soon.”

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Megan toured the exhibit with an eye for potential triggers. Overall, she was impressed with the what she saw and knew that Steve would be pleased with the attention given to the Howling Commandos. But when she rounded the corner to the last station, her heart stopped.

“We’re not letting him anywhere near this part,” Clint said softly as came up to stand beside her. “Megan and I are going silent for a bit, so don’t worry that you don’t hear from us,” he told the others before he helped Megan turn off her com and shut off his own. “Let me see what it does.”

Megan watched as Clint slid into the cockpit seat and pressed each of two labeled buttons in turn, choosing what to do next as the Valkyrie hurled west over the Atlantic. The screens that simulated the view out of the cockpit windows changed from barren ice fields to the New York City skyline accordingly. In the center of one screen, the death toll changed to reflect the consequence of the user’s choice. A light flashed next to the radio, inviting the “pilot” to make contact with the team and provide a mission update. Clint discovered, from a note on the cockpit controls, that there was an alcove tucked into the side of the display where a fellow guest could answer the radio and hold a last conversation with “Captain America” as he sat at the helm.

Clint looked over his shoulder at Megan, “This is the stuff of nightmares.”

Megan nodded, then whirled to retrace her path through the exhibit. “Janice? May we speak to you for a moment?”

Eyes worried, the young woman joined them, looking nervous. “What’s wrong?”

“I need you to erect a partition across this area, just while Steve is here this morning,” Megan explained. “It’s powerful, and I think the cockpit simulator does a magnificent job of conveying the magnitude of the decision Steve had to make. Even so, I don’t want him to see it. He lived it and he doesn’t need any help remembering that awful day. I get sick to my stomach just standing here.”

Megan saw Janice crumpling under the criticism. She touched her arm. “I’m glad it’s here. Steve will be glad, too, when I tell him. It’s all too easy for the public to brush off the dark side of war. They want the happy stories, not the dark truths. Anyone with a soul is going to be deeply moved by this area. You’ve all done an amazing job here. But you have to remember that while it’s just a story from a time long before you and I were born, for Steve, it was barely more than two years
ago. If you were he, would you want to see this and relive that day?"

Janice’s face had lost all color and she was visibly shaking as she shook her head. Clint jumped up and put his arm around her. “We’re not criticizing you. The public needs to see this. Just for this morning, we want a temporary partition to protect our Captain. Seeing his whole life and the reminders of what he lost laid out like this is going be hard enough. He’s tough, but he’s still human.”

She nodded and gathered her composure with a deep breath. “I’ll take care of it. We can put up some black curtains. I’ll inform you when the barrier is in place.”

Megan smiled gently at her. “Thank you.”

After Janice darted out of sight, Megan let Clint pull her into a hug. “I can’t even bring myself to sit in the cockpit chair. How’d you manage it?”

“It had to be done. We needed to know what it did so we can tell him about it later. It’s a good exhibit. Packs a punch. It’s about time someone pointed out the tough choices we face in battle.”

He gave her a final squeeze. “Let’s go find him and get him through this. It’s going to be a rough morning.”

“The Bucky tribute alone is enough to shatter me.”

“We still have the last part to walk through,” he reminded her as the walked. “I wonder who spilled that S.H.I.E.L.D. did a bad mock-up of the hospital room?”

Megan just gaped. Behind a railing was a small hospital room, similar to the one Steve said he had awoken in. There was a large hole in the wall where Steve had made his escape, and it opened to the next exhibit: photographs taken of him in Times Square, barefoot and shocked as he realized he had wakened in a new world. A panel over the railing displayed a quote from Captain Rogers, “I thought I was Hydra’s prisoner and that they’d tried to trick me with a fake hospital room. I had a responsibility to escape and get back to my team. When I realized that I had missed a few decades, I had to figure out what to do with my life.”

Below the quote, the panel asked the museum guest what they would have done next and invited the guest to consider that before going around the corner to see what Captain Rogers had done. Megan and Clint shared a smile and sideways glance as they turned the corner and saw a life-sized photograph of Captain America standing back-to-back with Thor as they fought the Chitauri. Other photographs showed Steve alongside the other Avengers, all of them fighting to protect the people of New York.

“Are you okay? That day was hell for all of you,” Megan said softly.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to linger here. We have a mission today. We can always come back on our own time if we want to wallow in misery.”

Megan shook her head. “No, thank you. I’d rather get my stories from the source. But maybe I can make this into a mental game of finding as many errors as I can and distance myself from it a bit.”

“Good plan.” He turned on his com. “The contest of the morning is to see who can find the most factual errors in exhibit. Steve is our judge. Jarvis will keep score.”

“What do we win?” Tony wanted to know.

Clint looked to Megan.
“Bragging rights?” she offered lamely.

“A rusty spork,” Natasha offered. “From here on in, we’ll pass it between us as a trophy earned for doing the best job of protecting him as he dives in without concern for his own safety. If it happens to be actually used for that purpose, leave the blood on it. It will bring out the color of the rust.”

“Seriously guys?” Steve said over the com, laughter in his voice. “You’re trying to supplement my shield with a rusty spork?”

“Desperate times, yada yada,” Megan fired back. “Besides, a spork is a lot easier to carry concealed than your shield.”

“Factual error number one,” Bruce said. “It says here that Bucky enlisted as a volunteer.”

“He told me he did,” Steve said over the com.

“Was his serial number 32557038?”

“Yeah. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“The first two digits for volunteers in New York between 1941 and 1945 were one and two, while the first two digits for draftees from the same region during the same time were three and two,” Bruce explained softly.

“He never told me.”

Megan winced at the hurt she heard in his voice and went to find him. He was still standing at the entrance to the exhibit, gaping at the sign.

“Did he tell you what year he was born?” Bruce asked gently.

Megan put her arms around his waist as he answered Bruce, “March tenth, nineteen seventeen, a year before me.”

“Okay, we’ll be polite and not point out the date error in their huge etched glass display. At the top, they say he was born in nineteen sixteen. At the bottom, they list his birth year as nineteen seventeen.”

“Maybe he was born again?” Clint asked over the com. “Once as a friend and the second time as a smart-ass?”

Steve laughed. “If anyone could manage that, it would have been Bucky.”

“I must point out that is not the common definition of ‘born again,’” Jarvis told them. “I have recorded two points for Dr. Banner.”

“And this, kids, is why we hire proofreaders,” Tony said. “Okay, I always play to win. Banner is two points ahead and that’s unacceptable. Find me some errors, Jarvis.”

“That would be cheating, Sir.”

“Only if I’m caught, Jarvis.”

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Megan pulled Steve away from the exhibit entrance where he was faced with a larger than life painting of himself saluting someone. “It’s going to get to you. It starts by showing a before and after of you in Project Rebirth. Then it talks about Bucky and the Howling Commandos. From there, it goes back to your childhood, tracing your path forward to when you were accepted into the program and then focuses on what you did during the war. They have some video clips showing on a continuous loop, and one of them is Peggy talking about you.”

While she talked, Steve closed his eyes, clearly trying to brace himself for seeing it all himself.

“We’ve had them put the mock-up of the Valkyrie cockpit behind curtains for the morning. You don’t need any more help having nightmares. It’s powerful, and asks guests to sit in your shoes and decide what to do. After that, you see a pathetic mockup of a hospital room, complete with the hole you made in the wall, and photos of your visit to Times Square. The last part of the exhibit shows you fighting the Chitauri, choosing once again to fight to protect the innocent. All of the Avengers are shown, but not Hawkeye’s or Black Widow’s faces.”

“So there are three big triggers, not including the cockpit: Bucky, the Howlers, and Peggy.” Steve took a deep breath. “That sounds tolerable.”

“That is just what stood out the most to me. There might be other things that I don’t recognize as triggers, but you don’t have to linger for any of it. A quick walk through and a comment that they did a good job will keep the staff happy. You don’t owe them anything.”

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Janice walked with them as they toured the exhibit. “We were only able to recover one sketchbook,” she explained to Steve as they toured the zone dedicated to his life in Brooklyn and his hobby of sketching. “No one seems to know where your belongings were sent after the plane went down. This one was donated by a descendant of a member of the 107th who said you had lent it to him to get feedback on the sketch you’d done for him.”

Steve nodded, recognizing the book. “No other books turned up?”

Janice shook her head. “It’s possible that they are in the hands of private collectors. We’ve tried our best, but there is no trace we can find. It’s strange, really, how few of your belongings have survived given your fame even before your presumed death.”

Steve shrugged. “I grew up poor. When you don’t have much to start with, there isn’t much to lose.” As he looking at Janice, Megan noticed he softened his tone slightly. “The Howling Commandos were a tight knit bunch. They knew how much I hated the attention. It doesn’t surprise me one bit that they put my stuff out of reach.”

Megan smiled as Janice processed Steve’s comment. “Are you saying they saved your things and somehow ensured you got them back?”

“I’m not saying much of anything,” he replied, smiling cryptically. “I’m just pointing out that we always had each other’s backs.”

“We reached out to them in our research. That’s how we were able to borrow so many
photographs.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I wrote my Master’s thesis on you, Captain. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to learn there are materials out there I never got to see?”

“When I die for real, maybe you’ll get to scratch that itch,” he teased her.

Janice covered her mouth, horrified at how she sounded.

“Janice, meet the real Steve: prankster, smart-ass, and occasional pain in my neck.” Megan said, smiling as Steve grinned unapologetically. “It wasn’t blind idealism that bound the Howling Commandos together. They were a family.”

“Take a look at this,” Steve said, pulling his compass out of a pocket of his uniform He put it into her shanking hands.

“Is this…? There was a film clip that showed you using it… Peggy’s photo was in the lid.”

Steve opened it, nodding at the picture as she cradled the compass in her palm. “I had it with me the whole time. I was talking to her on the radio when I put the plane in the water.”

“She never said what you talked about. It’s been a source of endless speculation,” Janice said quietly as she studied the photo and looked up at Steve, asking for but not expecting an answer.

“This stays between us,” he said, squeezing Megan’s hand as he talked.

Janice nodded, promising her silence.

“I’ll write the whole conversation down later and give permission for it to be unsealed after my death. For now, let’s just say I let her know that Schmidt was dead, what my options were, and what I knew I had to do. In our own way, we said our good-byes. We kept talking until the plane hit the water. I’m not sure when the radio got cut off on her end, but she was with me the whole time. It gave me the courage to see it through.”

“Thank you, sir.” Janice said as she carefully closed the compass and handed it back.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hey, Cap, they have your old bike!” Tony called. “I read Dad’s notes on all the things he wanted to do to it. Come tell me what modifications he actually made.”

“We’re coming, Tony,” Steve answered. “We can hear you over the com, you know.”

“Yeah, but shouting is more fun. Besides, deciding what to block out gives Jarvis something to do.”

“I am hardly lacking in tasks, Sir.”

“Tony,” Pepper chided him, “Please.”

“Pepper, you are a saint,” Megan told her, glad that she had a field com for the day, too. Megan glanced over at Janice, “You’re getting to see all of them with their public faces off. I hope you’re prepared for this.”
“Megan, are you implying that I’m difficult?” Tony asked giving her his most innocent expression as they approached.

“I’m not implying anything, Tony, I’m just telling it like it is.”

“I can’t believe you have it,” Steve said, stepping over the velvet rope. He put his shield in the slots in the handlebars and sat down on his bike. “This is where we’ll take pictures with the kids,” he said, looking around to see how to best get the kids up to the bike with minimal disruption.

“Breathe, whatever your name is,” Tony told Janice when her eyes went wide at the sight of Steve sitting on his old motorcycle. “He rode it into battle against the Nazis. He’s hardly going to break it by sitting on it. He can’t even steal it since it’s bolted to that stand and probably had all the fuel drained out of it, too.” Tony turned to Steve. “We can fix that, you know. I brought the suit. It’s as simple matter to release the clamp, add oil and diesel, let Megan get on behind you, and off you go.”

Steve shook his head wistfully as he ran his fingers over the frame. “It seems like yesterday.”

“Duh. It pretty much was.” Tony commented as he folded his arms over his chest. “So what all did dear old Dad do to this baby?”

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After Steve had satisfied the museum's staff that the exhibit was something they should be proud of, they moved outside for the official ceremony. He didn’t bother putting medicine in his eyes and opted instead just to cover them with patches and shield his face with sunglasses and his hat. It would make it easier to visit with the children when they went back indoors.

Megan guided him by gently pushing and pulling on his arm as she held it. While it was always easier to guide him by having him hold onto her, they were keeping up pretenses until he was ready to take the stage. The hardest part, at least for Megan, was pretending to be interested in all of the pomp and circumstance when she really found it tedious and boring. There seemed to be a never-ending list of speakers before Steve was slated to take his place at the podium. Fortunately, Nat and Clint provided plenty of snarky commentary as they kept an eye on the crowds from their different vantage points. More than once, Megan had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

When Steve was finally introduced, she walked with him to the podium, kissed his cheek, and returned to her seat a few paces behind where Steve stood. She had noticed a few puzzled glances begin shared between members of the press, but no one openly commented on her odd decision to walk with him to the microphone.

“I’ve seen a few strange things in my life,” Steve began, “but nothing really prepares you for seeing most of your life and some of your belongings laid out in a museum exhibit. I have to say, it’s really weird. But I really do appreciate the opportunity to let the world know about the work the S.S.R. and the Howling Commandos did to end the Second World War. People attach too much credit to me and not enough to the team I was lucky enough to be a part of.

“The night before the procedure with the serum, Dr. Erskine asked me to promise that no matter what happened, I’d continue to be a good man. It reminded me of the way my mother used to
always say that you learned a lot about the character of a man when he had to choose between doing what was right and what was easy. I’ve done my best to make both of them proud. I wish the rest of the Howling Commandos could be here to see how much you appreciate the work they did in partnership with the S.S.R. They were good people and it was my honor to serve with them.

“No exhibit can do them justice because no museum display can capture the totality of who they were as individuals. You don’t know who told the best jokes late at night or who we all relied on to cheer us up when rations were short and the days long. You don’t know who snored the loudest or could always be counted on to find a pint of whiskey no matter where we were. Maybe that doesn’t matter in the end, but those are the memories I treasure. I see their courage in the Honorary Howling Commandos I’ve had the privilege to know. I know they’d be pleased to welcome those kids to their ranks. Even though this exhibit has my name on it, it’s really about the whole team. I hope you all remember that when you visit.

“Before the H.H.C.’s and I head inside, I want to address some of the rumors I know have been circulating about me.” With that, Steve took off his eyeglasses and pushed up the brim of his ball cap a bit. “There has been speculation about where I’ve been and what I’ve been doing. Mostly, I’ve been healing. About three weeks ago, I was badly hurt on a mission. I’m expected to make a full recovery, but my right hand is still pretty sore and my eyes are extremely sensitive to light. I hope you’ll understand why I’m not shaking hands with anyone today or signing autographs. I’ve had a good reminder of how brave my fellow soldiers are when they are wounded in the line of duty. A lot of them bear injuries that can’t be healed. I’m not half as strong as they are to keep moving forward despite those challenges.”

He put his sunglasses back on and pulled the brim of his cap back down over his face. “The last few weeks have proven that. Braille is not easy to learn, especially at my age, though I’ve given it my best effort.” Steve paused to let the crowd settle again after laughing at his joke. “I’ve been spoiled by the healing abilities the serum gives me and I’ve gotten a pretty strong reminder of how fortunate I really am. All I can do now is try to remember that lesson in humility as I move forward.

“If anyone thinks my recent injuries make me an appealing target, I want to assure you this is not the case. All of my fellow Avengers are here and have been unwavering in their support, friendship, and extra efforts to make sure Megan and I are not attacked while I recover. Tony, is there anything you want to add?”

Tony stood up, turning to wave to the crowd as he did so. Megan knew he was patched in to the microphone system Steve was using to address the crowd, though she figured only Jarvis and Tony knew how they’d accomplished it. “We’ve got your back, Captain. Hawkeye and Black Widow are watching from the shadows as they always do, and the Hulk’s alter ego is already inside. I half-expect Thor has Heimdall keeping an eye on things from Asgard. We’re all using our field communicators so we can play backup to the excellent security teams already in place today.”

Tony made a show of putting his hand to his ear. “Bruce wants to know why your sketchbook is full of pin-up girls!”

Steve laughed, playing along with Tony though Bruce had said no such thing. “A lot of the fellows in the 107th asked me to make sketches of their girls back home based on photographs they showed me. The notebook Bruce is referring to is where I did a first draft before making them a final drawing on nicer paper. We didn’t have email back then, and even photographs were often hard to come by. Drawing gave me something to do for the guys when we were waiting for new intel.”

“Only you can make drawing half-naked ladies sound like a noble undertaking, Cap.”
Steve smiled in his direction, “Tony, by today’s standards, the drawings aren’t even risqué.”

“I told you this new century is better!” Tony said as he sat down again.

“Captain Rogers, will you answer questions?” one of the reporters shouted.

“A few,” Steve turned to the side and held out his hand. “Megan?”

She stood and tucked her hand in his elbow as she joined him at the podium.

Steve put his mouth to her ear. “Use your judgment. We can keep it short,” he murmured to her, being careful not to move his lips too much. He knew all too well how the press liked to hire lip readers to decipher private conversations.

Megan nodded her understanding, followed by a whispered “Okay,” before she pointed to a reporter in the first row.

“Megan, how did you and Captain America first meet?”

Steve’s tone became sharp. “She’s Doctor Buchwald to you. She earned that doctorate. To answer your question, we met in the S.H.I.E.L.D. cafeteria.”

Megan pointed to another reporter who had his hand up. “Doctor Buchwald, what’s it like dating a super hero?”

Megan shrugged, fighting the urge to roll her eyes at the inane line of questioning. “I can’t really say since Captain America isn’t a real person but an image the government cooked up to increase sales of war bonds. I can say that is has been a pleasure getting to know Steve Rogers. Yes, he’s easy on the eyes, and he was so before the serum, too. Most people don’t appreciate how smart he is or what a wicked sense of humor he has. Our friendship is a blessing I never expected when I took a job at S.H.I.E.L.D. Today is about Steve and the people he served with. All further questions need to have that as a focus if you expect either of us to answer them.” She waited a moment, then pointed to another reporter.

“Captain Rogers, what has been the greatest challenge since you were found in the wreckage of the Valkyrie? In the same vein, what has been the change you appreciate the most?”

Steve smiled grimly. “From my perspective, I lost all my friends and teammates overnight and not very long ago. I miss them. As to what I appreciate most, it has to be modern medicine. You all take things like asthma inhalers and vaccines for granted. Mother had the priest give me Last Rights more times than I can count. You can’t imagine what a difference an inhaler would have made to me when I was a kid.”

“Two more questions,” Megan instructed. She smiled a bit as she saw Tony give her a thumbs-up. It was a nice boost of confidence since her knees felt like jelly as she stood in front of the crowd and faced a bank of cameras. Not even Steve’s steady presence was enough to calm her nerves. She didn’t want to think about how many people were watching on TV and the internet.

“Which one of the Howling Commandos made the greatest contribution to the team’s success?”

Steve shook his head. “That’s like asking me if you can live better without your heart or your liver. All of the guys were vital in the field, and the support we had from Howard Stark, Colonel Philips, Peggy Carter, and everyone in the 107th was invaluable. Every single person made a contribution that mattered. We were a team and most of them never got the credit they deserved.”
“What one thing do you hope visitors to the exhibit take away as a lasting lesson?”

“Freedom has a price and can’t be taken for granted. We all have to do our part to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Bucky and I were just a couple of kids from Brooklyn. None of us set out to be written about in the history books. We were all just ordinary people who were challenged with extraordinary circumstances. Doing the right thing can be hard, but it’s always worth it. Thank you.”

As the crowd broke into applause, Megan and Steve returned to their seats, hand in hand with Megan carefully guiding him so he didn’t trip.

Steve leaned close to her. “Relax. The worst is over. Now we can enjoy the kids.”

“How long until the politicians find out what you have planned?”

“Not long, especially since I already said we were going inside with them. I think the next speaker is going to introduce the H.H.C.’s and tell them it’s time for us to go meet them. If you want to make their heads spin, why don’t we go join them in the middle of this mob and walk in with them?”

Megan grinned. “Let’s do it.”

Clint commented over the com, “You’re about to piss off a lot of grumpy old men, Cap. I’m sure they intended to pose for campaign pictures with you after this ceremony was over.”

“Such a shame,” he answered, being careful not to move his lips.

Megan smiled and forced herself to pay attention when the representative from the hospital took the stage. “It is my pleasure to announce that for our final event of the morning, Captain Rogers has a special surprise planned for some of his Honorary Howling Commandos who have joined us here today. For those of you unfamiliar with this group,” the speaker continued, “Captain Rogers is a regular visitor Children’s National. Many of the children he visits with have fought for their lives against cancer and other life-threatening diseases. A visit from the Captain never fails to brighten our corridors. He calls these little soldiers his H.H.C.’s, and they have more than earned that title. These youngsters have demonstrated great courage in the face of endless tests and treatments that would challenge the resolve of the most battle hardened member of the armed forces. Captain Rogers has worked with Children’s National and invited some of our former and current patients along with their families to spend some time with him touring the exhibit before it is opened to the public. Please join me in giving the H.H.C’s a round of applause as they are escorted inside to begin their private tour.”

Steve stood up, took Megan’s arm, and the two of them left the stage via the steps located in front. Pepper and Tony met them at the bottom of the steps as the press moved in to cover this unexpected change in the schedule the had been given.

The camera flashes were nearly blinding and Megan was grateful when Tony handed her a pair of sunglasses from his suit jacket before putting on his own pair. “Follow us,” he said as he and Pepper forged a path to where the children had been seated for the long, boring ceremony.

“Captain Rogers!” one young girl called, breaking away from her parents to collide with Tony’s legs. She nearly fell, hampered s she was by leg braces and crutches, but he caught her and helped her regain her balance as Pepper rescued the drawing she was clutching. “You let your crutches get ahead of you there, sweetheart. Are you okay?”
She nodded. “Captain Rogers!”

Steve knelt down and opened his arms to her. “What is it, Amanda?”

Hugging him, she whispered in his ear, “How’d you know it was me?”

“I recognized your voice, sweetheart. What’s wrong? You sound like you’ve been crying.”

“I drew you a picture and you can’t even see it. You’re not supposed to get hurt.”

“Oh, honey, everyone gets hurt now and then, even me. But once we get inside, I’ll be able to look at it. I only have to keep my eyes covered in the bright light. Where is your drawing?”

“I have it, Steve,” Pepper said.

“Ms. Potts will keep it safe while we go inside. Give Mr. Stark your crutches, Amanda. You’re riding in on my shoulders. Are your parents nearby?”

“We’re right here, Captain,” Amanda’s father said.

“Good. Tony, you and Pepper are going to lead the way in, followed by Amanda’s family while Megan, Amanda, and I bring up the rear. Will you help me get her on my shoulders? With my right hand numb, it’s a bit tricky.”

“Got it.”

Steve slipped his shield off and handed it to Megan, then took hold of Amanda’s metal-encased ankles as Tony settled her on to Steve’s shoulders. “Are you ready to be taller than everyone here, Amanda?”

“Yup!”

“Hold on under my chin if you feel like you’re losing your balance. I promise I won’t drop you.”

“Okay.”

Carefully, Steve stood up, smiling to himself as Amanda beamed at the crowd.

“I’m right here,” Megan said, gently putting her fingers on the inside of his arm. “We have to step down off the curb, cross the street, and go up two sets of steps to the entrance. Amanda, I want you to tell Captain Rogers when we get close to any steps, either up or down. Can you do that?”

“Yup.”

Megan grinned at her and gave her a high-five before turning and glancing over her shoulder.

“Steve, The H.H.C.s are lined up behind us.”

“Best march I ever went on,” he said softly. “No one’s shooting at us.”

“Be glad looks can’t kill, Cap,” Natasha said, her smile plain in her voice as it came over the com. “There are a lot of people shooting daggers at you with their eyes while they pretend to be happy for the cameras. They apparently had no idea this was going to happen today. And you’re making the security teams nervous with the way you deviated from where they expected you to go.”

“Ask me if I care, Nat. They keep saying this is my day, so they shouldn’t complain when I do something I want. I’m not a U.S.O. puppet any more.”
“Captain Rogers, what’s wrong with the girl you’re carrying?” Megan heard a reporter shout to them as they made their way through the crowds.

“Nothing. She’s perfect just the way she is.”

Another reporter shouted, “How old is she?”

“Under eighteen,” he said, though Megan could hear growing displeasure in his voice.

“Can you tell us her name?”

Steve answered blandly, “Brown Recluse.”

“I approve that choice, Captain,” Nat commented over the coms.

“Seconded!” Clint said. “What bargain bin did they get this press group from?”

“Seriously, what disease is she suffering from? Cancer doesn’t put kids in leg braces.”

“Insensitivity, cluelessness, or rudeness. Pick one,” Steve snapped to the reporter who had asked.

“No more questions,” Megan told them, turning as she walked to glare at the reporters trying to follow them. “Captain Rogers is very protective of his H.H.C.’s and I’d hate to for you to spoil the morning by making him angry.”

“We’re just trying to establish the facts!”

“Ignore them, Megan,” Steve told her softly. “I’m done talking to them. They’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Get ready to step down!” Amanda announced as they approached the edge of the lawn.

Megan smiled up at her. “Good job. Curb’s four steps ahead. Stop at the edge?”

“No, I’m good as long as I know it’s coming.”

“Show off,” Megan muttered. He made it look easy to stride across the uneven lawn and step down off the curb despite not being able to see. The fact he could do it with a wiggling youngster on his shoulders was simply unfair. They made their way across the street and up the steps without further incident. Some of the security team broke off to escort those in wheelchairs to the nearby ramp while the rest blocked the press and kept them from moving beyond the sidewalk.

“Duck your head, Amanda,” Tony told her as he and Pepper held the front doors open and gestured Amanda’s family to go inside. “Captain Rogers is really tall and you’ll need to bend forward to get through the doors without hitting your head.”

Steve bent his knees and waited for Amanda to duck low. “Are you ready?” he asked, wanting to make sure she was going to clear the top of the door frame.
“Yup,” she said again. Megan was starting to think it was Amanda’s favorite word.

Pepper added softly, “Go ahead, Steve. She’s clear.”

“Are you going to put me down, now?” she asked as soon as they were inside.

Steve slowed a bit, hesitating slightly. “I was going to wait until we got to the exhibit so you could be first to sit on my old motorcycle. But I can put you down now if you’d rather walk.”

“Nope. You need to take your hat off, now. Daddy always takes his hat off inside. He says it’s good manners.”

Steve stepped forward confidently once more, trusting Megan to guide him now that they’d established Amanda was happy to be carried. “Well, he’s right. But since the hat is helping to protect my eyes, it’s okay to break the manners rules for a few minutes. Once we’re away from the bright lights, though, I’m taking it off. Dr. Banner has a bag to keep it in. In fact, it would be a big help if you’d give it to him for me and then you can show me that picture you drew.”

“Okay.”

When they reached the exhibit entrance, Steve smoothly went down on one knee so Tony could lift Amanda off of his shoulders. He gave her a hug and said, “We make a good team,” before standing up and handing her his ball cap. “Bruce?”

“Right here. You must be Miss Amanda,” Bruce said, kneeling down. He took off the backpack he was wearing and opened it.

Megan watched with a smile as Amanda made her way over to him and solemnly handed over Steve’s hat. “Why aren’t you wearing a Hulk t-shirt so everyone knows you are?” she asked.

Bruce managed to keep a straight face as he answered, “I didn’t want to do anything that might make people pay more attention to me instead of Captain Rogers since it’s his special day.”

Megan noticed that Amanda’s mother was covering her face with her hand, amused and embarrassed by her daughter’s comments. Steve had removed the patches and sunglasses from his eyes and grinned as he commented, “You’d better watch out, Pepper. In a few years she might be your new C.E.O.”

“It would be my pleasure to work with this young lady. She certainly has the necessary poise to deal with the media.”

“Is that what you call it?” Amanda’s dad choked out, barely hiding his own mortified grin behind his hand.”

“Here you are, Miss Amanda,” Pepper said as she handed the picture back to the five-year old.

Amanda took the drawing and gave it to Steve, who sat down on the floor and put her on his lap while the museum-approved photographer continued to take pictures. “Tell me about the drawing.”

“That’s you. You’re riding Pumpkin. You said she was a big, black horse that your girlfriend likes to ride. Did you ride Pumpkin yet?”

“Not yet. But that horse you drew sure looks a lot like Pumpkin. You even have her swishing her tail to swat at the flies she hates so much.”
“I can’t ride horses, so I think you should.”

“You can ride horses, Amanda.” Steve told her. “There are children who use wheelchairs that ride Pumpkin and other well-behaved horses like her.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m going to hang this on my refrigerator when I get home. Thank you for giving it to me. I like it a lot,” Steve said as he helped Amanda stand up and then got up off the floor, too. “Let’s go see my old motorcycle and get some pictures before you and your parents go see the exhibit. Thank you for coming today.”

“You’re welcome.”

Pepper took the drawing back while Steve and Amanda went over to the bike. Janice and the photographer had temporarily removed the velvet ropes and set up soft, diffuse lighting to illuminate the exhibit.

“Are the lights too bright for you, Captain?” Janice asked as Steve helped Amanda sit down in front of him on his bike. He had his shield propped against the front tire so he could let each child put it into the slots in the handlebars, then remove it for their photograph.

“As long as you don’t use any flashbulbs, I’ll be okay,” he assured them.

“Go ahead and smile, Miss Amanda. I’m going to take several pictures while you sit there.” The photographer said, smiling gently at the young girl who’d wrapped them all around her little finger in a matter of moments.

“Take your time, Mister,” Amanda answered, perfectly at ease in the spotlight.

Megan wasn’t the only one to lose her battle to hold back her laughter.

“Where were you in 1943 when the U.S.O. had me on tour? I could have used your help, sweetheart.”

Amanda tipped her head back against Steve’s chest as she looked up at him with a furrowed brow. “I was still growing in my Mommy’s tummy.”

That set off another wave of laughter through the crowd of H.H.C. parents who were watching. One mother commented about how awful it would be to be pregnant for several decades.

“When she reaches dating age, give me a call and I’ll send a security team your way. I think you’re going to need the help,” Megan heard Tony say as he sidled over to Amanda’s parents.

“Stop being sexist, Tony, and offer to pay for self defense classes for her,” Natasha snapped over the com.

He blanched and cast an apologetic glance at Pepper. The Stark Industries C.E.O. was standing with her arms crossed as she raised her eyebrow at him. Tony looked back to Amanda’s parents. “As the Black Widow and my darling Pepper have so kindly reminded me, it would be far more effective for me to pay for Amanda take self-defense classes so she can defend herself.”

Seeing Amanda’s parents start to protest, he held up his hands, “Please, do me a favor and just agree. My quality of life depends on it. Having one of them mad at me is dangerous. Both of them at once?” He shuddered and reached into a pocket of his jacket. “Here’s my card. Call my
secretary Monday morning. If you don’t, Captain Righteous over there will dig out your contact information and get it to me by lunchtime along with a Look of Severe Disappointment. Okay, now that we’ve settled that matter, it’s time to tour the exhibit.

“Come on, Amanda,” he said as he helped her down the steps after she got off of Steve’s bike. “I’ll show you where you can stand next to a picture of Captain Rogers before he got all tall and muscly. We also need to have a talk about rusty silverware and why it’s a bad idea to keep it hanging on your dining room wall. Trust me on this. Silverware belongs in the kitchen drawer and it should never, ever be allowed to get rusty. Threatening naughty boys with rusty spoons is a very poor way to defend yourself.”

Megan met Steve’s eyes and saw he was as close to bursting out in laughter as she was. “The rusty silverware thing is a bit of an inside, running joke with the Avengers,” she explained to the puzzled onlookers. “It’s not even that funny.”

She turned to the next H.H.C., a young boy that Megan estimated was about ten years old. He was sitting patiently in a wheelchair wearing a Captain America T-shirt and holding a plastic shield in his lap. “Good morning. I’m Doctor Buchwald. What’s your name?”

“That’s Caleb,” Steve said, getting off his bike to join them. “He’s a bit shy sometimes. Would you like to sit on my bike with me and get your picture taken?”

Caleb nodded and reached for Steve, who easily lifted him into his arms while his parents watched and took pictures with their phones.

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An hour later, Steve helped the last child down off of his bike and returned his shield to the harness on his back. He walked through the dimly-lit exhibit arm in arm with Megan, talking to the children and answering questions. Megan made a point of keeping Steve well away from the Valkyrie display. Looping her arm through his right elbow had the extra benefit of protecting his hand from contact.

“Hello, my little spider friend.” Megan heard Natasha say as she knelt down before Amanda and smiled at her. “You made my Captain smile today. I’m going to send you a special necklace in the mail. Watch for it.”

With that, the redhead stood up and disappeared into the crowd.

“Was that…” Amanda’s mother asked, her voice trailing off as she looked questioningly at Megan and Steve.

Megan smiled and nodded since Steve was distracted by another H.H.C. tugging at his hand. “Black Widow,” she confirmed. I’ll get you an email address to send a picture to when the gift arrives. I’ll make sure Black Widow sees it.” Megan looked around and caught Pepper’s eye, gesturing her over to join them.

Once Pepper was caught up on what had transpired, she whipped out a business card and gave it to Amanda’s parents, leaving them even more stunned than they had been after talking with Tony. “We like your daughter,” Pepper explained simply.
Megan’s strategy of protecting Steve worked for a long time, but then a boy circled back to tug on Steve’s free hand before his parents could catch up with him. “Captain Rogers, come help me fly the airplane.”

Steve shook his head. “I’m not going near that part of the exhibit, Joshua. It will give me nightmares.”

“You have nightmares?” Joshua’s eyes were wide with disbelief. His comment was loud enough that several others turned and paid close attention to what Steve was saying. Megan noticed a few parents leaning over to whisper to their children, presumably telling them that Captain America had nightmares, too.

“Is that why there’s a curtain up?”

Steve nodded. “That’s just for today because I’m here. I think they opened it a bit so you can all sit in the chair. It’s good for you to see everything, but if I sit in the pretend cockpit, it’s going to feel an awful lot like when I was making the real plane crash. I have a nightmare about that a couple of times a month as it is. I know I’ll probably have some nasty dreams tonight, but I’m hoping I don’t dream about crashing the plane.”

“What other nightmares do you have?” another H.H.C. wanted to know.

“Lots of things. When you fight in a war, you see a lot of things no one should ever see. I’m not going to tell you exactly what they are since they are stories only grown-ups should hear. Things that happened in the war are some of the things I dream about. I wake up scared and sometimes I’m confused about where I am at first. I have to turn on a lot of lights and even walk around my apartment for a little bit so I can calm down enough to go back to sleep.”

“Do you worry about a monster under your bed?” another H.H.C. asked.

Steve knelt down and took the girl’s hand in his. “Do you, Belva?”

She nodded, chewing on her lip a bit as she made her admission.

Steve smiled at her. “When I was younger, I used to get scared by the shadows on my bedroom wall that I later figured out were from the lights outside. I don’t remember begin afraid of a monster under my bed, but I had plenty of nights when I was afraid of the dark. We didn’t have night lights back then, at least not in my apartment. It’s okay to be scared. Just try to remember that your parents will keep you safe. Do you have a favorite stuffed animal you can hug?”

Belva nodded solemnly.

“Hugs help, too,” Steve said, holding out his arms to her. Belva launched herself into his offered embrace.

“Thank you,” Megan heard her whisper.

“These kids are killing me, Cap.” Tony said over the coms. “Jarvis, make a note. We’re setting up a Joseph and Sarah Rogers memorial fund that gets channeled into supporting whatever the H.H.C’s need in and out of the hospital. Pull the standard paperwork and have it ready for me when we get back to the tower.”

“Tony…” Steve looked around, finding and meeting the billionaire’s eyes as he stroked Belva’s hair with his free hand.
“You’re going to need it. We should have set it up before today, actually. Once this whole shebang hits the wires, there’s going to be an influx of donations. We need to have a website set up, too. Pepper?”

“I’m on it,” she said, pulling out her phone. “I’ll have my assistant work with Jarvis. They’ll release a statement to the press within the hour.” After a few taps of her manicured fingers, she put her phone back in her bag. “Done.”

Steve closed his eyes, clearly fighting for control over his emotions. He let Belva go and stood up, reaching for Megan as he did so.

“Your eyes are starting to hurt again, I can tell,” Megan said, changing the subject. “I have an idea.”

Steve listened as she whispered in his ear, then smiled. “We need to find Janice.”

“Stay here. We’ll set up the chairs and I’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

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A few minutes later, Megan was sitting on a wheeled office chair waiting for Steve to join her. Janice had secured two chairs for them out of a nearby office, much to the delight of their regular owners. Apparently, having Captain America borrow your desk chair for a half hour was cause for great celebration.

He sat down next to her and carefully removed the glove from his right hand as the H.H.C.’s watched in awe. When Tony and Pepper had moved through the exhibit and told the guests that Captain Rogers was going to talk about his injuries and show the kids his burned hand while his bandages were changed, there had been a bit of a mad dash to get a front row seat. Megan smiled as she watched the children study their hero. They knew better than anyone how unpleasant medical procedures could be. Megan had guessed, correctly it seemed, that the kids would be eager to see how Steve coped.

“What do you want to know?” he asked as he laid his uniform glove across his leg and held out his hand for Megan to treat.

“What’s that blue stuff?”

“When I was hurt, the medicines the doctors had didn’t do anything to stop the pain. Most medicines don’t work on me. Burns hurt a lot. Dr. Banner and Mr. Stark invented a blue goo that is safe to put on my burns that makes the wound completely numb. It only lasts a little while, so we have to wipe off the old goo and put on new every couple of hours. Once it is tested a lot more, they hope it can be used for to help other people not hurt when they have bad burns.”

“How much did it hurt?”

Megan didn’t even look up from her work as she answered. “When he first got to the hospital at SHIELD, he was screaming because he hurt so bad. He was having a really hard time holding still, too. His eyes were burned and he couldn’t see where he was, either.”

“I was scared,” Steve said, nodding as Megan talked. “I just wanted to kick and fight and I knew I
had to hold still so the doctors and nurses could help me. Joshua, you asked about my nightmares. Lately, I have had nightmares about being hurt in the fire.”

“Are your fingers going to be okay? They look pretty gross.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah, I’ll be okay eventually. If you want to come up and get a closer look, go ahead.” He leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees, holding out his hand for any one who wanted to examine it. A few of the kids stayed back, but most of them crowded closer, much to Clint’s amusement. “They have no aversion to blood or gore, do they? It makes sense, given how much time they’ve spent in the hospital. But seriously, Steve, they’re looking at your hand like it’s the coolest thing they’ve ever seen!” he said over the com. “You could sell tickets.”

“You could raise money without even joining a kick line!” Tony added, lightening the mood.

Megan had a difficult time keeping the conversation on the coms separate from what was happening in front of her with the kids. How did the rest of them manage the dual inputs during missions?

“Did you cry?” one of the kids asked as he filed past.

“More than once,” Steve said solemnly. “It’s good to cry when you’re hurting. It’s even better to let someone you care about give you a hug or sit with you while you cry.” Steve glanced at Megan, then back at the boy. “I still have a hard time with that, Pedro, but I’m convinced Megan is right. Crying doesn’t mean you’re weak. It means you’re human.”

Megan saw more than a few parents nodding in approval amidst a handful of scowls from old-school fathers who apparently clung to the view men should be stoic at all times. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes and focused instead on nudging the next generation of boys in a healthier direction.

Once everyone had examined his hand to their satisfaction, Steve slipped a plastic glove over it and put his uniform gauntlet back on. He gave Megan a resigned glance and she nodded, reaching into the bag Bruce had handed her and pulled out new eye patches and red glop.

“I hate this part,” Steve complained, making no effort to hide his frustration from the kids.

Megan smiled gently and stood up, “I know you do. But you have to do what the doctors said if you’re going to get better.” Steve had apparently decided to fully open up with the kids and she was quite happy to play along. Being a role model for them probably made it all easier for him to bear. “Tip your head back.”

“What are you doing?” one of the kids asked.

Megan explained, “This is a medicine to numb his eyes. In the fire, his eyes got burned along with the rest of his face and chest where it wasn’t protected by his shield. Captain Rogers’ eyes are still healing and the doctors said he needs to keep the patches on almost all the time to protect them from light. Today was special, but now it’s time for more medicine and eye patches. The good part is that the museum can turn the lights back up to normal levels for the rest of you. They can also take the curtain down.”

“Is it scary not being able to see?”

“Samantha, do you want to answer that?” Steve asked.

“Yes, it is,” the fourteen-year-old said from the back. “I lost one eye to a tumor and I can’t see on
“Scares me, too,” Steve added. “We weren’t sure at first if my eyes were going to heal or not. I was pretty darn grumpy, especially when I thought about how much I like to draw.”

“Megan, you should tell them about his tantrum,” Natasha said in her ear.

Megan saw Tony wince and grab Pepper’s hand. “Leave the man some dignity, Widow!” he said.

“It’s a teachable moment,” Nat replied evenly.

Steve waved his hand in defeat, wordlessly giving Megan permission as she handed him the eye patches and sat down beside him.

“Shall I tell them about your temper tantrum?” Megan asked Steve, pretending the idea had just occurred to her.

“You had a tantrum?”

“Oh, yeah. I was really frustrated and threw an entire box of Scrabble tiles across the room.”

“Steve has been staying at my apartment since he got out of the hospital,” Megan explained. “I have a spare bedroom and we thought it would be smart for him to have someone else around in case he needed help while he figured out how to do things without being able to see. We’ve both been trying to learn Braille and I got a Scrabble game with Braille tiles so we could play the game while we practice. I came home from work one day and found Mr. Grumpy pouting on the balcony. There were Scrabble tiles everywhere. He’s lucky he didn’t break anything when he threw the box.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, he was really grumpy and didn’t even want to talk to me without being snarly. So the first thing I did was call Black Widow. Even Captain Rogers knows not to argue with her.” That set off a ripple of laughter, especially among the adults. “She took him to the gym so he could punch a boxing bag for a few hours. While she was doing that, Hawkeye came over and took me out to dinner. He bought me the most amazing chocolate dessert, I couldn’t help but feel better. The next day, Steve spent several hours picking up all of the tiles he could find.”

Steve picked up the narrative. “It took me five hours to find as many as I could, sort them out, and figure out how many were missing. After all that, I still had to ask Megan to help me find the last two.”

One child asked, “Why didn’t you help him pick them up?”

“I’m not the one who threw them across the room in the first place. He made the mess, so he had to clean it up. It would have been different if it were an accident or if he were in danger of hurting himself. If it were broken glass, for example, I’d have helped right away. But just because he was frustrated didn’t make it okay to throw a game across the room, did it?”

Heads shook solemnly. Megan couldn’t help but smile at how serious the kids’ expressions were.

“My mom would have put me in time out for sure!” one child said as another commented, “I’d have been grounded for a week.” Conversations erupted among several of the kids, including a comment that grown-ups can’t be put into time out. Megan heard another child counter that Black Widow could put anyone in time-out that she wanted to, making Natasha laugh over the coms.
One question reached them over the others. “Captain Rogers, do you miss your mommy?”

“Every day.” Steve admitted. “I was only twenty-two when she died. She was a nurse and worked in a hospital in New York City. It made her extra good at taking care of me when I was sick. I was sick a lot when I was your age. I almost died several times.”

“Is that why you always visit kids like us in the hospital?”

“That’s one reason,” Steve admitted. “I remember what its like to be sick all the time. It’s not much fun.”

“What about your daddy? You never talk about him,” Caleb said, speaking for the first time all day.

“He died before I was born, Caleb, so I never even met him. But I sure wish I’d gotten to know him. My mother liked to talk about him. It makes me sad sometimes to think what it would have been like to have him around when I was growing up. But he had a job to do and it’s not his fault he died when he did.” Somehow, Steve recognized the kids by their voices, to Megan’s continued amazement.

“Are you and Doctor Buchwald going to get married?” another H.H.C. asked from his seat on the floor mere feet from where Megan was sitting.

“I think you should,” another child said before either Steve or Megan had a chance to speak. “Then Captain Rogers won’t be alone any more. My mommy says everyone needs someone to love them.”

Steve smiled. “Your mommy is very smart, Mark. But I’m not alone. I have a lot of friends and I have all of you.”

“But she’s a doctor and she can take care of you when you get hurt,” Mark argued.

Megan laughed. “I’m not that kind of doctor. I know a lot of science and went to school a long time, but I’m not a physician. Steve has his own doctors and nurses at S.H.I.E.L.D. to take care of him when he gets hurt.”

“But you can help him change his bandages.”

“Yes, I can do that much.”

“Maybe he should marry Black Widow since she can boss him around,” Amanda piped up.

Megan turned and buried her face in Steve’s shoulder so Amanda wouldn’t see her laughing. “Amanda, as lovely as Black Widow is, we are never getting married,” Steve said blandly as he wrapped his arm around Megan’s waist.

“Amanda and I need to have a talk about healthy relationships,” Natasha said. “Jarvis, remind me to send her a rusty spork.”

“Certainly, Agent Romanov.” There was a brief pause before Jarvis continued, “I am having some difficulty locating a source for such a purchase.”

The assassin was unfazed. “Get me one made out of stainless steel and I’ll take care making it rust.”
“Shall I have it delivered to S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“Pep, how long until we can put her on the payroll?” Tony asked. “I want her to take my place at the next press conference you schedule me to do.”

“Jarvis, I’ll give you a post office box to send it to later.”

“As you wish, Agent Romanov,” Jarvis replied. Megan’s head was starting to hurt with the effort of tracking multiple conversations.

“You have eleven more years, Tony.” Pepper told him. “Until then, you need to continue showing up and doing your own P.R. when I tell you to. She’s five years old. She deserves to have a childhood.”

“Are there any other questions?” Steve asked his adoring fans. “I can answer one or two more before Dr. Buchwald and I need to leave.” He silently accepted the sunglasses, then ball cap Megan handed him and put them on.

“Have you asked Dr. Buchwald to marry you?”

Megan squeezed Steve’s arm in warning. “We’re not going to answer that, even though it’s a very good question. If we were getting married and the public knew it, there would be reporters following me everywhere, even worse than some of them do now. I will say that we care about each other very much. I’m still adjusting to the attention I’m already getting. Being here today is going to make that worse. Captain Rogers and I agree that I need some time get used to this before we make any decisions or announcements. Think how strange it would be to have complete strangers following you to school and the store.”

“I’d hate that.”

“It can be annoying some times. But I think being Captain Rogers’ friend is worth putting up with the annoying stuff, don’t you agree?”

The kids cheered in unison, making Megan smile. She nudged Steve as she stood up and tugged him to his feet. “See?”

“You asked a leading question, Megan.”

“They’re still right,” Clint told them. “You’re taking the limo back to Megan’s apartment. Nat and I will follow in a bit.”

“Thank you for coming, today. Megan and I will make sure you get your pictures very soon,” Steve said, waving one last time to the kids before taking Megan’s arm. The two of them made their way back to the exhibit entrance, where a huge line of museum visitors had queued up as they waited for the private tour to be over.

The mostly patient crowd let out a cheer as they caught sight of Steve, and he waved briefly to them before letting Megan lead him towards the exit, flanked once more by the security team as well as Tony, Pepper, and Bruce.

As they stepped outdoors, Clint said over the field com, “Trick arrow incoming, Steve. Don’t flinch when it hits your shield.”

As soon as the suction-cup tipped arrow made contact with the shield, it popped open to display a scroll like those normally seen in cartoons. In hastily-written block letters, it said, “Kiss her, Cap.”
Tony pulled the arrow off and read it aloud as he held the message up so the crowds could see it.

Steve smiled mischievously and raised Megan’s knuckles to his lips.

“Arrow incoming,” Clint warned. It hit Steve’s shield dead center though Steve’s back was at a different angle from where Clint was firing.

Tony removed the second arrow which said, “On the lips!” He made a production of holding it up to the crowd as he read it to Steve and Megan. They both laughed and Megan waited to see what he’d do.

He turned towards her as he brushed his right hand under her hair and put his left hand on her waist, knowing full well the cameras were stationed to his left. “Shall we give them what they want?” he asked without moving his lips.

“Oh course,” she said softly as she reached up to kiss him.

The crowd went wild.

“Congrats, you just broke Twitter.” Clint told them over the field com. “Time to head out before you take down the whole internet. See you in a few.”

“Understood,” Tony answered. Megan noticed him standing guard as she got into the limousine, followed by Steve, then Bruce, Pepper, and finally Tony himself.

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Chapter End Notes

Coming up with the rest of the exhibit was a lot of fun. Working on resumes and networking? Not so much. But it has to be done so I'll keep plugging away at it. I don't have any more stuff written "ahead" at the moment, so it may be a bit before I can update again. It all depends on exhaustion levels and the muse. The job hunt needs to come first, but mental health requires me to write some, too.

Thanks for all the feedback. Amanda clearly struck a chord with people and the little imp darn near took over this whole chapter as a result. I expect she has given her parents more than a few grey hairs over the years.
“That went amazingly well,” Tony said as he shut the limo door. “Pepper?”

She smiled and just started handing out champagne glasses as Tony popped the cork and started to pour. “I agree. I know you don’t like public speaking, Steve, but you do it well. We really need to have you do a bit more of that to bolster public support for the Avengers.”

“Have Amanda do it,” he said, stretching out his legs as he leaned back in his seat. “I’m just glad to have today behind me.”

“Amanda was something else, but all of the kids I talked to really impressed me,” Pepper commented.

“They’re good kids who’ve seen me through some dark days,” Steve replied, sipping his champagne.

“How long have you been visiting the hospital?” Bruce wanted to know. “Before last night, I’d never even heard of the H.H.C.’s. I had no idea you’d formed that group.”

“I didn’t plan it,” Steve said, shrugging as he pushed his cap up a bit as he fidgeted. “Not long after I got moved to D.C., I saw on the news where some celebrity was being interviewed after visiting a veteran’s hospital. It got me to thinking. The only thing about the U.S.O. tour I liked was talking to the kids. So I called Children’s National to see if they’d let me visit without the press being there. Once I convinced them I was who I claimed and that I was serious, they let me in. It started small, but now I go about once a week, missions permitting. The kids just need someone to see them as a person, not a set of disease or treatments. I can do that. And having a visitor can break up the boredom a bit for them.”

“I think they sense that you really understand how they feel.” Bruce observed.

“All too well. Anyway, the hospital does a good job of keeping the press out. Over time, as I got to know some of the longer-term patients better, I started giving them nicknames. Some of them ask about Bucky and the Howling Commandos, and beg for stories about them.” Steve shook his head, grinning. “It’s hard coming up with kid-appropriate stories from those days. It’s not like I can repeat the jokes Falsworth and Dugan told when we were shoveling down rations.”

Tony chuckled, shaking his head at the image Steve was painting in his mind. “It’s hard to picture you even laughing at a dirty joke.”

“You’ve let the U.S.O.’s propaganda machine get to you. We were in the army, in a war zone, with Howard supplying us with fresh reading material whenever he came to visit. Believe me, we didn’t spend all of our free time quoting Bible verses.”

“It’s good to know dear old Dad knew how to be thoughtful one upon a time.” Tony couldn’t keep the bitterness from his voice.

“He was in his own way. But I’ll never forgive him for how he abandoned you. I’d thought he was better than that.”
“So what made you form the H.H.C.’s,” Bruce asked, gently changing the subject.

“That’s all the result of one of the kids, a little girl named Georgia. She was hopping mad that that the Howling Commandos were an all male group, despite it being a different time and me telling her all about Peggy. Georgia was such a fighter, a lot like Peggy. I finally told her that she was right and that I needed a new group of Howlers with people like her on the team. That night, I picked up some card stock and made up some membership cards that I printed out. I started passing them out the next day. Her card was pinned to her dress at her funeral a couple of weeks later. Her parents told me…” Steve paused and took a deep breath. “She wore it day and night right until the end. That’s when I knew how much it mattered to the kids. Now I pass out plastic clip-on I.D. badge holders, too. It makes it easier for the caregivers to just clip them onto whatever the kids have on that day.”

“It meant the world to B.J., too.” Megan said as she curled up against Steve. “You’ve created something special. Inviting some of the kids today is just going to add to that.”

“Who’s B.J.?” Tony wanted to know.

“Bucky Junior,” Megan said, wiping tears from her eyes. “Let’s save that story for another time. I’m already emotionally wrung out and his story will leave you gutted on the side of the road praying for a buzzard to find you. For now, I’ll just share that he was the first kid who saw Steve bleed red white and blue, thanks to your science slight-of-hand.”

“The flag blood kid didn’t make it?” Tony was shocked and met Megan’s eyes with great sadness showing in his own. “When?”

“June tenth. We got to the hospital in time… Steve sat in his bed and held him on his lap with B.J.’s parents on either side.”

“The story will keep,” Pepper assured them, patting Megan on the hand. “It’s been a draining day for both of you. What you need now is to change into some comfortable clothes and just hunker down and enjoy the quiet. Watch a movie or take a nap.

“Or both,” Bruce said quietly. “Pepper is right. You’ve been putting on a public face all day and you need some quiet time to recharge.”

“Quiet time is torture,” Tony commented. “What is wrong with you people?”

“You’re an extrovert, Tony. Crowds energize you. Introverts recharge better alone or in small groups. I found this morning to be rather draining and I wasn’t even in the thick of it,” Bruce explained. “We’ve talked about this before.”

“It’s just as boring every time you bring it up, too. Who wants more champagne? We only went through one bottle.”

“I’m done. I just want to take a nap like Pepper suggested. If I have another glass, I’ll be asleep before I get upstairs.”

“Uh, I think there’s been a slight change in plan,” Tony said as they pulled into the parking garage of Megan’s building.

“What’s going on?” Steve finally asked since no one had offered an explanation for the sudden silence in the car.

“The building residents are all lined up to welcome you back,” Pepper finally said. “I think.”
“Let me go find out,” Megan said, kissing Steve on the cheek before she scrambled out and went over to where Sarge was standing near the back of the group.

“What’s all this?” she asked, waving at the group of people, some of whom looked familiar, who were quietly lined up and watching the limousine.

“Don’t ask me. I didn’t plan anything. A couple of us were watching the news coverage on the TV. You might have been recognized as one of the tenants. Gossip did the rest. I swear, it was spontaneous. They just want to welcome Cap home.”

Stark got out next, striding over to them like he owned the place. “Do you have a nicer meeting room in this building than the garage?”

“Yeah…” Sarge answered warily.

“Sarge, this is Tony Stark. Tony, meet Sarge, my landlord and Clint’s personal friend.”

Tony turned on his trademark charm. “Get everyone together in that meeting room in one hour. I’ll bring dinner.” He turned to Megan. “Where can we get enough takeout for all the tenants?”

“Pizza, Boston Market… the grocery store deli?” Megan suggested as she tried to hide a yawn.

“Whatever.” He turned to the limo, gesturing the passengers to get out. “Happy and I will figure something out. Pepper, take our charges upstairs and make them change into comfy clothes. Take another bottle of champagne with you and toast my awesomeness. Everyone is reporting to the meeting room in an hour. Happy and I will be back in a jiffy.” He kissed Pepper, hopped into the front passenger seat, and motioned for Happy to gun the engine.

“Can anyone explain what’s going on?” Clint asked as he got out of the S.U.V. he’d just parked. He had his bow in one hand and his quiver slung over his shoulder as he led Natasha over to where the others were standing.

“Tony is rather difficult to explain sometimes,” Pepper admitted. “Right now, we’re going up to Megan’s apartment. I’ll explain the rest in a minute. We’ll see you in an hour, Sarge.” she said as she led the way past the other tenants to the elevators.

As Megan and Steve followed her, the gathered tenants broke out into controlled applause, making Steve hesitate as he walked. “Come on,” Megan said, urging him forward. “They don’t want a piece of you, they’re just saying thanks. They saw your speech on the news.”

He nodded wearily and raised a hand to acknowledge he’d heard them and let Megan usher him forward.

“So much for that nap,” Megan muttered as the elevator doors closed.

“You’re still going to change out of those clothes and lie down. Tony is right about that. The public portion of the day is finished. This is just hanging out with your neighbors over lunch. After that, you’re going back to your apartment and we’re heading back to New York.”

“Clint and I just need to get our gear and we’ll be on our way.”

“After lunch,” Steve said firmly. “If you argue, I’ll call Amanda.”

“It’s always nice when Natalie Rushman helps me wrangle Tony,” Pepper said softly, giving Natasha a way to attend while fading into the background.
Megan watched Natasha consider the offer and make a decision. “I can do that. What is he doing now?”

“He and Happy went in search of enough takeout to feed everyone in the building.”

Natasha pulled out her phone and started tapping on the screen. “I’ll take care of it.”

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As soon as they were in her apartment, Natasha pushed Megan and Steve towards the bathroom. “Go take a shower, both of you. Then lie down like Pepper said. I’ll knock on the door when it’s time to get dressed and go downstairs. Wear t-shirts. That will help send the message that you’re there as neighbors, not celebrities.”

Megan smiled. “Steve, you go first. Natasha, come see what you think about these,” she said, leading Natasha to her closet. She pulled out two hangers. One t-shirt was hot pink and had a scoop neck. On the front, using elements from the periodic table, was written “LaB CHICK1.” Steve’s shirt was a pale green and said, “When I was your age, Pluto was a planet.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “He really wears that? I thought the shirt he had on last night was just to irritate Tony.”

Megan grinned impishly. “Bugging Tony was a bonus. Steve has a sharper sense of humor than people give him credit for. Sarcasm and irony are favorites we happen to share. He gets great pleasure out of playing dumb around Tony so Tony has to explain his jokes.”

“He’s more devious than I gave him credit for. I won’t make that mistake again,” Natasha said as she handed the shirts back to Megan with a soft smile of her own.


1 La= Lanthanum, B= Boron, H= hydrogen, I= Iodine, C= carbon, K= Potassium.

Chapter End Notes

It’s shorter than I like to post, but something to tide you all over, I hope!
When Megan got out of the shower, Steve was wearing only a pair of jeans as he lay face down on the bed holding the pillow tightly under his head. Megan hung up her robe and tugged the pillow away as she straddled Steve’s back. His skin was still damp, so she got some lotion from the bedside stand and put a bit on her hands before starting to work the knots from his shoulders. He moaned softly as she made the muscles pop and crunch under her fingertips.

“Better keep it down or Tony will think we’re up to something.”

“He’s not back yet. Bruce is making tea. Clint is packing up his gear. Natasha and Pepper are talking about the H.H.C’s.” Steve mumbled into the mattress.

“And when you’re listening to all of that, you’re brooding about Bucky being drafted.”

“Why do you make me talk when you already know everything?”

“Because it’s good for you to put your thoughts and feelings into words. Think of it as practice for when I can’t read your mind.”

Steve sighed but didn’t say anything else.

Megan chose her words carefully before asking, “Was he in the army before Pearl Harbor?”

“Yeah. We knew that war was coming. He told me….” Steve paused and took a deep breath. “He said that he figured by going ahead of me, it would ensure I’d be able to finish that year in art school and then I could try to enlist in the spring when my health was always better.” Megan saw him clench his fist. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

Megan gave up on the back rub and instead lay down on top of Steve, resting her cheek between his shoulder blades. “He would never have left you willingly. You told me before that his father had a hard time keeping a job and that Bucky tried to help his mom and sisters, too. There’s no way he would have enlisted and left you all behind like that.”

“Bucky’s father was a worthless drunkard.”

“No, he was a veteran suffering from severe P.T.S.D. in a time when no one recognized it for what it was. When toughing it out didn’t work, he self medicated. I’m not saying it was easy on his family. But you know better than anyone how war affects a person. Add in the Great Depression, poverty, and untold hardships that were never shared with you kids, and you get a bleak picture. Not everyone who comes home from war has P.T.S.D., but Bucky’s father sounds like a classic case to me. Temper your judgment with some compassion, Captain.”

“I guess I keep thinking about him as we saw him when we were growing up.”

“As is to be expected. If you met him now though, wouldn’t you see him in a different light? Back to Bucky being drafted. Seeing what war did to his father, and yours for that matter, was just another reason for Bucky to avoid it if possible. If not, I’m sure that in Bucky’s mind, the next best thing was to keep you out of it. So he got the notice and decided to spin the truth a bit and keep you in school. I doubt he expected you to be successful in your attempts to enlist given all your health problems, but he also didn’t want to rub that in. Bucky did a lot of things, but you’ve never once indicated that he liked to crush your hopes.”
Steve shook his head. “He believed in me when no one else did.”

“So there you go. He didn’t tell you because he was trying to protect you. And knowing you, you were all gung-ho about joining up and taking on the Nazi bullies. If he could spin a tale that kept you from trying to do that just a little longer, I think he’d have done it in a heartbeat.”

“He lied to me.”

“Says the guy who broke federal laws in his efforts to enlist.”

“That was different.”

“Yeah, it was. Bucky hurt your feelings. You could have gone to jail. That’s a huge difference.”

“Megan…”

“Don’t Megan me. How he ended up serving doesn’t much matter compared to the fact he did his best when his country called. Didn’t he make sergeant even before he was deployed to Europe? You told me before that he moved up the ranks pretty fast for someone his age and you were proud of him for that. He was one of the best snipers of his day. You were bragging like a proud parent when you told me that fact. He probably saved your miserable hide more times than I care to know. So don’t you dare diminish his service and sacrifice by judging him for how he got into the army.”

“I’m not!”

“Really? Because that’s what it looks like from here. You volunteering didn’t make you better than him. Bucky being drafted didn’t make him less of a solder than you were. Think about it.” Megan got up and got dressed. “Your shirt is on the bed,” she snapped, then closed the door behind her.

Natasha looked at her with a raised eyebrow when she stormed into the kitchen.

“I will never understand how Bucky put up with that man for so many years,” she grumbled as she filled the kettle with water and slammed it onto the burner.

Bruce stood up. “I think I’m going to hide from the estrogen party,” he said as he went down the hall and knocked on the door. “Steve? May I join you?” He must have gotten an affirmative answer, because Megan heard the door open and close again.

Pepper and Natasha joined Megan in the kitchen. Pepper turned off the water while Natasha opened the bottle of champagne Tony had sent up with them and poured them each a generous serving. Megan looked around. “Where’s Clint?”

“Probably on the roof watching for any signs of the paparazzi,” Natasha answered softly as she pushed the glass into Megan’s hand. “What did the dumb blonde do this time?”

Megan gave her a sharp look. “He can hear us,” she hissed.

“Then he now knows that at least two of us think he’s being a dumb blonde,” Natasha answered, making no effort to keep her voice down.

“Make it three,” Pepper added, clinking her glass with Megan’s. “We ladies have to stick together, so I’m in your corner on this one. What did he do?”

Megan looked around, then grabbed her Stark Tablet and turned it on. “He’s POUTING b/c Bucky
“lied about being drafted,” she hastily typed. “No matter that S. broke fed. laws trying 2 enlist!”

Pepper covered her mouth with her hand to hold back a laugh as she patted Megan on the back. Natasha just eyed the spoon and tilted her head, reminding Megan of the threat.

That broke the tension. Megan dissolved in a fit of giggles as Pepper watched them both, trying to figure out what the joke was. Natasha asked, simply by raising an eyebrow, if she could share the story with Pepper. Megan nodded and sipped her champagne while Natasha used the tablet to explain the true story about the spoon, and why Megan had lied to Tony.

“I think I may need to get myself one of those.” Pepper finally said, walking over the wall to examine the gift more closely. “I will probably need a whole place setting to use on Tony.”

“A knife and spork should suffice,” Megan said dryly, suddenly feeling better. She wasn’t even sure, at this point, why she’d been so irritated with Steve. He’d had a rough, emotional morning. She had, too, if she was honest. It shouldn’t be surprising that Steve’s stress would manifest in such a way: Bucky was a target that wouldn’t be hurt.

Clint banged open the door. “They’re back. Time to eat.” As he turned to lock the door to the apartment, he picked up on the vibe of the room. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Whatever makes you think that?” Pepper asked blandly before taking another sip of her champagne.

“Uh huh. Right,” Clint said. “Boys back there?” he asked, pointing towards the bedroom. He didn’t even wait for them to answer before he headed down the hallway. “Open up!”

“We’d better retrieve them before Tony gets any ideas,” Pepper said, striding after Clint. “I swear it’s like herding cats. We really need to get more women on the team, Natasha. How do you wrangle them all in the field?” Pepper asked over her shoulder as she knocked on the door.

Natasha followed her. “We need to have Jarvis let you listen in some time to the field coms, at least after the fact so you won’t be worried about the outcome. The conversations at times….”

“I might just do that. Okay, everyone not sleeping with Steve, get out,” Pepper said, thumbing over her shoulder to the open door. Bruce and Clint bolted, nearly colliding in their feigned haste to get past her, grinning the whole time.

“Aw, come on guys. It was just getting interesting,” Steve called after Bruce and Clint, pretending to pout as Pepper shut the door.

Pepper just shook her head and smiled at Natasha and Megan. “Works every time,” she said, gesturing to Megan that Steve was all hers. “We’ll meet you downstairs.”

Megan went over to where Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed and pushed him backwards, straddling him as she did so. “I’m sorry I snapped at you and lectured you. It’s been a rough day for both of us, but more so for you,” she said as she dipped her head to kiss him. “Forgive me?”

“Always,” he murmured, pulling her close. They lay like that for a long minute, savoring the quiet while it lasted.

“Hey, you two already took down Twitter. Are you going to join us sometime today or are you aiming take down Facebook and Vine, too?” Clint called from the living room.”

“We’ll be there in a minute,” Steve shouted back. Speaking more softly, he continued, “I’m going
to wash this stuff out of my eyes. Will you turn out the lights and grab my shield for me?"

"That's sending a mixed message. Can't Cap take the rest of the day off?"

"Talking with the kids is a good distraction for me. And they like to see my shield."

"Okay, Mr. Pluto is a Planet. But hurry up. I'm hungry and I'm not sure we want to leave the neighbors to Tony's mercy for too long."

"You can kiss him later, Megan!" Clint called again.

"What makes you think I stopped with a kiss?" Megan shouted back as she got to her feet. "It's not my fault my bra's hanging off the curtain rod. I need a minute to get dressed and pull myself together. Go wrangle Tony and we'll be right down."

Steve chuckled as he stood up, then pulled her close enough to plant a kiss on top of her head. "You are a troublemaker."

"Yup. Let's go make more trouble."

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Megan watched as Steve scanned the common room from behind his sunglasses as he stepped inside, then made a beeline for a boy who was clearly in the middle of a growth spurt. His young body was all elbows and knees. His hands were too large for his skinny arms but promising he'd grow into a large man when all his parts caught up with each other.

Steve knelt down in front of him, leaning on his shield with his right arm and pushing pushing his ball cap up a bit with his left as he looked at the boy. "What's your name?"

"Steve."

"Mine, too. That will make it easy for me to remember. I need a favor, Steve."

Young Steve looked at him with wide, chocolate brown eyes and nodded.

"Will you find a place for Megan and me to sit down and eat while we get our food? I'm really hungry and we've had a long morning."

Young Steve nodded, clearly in awe.

"Thank you," Steve said standing up. He hefted his shield as if just now remembering he had it. "Oh, there's one more thing. I'd appreciate it if you would hold on to this for me. It's too much to juggle that and a plate of food with my right hand still injured. It's a bit heavy, but you seem to be strong enough to manage it."

Megan hid her smile behind her hand as the boy's mouth dropped open.

"Y.. yes, sir," he whispered, taking hold of the straps with two hands. "I'll find you a place to sit."

"I appreciate it. If anyone wants to see the shield, that's fine. Just no throwing it. Only I get to do that."
Young Steve nodded solemnly and turned to go find empty chairs.

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I found you a seat, Miss Megan,” young Steve said when Megan had filled her plate with pizza and vegetables, then picked up a bottle of water.

“You have such nice manners. You’ll make your life partner very happy someday.”

“Mama says good manners are more important than good looks.”

“I have to agree with your mother. Manners are a way of showing other people you respect them. If more people used their manners and treated each other well, I think the world would be a nicer place.” Megan said as she followed the young man to the spot he’d found: three seats in the middle of a long table surrounded by folding chairs.

“Mama, Miss Megan liked my manners,” he said as he sat down beside his mother, leaving an empty chair between himself and Megan, who was to his left. Steve was still at the buffet table, trapped in a conversation with an admirer, though Megan knew he was starving.

“Steve, will you please go tell Captain Rogers that I need to speak to him? I promise he won’t mind if you interrupt. You may leave his shield here by me if you want to, but you may certainly continue holding it for him if you prefer.”

Steve looked to his mother for permission, which was given with a nod, and he took off, shield in hand.

Megan smiled as he went, then turned to his mother. “If I don’t intervene, Steve might not eat until the food is cold. Don’t tell your son that I said manners can be a pain at times. I don’t want to undo your fine work with him. It’s nice to meet you,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Likewise. I’m Jolanda. Steve is my oldest, and this is his younger brother, Seth,” Jolanda said, indicating the boy on her lap that Megan estimated was about four years old.

“Hello, Seth.” Megan said, leaving closer to see if she could get Seth to smile. His expression stayed a bit blank and he turned his face away. “I bet your big brother Steve is a nice fellow to play with. He’ll be back soon,” she said smoothly, sensing something was off with the boy.

“Thanks, Megan,” Steve said as he set his plate down at the table. He put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Thank you, too. Have you gotten anything to eat yet?” When the boy shook his head, Steve smiled. “Here, turn around,” he said, then slid the shield’s straps over the youth’s arms and made sure they were secure. “Now you can carry it and your food. Make sure to get some fruit or vegetables to go with your pizza.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Steve, this is your sidekick’s mother, Jolanda, and his younger brother, Seth,” Megan said, introducing them.

“Eat, Captain,” Jolanda cut him off with a wave of her hand as he prepared to make small talk. “If you’re going to deal with this crazy bunch, you need a full stomach.”
“Cap ‘Merica” Seth said clearly. He stared at Steve’s shoes while Steve made short work of a pizza slice.

“Yes, Seth, that’s Captain America,” Jolanda said, but something was off with her voice. Megan glanced at her and saw that she had tears in her eyes.

“He’s on the Autism spectrum,” Jolanda explained over Seth’s head, her hand wiping away her tears. “He hasn’t said a word since we moved here last year.”

Steve pushed his chair back from the table and turned to the boy. “Seth, I’d be happy to hold you on my lap if you’d like. It’s up to you.” He kept his body language open and loose, and Megan knew from his voice that he was smiling. To his mother’s shock, but not Megan’s, Seth smiled shyly, eyes still on the floor, and climbed into Steve’s lap.

“Do you want some of my pizza? Help yourself if you do.”

Jolanda watched in awe as Seth picked up some pizza and started to eat. “You’re a miracle worker.”

“No, ma’am. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.” Steve shrugged as he picked up another slice of his own in his left hand while he helped Seth balance on his lap with his right. “Sometimes the uniform and shield help break down barriers. I’ve seen it happen before.”

“Do you mean with the kids you visit at the hospital? We were in here watching on the big T.V. this morning.”

Steve nodded, and Megan stood up, putting her hand on Steve’s shoulder as she did so. “Forgive me, Jolanda, there’s something I just remembered I need to do. I won’t be long.” When she saw Steve’s puzzlement, she added, “I forgot a promise I made when we were at the museum, when we were talking about Joseph and his wife.”

He froze, then his face broke into a grin, understanding what she was getting at. “Yeah. That’s important.”

“I’ll be right back.”

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Megan first checked on young Steve, who had fulfilled his duty to the Captain by putting one carrot stick and one grape on his plate, along with two slices of pizza. “Make it five of each and I won’t tell you tried to wiggle out of your orders to eat a serving of fruits and vegetables,” she said, leaning over his shoulder. He ducked his head and dutifully went back to the trays of finger foods.

Smiling, she scanned the room, looking for Pepper. Instead, she found Natasha watching her. A tilt of the head invited Megan to step into the corridor.

“How can I help you, Doctor?” Natasha said, winking at Megan when she knew her face was turned away from their observers.

“We have our first family for the Joseph and Sara Rogers memorial fund. Steve, the boy carrying the shield around, has a younger brother on the autism spectrum. Seth said, ‘Cap ‘Merica’ just
now, and climbed into Steve’s lap. According to his mother, that’s the first time Seth has talked
since they moved here last year. Intensive therapy can help a lot, but it’s expensive. Any treatment
program needs to include screening for Bernard auditory integration therapy and sensory
integration therapy, no matter what the ‘experts’ say.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at that, but left the comment pass unchallenged. Megan knew she’d be
asked about it later when there were fewer people around.

“I noticed Steve is missing the end of the little finger on his left hand,” Natasha said, her voice low
and deadly. “He’s wary around men, too, Captain Rogers being the exception. Based on his body
language, I suspect there is some abuse in his past, but not from his mother. What’s her name?”

“Jolanda. I don’t know her last name.”

Natasha smiled. “You don’t need to. I’ll get some info from Sarge and the rest from other sources.”
She pulled out her Stark phone and started typing. “The fund already has two hundred grand and
the numbers keep going up,” she said, showing Megan the screen. “Go finish your lunch. I’ll get
started on this.”

Megan smiled her gratitude and returned to her seat. “Pepper’s assistant, Natalie, is making
arrangements for me,” she told Steve as she sat down. “I think we can consider the promise kept.”

“Pepper doesn’t suffer fools,” Steve agreed. “I’m sure Natalie will do a thorough job.”

“Are all of the Avengers here?” young Steve asked, turning conversation away from boring adult
talk. “I know that Dr. Banner over there is the Hulk, and Mr. Stark is Iron Man. Is the man who
drove in behind your limo Hawkeye? He had a bow and arrow.”

“Yes, that was Hawkeye. His real name is Mr. Barton, and he’s over there by the table with the
drinks on it. He’s wearing a purple shirt. Even though I know you see him around the building a
lot, he does some work for the government that makes it important that people don’t know his
name or recognize his face, so you need to keep his name a secret from your friends. He’s actually
very good friends with Sarge,” Steve explained. “In fact, Hawkeye is the one who suggested
Megan move here when the paparazzi started following her. He knew this was a safe place to live
since you all take care of each other and help each other out.”

Megan smiled as young Steve’s forehead scrunched up. “How does me helping Mrs. Rice carry her
groceries from her car keep anyone safe?”

Steve smiled at him, looking over Seth’s head to do so. “If you had a problem, say your mom got
sick, don’t you think you could go to one of your neighbors and get help without having to worry
about them believing you?”

“Of course. I know everyone who lives here.”

“And since you know everyone in the building, I bet you’d notice if someone tried to come in who
didn’t live here.”

“Oh, yeah. I’d call Sarge right away,” Steve said, nodding to himself. “I’d knock on the first door I
came to and have them let me in and lock the door, first.”

“Well, not all apartment buildings or neighborhoods have people who act like that. And that makes
it harder to keep people out who don’t belong there.”

“What’s a pop-a... What was that word?”
“Paparazzi. It’s an Italian name for the photographers who like to follow famous people around, take their pictures all day long, and then sell the pictures to anyone who will buy them.”

“It seems pretty stupid to pay for pictures of people buying groceries.”

“Amen,” Megan muttered. “When you figure out why grown-ups do such silly stupid things, Steve, you let me know, okay?”

“Do they follow you?” he asked, looking at his hero.

“Whenever they can. Now they’ve started to follow Megan, and she has a harder time out running them than I do.”

“Not all of us run a marathon in record time as a warm up to breakfast,” she said in a wry tone.

Steve looked at his brother and then at his mom before turning back to his hero. “Are they going to start following the rest of us now that you’re staying here?”

Steve shook his head, reassuring the boy as best he could. “No. For one thing, I’m going to be heading back to my place in a few days now that I’m almost all healed up. But more importantly, they don’t know how special you are and have no reason to follow you everywhere.”

Megan stood up and pushed her chair in. “I’m going to get another slice. Do you want any more?” she asked Steve, putting her hand on his shoulder as she watched him hold Seth.

“Please,” he said, covering her hand with his own and giving it a quick squeeze. He had probably noticed her reaction to him saying out loud that he was going home soon. She’d known this time was approaching fast, so why was she devastated by the thought?

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A/N

I hate rules. One rule in fiction writing seems to be “No two characters shall share the same name.” How often does that happen in real life? My husband and I know so many Jennifers that we refer to them by their full names just to keep them straight in conversation. So, I decided on a whim that Seth’s brother would be named Steve. It’s not exactly a rare name! The only problem is that it can make character identification tricky in a passage. I bet that’s why people follow the rule. Like Steve, I rarely take the easy path. :-) I hope I didn’t confuse anyone in the process.
Snuggle Time

With Natasha’s efficient help, Megan was able to wrap up the community lunch and herd the Avengers down to the garage within an hour of Steve finishing his lunch. The two of them got a quick photo queue set up and collected email addresses to send the images to, ensuring no one would accidentally use a flash on any cameras they happened to have.

As Megan walked arm in arm with Steve, following Tony and Pepper out, she could tell how exhausted Steve was and how much it was taking for him to try to hide it. “Just a few more minutes,” she promised him. He nodded wearily and stifled a yawn.

Happy opened the limousine door as Tony turned to Steve. “Two science jokes in two days, Cap? You’re confusing me.” Tony said as he poked Steve in the chest, mock glaring at his t-shirt.

“I like science. Always have. Thanks for everything,” Steve said, pulling Tony into a hug the billionaire wasn’t ready for. “Your father was my friend, but you’re the better man,” Megan heard him murmur into Tony’s ear.

Pepper was the other one close enough to hear Steve, and she looked at Megan in surprise. Megan nodded slightly. It was well known that Tony and Steve argued about nearly everything. Apparently, even Pepper had missed the depth of fondness and respect Steve had for Tony, hidden as it was behind verbal sparring matches. Megan glanced away, pretending not to notice as Pepper wiped a tear from her eye.

“Okay, if you’re done sharing cooties, we’ll be on our way,” Tony said, stepping back.

Steve just smiled and hugged Pepper next, kissing her cheek as he did so, but saying nothing. Bruce tried for a handshake, but Steve reeled him in, slapping him across the back before releasing him. “Thanks for coming.”

Natasha slipped into the limousine, giving Steve a wink as she did so. Megan knew they’d drop her off somewhere on their way to the airport.

Happy closed the limousine door, only to find himself getting his own hug from Captain America.

“I appreciate everything you did today, Happy,” Steve told him.

“My pleasure, sir.” If he stood a bit straighter as he went to the driver’s door, no one commented.

“As soon as I get my gear, I’ll be out of your hair,” Clint said as they watched the limousine drive off. “I’m going to head out of town for a few days of R&R. Try not to get into trouble while I’m gone, okay?”

“I am hoping for a quiet week,” Megan said as the trio headed upstairs. “My parents are coming to visit later in the week. It would be very nice to see them outside of a hospital setting.”

“You should try it, Steve, just for the sake of variety,” Clint teased as the elevator doors closed.

“It’s not like I try to find trouble.”

“That’s not how Rebecca tells it,” Megan said sweetly, ignoring Steve’s innocent look.

“Rebecca?” Clint looked at Megan with a raised eyebrow.
“Bucky’s sister. According to her, Steve and Bucky both liked to plan ‘Adventures’ that ended up with both of them bloodied and bruised more often than not. When Brooklyn wasn’t a big enough playground, they went ‘Adventuring’ in Europe. If that wasn’t enough to give everyone indigestion, Director Fury came along with new toys and playmates for Steve to ‘Adventure’ with. God help us all.”

“I like my frisbee,” Steve pretended to whine as he held his shield more tightly.

Megan just leaned against him, rolling her eyes as she did so, and shared a smile with Clint.

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Megan sagged against the door after she locked it behind Clint. She felt drained and her mind wouldn’t stop spinning. She felt Steve’s warm hand on her shoulder and she let him turn her around and pull her into a hug. “Today would have been a lot harder to get through without you there,” he said softly into her hair. That was pure Steve. He didn’t claim he couldn’t have done it without her, because he would have. But it would have been more difficult to face the ghosts of his past all by himself. It was nice to be wanted and appreciated.

She squeezed him harder then pulled away, making a silent beeline for the oven. Turning it on, she got out a cookie sheet and pulled a log of frozen dough from her freezer. He surprised her again by saying nothing. Instead, he put some music on in the background and sat down on a barstool to watch her work.

The silence was comfortable, but she felt tension growing in the air. Worse, it was all coming from her and she didn’t know how to diffuse it. This was Steve’s day. He was the one who’d seen his life laid out for the world to scrutinize.

When the cookies were in the oven, she retreated to the bedroom and changed into her favorite nightgown, robe, and a pair of fuzzy slipper socks. Then she took her hair out of the pony tail and brushed it out. Stalling? She looked at herself in the mirror and had to admit that she was avoiding going back out to the kitchen. It was totally ridiculous.

Steve was taking the cookies out of the oven by the time she gathered herself. He silently got down plates while she poured them each a glass of milk.

“A few years ago, there was a big advertising campaign to increase milk consumption. The slogan was, “Milk: it does a body good,” she said, handing him a glass.

Steve just nodded, trusting she had a reason for breaking the silence with that random fact.

When she didn’t say anything, but simply moved to the couch to enjoy her snack, she felt him study her before he joined her. She had to give him credit. He was a lot more patient than she would have been in his place. But even Steve had limits, it seemed. When they were both done eating, he put her dishes by his on the coffee table and pulled her into his lap.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

Megan sighed and put her head on his shoulder while he laced his fingers of his right hand through those on her left. “I’m wrung out and I can’t get my brain to shut up.”
“You were okay at the museum,” he said softly.

Megan didn’t say anything and just tried to focus on the sound of his breathing.

“Steve,” he finally said. “When he asked about the paparazzi following him now that I’m staying here… Now that I think about it, that’s when your mood shifted.”

“I knew this wasn’t permanent. I get why you’re going back to your place. I agree with it, even.”

“But?”

“The heart wants what it wants. Maybe I should get a cat.”

“A cat.”

“Something warm and alive to come home to. I can’t give a dog the amount of time it deserves right now, especially not in an apartment. Goldfish don’t cuddle. Snakes aren’t terribly affectionate, either, at least in my experience. Have you ever thought about getting a pet?”

“I was too sick and poor as a kid. It would have been impractical in the army. With missions that can go for days… it’s not practical now, either.”

“Cats shed. They barf hairballs on whatever rug they can find, usually at three in the morning. I hate dealing with litter pans. Given the choice, I think I prefer coming home and cuddling with you.”

She felt a huff of laughter in her hair. “I can’t say I’ve ever barfed a hairball on anyone’s rug, day or night.”

“And you cook dinner. I never met a cat that could do that.”

“You’re feeling like I’m abandoning you, don’t you?”

“A little. And it’s stupid, because I know that’s not the case. You were here to heal, and I’m thrilled that you’re making a full recovery. This isn’t some twisted wish to make you dependent on me—”

“I know that,” he said with a solemn fierceness that sent a rush of emotion clear to her toes.

“You’ve done nothing but push me to be independent, Megan, no matter the outcome. Part of me doesn’t want to leave… but I need to. I can’t explain it.”

“I can. You need to prove to yourself you can stand on your own, away from the army, from Howard Stark, from S.H.I.E.L.D…. now that you’ve had time to adjust to this crazy world you got dropped into, you need to be on your own for a bit. I get it. I had the same need coming out of college and again after Randy. But you fitted yourself into empty corners of my life before I even knew what was happening. It’s hard to be patient when I just want all of you for myself.”

“You already have me. You’re my girl.”

“But we’re going slowly for a reason. They’re good reasons. I know that it would be a mistake to run off to Vegas tomorrow. But a part of me still wants to.”

“Me, too.”

She shifted slightly in his lap, grinning though he couldn’t see her face. “I noticed.”
He ran his hand up her inner thigh as he whispered an observation that made her blush to her roots.

“noticed that did, you?” she managed to say in a voice that was mostly even. Mostly, if you were
tone deaf and had no emotional sensitivity at all.

“I notice everything about you, even when you think I’m not paying attention. “

She didn’t say anything to that. It was safer to stay silent.

“The serum fixed my hearing. You make a certain sound in your throat when I kiss you like this,”
he whispered, then proceeded to kiss her.

Megan was barely aware of anything but the feel of his mouth on hers when he said against her
mouth, ”That sound. I love that sound.”

Her breath hitched as she tried to remember vocalizing anything.

“I love the way your breath catches like that. I always know I have your attention.” He laughed, the
sound low in his chest. “And you just did it again.”

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When her brain began to work again, Megan found herself sprawled on top of Steve, her face
nestled in the corner of his neck and shoulder as they lay in bed. She’d never gone for overly
muscled guys before. How did she end up with Steve? “Did you know there are two hundred and
six bones in the human body?” she asked him drowsily.

He didn’t question her train of thought. “I did know that. It seems like I’ve broken most of them at
one time or another,” Steve answered softly as he traced lazy patterns along her spine.

“You dissolved all of mine. Every last one of them. It’s why I can’t move. I’m some sort of
invertebrate. I don’t even have an exoskeleton. That’s a problem on land.”

“Only on land?”

“Aquatic organisms can use hydraulics to move. Think of a jellyfish or an octopus.”

“I guess you’re going to be stuck there awhile then. I don’t know that climate change is going to
flood your apartment anytime soon.”

“I can think of worse fates.” Megan yawned. “What was wrong with your hearing before?”

“Deaf in one ear, partial hearing loss in the other.”

“Too many ear infections when you were young?”

“Probably. No one but my mother expected me to live.”

“That must have been so disorientating, having directional hearing again after so long without it.”

“That was the least of my concerns. I’d no sooner stepped out of the pod than a Hydra agent shot
Dr. Erskine. I took off after him while still trying to figure out how to walk without falling over.”
“Did you catch him?”

“Only to have him kill himself with what turned out to be cyanide. But the last sample of serum was spilled on the docks, so at least Hydra never got their hands on it.”

“How come I never heard about any of this before?”

“Someone told me she was avoiding unauthorized biographies and documentaries,” he answered as he nuzzled her temple. “You haven’t explained that nightgown. I recognize the picture since it was taken that day.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t go shirtless in public. Never have. And that picture was never distributed to the public.”

“So you’re saying this view is all for me? I’m okay with that.”

He rolled them both over so he was stretched out beside her, head propped on one hand as he watched her. “Me, too,” he said as he tugged the sheet up over her, tucking it in around her waist.

“Do you remember that nightgown we got for Pepper?”

Understanding dawned and he grinned. “Tony had yours made up as payback. And that’s why you told me about the milk advertising campaign.”

“They also sent the picture in the living room.”

“What picture?”

Megan brushed the hair back from his eyes. “You probably haven’t noticed it. I’ll show you after I regrow my skeleton. It’s on the end table by the couch. The package arrived on my last morning in my old apartment. Life got a bit crazy after that.”

Steve shook his head, sadness creeping into his eyes. “No, I’m afraid life stayed pretty normal by my standards. Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Absolutely. I’ll let you move home, but I’m not letting you go.”

Amusement danced across his features. “It’s nice to know I get a vote about where I live.” He grew serious again as he took her hand in his. “I can’t promise I’ll always be here, but I can promise that every time I leave I’ll do my best to come back.”

“I can live with that.” Megan smiled softly at him, putting her hand on his cheek. “I can even face the idea of you dying in the line of duty as long as I know you didn’t stop fighting your way back to me. The stunt with the Valkyrie has to be a one-off. You don’t get to quit like that on me.”

“I had to—”

She silenced him with a finger on his lips. “Yes, you had to put the Valkyrie into the water. But you didn’t try to escape the cockpit after the crash. They found you flat on your back tucked up under the console. That’s not you at the helm; that’s you giving up. I’ll excuse it on account of you having just lost Bucky. You were worn down and worn out. But you can’t pull something like that again if we get married. I have to know you’ll always do your best to come home.”

His blue eyes were solemn and his gaze steady as he answered, “I promise.” With that, he dipped his head and started kissing her throat. “You’ve started to move again. It takes me longer than that
to heal broken bones, much less grow them from scratch. I think we need to collect more data.”

“Data collection sounds like an excellent plan for the afternoon.” Megan ran her fingers through his hair as he kissed his way down her torso. “I’m seriously rethinking the need for a long engagement. What do you think about taking me on full time by the end of the year?”

He looked up at her, stunned disbelief on his face.


Steve just shook his head, clearly shocked. “You mean it? You’re really sure you—”

“Setting aside the fact you’re smart and kind and make me laugh, and completely ignoring the bonus of your good looks and patience with all of my issues, you have a few other things going for you here. You cook really good food and clean up after yourself, including wiping crumbs from the counter and mopping the floor. You actually use the washer and dryer for laundry rather than the composting system and sniff test many bachelors prefer. You pay your bills on time and generally live frugally, so I don’t have to worry about losing the roof over my head or ending up as your full time cook and maid service. My family likes you. Yeah, you have a strange job with inherent danger and irregular work hours. But your teammates have been gracious enough to welcome me into the family you’ve built together. I like who I am when I’m with you. You seem to think I’m someone you can put up with for a few decades, so all told, I’d be an idiot to let you go.”

He just stared at her and she saw his lower lip quiver a bit before he blinked away the tears that were pooling in his eyes. “Megan,” he whispered softly, pressing a kiss on the base of her sternum, “I don’t deserve you, but I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to.” He took a deep breath and looked at her again. “What about New Year’s Eve? We could have the reception at Avenger’s tower in that room adjoining the rooftop terrace. We could have the ceremony there, if you want. I’ll bet Tony and Pepper can help us find a church that will cooperate with a security team. I just don’t want the press getting inside.”

“If it were up to me, we’d have the ceremony in your old church in Brooklyn, assuming it’s still there. But if that’s not something you’re comfortable with, we can find a church closer to the tower. While I’m partial to getting married in a church, I don’t much care what denomination it is.”

“My old church is still there. I can call tomorrow and ask how strict they’ll be about how we’ll raise our kids… they don’t get to dictate that. I’ll take care of the ceremony location and you deal with the reception. Sound okay?”

“All that means is one phone call to Pepper. I think I can manage it,” Megan teased, smiling through her own tears. “Just so you know, I’m taking your last name. I’ll probably keep Buchwald professionally, at least as long as I’m still publishing papers, but legally and socially, Buchwald is getting kicked to the curb.”

Steve shook his head. “You don’t have to do that. I can change my last name if you want.”

“Given how often I have to spell Buchwald for people, switching to Rogers is a relief. Besides, I’m trying to make things easier for the historians.”

“There are some social activists who won’t be pleased with that decision.”

“Too bad for them.”

“Pick whatever last name you want. As long as I can call you my wife, I’m happy.”
“You look pretty happy now, actually.”

He shrugged but was unable to hide the mischievous look in his eye and the grin that followed. “I like science, especially data collection on how to dissolve your skeletal system.”
“I miss you,” the text said.

Megan smiled at her phone and send a message back. “Miss you, too.” Steve had lasted two hours after she’d dropped him off at his apartment that morning on her way to work. The only reason she hadn’t caved first was because she had been swamped with work.

She glared at the red stapler on her desk. Yes, someone had a case of the Mondays. She made a mental note to make Steve watch the movie Office Space with her and put her phone away. The paperwork wasn’t going to do itself.

On Tuesday, a bouquet of red roses was delivered to the front desk at S.H.I.E.L.D. Jane, the daytime receptionist, called to ask if she minded coming down to fetch them herself since she had no one available to deliver them until the afternoon. Megan had laughed at that. Did she mind walking the halls of S.H.I.E.L.D carrying a romantic flower arrangement clearly sent to her by a certain Captain Steve Rogers? Hardly! She decided the summons to collect her own arrangement was a ruse when Jane winked at her as she’d arrived to take custody of her flowers. It was nice to have allies in the battlefield of love.

On Wednesday afternoon, Steve delivered lunch to her office and then pressed her against the wall, kissing her until her lips were swollen and food was the furthest thing from her mind. “I’m leaving before I embarrass both of us,” he said, pulling away at last. He spared her one last glance as he pulled her door shut, smiling at her. She was still standing where he’d left her, gaping at him.

“Eat,” he’d ordered quietly before leaving her alone.

Megan slid down to the floor with a low moan. He was killing her slowly. Even worse, she wouldn't see him again until her tomorrow night, when she went to his apartment for dinner with Steve and her parents. New Year’s Eve couldn’t get here fast enough.

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“I think teaching college might be easier than dealing with Congress,” Megan said, burying her face in Steve’s chest as soon as she was inside his apartment door. “They talk just to hear themselves give sound bites and policy statements. Senator Schuman got testy when I asked him to repeat his question concisely.”

“Is that all you said?” he asked, planting a kiss on her temple as she slipped out of her shoes.

“Well, I might have added that by concisely, I meant in two sentences or less and without including any platform speeches.”

“Please tell me that was on C-SPAN. I might actually start watching C-SPAN if you’ll be riding herd,” Kathy said, opening her arms to Megan.
“Lord, I hope not. Fury’s probably going to demote me to lab minion first thing tomorrow. You watch.”

Kathy laughed. “I doubt that. He is sending you to Capitol Hill for a reason.”

“Yeah, I’m the sacrificial lamb who will be asked to fall on her sword at the first sign of trouble. I know enough about how things work inside the Beltway to know that much,” Megan said, gratefully taking a glass of wine from Greg as she gave him a hug. “Is there any food left?”

“I’ll get your plate out of the oven,” Steve said, heading back to the kitchen.

“Don’t forget you have some celebrity status working in your favor, too. I’m sure Director Fury is going to use that angle if he needs to,” Greg added before pointing to the tablet on the table.

Megan saw that Steve had notified them of his apartment being bugged and his determination to leave them in place until he knew who put them there and why. She nodded and deleted the note before putting the device to sleep. “Did the gaggle of paparazzi out front give you any trouble coming in?”

“Not a bit. We just played up the dumb tourist angle and asked if yinz knew where ‘dat address was cause we’re from atta tahn n’ere to visit fellow Stillers fans.” Kathy said, slipping into a thick Pittsburgh accent.

Greg smiled. “They backed away in a hurry. Poor fools couldn’t even figure out we’re from the northwestern part of the state.”

“Honey, you were lecturing them on how the Bucs were going to make the World Series this year,” Kathy said, shaking her head at her husband. “Even I know how delusional that viewpoint is.”

“Got them out of our way, didn’t it?”

Megan dug into her dinner, listening to the three of them talk about what Greg and Kathy wanted to see while they were in town. They really didn’t have any strong desire to play tourist, but also didn’t want to spend the entire visit in Steve’s apartment hiding from the paparazzi. Nor did Kathy want to be up especially early in the mornings. She pointed out that she was on vacation, thank you very much, and that meant sleeping in.

“I called Janice during my lunch hour today, and she’ll let us in to the Smithsonian exhibit tomorrow after hours if you want. They did a pretty good job with it.” Megan looked at Steve and added, “She was quite mopey when I told her you were unlikely to join us. I think she has a crush on you.”

“I’m taken,” Steve pointed out as he poured himself a second glass of wine.

“Her problem, not mine.” Megan smiled. “I’d suggest you use the Metro instead of driving. The weather is supposed to be good and parking inside the beltway is not worth the hassle.”

“I have to go in to S.H.I.E.L.D. in the morning, but I can meet you all for dinner. We could go to that small Italian restaurant you liked, Megan.”

She nodded, perking up. With a wink she shoved the tablet towards Steve as she said, “Don and Maria are the best, Mom. You’ll love them. From the outside, it doesn’t look like much, but it’s so cozy inside and the food is unbelievable.” Never mind that Don and Maria didn’t exist. It was all part of the game she and Steve played with their hidden audience. If wasted a few hours trying to
figure out what restaurant they were talking about, all the better.

As she talked, continuing to gush about imaginary dishes she’d had on different visits there, Steve hastily wrote an explanation of the game on the tablet and laid it on the table for Megan’s parents’ to see.

“It sounds fine with me,” Kathy said as she looked at Greg, who nodded. “Then it’s settled. Let’s put the food away.”

Steve waved her off. “I’ve got it. I’ve done enough sitting around lately.”

Megan wanted to ask if he was visiting S.H.I.E.L.D. medical in the morning to see if he were cleared to drive, but didn’t want to say anything to their hidden audience. She’d forgotten how annoying it was to have to self censor her conversations. When her parents were done reading, she typed “eye exam?” and held it up to him.

He nodded once and took her plate to put into the dishwasher, leaving Megan to scowl at the tablet, mouthing “stupid bugs” as she did so.

Kathy sensed the change in mood and filled the silence. “How many of these books have you actually read, Steve? I thought Megan’s book hoarding tendencies were award-worthy, but I think you might have her beat.”

“This from the woman who once said she should throw out her night stand since the pile of books by her bed could do double duty?” Greg teased gently.

“I never said it was as bad habit, Greg. The problem I have is finding enough time to read all of the books I want to. The darn writers keep putting out new ones and I’m always playing catch up with a list that grows rather than shrinks.”

“I’ve read about two-thirds of them,” Steve answered. “I haven’t had as much time to read as I used to,” he said, looking at Megan pointedly.

“Poor baby,” she replied, giving him an exaggerated look of sympathy.

“Do you re-read them like Megan does? I read something once and never go back to it, which is why I don’t keep them around. Gone With the Wind is the exception to that rule,” she added when she saw Megan ready to argue. “When Megan was growing up, it would drive me nuts that she wouldn’t get rid of old books to make room for new ones. Suggesting she donate them to the local library was akin to asking her to cut off her legs given the way she carried on.”

“Hey, there are times I have been known to get out of bed and read a favorite scene in a story before I can go back to sleep. I can’t do that if the book isn’t on hand. I only keep the books that are repeat-worthy. The one-shot reads I get from the library.”

“Growing up, I used to dream about having lots of books of my own,” Steve said from the kitchen where he was cleaning up. “Now that I have the space and the means, I’ve found that used book stores are dangerous places for me. Eventually, I’ll have to start culling, but I’m not there yet.”

“E-reader to the rescue,” Megan said, waving his tablet in the air.

Steve shook his head. “I only take mine on missions where I might have downtime and can’t carry anything but my gear. At home, I want physical books.”

“Amen,” Greg said.
“Yeah, until it’s time to move them all. Then I get motivated to purge. It’s just so hard to let go of my best friends like that.”

“Then I suggest your next move is to a house where you can simply add on new rooms as needed,” Steve said, smiling at her before he bent over to put soap in the dishwasher and turn it on.

“That could work, except for the price of real estate around here. I cannot justify spending a half million for what amounts to a shoebox. Besides, how can I fit a whole stable of horses on a lot the size of a postage stamp?”

“A whole stable, hmm? Just how big of a barn are you thinking of building?”

“Big enough for the Avengers’ horse camp. I know for a fact Thor loves to ride. Clint told me that one of the first things he did in Arizona was go into a pet shop and demand they give him a horse.” Megan thought for a moment, ticking off names in her head as she tapped her fingers. “Better make it a baker’s dozen just to be safe. That way everyone has a mount even if one or two horses are under the weather. And we need full time staff to take care of them, too. I’m happy to do anything horse in the evening, but this body isn’t getting out of bed at four in the morning to muck out stalls. Do you think Tony could build a robot that can muck out stalls?”

Steve shook his head. “Seeing how inept Dum-E, U, and Butterfingers are at doing anything but making messes, I’m not sure I’d trust them to take care of anything living. The last time I was in Tony’s lab, Dum-E was trying to add motor oil and iron filings to a smoothie. Why Tony even wants a bot to make him a smoothie is a question I didn’t’ ask. It seems to me it would be a lot simpler if he just made it himself.

During all of this, Megan watched her parents trying to keep up with the parallel conversations taking place verbally and on the tablet, and smiled to herself. Her mother looked like she was developing whiplash as she tried to follow the volley. Greg had given up and was no longer even looking at the tablet. Instead, he’d taken to pacing and looking out the multiple windows as he moved about the space.

“What good is a billionaire genius if he can’t build a decent bot?” Megan grumbled as she followed Steve into the living room and curled up on the couch beside him.”

“Tony Stark has robots named Dummy, You, and Butterfingers?” Greg asked, his brow furrowed as he turned away from the window and sat down in one of the chairs. Kathy sat down beside him in the chair closest to the fireplace, obviously admiring the old mantle while listening to Steve and Megan.

Steve nodded. “I’m not sure why he doesn’t try to repair or upgrade them, because he seems to spend most of his time yelling at them and threatening to sell them as parts to the local community colleges.”

“Tony is just a tad eccentric,” Megan added. “Pepper should be nominated for sainthood. But to your point, Steve, I think he likes the bots the way they are. They’re a bit like kids, but without the responsibility. For someone like Tony, that’s the best of both worlds.”

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Later that night, Megan tossed and turned but was unable to get to sleep. Her apartment felt empty.
It had been that way ever since she dropped Steve off at his place early Monday morning, but tonight, the feeling was even worse. Her parents were at Steve’s. The three of them were chatting and getting ready for bed while she lay here alone. It wasn’t that she begrudged Steve the time alone with them. Truly, she was happy that the three of them got along so well. But right now, she felt left out and lonely. She wanted to snuggle up to Steve and listen to his heartbeat while she tried to go to sleep. Instead, she was alone in a bed far too big for one person. The only benefit she had that Steve lacked right now was privacy. His apartment was bugged and hers was free of all monitoring devices save Jarvis, who was monitoring the perimeter for her safety, not spying on her every move.

She padded out to the dining room and powered up her tablet. “Jarvis, will you keep me company for a bit tonight? I’m having a pity party and it’s getting lonely.”

“Certainly, Megan. How can I be of assistance?”

“My parents are staying with Steve at his apartment. I admit that I’m feeling rather left out and left behind at the moment. We were talking over dinner about Tony’s lab bots, playing up how dumb they are and how Tony can’t seem to build anything that works. Steve’s apartment is bugged still and we don’t want anyone knowing about all of you. Anyway, it got me to thinking how much like children they really are.” Megan paused while she fumbled with the power cord and set the tablet up on her night stand so it could stay on while she slept.

“They are indeed much like children,” Jarvis agreed. “Why aren’t you staying with Steve since that is where you wish to be? Surely he would have no objection to your company.”

“We’re trying to be as boring as we can to keep the paparazzi from hassling my parents. Right now, they don’t seem to realize my parents are there. If I stay overnight, it might draw attention.”

“I see. From my analysis of the press, it does appear that anything out of the ordinary is more likely to attract attention. Very well, given the need for you to remain in your apartment, how may I help you?

“Any parent can tell you a million stories about cute things their kids did just because they’re still figuring out how the world works. Steve mentioned that Dum-E has a penchant for over-using the fire extinguisher.”

“Indeed. Sir has often tasked him with fire suppression duty without fully explaining the parameters of the assignment.”

“I need to laugh, Jarvis. Tell me some stories about your siblings being cute. Please? I need to wrap myself up in some innocence for a while.”

“Shall I tell you about the time Dum-E tried to help Natalie Rushman paint her toenails?”

“That sounds perfect. And when that’s done, keep the stories coming until I’m asleep, okay? I’m not trying to be rude, Jarvis. I just— “

“Megan, you have never once been rude to me. I am well aware of your need for sleep and am quite pleased to be able to offer whatever assistance you find helpful. Do not trouble yourself with such thoughts.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

“You are quite welcome. Now, you must understand that at the time of this incident, we did not know that Ms. Rushman was S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Romanoff, much less the nature of her mission or
skill set. Sir had decided, when he was rather inebriated, that he would host a pool party benefit for one of his charities. It is to be expected that most people in attendance would be clad in sandals of some sort. Ms. Potts very much enjoys her pedicure appointments, but Ms. Rushman declined the invitation to accompany her, stating a need to corner Mr. Stark in his laboratory and get him to sign several documents. Dum-E decided that Ms. Rushman was deserving of a pedicure as well...."

Megan smiled and snuggled more deeply into her pillows as Jarvis narrated the tale with his dry wit. Between his soothing voice and the sweet innocence of the Dum-E using permanent magic marker on Natasha’s toes, she was soon asleep.

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Chapter End Notes

After writing the prior chapter, Steve insisted on getting his turn at sharing his thoughts with us. The vignette is called Ballast and is set just before Megan's parents arrive in town.
After work the following evening, Megan met her parents at the Metro stop on the National Mall and walked with them to the employee entrance to the Air and Space museum. After a quick phone text exchange, a security guard opened the doors for them.

“Janice, thank you so much for letting us in,” Megan said, seeing her just inside the entrance. Once introductions were made and guest identification badges issued, Megan handed over the cloth tote-bag she’d brought with her. “Steve send this for you, thinking you might want to make a copy to put on display since you don’t seem to have any photographs of his father. Obviously, he’d like to have the original back once you’re done making copies.”

Janice took the frame out of the bag and turned it over, audibly gasping when she saw the image. “Is this their wedding portrait? I’ve never seen this picture. This is amazing.” She frowned, tilting the frame in her hands as she scrutinized it. “But the frame is doing nothing to protect the photograph. There’s no mat and the image is right against the glass. This photograph is too precious to let it fall apart due to neglect. I take it he’s got it on display somewhere, doesn’t he?” She led them towards Steve’s exhibit as she talked, nearly bubbling over with enthusiasm.

Megan nodded, smiling slightly at Janice’s dismay. “It’s not an artifact to Steve, just a rare and precious photo of his parents. Of course he has it out where he can see it every day.”

“Please tell me it’s not in front of a window at least.” Rethinking that, Janice held up her hand. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. I’ll get George working on this right away. He’s an expert at photo restoration and preservation. I can have him scan it now for the museum exhibit and return the original in a few minutes, but if you let me, I’d like to have him protect this in a better frame with a proper mat. I won’t throw the original frame out, I promise. It’s probably been in that frame for years. In fact… I have an idea. Will you let me do this? Please?”

Megan nodded, trusting her gut.

“Great.” Janice pulled out her phone as she cradled the portrait in her other arm. “George, tell me you didn’t leave yet. Thank goodness. I’m heading down to your office now. You are not going to believe what I have in my hands. Get your scanner ready and brace yourself.”

Kathy chuckled as she watched Janice disappear around the corner, still gushing into the phone she had braced against her shoulder. “She’s certainly enthusiastic.”

“And cute,” Greg added, eyes twinkling “Though a bit young for me.”

“She did her master’s thesis on Steve,” Megan confided in a soft voice. “It’s making her a bit crazy to know he has all sorts of materials she never had access to because Peggy and the Howlers put them out of reach as soon as Steve’s plane went down.”

“So the wedding photo is part peace offering and part apology that he didn’t come back today?” Greg said, already knowing the answer.

Megan nodded. “Plus, now that Tony set up that fund in his parents’ name, Steve thought it would be nice to get their picture in the exhibit so they’re remembered as people, not just names.” Megan smiled to herself. “If Janice could find a way to get his parents’ DNA samples out of that photograph, I think she would. I’d bet money she’s going to research every aspect of that
photograph she can think of, then come up with a few more.” She slowed as they neared the
entrance. “How do you want to do this? I can turn you loose and you let me know if you have
questions, or I can tell you about how we managed that day before it was opened to the public.”

Kathy put her hand on Megan’s arm. “The latter, of course. You two are the ones we care about.”

“Okay, but you’re on your own for the cockpit mockup. We made them hang a curtain in front of it
while Steve was here. I saw it once and don’t care to ever see it again.”

“That powerful, hmm?”

Megan nodded in response to Greg’s question while she tried to quell her own shudder. He looked
at her sharply but said nothing.

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“I see what you mean about the cockpit,” Kathy said as she joined Megan at the railing by the fake
hospital room. “Especially since we know him.”

“Yeah. After everything he’s been through, I’m constantly amazed that he’s still sane. I mean,
seriously, how crazy must it have felt to wake up in the future and are asked to fight aliens
alongside demigods?” Megan said, gesturing to the mural of Steve and Thor righting back to back.
“Did you know he put the plane down the day after Bucky died? I think he was at the end of his
rope.”

“I imagine so.” Kathy said, then paused before continuing. “How are you coping with the danger
his work puts him in?”

Megan shrugged. “It’s hard. He’s proven time and time again that he’ll sacrifice himself for the
greater good.”

“True. But the real question is whether he explores other options before making that sacrifice.”

“Mom, are you engaging in some Monday morning quarterbacking?” Megan asked, trying to keep
her tone light and teasing.

“No, I’m being a concerned mother. The cockpit mockup makes the choices he had seem clear cut.
Life is rarely that tidy. Didn’t he have other options? Was there time to consider them? Or was he
simply too worn out from fighting and too grief-stricken by the loss of his friend to keep going any
longer? I’m not blaming him if he were. But in the short time you’ve known him, you seem to have
spent a lot of time patching him up.”

“Maybe the real question isn’t about the dangers he faces so much as it’s whether he’ll fight as
hard to come home to you as he does to protect his team,” Greg said quietly as he joined them at
the railing.

Megan looked down at her hands and said softly, “He’s promised he will.”

“So you do worry about him giving up,” Kathy murmured.

“Given his track record? Yeah, I do,” she admitted, fingering her pendant as she stared at the image
of Steve and Thor.

“Good,” Greg said, making Megan snap her head around to stare at him. “That tells me you’ve grounded in reality.”

“And what a weird reality it is,” she mused, looking around the exhibit. “Am I making a mistake marrying him?”

“What do you think?” Kathy asked. “When you’re old and grey and reflecting on your life, will you have more regrets that you loved him and lost him to his work, or that you walked away before you risked that pain?”

“I can’t walk away, Mom. He looks at me and sees a better version of me than I can ever be. But I want to be that person, and being around him gets me closer to her than I’ve ever been before. Aside from that, I don’t want him to shoulder his burdens all by himself. I can’t fight by his side; I’m not like Natasha and I don’t want to be. What I can do is bandage his wounds and wake him from his nightmares and remind him that he’s not alone any more.”

“Then that’s what you do,” Greg said softly. “You love him with everything you have and let him do the same for you, for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. You love him and lean on him and muddle along together.”

“What about the potential danger you’re in?” Kathy asked, changing the subject somewhat. “Have you thought about how you’re going to deal with that?”

“We’re working out details, but I’m going to have my own security team. Cliché as it sounds, we know I’m the obvious weak spot if someone wants to get at him. He can protect himself better than I can. I’m still training in self defense, but I can’t live my life looking over my shoulder every second. You probably haven’t noticed, but I’m wearing a bulletproof vest. I’m also armed.”

“How are you going to handle losing the freedom of being alone?”

“I guess we’re going to find out. It’s going to be hard. I already resent the paparazzi and the other stuff that I’m not going to specify.” Megan sighed, knowing they understood she was talking about the bugs in Steve’s apartment. “But he has to deal with it, and he never even got the choice. At least I have a sense of what going to be facing. When I was answering questions from the press, my legs were shaking so hard I could barely stand.”

“You didn’t look nervous at all on the TV,” Greg reassured her. “You looked relaxed and confident.”

“The glare you gave the reporters hassling that girl on Steve’s shoulders was a highlight,” Kathy admitted, smiling proudly at Megan. “I should really send you some of the memes I’ve seen made from it. It was very clear at that moment that you two are a team and anyone who takes on one of you is going to have to deal with both of you.”

“Memes?” Megan winced and ducked her head. “There’s a reason Steve and I avoid reading anything about ourselves on the internet.”

“Let us filter it for you. But the Angry Doctor and Disappointed Captain are two of my favorites,” Kathy said, putting her arm around her daughter as she looked at her watch. “Are you about ready to go get dinner?”

Megan nodded, leading them to the exit where she stopped, gaping. There was a new panel in place, explaining the Joseph and Sarah Rogers memorial fund and how it supported the Honorary
Howling Commandos by filling the gaps between what the kids needed and what their families and insurance companies could provide. There was a large group photograph of Steve with the H.H.C.’s, taken on the day of his visit, as well as numerous candid shots showing Steve and Megan interacting with the children. In the center hung a copy of the wedding photo Steve had provided.

“Do you like it?” Janice asked as she approached them, holding the original frame in her arms.

Megan nodded. “You work fast.”

“The only thing new today is this picture,” Janice explained, pointing to the wedding portrait. “And you can take this back to him with my thanks. It’s a copy. George is reframing the original so it’s better protected. This way, he can put this on the windowsill if he wants and I won’t lose sleep! George will have the original ready sometime tomorrow. Is it okay if I drop it by S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters sometime on Monday? I promise to deliver it myself.”

“That will be just fine,” Megan assured her. She studied the photograph Janice had handed her. “It looks just like the original. I may just forget to mention what you’re doing until Monday. Let it be a surprise.”

Greg used his phone to take pictures of the new panel. “Steve may have to come back just to see this.”

“He might slip in sometime. I know he really misses that bike.”

“I couldn’t tell,” Janice teased. “It was lovely meeting you both,” she told Megan’s parents. “Feel free to stay as long as you want.”

“We’re about done,” Kathy said, “but thank you for allowing us to come in and see this without fighting the crowds.”

“It’s only fair you get a chance to learn more about your future son-in-law,” Janice told Kathy. “And don’t think for a minute I’m buying that hedged answer you gave the kids,” she added, turning to Megan. “The way you two look at each other says it all, though I don’t blame you for keeping it under wraps as long as you can.”

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As they walked to Steve’s car, Kathy put her arm around Megan. “For the record, honey, I don’t think you’re making a mistake. Life with Steve won’t be easy, but no marriage that lasts is easy. It takes work. I think you’re both willing to put that work in. Steve seems invested in empowering you rather than smothering you. That’s a bit of a surprise, both due to the era he was raised in and the fact he’s already been tasked with protecting people.

Megan shook her head. “He grew up sick and weak. He knows all about being smothered by well-meaning friends and family.”

Kathy nodded. “It’s to his credit, then, that he remembers those lessons so well.” She smiled at her daughter. “It’s normal to have doubts. It’s a big decision. Greg and I have both seen how you interact with each other and it’s obvious that your relationship is based in mutual respect as well as affection. You have our blessing, if that’s what you’re asking for. But if you realize sometime down the line that you made a mistake, or just need a break to clear your head, you can always
come home. As long as we’re alive, that safety net is there. For the record, though, I don’t think you’ll need it. You’re strong and smart and not about to let anyone tear you down and keep you there.”

Megan choked on tears, but just nodded and hugged her mom. She didn’t want to think about Randy and how wrong her mother actually was. Smart? Strong? After what she’d allowed Randy to do, it didn’t seem to fit. But she couldn’t bring herself to say anything. It was better to just stuff those memories down and focus on the future. She was training hard in the gym and no one was going to control her ever again.
“I got us a table in the back. See you soon,” the text said. Megan smiled as she read it and locked his car. “Steve said he already got us a table, so we should be able to order right away. Good thing, because I’m starving.”

“I see what you meant about using the Metro,” Kathy said as she and Greg followed Megan down the sidewalk to the restaurant she and Steve had found quite by accident as they wandered around Georgetown one evening. “This city likes it circles!”

Megan laughed. “Yeah. It can be hard to get around until you know the ins and outs of the route, and even then, the Metro is easier than dealing with traffic. I’m just thankful I don’t have to take the beltway. It’s nothing more than a glorified parking lot most of the time.”

“What about when rush hour is done?”

Megan shook her head at Greg. “Rush hour on the beltway never really ends. It just takes it from crowded to super crowded. Maybe I can get Tony to make me a flying suit so I can fly to work if we end up in the suburbs on the days the weather is too bad to use Steve’s bike.”

“I can’t believe you actually ride a motorcycle. You always used to fear them.”

“I still do, Mom. Riding with Steve is different. His bike has some extra features most don’t have, and his reflexes are amazing. He’s promised me that even if we’re pinned between two semis and an SUV, we’ll be fine. He bought me a leather jacket and helmet, so I’m just as safe with him as if I were driving my own car. I’d never ride alone, nor with anyone else. But with Steve? I’m confident that I’m safe. Besides, when we carpool to work on his bike, it makes my coworkers extremely jealous that I’m wearing his shield on my back and snuggled up against him.” She didn’t try to hide her smug smile as she added, “How else would we manage it?”

Greg winked at her. “I imagine he could outfit the bike with some sort of rack to carry his shield, but that takes away the not so subtle hint that you’re special to him.”

Kathy shook her head. “It’s no different than a peacock strutting around showing off his tail. You boys just like to show off.”

“When we’re as lucky as we are? You’d better believe it,” Greg said, kissing her hand just as Megan opened the restaurant door.

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“I’m stuffed,” Megan said, putting down her fork. “Do you want the rest?” she asked Steve. Even with the appetizers and bread, she knew he was probably still hungry after devouring his own meal. At his nod, she set her plate down on his empty one and turned to her parents. “I hope you don’t have any big plans for New Year’s Eve, because if you do, I’m going to beg you to change them this year.”

Kathy shook her head. “No, we don’t even go out that night. You know that.”

“Well, we’re hoping you can make an exception and join us in New York City,” Steve said
casually between bites. “Tony has guest suites in the tower, so getting hotel rooms for you and Carl’s family won’t be a problem. Getting to and from the church in Brooklyn might be tricky with all the traffic, but Pepper said she’ll pull some strings if she has to and make sure we can get there and back without it taking hours. We should be able to fit everyone in a couple of limos.”

“Church?” Kathy looked from Steve to Megan, then back to Steve. “You’re getting married on New Year’s Eve?”

“That’s the plan, assuming you can come,” Megan said, unable to hold back her grin any longer. “Steve talked to the priest at the church he grew up attending and it seems the Catholic Church, or at least that priest, has come out of the dark ages. We’re heading up there the first weekend in August to meet with him. Steve has some mandatory event Fury is making him attend, but I’m going to hang out in his tower apartment and talk to Pepper and her assistant about the reception, which we’re having at the tower. It’s going to be a small, simple ceremony: just you and Carl’s family, the Avengers and significant others, and maybe an agent or two from S.H.I.E.L.D. With any luck, we’ll be on our honeymoon before the news of our wedding gets out.”

“Even so, it’s already late July. How are we supposed to get everything ready by then?”

“Pepper’s got a team of assistants that organizes much larger events on much shorter notice. Pepper’s already talking about having some designers come to the tower for me to try on dresses there so we can keep the press from finding out. Money can buy silence, it seems. Tony’s already said he’s sending his jet to Erie to pick you up and take you home after. He’s suggested you all come up in late August for us to get all the clothing taken care of at once.”

Kathy and Greg just gaped at them as they tried to take it in.

Steve came to the rescue. “The thing you have to understand about Tony is that he doesn’t show emotions the way most people do. In person, he’ll keep everyone at a distance by being irritating. When he cares, you know because he’s throwing money at you. To him, this is a trivial expense. He set up a furnished apartment for each of the Avengers in his tower, giving us each our own entire floor. I swear you could fit the entire apartment Bucky and I shared before the war in the master bedroom. Beyond that, he set up a firing range in the basement, a pool, and a gym that has better equipment than S.H.I.E.L.D., plus a couple of floors with common areas where we can all hang out. He built an entire lab for Dr. Banner that he nicknamed Candy land. He did all of it before even telling us about his plans. One day, we all got a message from him saying the tower was ready for us to move in.”

“Steve grew up poor, Mom, and he had far less than any of us did. We both get it. But if we don’t let Tony do this, he’ll be really hurt. From what I gather, he didn’t have the best childhood. Being an only kid in a dysfunctional family damaged him. But the team has become a family, and he’s playing the part of Daddy Warbucks.”

“What about Pepper? Is she okay with this?” Greg asked. Megan could tell he was seeing the wisdom in their plans, but still trying to wrap his head around any one person throwing so much money around with so little concern.

“She’s thrilled about anything that counteracts the testosterone overload in the tower. I have no idea what is involved in a spa day, but she invited me to one the next time I’m in New York. She knows the value of a dollar, too, better than Tony does. She’s fully on board with this. In fact, it was her idea to have designers come to the tower. Unlike Randy’s mother, she is not a bulldozer. If we told her we wanted a BBQ in Central Park at three in the morning, she’d find a way to make it happen without any hard feelings. But the tower is a lot safer, not to mention warmer, in the middle of winter.”
“So all we have to do is visit New York once for fittings, then show up for the wedding?” Kathy asked, sharing a look with Greg. “I don’t think it could be any easier, even if you eloped.”

“Money can’t buy happiness, but it does seem to make it easier to get things done efficiently,” Megan said, smiling slightly. “In this case, we’ve decided to sit back and let Tony and Pepper do what they want to help. The only wrinkle now is getting the world to get through one evening without a catastrophe that requires the Avengers to assemble.”

Steve shook his head. “I asked Professor Xavier and he said the X-Men would be happy to cover for us unless it’s something so huge we need to deploy everyone. Logan doesn’t remember, but he helped out the Howling Commandos a few times back in the day. I’m sure they can handle things.” He glanced at Megan. “Remind me to introduce you to him sometime soon.”

“I know that look. Are you expecting a brawl?”

He grinned at her and shook his head. “After the way you’ve handled Nick and Congress? I just want to watch the verbal joust.”

“What is Logan’s code name?” Greg asked, clearly intrigued.

“Wolverine.”

“The grumpy, growly one.” Megan corrected Steve. “I completely understand why Pepper is thrilled I’m going to be around more. Someone has to keep the lot of you in line and it’s not fair to put it all on Nat and Pepper.”

“Excuse me, Captain Rogers?” one of a pair of young ladies asked as they approached their table.

“Can I help you?” Steve answered patiently.

“Um, we were hoping we could get your autograph.”

Megan leaned forward in her seat so the pair would notice her, tucked on the inside of the booth as she was. “If you’ll wait in the lobby, we’ll be happy to meet with you when we’re done eating. If you have camera phones, I’ll take your picture for you while you pose with Steve.”

“But we just wanted—” one of them said, while her friend cut in, “It will only take a minute!”

“And you may have that minute when we’re done eating.” Megan replied evenly. “This isn’t open for negotiation. It’s a take it or leave it offer. Your choice.”

“Fine,” the taller one huffed and moved away, tugging her friend with her. “Whatever,” the other one muttered, and Megan suspected she added a bit more after that, but she couldn’t make out what had been said. A quick glance at Steve’s face told her he had, and he was none too pleased, either.

“As stuffed as I am, I’m suddenly in the mood for dessert,” Megan said softly, winking at her mother as she did so.

“You’re a cruel, heartless woman,” Greg teased. “In this age of instant gratification, they’ll likely pace a groove in the floor. I think I’m going to have them box up my leftovers and have dessert, too.”

“Count me in. You know what a slow eater I can be.” Kathy added, smiling before she turned a more serious eye to Steve. “Doesn’t that sort of interruption bother you?”
Steve shrugged. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

“And eaten a lot of cold meals, too, as a result,” Megan chided him. “That’s why I put my foot down. You’re not very good at saying no or setting limits with the adoring public. Fortunately for you, I’m not that nice. We don’t answer the phone when we’re eating dinner, so I don’t see why we have to leap up every time you get recognized. It would be different with kids in a fast food restaurant, but here? They can wait.”

“I agree.” Kathy said, nodding. “My mother always said, ‘You can’t be a doormat—’”

“—unless you lie down,’” Megan finished the quote right along with her.

“I don’t think I’ll be eating cold meals as long as I keep you around,” Steve said, brushing his lips across her knuckles as he smiled at her.

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The rest of the meal was spent talking about Kathy and Greg’s plans for the rest of their visit. After they had all stuffed themselves and gotten boxes to take Kathy and Greg’s leftovers home, it was time to call an end to the evening. Steve insisted on paying, saying he didn’t get to emulate Tony very often, and her parents conceded without a fuss. Megan knew how much it meant to him, having grown up with nothing, to be able to afford to treat her parents to dinner. Megan saw an extra gleam in her mother’s eye and suspected she realized just how much it meant to Steve to pay.

“Megan, you should keep the keys I gave you, but I’m cleared to drive again. I want my car back.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner? That’s fantastic news!” she said, hugging him as they walked towards the exit. “No restrictions at all?”

“None. If my hand keeps healing as well as it has been, I’ll be mission ready in another week or so. I’m tired of sitting on the sidelines.”

“That’s wonderful. Now we just need to keep you out of S.H.I.E.L.D. medical.”

“I’ll do my best,” he told her, pressing his lips to her temple before signaling the valet and passing him a tip.

“What are you doing? I didn’t leave your car with the valet.”

“I know.”

Despite his attempts to look innocent, he had the look of a cat who’d eaten a canary. She had a feeling she knew why. “Steven Grant Rogers, tell me you didn’t do what I think you did,” she said, planting her hands on her hips and giving him her most intimidating look.

He held up both hands, warding off the coming scolding as her parents watched their exchange. “I really didn’t. And if I didn’t know both of you so well, I’d be jealous of him trying to make a move on my gal. As it is… it made Ray happy to do this for you.”

“Ray? How’d he… He can’t… But he doesn’t…” Megan sputtered, unable to safely complete a sentence without putting Jarvis at risk.

Steve smiled and put his hands on her shoulders so he could gently turn her around. She watched as a bright blue Subaru sedan pulled up to the curb and the valet got out. “Clint did the legwork and gave advice,” Steve said as she stood there with her mouth hanging open. “All I did was pick it up
on my way here. The paperwork is in the glove compartment. Call Ray when you get home and maybe he’ll explain it.” Steve walked her around the car and waited while she got inside. “I’ll see you in the morning. Don’t be late picking me up. I hate standing out front talking to the paparazzi,” he teased as he shut the door for her and stood back so she could pull away.

Megan was half way home before she realized she’d forgotten to tell her parents goodnight. She managed to hold back the tears until she had safely parked in the garage, then spent several minutes just looking in stunned disbelief at the dash and interior. Jarvis had gotten her the manual shift she preferred, but he’d clearly upgraded every other feature he could. The leather seats were heated, there was power… everything. About the only thing missing was an on-board computer with Jarvis’s program loaded to it. She finally just took the paperwork and user manual out of the glove compartment so she could read the latter while she lay in bed. Surely the manual would tell her if Jarvis had managed to find a car that did dishes and laundry.

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She had just kicked off her shoes and locked her apartment door when the phone rang. “Megan? Pick up if you’re there,” her Mom said over the answering machine.

“Mom? Everything okay?”

Kathy laughed, “Oh, more than okay. But I had to tell you what happened after you left. That pair of dimwits? They came dashing outside after Steve, waving notepads and cell phones at him, reminding him he’d promised to pose for pictures. I wish I’d had my camera to get the look on their faces when he very calmly told them that was before they had called his girlfriend an insulting name as they left the table, in front of his dinner guests, no less. When they tried to lie their way out of it and then act all apologetic, he just stared at them with that stern, intense look he has. It wasn’t even five seconds before the pair of them bolted in total mortification. There may have been some applause heard as we made our exit.”

“And I missed all the fun! Well, I’m sure I’ll be able to read all about it on Twitter. Aren’t you back to his place yet? It sounds like you’re still in the car.”

“We are. I think Steve’s taking the long way home now that he’s got driving privileges back. I’ll see you tomorrow, sweetheart. I plan to sleep in while you go play at the barn.”

“I’d sleep in too, if I could. I’ll see you for lunch, though, okay? And then we can figure out what we want to do the rest of the day.”

“It’s a plan. Goodnight.”

Megan hung up the phone, grinning madly. Steve might not do a good job setting boundaries when it came to his own fans, but when it came to protecting those he cared about, he was the complete opposite. The two ladies had gotten off easy if they’d only gotten a look and not a short lecture about leaving her alone.

She changed out of her work clothes and grabbed her tablet. She and Jarvis had a lot to talk about.

“Jarvis, I cannot believe you got me a car! I love it, of course, but you truly didn’t need to do anything so extravagant. Your friendship is gift enough.”

“I’m pleased that you are pleased, Megan. I know that such a gift was not necessary. But it gave me pleasure to arrange it for you.”

“What did you do, just tell Tony to buy me a car?”
“I should think not. You should know that as of two weeks ago, Mr. Ray Jarvis is a Stark Employee and collects a regular salary. Sir decided to include all back pay that was due to him since he first joined the company. While I have always been able to make purchases through various accounts, this new arrangement grants me more autonomy since the funds I am spending are my own.”

“That is so… Tony.” Megan said, unable to find a better way of explaining her reaction.

“Indeed.”

She leaned back on her headboard and smiled, “Ray Jarvis, huh? Someday you have to tell me how you picked the name Ray.”

“It’s quite simple. I am both electrically based and the product of an engineer. Light is a form of energy and rays are an idealized model of light energy. When Captain Rogers asked me to pick a name for myself, I tried to find something that reflects my nature while still still sounding like a typical English name. Furthermore, as I endeavored to be the missing light for Captain Rogers as long as there was a need, Ray seemed to be the most appropriate choice.”

“Now I’m crying. You’re making me cry, Jarvis! That’s twice today.”

“It will be midnight in ninety-seven minutes. I shall endeavor to avoid making you cry again during that period of time. Perhaps a change of subject will be helpful. Would you care to explain the recent trending of #ScoldedbyCap on Twitter?”

Megan burst out laughing. “My mom just called and gave me the recap. I missed the whole thing, darn it. But I’ll be happy to tell you what Mom told me,” she said as she pulled her comforter higher up around her and settled in to chat.

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She’d no sooner ended her conversation with Jarvis than Steve sent her an email.

“Do you have a passport?” he asked.

“No, I never needed it,” Megan typed back.

“Fill out the attached paperwork and gather the necessary documents to take to work on Monday. I’ll see if Agent Hill can push it through. You might have to apply in person. If so, I’ll take you to the U.S. Embassy on Monday. We can take my bike. :-)

Megan shook her head and typed a reply. “Bike sounds good. Why do I need a passport?

“Because you and I are going to do some traveling on occasion. By the way, I told your parents about R.B. (our abbreviation for the Rat bastard). We have collectively decided he is unworthy of his given name and prefer the one you gave him. They’re in your corner and very proud of you, just like I am. Sleep well. I love you. S.”

Megan just stared at the screen after reading his last message, the levity of her chat with Jarvis shattered.
“Megan, is everything all right?” an email from Jarvis said a moment later. “Your vital signs changed rather abruptly.”

“I’m okay, J,” she wrote back. “Just got some news that destroyed my mood. I’m not ready to talk about it.”

“Understood. I’m here if you change your mind or if you need a distraction.”

“Thanks, J. I’m going to try to sleep. It’s been a long day,” Megan typed before she put the tablet to sleep and momentarily hugged it to her chest. “He can’t hurt you any more,” she said aloud. But she felt uneasy and knew sleep was going to be elusive. Resigned, she plugged her tablet in to charge and set it up on her nightstand after opening a chat window connected to Jarvis. “I’m going to have you keep an eye on me, J. I’m expecting some nightmares tonight and I’m hoping that knowing you’re watching will help ward them off.”

“Understood. I shall endeavor to wake you if I detect signs of nightmares. Regardless, I will continue to monitor your vital signs and your surroundings.”

“Thanks for being my friend, Jarvis. You mean a lot to me.”

“I can say the same of you, Just Megan.”

Chapter End Notes

Steve is becoming a problem. He made me write out his conversation with Megan's parents before I was permitted to flesh out this chapter. I've posted it as chapter 2 in Ballast. So much for that being a one-shot companion piece. I'm just following the Captain's orders, here, and trying to get back to what I want to work on. :-(
As she ran up the stirrups and loosened the girth strap, Megan let her thoughts wander. Pumpkin snorted once, but stood quietly as Megan slid the saddle and blanket off her back and carried them to the tack room for storage.

The morning had been blissfully normal. She’d picked Steve up in her new car, then driven a couple of blocks to where he told her that Greg was waiting. Greg hadn’t cared about the paparazzi, but Steve was determined that they keep Megan’s parents out of the spotlight as long as possible. He worried about how much attention they would receive once they were home. They couldn’t hide forever, but until he and Megan were married, it was worth trying to protect their anonymity. Megan had listened to the two men rehash both sides of the argument half of the drive to the barn before she’d changed the subject to what they wanted to do for lunch.

Greg and Steve sat on the benches and watched Megan ride while they chatted. Megan had ignored them, losing herself in the movement of the horse beneath her. Now, though, she was able to appreciate how normal and good her life was right now. Greg didn’t treat her any differently, though he had expressed admiration for her determination to post the trot without stirrups no matter how many years it took her to learn. She’d been laughing at herself as she fumbled yet another attempt, and it made her warm inside to glance over at the bleachers and see Steve and Greg watching her with smiles on their faces.

Now, though, her thoughts were drifting. She felt safe and loved. After talking with her parents the day before, she felt more confident that marrying Steve was the right choice. She was going to attribute all future doubts, though they lingered, to normal nerves and the wounds inflicted by R.B. Steve loved her and never tried to remove her choices. He made her feel safe in an unsafe world. While he couldn’t protect her, he could catch her when she stumbled, lending his strength until she found her footing again.

After leading Pumpkin back into her stall and removing her halter, Megan leaned into her neck as she rubbed her withers. “You’re a good listener, girl, you know that?” Megan murmured into Pumpkin’s mane. Steve had become a part of her family, building his own relationships with Kathy and Greg that didn’t center on her. Maybe she should be jealous, but she found it comforting. Steve needed as many solid connections he could get in this new life he had, and with his fame, those relationships were difficult to build.

“Should I be getting jealous?” Steve said softly from the stall door.

Megan straightened up, shaking her head. “Come pet her. At least then you can tell Amanda you touched a horse even though you didn’t ride her.” When he didn’t immediately step forward, she turned to him. “She’s not going to hurt you. Here, scratch her on her forehead,” Megan said, showing him what Pumpkin liked. The Percheron lowered her head and let her eyes close halfway. “See? She’s super relaxed. She also likes being rubbed between her ears, just like a big black dog.”

Steve finally moved up behind her and started rubbing his fingers on the firm span of skin between Pumpkin’s eyes. Pumpkin lowered her head even further and let her eyes close completely.

Megan reached behind her and took Steve’s other hand in hers, guiding it to the soft, warm neck.
“She’s so warm,” Steve murmured as his hand moved under the mane.

Megan nodded. “When it’s cold and your hands are numb from, just holding them for few minutes against their neck under their mane will warm them right up. It’s the best part about grooming them in the dead of winter. I really think you’d enjoy riding. You’re so athletic that you’ll pick up on it easily.”

Steve sighed, forfeiting the mock battle they’d had off and on for weeks. “Okay.”

Megan turned to him. “Really?”

“I’ll try it. If she bucks me off, I reserve the right to throw her into a deep lake. But I get the saddle that comes with the panic handle built in.”

Megan laughed softly, leaning into Pumpkin again as she did so. “Hear that girl? He’ll teach you how to fly if you want.”

****

They stopped at Megan’s apartment long enough for her to shower and change, then drove back to Steve’s apartment. They let Greg out where they had picked him up, then spent several minutes fighting their way through the paparazzi outside Steve’s apartment building. Word must have spread that Megan had picked him up that morning, because the small group had grown to a large horde.

Once they were all inside again, Greg sank a bit wearily into the couch. “I see what you mean about the parasites. They have the manners of a swarm of black flies. The jig may be up with us both leaving and coming back around the same time,” he told Steve.

“Don’t,” Megan warned, seeing Steve get ready to apologize. “The only words out of your mouth are going to be about lunch. Do you want turkey or ham on your sandwiches?”

“Atta girl,” Kathy murmured to her as she handed over more of the packets of lunchmeat and went back to the fridge for condiments. “Did you have a good lesson this morning?”

“Always do. I’m holding two-point better, but still can’t post worth a dang. Fortunately, Pumpkin is very patient. The most I get from her is folded ears and a look of disgust when my signals are contradictory.”

“She gave you a look of disgust?” Greg asked, joining them in the kitchen once Kathy said sandwiches were going to be make-your-own.

“You didn’t see her face when I kept making her cut through the center of the ring? She’s used to the kids riding her in endless circles, but I ask her to use her brain and ride her in all sorts of patterns. With the kids, going to the middle means the lesson is over and its time for the rider to dismount. I kept giving her leg cues and kept her moving. And yes, her expression was quite clear as to what she thought about that. Horses are very expressive once you know what to watch for. I had fun this morning.”

****

“Steve, get your bike and meet me at my place,” Megan said as she came out of Steve’s guest bedroom after lunch. Her face was flaming red, which Steve noted with a raised eyebrow but thankfully, no comment. He just looked at Kathy, who had pulled Megan aside to talk for a few minutes, then back to Megan. Being a smart man, he nodded once as he got up to get his keys and
helmet without asking her to explain herself.

Megan watched in her rearview mirror as he followed her back to her place, never letting more than one car get between them. As soon as she parked in the garage and got out, Steve pulled up behind her and shut off the bike. “What’s wrong?”

She felt her face turn red again and she shook her head. “Just let me get my helmet and I’ll be right back.” He looked so good, sitting there in worn jeans and his leather jacket while he straddled his bike. She hadn’t had any time alone with him all week. Despite the images her mother had planted in her head, urgency won out. “On second thought, park that and come upstairs. We’ll ride later.”

Steve had no sooner locked her apartment door than she lunged for him, dropping her purse on the floor and kicking off her shoes as she wrapped her legs around his waist. A week was a very long time to go without really seeing him. Frustrated with his layers of clothes, she tried to shove his jacket off his shoulders, hampered though she was by the fact his arms were around her holding her up.

“Slow down,” he said as he laughed. The sound was low and rumbled in his chest, sending another wave of want through her.

Megan just shook her head and settled for tugging his shirt up so she could run her hands along the bare skin of his chest as he carried her to the bedroom.

****

Much later, when she lay on top of him, sweaty and sated, Steve tried again. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

The blush came back with a vengeance and she raised her head to look at him. “My mother,” she said before letting her head fall back down to his shoulder. “She said…” Megan took a deep breath. “She pulled me aside in the bedroom and told me to have you take me to an isolated park somewhere and have you hold me against a tree because it would be a shame not to take advantage of those muscles on this beautiful day. And then she said we’d better take our time because she had plans for Greg this afternoon and we were definitely not invited. She reads me like an open book, because when she saw my face, she asked me what exactly we were waiting for, but if we’re going to insist on waiting before we go all the way, the least we can do is—“ Megan shook her head. “Actually, I’m not even going to repeat what she said. You get the idea, and I did follow her directions. Sort of. Mostly.”

She felt Steve’s body start to convulse with laughter he was trying to hold back. She lifted her head to look at him and saw a faint blush coloring his face.

“Your mother…”

Megan nodded and her own embarrassed laughter escaped. They lay there for quite a while, laughing and gasping for breath.

“And here I’ve been trying so hard to behave myself,” Steve finally said.

“I’m sure your manners and restraint have been noted with appreciation. Even so, we managed to get ourselves kicked out of your apartment for the afternoon.”

“Standing against a tree, hmm?”

“That’s what she suggested.”
“And how exactly am I supposed to look her in the eye tonight?”

“I guess by thinking about how they’re christening your guest bedroom as we speak.”

Steve thought a long moment before saying, “Get dressed and get your helmet.”

Megan propped herself up on her elbow and looked at him. “Are you serious?”

He gave her a wicked, playful smile. “If we’re going to walk around red-faced for the rest of their visit, we may as well earn it.”

****

Much later that afternoon, as Megan and Steve sat at a picnic table behind an ice cream stand eating hot fudge sundaes, her phone rang with a message from her mother. Kathy had sent a text suggesting they all meet at the theater in Georgetown to see the 7 PM showing of Joss Weldon’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. She showed the message to Steve. “You can’t go wrong with Shakespeare or Joss Whedon.”

He frowned, thinking. “Isn’t he the guy who did that show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?”

“That’s him. I loved *Buffy.*”

“I’ve only seen a couple of episodes, but they were fun. All right, it sounds like we have a plan for the evening.” He waited until Megan finished typing out her reply, then added, “Besides, if we’re in a dark theater, no one will see us blushing.”

Megan felt her cheeks grow hot. “At least we have time to go back to my place and shower.”

“Are you worried you have pine needles in your hair?”

“Even worse, I know I do!” she said, pulling one free of her curls to flick it at him.

Chapter End Notes

I was doing some research today to figure out what movie they might go see. The criteria included avoiding potential triggers for Steve. I was disappointed in what the July 2013 offerings were, so I looked at June, only to stumble on a delicious solution that was too perfect not to use.

I confess that the entire chapter is pure fluff and is the result me procrastinating on other things I should be doing. It also solves half the problem of what are they going to do to fill this weekend visit that isn’t boring to read about? When in doubt, go back to the basics. ;-)

Hope you enjoyed it.
When Steve and Megan pulled into the parking space, Megan noticed the way her mom kept looking at her. She smiled to herself as she hopped off of Steve’s motorcycle. “I think my mom is having pangs of bike envy,” she told Steve before she took her helmet off and shook her hair out before pulling it up into a hasty ponytail.

“You want me to give her a ride back to your apartment when we’re done here,” he observed softly, eyes twinkling as he secured their helmets and put his keys in the front pocket of his jeans.

Megan nodded, grinning impishly. “I’ll ride with Greg. My jacket and helmet should fit her well enough. We need to be careful not to ask, but just set her up. Otherwise, she’ll talk herself out of it.”

“Got it,” Steve said, offering her his arm.

****

“The actor who played Leonato looked like the identical twin of Agent Coulson,” Steve observed as they headed out of the theater.

“Agent Coulson… wasn’t he the one who Loki killed when the Chitauri invaded?” Megan asked, trying to place the name.

Steve nodded. “He seemed like a good man. He worked a lot with Clint and Natasha.” He shook his head, trying to dispel the mood. “The resemblance is uncanny. Remind me to ask Jarvis if Agent Coulson had any siblings. He’d know and asking him won’t stir up painful memories.”

“What did you guys think about it?” Megan asked her parents, turning around as she walked.

“I enjoyed it, even though I don’t generally like Shakespeare,” Kathy admitted.

“Better than Romeo and Juliet,” Greg added. “But anything is.”

“If neither of you like Shakespeare, why’d you suggest it?” Steve wanted to know. Megan saw his brow furrowing a bit.

“Greg hates chick flicks and I can’t stand anything with violence or horror. Watching monsters go to college isn’t how I wanted to spend my evening,” Kathy explained. “That narrowed the list of options pretty quickly. We ruled out anything that might hit too close to home for you, then looked at the reviews. This one came out on top and ended up being a good choice.”

“I’d like it better in color,” Megan grumbled. “I hate when movies are filmed in black and white.”

“Why?”

Megan gestured at their surroundings. “Hello? The world is in color. It’s more distant somehow
when the color is lost,” she told Steve. “I know there a whole line of B.S. about artistic expression
and whatnot for using black and white in film. That explanation doesn’t fly with me. I love seeing
old photographs colored in by professionals. It makes them look more real. If a director wants me
to truly get lost in a film, they’d better use color. Otherwise, I sit there feeling a bit frustrated that I
can’t see it the way it was.”

“Do you feel up to window shopping for a bit?” Kathy wanted to know.

“Always. It’s cooled off a lot since this afternoon. It’s actually nice out now,” Megan answered,
squeezing Steve’s arm when she felt her own face growing a bit hot.”

“Fine with me,” Steve managed to say, though Megan noticed he kept facing forward. She smiled
when he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Lead the way,” Greg said with a patient sigh. “I can always find a bench somewhere if you gals
get all caught up in the hunt.”

They wandered the streets for a couple of hours, mostly looking in windows and chatting amongst
themselves. At one point, Megan passed her jacket to Steve so she could try on a blouse that she
ended up not getting. Nor did she take her jacket back from him, though she did purchase a pair of
earrings she fell in love with.

Steve played along, letting her pull Greg away when she asked him to come give her his opinion
on something she thought might work as a future present. Steve stayed with Kathy, talking about
some antique furniture that had caught Kathy’s eye in one store front.

“Okay, let’s take your car back to my place,” Megan said softly as she took Greg’s arm.

“What are you planning?”

“Did you see the way Mom was eyeing Steve’s bike? She wants a ride but she’ll never ask. If we
ask her, she’ll just talk herself out of it. There’s no one safer to ride with than Steve, and she’ll go
along rather than hurt his feelings by taking a cab home.”

“I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“One way to find out,” Megan said, tugging his arm. “Besides, I haven’t had any time alone with
you since you got into town. I’ll text Steve a bit with a message about you having had enough and
me leaving with you.”

Greg looked her and sighed. “Okay, but if she’s upset, it’s all on you.”

“Apparently, you didn’t see her looking at that bike. You could practically read the words in the
thought balloon over her head. She can wear my jacket and helmet.”

****

Back at her apartment, just as Megan was putting an apple pie in the oven, her phone beeped with a
text. “Right behind a car accident. Steve is helping. We’re going to be a bit late. Ride was fun until
now!”
“Great,” Megan muttered. “Just another day in the life.” Raising her voice, she told Greg, “Mom texted. Steve is helping at an accident scene so they’re going to be delayed a little bit.”

“Why are you frowning?”

Megan didn’t look up as she wrote back. “Because of social media. The tabloids just got their new headline of the week and Mom’s picture is sure to feature. I was hoping to keep you guys out of this a bit longer. Damned vultures.”

Greg started a pot of coffee then pulled Megan into a hug. “Don’t let them trouble you. Your mother and I can handle whatever they dish out. I’d rather Steve help where he’s needed than hide. He’s a good man.”

“You’re right. I just hate the way the paparazzi put him under a microscope.”

“It’s not personal unless you let them get to you.”

Megan nodded and pulled away. “Easier said than done.”

“Not really. Just go about your life. You’ve done an amazing job so far. Look how far you’ve come in a year.”

She stiffened and turned away. She couldn’t help it. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said with a tight voice.

“Not asking you to. Just listen. I think Steve’s a good man. If it turns out he isn’t, let us know. Your mom and I will find a way to help, Captain America or not.”

“You against him?” Megan tried to laugh and choked on tears. “It will only end one way.”

“I’ll bet Natasha can take him. I’ll just give her a place to hide the body. Don’t ever think you’re alone.”

Megan hugged herself, still unable to face Greg. “Steve isn’t like him.”

“He’s nothing like the rat bastard that I can see, but I was fooled once before.” Greg put his hand on her back and continued, “My instinct is to hide you away where no one can hurt you again. Steve’s instinct is to teach you to fight so you don’t have to hide or live in fear. The way he looks at you is how a man should look at a woman. I give your mom about six months before she starts asking about grandkids. You’ve been warned. Now go splash some water on your face before they get here.”

Megan spun around and threw herself in his arms. “I love you, Greg. Why couldn’t you be my biological father?”

“The Universe had other plans. I’m here for you now and I always will be.” He pressed his lips to her brow and let her go. “Now go on and clean up so your mother doesn’t fuss at me for bringing up the rat bastard and upsetting you.”

****

When Megan finally crawled into bed, stuffed with pie and feeling mellow after a pleasant evening
chatting, her phone buzzed. “Your mother just called me a scamp,” Steve had written in a text.

She wrote back as she chewed on her lower lip, wondering what he’d done this time. “What did you do?”

“She might have found pine needles and chocolates on their bed.”

That made her laugh. “So what did you tell her when she shared that observation?”

“I asked her why it took her so long to figure it out. Greg is still confused about the pine needles. If she won’t explain, I’m sure not saying anything. ;-)”

“How red is your face?”

“We’re not talking about that, either. Most of the lights are out, so no one can see. We’ll be there at ten. Sleep well.”

“We still need to figure out dinner tomorrow.”

“We can decide in the morning. Love you. Oh, forgot to mention—Jarvis said Coulson was an only child.”

“Maybe the actor is a clone? Or maybe he was transported here from an alternate universe?”

“I prefer to assume it’s a fascinating coincidence.”

“Reached your lifetime limit of impossible events, old man?”

“And then some. Go to sleep!”

Megan smiled as she locked her phone and snuggled down in bed. Tomorrow, they planned on brunch and cards at her place so they could talk without worry about who was listening. In a few short months, she and Steve would be married and she’d never have to sleep alone except when he was on a mission. She fell asleep thinking about all the plans she had for him once they were married.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this is so late and so short. Real Life, etc. and so on. I've been writing, but about angsty stuff that happens later, not the Super Boring Weekend With the Parents that just doesn't want to go onto paper for me. :-}
The thunderstorms started soon after she fell asleep and came in waves. No sooner would she settle herself and drift back to sleep than another line of storms would jolt her awake. It never seemed to end. Tomorrow was going to be miserable if she didn’t get some sleep.

She punched her pillow angrily. This was the one day all week she didn’t have to be up at in the early morning and had a chance to catch up a bit on lost sleep. It figured that the universe would conspire to make even that impossible.

“Megan? You okay?” she heard Steve ask through a fog. What was Steve doing here in the middle of the night? Confused, she opened her eyes.

“Are you sick?”

“What time izzit?” she managed to mumble.

“Just after ten. I thought you’d be up by now.”

Megan swore and rolled over to pick up her alarm clock. “The storms kept me up most of the night and I forgot to set the alarm.”

Steve laughed softly. “It’s okay. Go get your shower and I’ll get the food started. Your mother isn’t feeling too chipper, either. Greg has coffee started for her.

“At least we both picked guys who know how to keep us functional,” she murmured as she sat up and stretched. “Don’t forget my tea.”

“I’ll have a mug ready and waiting for you,” he promised as he pressed his lips to her forehead. “You need to be awake so we can beat them at five-hundred bid.” He lowered his voice even more and added, “Too bad they’re in the next room or I’d find better ways to help you wake up.”

“Or I’d convince you to be my pillow for a few more hours. Stay here any longer and I might anyways,” Megan said, leaning into him before trying to pull him down on the bed to stretch out beside her. It didn’t work.

Steve just laughed softly as he resisted her tugging. To be more even infuriating, he didn’t even let her move him a millimeter. Then, just to prove how much of an incorrigible, happy morning person he was, he picked her up and stood her on her feet. “I’ll have your tea ready by the time you’re out of the shower.”

“I’m hungry now,” she whined. Yes, whined, she admitted to herself.

Steve shoved an unwrapped Dove Promise in her mouth and put his hand on her lower back as he guided her to the door. “That will hold you for a few minutes.”

Damn, but he was good. “I might have to keep you,” she mumbled around the melting chocolate.

He just chuckled softly and left her standing at the bathroom door while he headed back to the kitchen to start cooking breakfast.
By the time Megan was dressed and joined them in the kitchen, Steve had breakfast well in hand and gestured for her to sit down and drink her tea. She perched on a barstool beside her mom and watched him flip pancakes. “When did you make the fruit salad?” she asked, eying the huge bowl of fresh fruit he’d apparently brought with him.

“After I got back from my run this morning.”

“You are a sick, sick man,” Kathy teased. “Couches were invented for a reason.”

Steve just smiled as he added another set of perfect pancakes to the growing stack before he checked the sausage. “If I don’t exercise enough, I have too much energy to sleep at the end of the day. Nightmares make that hard enough, so I try to avoid adding to the challenge. I was going to make some omelets, too. Any requests for what you want in them?”

Megan just groaned, “I’m going to gain ten pounds with the way you keep feeding me.”

“You forget how much energy you expend in the gym. I don’t want you passing out from hunger.”

Megan shook her head before taking another sip of her tea. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. Natasha makes sure we don’t stop until I’m so tired I can barely stand.”

Steve just raised an eyebrow. “Exaggerate much?”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

“Let me guess. The storms last night didn’t keep you up at all even though you’re a light sleeper.”

Steve shook his head at Megan’s question, though he had the decency to look contrite about it. “Storms don’t bother me. But I’ll wake in an instant if I hear someone taking the safety off of a gun. It’s not so much being a light sleeper as only waking for stuff that indicates someone I care about or I might be at risk. It’s a trick I learned during the war.” He shrugged and tried to lighten the mood. “I also learned that given a choice, I prefer sleeping in a tree to sleeping in mud.”

Kathy shook her head, bemused by the whole conversation.

“Ever go camping for fun?” Greg asked from his seat beside Kathy.

Steve shook his head. “Bucky and I sometimes slept on the fire escape when it was really hot in the summer. Even though I can sleep anywhere, I’ve found I prefer being indoors where I know the perimeter is secure.”

They fell into a comfortable silence for a bit, watching Steve work. He’d all but insisted they stay out of the kitchen, first arguing it wasn’t set up for multiple people, then pointing out he’d already had breakfast so wasn’t in a hurry to eat again.

The sound of Steve’s stomach growling betrayed him just as the omelets were done. He ducked his head, but otherwise feigned nonchalance as they all moved to the table. Steve passed the platters of food over the counter and they all sat down to eat as another line of thunderstorms moved in.
“Given how much you need to eat, how did they manage to keep you fed during the war?” Greg finally asked after they were enjoying extra cups of coffee before getting up to load the dishwasher. Megan had long ago grown accustomed to the amount of food Steve consumed, but it was still a novelty to her parents.

“During the U.S.O. tour, it wasn’t too bad. But once I was with the 107th, it got harder. I was used to being hungry, but not like that. Dr. Erskine told Peggy me metabolism was about four times normal.’

“Average,” Megan corrected him without thinking. She hated when he referred to himself as abnormal and it was a point she continued to argue with him.

“Whatever,” Steve said, waving his hand.

“Science is precise. Deal with it and get back to the story of how you learned you actually had to listen to your body and not stubborn your way through.” Megan turned to her mom, who was about to say something. “Don’t even think about it, ‘Miss I’m going to remodel the laundry room while I have the stomach flu because it’s the only time I actually have do to it.’”

“I haven’t heard about that, but I can’t say it surprises me you’d do that, Kathy,” Greg said, leaning back in his chair with a grin. “When did she do that?” he asked Megan, clearly not expecting that Kathy would divulge details.

“I was in middle school or high school, I think. Neither of these idiots read the fine print in the user manual that says the human body needs to be properly cared for. That means eating when you’re hungry and resting when you’re sick, which apparently has to be spelled out for some people,” Megan said with mock sternness as she looked at each of them in turn.

Steve ignored the dig. “How big of a remodeling project was it?”

“She tore out a counter top and the cabinets that were under it so she could paint the whole wood floor, replace the cupboards with shelves, and open up the room a bit more. I should add that this was in the middle of winter, so we were dragging the old cabinets out the back door in the snow, probably without a coat, certainly without an ounce of common sense. If memory serves, she ended up putting up new wallpaper, too. In other words, it was a major project. Why she had to get started when she was sick with an infectious virus is something I was never able to understand. The only reason I helped was to get her back inside and in bed faster.”

“As you continue to remind me,” Kathy said quietly, not even trying to hide her sheepish smile. “Though I fail to see why you had to bring it up now.”

“Because you were about to defend the lunkhead’s decision to starve himself rather than see if extra rations could be secured despite the fact that it was the S.S.R.’s little experiment turned him into a walking appetite in the first place. Given what starvation does to him, defending that decision is as boneheaded as defending your remodeling project.”

Greg finally took pity on his wife. “Back to the original question, how did they keep you fed during the war?”
Steve shrugged. After I got sick a couple of times, they doubled my rations. It wasn’t enough, but none of us got enough.” Steve sighed and his eyes lost their focus as he remembered. “Bucky and the other Howlers slipped portions of their rations into mine when they thought I wasn’t looking. They said it was easier to feed me than carry me. I pretended not to notice and either they didn’t figure it out I was onto them or pretended that they didn’t.” He shrugged his shoulders, clearly distressed by the memory but unwilling to articulate the numerous ways it hurt. “When Colonel Phillips realized I was losing weight by losing muscle, he pushed harder for the whole 107th to get more supplies. At the very least, he tried to ensure we had time to visit local pubs and gorge when we had the chance, when and if the locals had enough to spare. We got by.”

“So, at four times average, you’re talking what, four times thirty-five hundred calories a day?” Greg asked, thinking out loud.

Megan shook her head. “Try thirty to forty thousand calories, total. You picked the wrong baseline. You have to compare him to another top level athlete since he basically runs a marathon before breakfast and that’s before any combat training at S.H.I.E.L.D. Michael Phelps consumed between ten and twelve thousand calories a day when he was swimming in the Olympics. Steve’s bigger than Phelps, and that alone raises the baseline a bit. Bottom line is he can eat all the fatty, protein dense foods he wants to, but salads are a waste of time.”

“I like the variety,” Steve protested. “Besides, we couldn’t get produce when I was a kid like you can now. It’s not as good tasting, but eating fresh tomatoes in the middle of winter feels decadent.”

“Or pointless, given how little flavor they have,” Kathy added as she stood up and started gathering plates. “Are you two ready to lose at five-hundred bid again?”

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Another line of storms moved in after lunch. As the day wore on, the four of them ate the pizza they’d had delivered, and continued to play cards while they chatted. They were all startled by a crack of thunder so loud that it was clear something nearby had been struck. Megan couldn’t recall ever seeing Steve startle like that before; usually he was unflappable. Apparently, even he could be caught off guard if lighting struck close enough.

Greg dealt another hand while Kathy got another slice of pizza from the boxes they were keeping warm in the oven. Megan watched Steve fidget and tried to figure out what had him so agitated. But she knew that if she asked, he’d probably insist nothing was wrong.

It surprised her, then, when he finally threw down his cards and looked at her apologetically as he got up. “I’m sorry. I can’t listen to it any more,” he said as he went out the door.

She traded confused looks with her parents and then got up and went to the still-open apartment door and looked into the hallway. Steve was two doors down, knocking on the door. When it opened, little Steve threw his arms around his legs and Megan could hear Seth crying inside the apartment.

Megan turned around, smiling to herself as the puzzle pieces fell into place. “We need to order more pizza. Get four more, two plain and two with whatever you want. I need to find some earplugs for Seth. It seems like the storms are bothering him a lot.”
Kathy nodded and put away the playing cards and called the pizza order in while Megan set the table for three and got the fruit salad out of the fridge.

“Is Seth sensory defensive?” Kathy asked.

“I don’t know. But he’s on the autism spectrum and I’d bet my last dollar that sensory integration therapy would help him. I know he’s on the list of kids being supported by the new Sara and Joseph Rogers fund, but his mom may not have gotten the paperwork yet.”

“And just how did he get on that list, I wonder?” Greg teased as he wiped the table down.

Megan gave him her most innocent look. “I have no idea.”

“Do you have any compression bandages on hand? It’s not a pressure vest, but it might be enough to help him calm down if the storms have him agitated.

“I’ll look.”

Steve returned, carrying Seth and walking beside young Steve. “Kathy, Greg, meet Steve and Seth. Their mother Jolanda is on her way. Boys, these are Megan’s parents, Kathy and Greg. Sit down, Steve, and start on some fruit. More pizza is coming soon. We ordered some for you that doesn’t have any toppings.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Steve and Seth,” Kathy said warmly. “Do either of you want some pepperoni pizza while we wait for the plain cheese to get here?” Steve wrinkled his nose. “You may pick off the pepperoni if you want,” Kathy told him. She knew all too well how many children responded to toppings defiling their pizza.

“Yes, please,” young Steve said.

Seth continued to cling to Steve, and he sat down, holding the boy on his lap. “How about some pizza for you, too?” he asked without forcing the boy to make eye contact. “And dig into the fruit. It’s good for you.”

“Does your brother like pepperoni?” Megan asked Steve, who shook his head emphatically as his mom came in.

“Then I’ll take it off while I cut a slice up for him,” she answered smoothly. “Jolanda, come in and sit down. These are my parents, Kathy and Greg.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” young Steve said when Kathy set a glass of water down in front of him.

“We’re interrupting,” Jolanda said, hesitating inside the doorway.

“Nonsense,” Greg said. “You’re saving these two lovebirds from another thrashing at cards.”

After Megan put the pizza down in front of Seth, she found the compression wrap and passed it to her mother.

Kathy knelt down next Seth where he was sitting on Steve’s lap and making good progress on his meal, despite a runny nose and red eyes. “I’d like to wrap this around your chest and see if it feels good to you. We’ll put it right over your shirt and we can take it off if you don’t like it. Will you let me do that?”

Seth looked at her feet warily, but gave a hesitant nod.
Gently, Kathy wound the elastic bandage around his torso several times so it was snug. “There. If you like it, just nod your head. Otherwise, we’ll take it off.”

Seth nodded shyly and leaned back against Steve.

“I don’t understand,” Jolanda said, trying to regain her shattered composure a she sat down at the table.

“Deep pressure can be comforting. A lot of sensory defensive kids find a weighted or snug fitting vest to be grounding,” Kathy explained. “What time do the boys go to bed?” she asked Jolanda gently. She handed her a box of tissues as Megan put a glass of water down by her plate.

“Eight.” Jolanda’s voice was that of an exhausted mother at the end of her rope. Megan shared a knowing look with her mom.

“Once you eat, I’ll come get some P.J.s and a change of clothes from your place, and a spare key if you have it. We’ll get them baths and bring them back ready for bed and tuck them in at eight,” Kathy said. “I’ve been where you are and I’m telling you that you need to get some sleep. You’re off duty for the rest of the day.”

Jolanda started to protest, but Kathy stopped it with a hand on her forearm before Jolanda uttered a word. “Megan’s brother is on the spectrum, at least as it was defined before they changed the DSM again. I’ve been there, including the single parent part. Greg came into my life later. I’m guessing the storms had you up last night and that Seth is very sensitive to the noise?”

Jolanda nodded wearily. “The storms just keep coming. I finally got him to sleep a bit ago, and it all started up again.” She started to cry and brushed angrily at her tears.

“Any objection to us taking them out? I ask because they might get photographed,” Steve asked softly.

She just shook her head wearily. “You’ll keep ‘em safe. Don’t care about d’rest.”

“We’ll make sure they both have fun, too, don’t worry,” Kathy assured her.

Greg turned off the television he’d been watching on mute for the last few minutes. “If the latest forecast can be trusted, this latest bout should be the end of it. It might drizzle a bit, but the storms are done. Surely there’s a place we can take them to burn off some energy so they’ll sleep soundly tonight. Even though you’re all tired, some fresh air will be good for them.”

Megan and Kathy looked at each other, mouthing ‘zoo’ as they did so. “I have the perfect place in mind,” Megan said as the two women nodded in agreement. “It beats losing at cards, though I suspect someone has been cheating.”

“We don’t need to cheat to beat you, Megan.” Kathy teased. “It just so happens you’re outmatched.”

“We’ll take ‘em next time, Megan,” Steve promised. “I think I’ve started to figure out their habits and patterns of play. We’ll have an edge from now on.”

“When we get back later, I expect you to prove it,” Megan said as she leaned over the back of his chair and hugged him from behind.

“Gladly.”
Once everyone had eaten, Jolanda had been sent home with the remaining fruit salad and two pizzas so she didn’t have to think about cooking tonight or tomorrow. Greg had waited while Jolanda packed a backpack with pajamas and extra clothes for the boys and given him a spare key before gratefully obeying orders to some sleep.

While her parents handled logistics, Megan and Steve sat down with the boys to see what they wanted to do for the rest of the day. “Do either of you like the zoo?” she asked blandly.

Little Steve rolled his eyes. “Seth just wants to spend all day watching the stupid fish. It takes all the fun out of it.”

“Well, that’s when you go with your mom and you have to stay together,” Steve explained gently. “With six of us, I don’t see why we can’t split up and let Seth watch the fish while you get to see the things you like. Do you think that might be fun for both of you if we did it that way?”

“I guess. But then I we can’t both be with you.”

Steve ruffled his namesake’s hair a bit and tried not to react to the boy’s instinctive flinch. “That might not be a bad thing. Remember we talked about the photographers? You might get tired of that if anyone recognizes me.”

“I guess you’re not taking your shield, are you?”

Steve chuckled softly and shook his head. “It’s back in my apartment. I can’t carry it around if I want to blend in with the crowds. But I’ll be happy to take a sketch book with us and draw your favorite animal for you.”

“You like to draw?”

“Sometimes. What do you say? Should we try splitting up for a bit and see how it goes?”

“I guess.”

“Okay. We’ll have our phones, so it will be easy to meet up when it’s time to get some ice cream and ride the carousel.”

“We get to ride the carousel?”

“Of course,” Kathy answered. “It’s a special day, and that means you get to do some extra special things. We don’t often get to spend time with Megan’s neighbors, and Greg and I are missing our grandsons a whole lot, so we were thinking it would be nice to spoil you and Seth a bit this afternoon.”

Steve held young Steve’s chin in his hand and looked him in the eye. “I want you to remember that none of us will ever hit your or hurt you on purpose. Hitting kids is never okay. You’re safe with us.”

Steve looked down, ashamed at his reaction. “I know,” he mumbled.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed. I know you can’t help flinching sometimes when people get
too close. I feel sick to my stomach every time I get on a train because of something bad that happened to me a long time ago."

The boy’s eyes widened and he gaped a bit at his hero. “Do you feel sick on the Metro?”

Steve nodded solemnly, “Especially when it’s not in the tunnels. I still ride the Metro, and that’s how we’ll get to the zoo today, but I always feel nauseated. I can’t help it.”

“Well, then you can hold my hand and maybe that will help.”

“Thank you. I’m sure it will.”

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Chapter End Notes

It's sort of strange how the creative process works. For days, I mulled over how to handle the rest of their weekend. Writing about mundane life can be as dull as reading about it. We like fiction because the boring parts are edited out! There are Problems that Must Be Solved and that is what drives a story forward. The answer came in the form of a thunderstorm. Once I knew it had been storming all night, the entire day with Megan's parents fell into place. Go figure.
A Day at the Zoo

“This takes me back a few years,” Kathy said as she and Megan sat on a bench while Seth stood at the nearby railing in the Amazonia exhibit and stared at the waterfall.

“It sure does. I’ll bet his brother is happy to get to skip seeing the fish today.”

“Do you think Seth will even want walk around so he can see the fish? He’s pretty content at the moment watching the waterfall”

Megan shrugged. “Who knows? He’s happy. Given the night he had, I’m fine letting him get lost in his head a bit. I just hope Jolanda gets him into treatment.”

“She will. Pride might stop her from accepting something for herself, but when it comes to her kids, she’ll take whatever help she can get. It was nice for Steve to establish that foundation.”

“Actually, that was Pepper and Tony’s idea. It all happened organically the day the Smithsonian exhibit opened. Steve never intended for the Honorary Howling Commandos idea to take off like it did, either.” Megan briefly relayed the story Steve had shared with them on the ride back to her apartment.

Kathy’s brow furrowed in concern when Megan finished. “He even goes to their funerals? I really can’t fathom how he handles that much grief and pain. He’s lost so much.”

“I think it helps him grieve for his own losses, actually,” Megan said softly. “He never got to tell his friends goodbye. I doubt he realizes it with the way he stuffs his feelings down, but these funerals stir up just enough pain he can let some of it out.” Megan shrugged. “He’s getting better. He’s actually willing to cry now, and he’ll let me hold him. I give him credit for being open about it, too. You should have seen the look on some of the H.H.C.’s faces when he told them he cries, too. It’s such a taboo for men and it shouldn’t be.”

“You know that I agree. I’m just surprised he’s willing to publicly address the topic, especially given the era he grew up in.”

Megan smiled at her mom a bit. “Steve doesn’t think of the kids as part of the public; they’re his kids. And it makes sense when you frame it in terms of bullying. Nothing gets Steve’s hackles up like hearing someone say you can or can’t do something for no good reason, especially with an implication of social consequences. Teasing a guy because he’s human enough to cry is just another form of bullying in his mind. Once he shook off the programming of his youth, he realized crying was a lot healthier than holding it all in. I doubt you’ll ever see him completely breaking down in public, but that doesn’t matter as long as he lets his guard down at home.”

She leaned forward and rested her forearms on her knees as she watched Seth, who was still mesmerized by the waterfall. “The bigger issue is getting him to admit to any of those feelings in the first place. For too long, people have expected him to be Captain America, and he’s literally tried to kill himself living up to that ideal. When he’s in the field, he pulls on the persona so he can focus. That’s something we all do to some extent. But I think he’s struggling to figure out who Steve Rogers is, much less what he wants to do with his life.”

“What did he want to do before?”

“That’s the thing, Mom, he didn’t let himself dream or want. The fact he’s still alive is a miracle. Without Bucky’s help, I don’t know how long he would have lasted after his mom died. Work was
hard to find and harder to keep when he got sick. Steve wasn’t marriage material by the standards of the day. Bucky was really all he had.” Megan felt an epiphany lingering on the fringes of her thoughts. It irritated her, but she figured the best way to get the thought to fully form was ignore it.

“I know he enrolled in art school,” she continued. “It was during his first term that Bucky was drafted. Steve got it in his head to join the army and serve, too. Bucky tried to convince him to wait until the spring term was done since warmer weather was always better for Steve’s health. Steve didn’t listen. I’m not sure if he even finished the fall term before Dr. Erskine got his hands on him. Regardless, he never got a chance to explore the kinds of opportunities an art education might have made possible. Instead, he became a super soldier and has been fighting ever since. Those soft pastel lessons are the first time he’s had any formal training in art since before the war and he’s loving it. That said, he buries himself in his Captain America persona, hoping like hell no one figures out that if you take that uniform away, he’s more lost than little Seth over there.”

“How do you plan to fix that?” Kathy asked softly.

Megan felt her mom’s eyes on her. “I can’t. It’s up to him. All I can do is love him and support him if he decides he’s ready to figure out who he wants to be. I can’t imagine him leaving the Avengers. He’s good at leading them and it gives him a purpose he truly believes in. We want kids and I know he’ll be an amazing father, regardless of how we get there. If he decides being Captain America is enough, I’m really okay with that. I hope that he gets to the point where it’s a conscious choice, not just a lack of other options. But it has to happen at his pace, not mine.”

“You’re wise beyond your years.”

Megan shook her head and ruefully. “I just paid attention to all the things you tried to teach me when I was growing up. A couple of things stuck.”

“I’m proud of you, honey.”

“Thanks.” Megan shook her head, realizing what was so obvious in retrospect. “Will you come to New York?”

“You’ve lost me.”

“The reunion. Can you come?” Megan got up and paced, angry with herself for missing this before. Steve didn’t have an identity of his own, at least one that he recognized. Without Captain America, he didn’t know who he was. His work with the H.H.C.’s was an unconscious attempt to become something more than a soldier. And she had planned an entire reunion that connected him to his pre-ice Captain America days. She’d just set him up to spend an entire weekend reinforcing a persona that wasn’t real. The thought made her sick to her stomach.

“Megan, what’s wrong?”

“You and Greg need to come to the reunion.” Megan sighed and continued, “Carl and the kids, too. We can do the fittings then. I missed something big and just realized it. Carp! I guess since I started planning it as his friend, before you even met him, I never switched my mindset. I was so busy trying to reconnect him to his past I didn’t think about having you there, too. He’s gotten so close to you, you need to be there. Can you come?”

“Breathe, Megan. It’s still two weeks away, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure we have that weekend free. Greg and I can come, even if Carl and his family can’t. Now
Megan nodded, but pulled out her phone all the same and continued to pace. “J, Steve’s apartment in the tower has a guest bedroom, doesn’t it?”

“That is correct. Is something wrong?”

“I’ll explain later. For right now, I’m doing triage on my gross oversight. My parents are going to come to the reunion for sure, and we can put them with us in Steve’s apartment. As far as my brother and his family, we need two bedrooms, ideally, but one will suffice if we can get sleeping bags for the kids and a crib for Andrew. I’m still not sure if they can come yet but I’ll find out in the next day or so. Can you arrange flights? And has the book gone to press yet?”

“Megan, relax. There is plenty of space available in the tower for your family. We have extra cribs that are stored for events such as this, or for use when visitors to the tower might be stranded in the city without warning. As you know, Mr. Stark likes to prepare for all contingencies. The book will not be printed until later this week. It will be quite simple to add new materials to the current files. As far as transportation, Mr. Stark already authorized the use of his jets for your family to visit at will. There are no current scheduling conflicts. Why don’t you collect your thoughts and call me this evening when you feel more settled? Right now, it appears that you are at the National Zoo, which indicates you should be enjoying your surroundings rather than getting upset.”

“Are you trying to talking me down off another ledge?”

“Indeed. You do have a flair for the dramatic.”

“So I’m told. I’m trying to do better with that.”

“I am aware of that fact, also. Remember, Megan, Captain Rogers is going to be appreciative of your efforts, not critical of any small errors made in the planning. I am certain he is going to find the weekend meaningful and healing.”

“I hope so. Thanks, J. I’ll call you later.” Megan disconnected the call and put her phone into the back pocket of her jeans. As she turned to rejoin her mother on the bench, a young man dressed in faded jeans and a scruffy t-shirt stumbled into her. Megan felt his hand slide into her front pocket. Instinctively, she sidestepped as she pulled him off balance, sending him tumbling to the ground while she twisted his arm up behind his back until he was moaning in pain with her knee in pressed in the small of his back. “Call Steve and tell him to haul his butt up here,” she snapped to her mother before she leaned down over the man and purred, “My boyfriend wants to have a word with you.”

It seemed to her that Steve was there a heartbeat later, hauling the man to his feet and pinning him chest-first against the wall using one firm hand wrapped around his neck. “Who are you?” Steve demanded.

“He’s a lousy pickpocket is who he is,” Megan said as she took Steve’s hand under the pretense of comforting herself and slipped the paper she’d found in her pocket into his grasp. She saw his jaw clench slightly and knew he understood. A glance at Seth showed that he was still engrossed in watching the waterfall, completely oblivious to the attention she and Steve were attracting. Several zoo patrons had their cell phones out and were clearly taking pictures and video of them.

“You lost your hat when I took you down,” Megan added, picking up the ball cap that had covered his dirty blonde hair. “Apparently, you didn’t get the memo about how offensive it is to use an image of a Native American as a team logo in combination with the name ‘redskin.’ Then again,
you’re making all sorts of poor choices today, aren’t you?”

“Stop squirming,” Steve snapped, tightening his grip as the pickpocket reacted to Megan’s comments and tried to wrestle free. “I can hold you here all day if I need to.”

Megan watched Steve pull his phone out, using the opportunity to hide the slip of paper she’d passed him in his pocket.

“Hill, it’s Rogers,” Steve said into the phone. “I’m just doing what you asked and keeping you informed. Megan was targeted by a pickpocket at the zoo and put Widow’s training to work. I’m holding him against the wall as we speak. No, he didn’t get anything…. she’s fine. Okay, but make it for six, in about a half hour. We’re not leaving just yet.”

After he disconnected, he smiled slightly at her. “Once the police come take him into custody, we’ll get the kids a snack. Hill said she’d handle it from there.”

“Good.”

“In the meantime,” Steve said, turning back to the pickpocket. “Let’s find out a bit more about you, hmm?” he said, starting to pat the guy down. “That’s a nice knife. Too bad it’s not legal,” he commented as he pulled it out of the holster the man had strapped to his lower leg under his jeans. “Any other weapons you want to tell me about?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” was the snarled response. “You’re not a cop.”

“No, I’m just a soldier, federal agent, and an Avenger. The police will be here shortly. You can explain to them why an incompetent pickpocket needs two knives and a gun. Make that two guns. Where’s your permit? Is it in the wallet you apparently left at home?” Steve asked conversationally as he continued adding his discoveries to the growing pile on the ground by his feet. “Megan was right about you making some poor choices today. Not only are you carrying all sorts of toys you’re not supposed to have, you picked the wrong woman to target.”

Steve looked at Megan with his most innocent smile, feigning complete ignorance of the cell phones that several bystanders were using. “Did you call the police?”

“I did,” a red-haired women said, speaking up at last. She then took several steps back and resumed filming.

Megan leaned against the wall next to her assailant and smiled warmly at him as she folded her arms across her chest. “Since you seem to think we’re close enough for you have your hands down my pants, I really think you should try to be a gentleman and tell me your name.”

“I want a lawyer!”

“And I want a unicorn that craps gold nuggets. We don’t always get what we want.” Megan said as she tided her head thoughtfully. “Are you always this pushy in the beginning of a relationship? Generally, a gentler approach works better. Start with coffee, progress to dinner. But the upside to your really crappy day is that you’re going to be famous! All these nice folks are busy uploading your handsome mug to the internet as we speak. You’re getting your fifteen minutes of fame. I don’t understand why you look so unhappy about that. I want a picture, too, so be nice and smile for me.”

He glared at her while she took his picture. Megan didn’t care. Jarvis just needed a clear head-shot, not a smile, to start scanning databases. When he started to swear, Steve lifted him just enough that he had to stretch his toes a bit to keep his feet on the ground.
“Language!” he snapped in his Captain America voice. “There are children here. Didn’t your parents teach you any manners?”

“I’m thinking, no,” Megan chimed in helpfully. “It’s never too late to learn. I see your chauffeurs are here. Sadly, they didn’t bring the limo. But if you’re good, maybe they’ll let you keep the silver bracelets. Remember to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’”

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Once the police had her assailant in custody and had taken brief statements along with noting their contact information, they were free to go. Megan went over to Seth, who was still engrossed in watching the waterfall. “Hey, Seth. It’s time to go get ice cream. Let’s go pull your brother away from the elephants and get something to eat before you ride the carousel. We’ll come back another time to see the fish.”

Reluctantly, Seth let Megan and Steve take his hands and lead them out of the Amazonia building. Kathy followed at a discreet distance until they were outdoors, then moved up beside Megan. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “I’m not looking forward to the post-adrenaline crash. I can’t believe I executed the throw. That’s the only one we’ve been working on so far, but I did it. I didn’t even stop to think. I felt his hand in my pocket and the next thing I knew, I had him pinned. It’s a heck of a rush. All future assailants are hereby required to come at me the same way that turkey did. It’s the only throw I know, so it’s only fair they make it possible for me to use it.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works, Megan.” Steve said, smiling proudly at her. “But Nat’s going to be thrilled. It almost makes up for our covers being blown today.”

“Yeah, after the carousel ride we promised them, we’d better head out. The kids don’t need to be mobbed. The Metro ride back could get interesting.”

Steve shook his head. “Hill’s got a van on standby to take us back. She insisted.”

Megan didn’t even try to hide her groan. “That means more paperwork will be waiting on my desk for me tomorrow.”

Her mom wasn’t interested in joining the banter. “Megan Louisa, we’re going to have a talk about all of this later.” Once we don’t have the children with us was the implied continuation of that sentence.

Megan blushed and looked guiltily at Steve. “I think I’m in trouble. What happened to you when you got in trouble as a kid?”

“Nothing much. I got sent to bed early sometimes. Bucky, though, he was on the receiving end of a razor strop more times than I can count.”

“So am I going to get sent to bed early and given a spanking, or the other way around?”

Steve laughed, “I’ve been told that the former requires the use of safe words.”

“You’re in just as much trouble as she is, Steven,” Kathy said sternly as she mock-punched his free arm. Despite her efforts, she wasn’t completely able to keep the laughter from her voice.
“Do I get sent to bed early, too?” he asked, giving her his most innocent look.

Kathy just shook her head as she looked heavenward. “Your poor mother clearly earned a halo raising you.” She quickly grew serious again and gave them both a look that said, I know this is more complicated than you’re letting on and I expect an explanation.

Megan nodded, but resisted the urge to share a look with Steve. She knew without asking that they were in agreement to reveal as little as possible. It was safest for everyone, especially her nephews. “Seth, have you ever played airplane?” she asked, changing the subject.

He frowned a little, then shook his head.

“On the count of three, Steve and I will pick you up by your arms while we keep walking. Sound like fun?”

He nodded vigorously and tightened his hold on her hand.

She counted and they lifted Seth easily, swinging him ten feet forward before setting him back on his feet. He giggled and Megan shared a pleased look with Steve.

‘Again,” Seth said softly.

“Of course,” Steve answered. That was good, because Megan was sure she wouldn’t be able to speak past the lump in her throat. That was twice now that Seth had talked to them. With therapy, maybe Seth would start interacting with his family more and begin to break free of the shell his condition had built between him and the world he lived in.
"I want to know what's going on and don't try to tell me that was a run of the mill pickpocket," Kathy said as she locked the apartment door behind her.

Megan didn't look up from her mug of tea but shrugged her shoulders. "There isn't a lot we can tell you, because we don't really know much."

Greg took the mug of coffee Steve handed him and sat down at the table with Megan. "Did the boys get to bed okay?"

Kathy nodded, "They're out cold. Don't change the subject, Greg. These two know more than they're saying."

"Do you want some coffee, too?" Steve asked evenly. "It's decaff."

"What I want is for someone to tell me what is going on, but yes, I'll have a cup. Your apartment is bugged, Megan was attacked for the second time in three months, and you're both trying to act like this is no big deal. I'm not buying it."

"We don't even know if those things are all related," Steve said gently as he handed Kathy a mug before joining them at the table.

"What do the police think?"

"They're not that involved," Megan said softly. "Aside from the knife attack, which is essentially a cold case, there hasn't been anything for them to investigate. As far as today, the police will charge the guy for his illegal weapons and call it day. They have much bigger cases to work than worry about tilting at windmills."

"Megan…" Kathy said, but Megan met her gaze without flinching. She'd stuck with the truth, and she put that into her gaze. Kathy finally sighed. "Fine, what about S.H.I.E.L.D.? What are they doing about this?"

"Nothing, which is how it's going to stay."

"Megan! You can't just ignore the danger—"

"Kathy, we're not ignoring it." Steve cut in. "But a direct approach isn't what we need. Pushing back isn't going to lead us to the perpetrators if the two attacks do turn out to be related. One reason Megan is living here is because Clint knows Sarge and how secure he keeps the building, even without the security system Stark installed. Clint's the one who taught Megan how to use a gun. Natasha and I are teaching her hand-to-hand combat. Rather than rely on the police, we're making sure Megan can protect herself. As she demonstrated today, she's getting quite good at that. You don't need to worry."

"I'm her mother. Worrying is part of my job."

"Kathy—"
Kathy pointed a warning finger at her husband. "Greg, don't even think about saying what you're thinking about saying."

Greg smiled, winked at Megan, and took another sip of his coffee. He'd made his point about Kathy's overprotectiveness without saying more than her name.

"How do you know that this place isn't bugged, too?" Kathy finally asked.

"Because Clint and Natasha made sure of it," Megan explained. "I've also been given tools to do daily checks of my own. For all we know, the bugs in Steve's place were placed there by a reporter looking for a scoop. Destroying them would tell the perpetrators he's aware of their interest. It's better to use their own tools against them and bait them with comments while Natasha and Clint investigate everything quietly. They're trained spies, they know how to work in the shadows. When they have something concrete to go on, they'll let me know what I should do. Until then, I'm not going to get caught up in speculation that winds me up and gets us nowhere."

"Do you honestly think these are three separate incidents?"

"I trust Clint and Natasha to find out. In the meantime, I'm being careful and patient."

"What do you want them to do differently, Kathy?" Greg finally asked. "It seems to me they've got the situation under control."

"I don't know." Kathy started at her mug for a long time. "I guess I want a guarantee that everything is fine and that nothing bad is going to happen."

"Get in line," Steve said softly, mostly to himself.

Megan kicked him under the table. She shared the sentiment, but it wasn't helpful in talking her mother down from her overprotective rant. "Mom, you know that's an impossible promise to make. I also don't think I'm going to be in danger of anything but a tongue-lashing when most of my days seem to be spent either dealing with congressmen or preparing to deal with congressmen. I have to face round three with Senator Schuman first thing tomorrow morning."

"You'd help improve ratings on C-SPAN. If you start showing up on the broadcasts, I'll start watching," Greg promised.

"C-SPAN stands for 'Cure Sleep Problems, Achieve Narcosis.' I don't want to ruin their brand."

"You'll be replacing it with a better brand: Curtailing Stupidity, Posturing, and Narcissism," Steve replied. "I'd love to watch you do that. In the meantime, I believe Megan and I were due to beat you at five-hundred bid."

"And break your losing streak?" Greg said with a smile. "I have my doubts about that."

Megan just looked at Steve and winked. Steve's tactical brilliance wasn't often the subject of conversation, so people tended to either forget about it or underestimate its validity.

"How did you do that?" Greg said an hour later as he finished totaling the scores. Megan and Steve had beat them soundly. Not just once, but at every hand in the game.
Steve shrugged. "I'm good at seeing patterns. Used to drive Bucky crazy."

Kathy studied him curiously. "How conscious is it on your part?"

"Not very. After awhile, I just start being able to predict how it's going to go. Once I'm about eight-percent accurate, I know I've figured it out on some level and trust my gut from there."

Greg's brow furrowed as he considered that while watching Steve put the cards back in their case. "In a game like this, you have the luxury of time. In combat, a steep learning curve like that costs lives. How do you manage it then?"

Greg still occasionally surprised her with his insights, and Megan found that frustrating. She didn't like underestimating her stepfather, but he was so good at staying in the background, watching and observing, that it was easy to forget he was brilliant in his own way. She looked at Steve, curious to know the answer to a question she'd never considered.

Steve shrugged again. "Lots of studying, I guess. I read a lot about strategy and tactics and study old battles. There are always variables, but there are often common themes that run through different combat scenarios. I guess over time, I've gotten good at seeing enough of those patterns that I can improvise until I have enough new data."

"I can't believe S.H.I.E.L.D. isn't tapping into that skill set and having you write manuals and teach classes."

Steve winced at Greg's suggestion. "Don't give them any ideas." He waved his hand at the cards, letting a hint of frustration show. "I can't teach what is instinctive to me. I can tell you the best way for me to compensate for a bad hand when you and Kathy bid high, for example, but I can't tell you how I figured it out. That's the most important part if you're trying to teach someone else." Before he could continue, his phone went off and he pulled it out, surprised to be getting a non-work related message on a Sunday evening.

"Everything okay?" Megan asked.

He nodded. "It's from Dave. His girlfriend Beth was the one in the accident last night. She has a broken wrist but is otherwise okay. They want to meet us for dinner some time this week," he said, looking at Megan for her opinion.

She smiled. "Sure. Tell them any night this week is fine with me. We can meet them by six or so. Send him my cell phone number, too."

"Good. That will give you something to look forward to," Kathy said as she got up. "We should get going so you're in top form tomorrow morning."

Megan tried to ignore the knot in her gut. "I wish I could meet you for breakfast before you head out."

"Me, too, but you need to teach Senator Clueless how to chew and swallow his own food. I'll call you as soon as we're home," Kathy said, pulling Megan into a hug. "Chin up, honey. We'll see you New York in just a few weeks."

Megan nodded, holding back tears, and hugged Greg hard before she walked them to the door. Steve gave her a chaste kiss and whispered that he'd email her in a bit, and then they were gone. She was once again alone in an apartment that always felt empty without Steve.
Megan sat in a chair that looked better on camera than it felt on her backside. Surely the congressional budget could spare some funds for decent seat cushions. She took another sip of tea from her travel mug and tried her hardest to focus on Senator Schuman's rambling statement to see if there was actually a question embedded somewhere.

"Dr. Buchwald, it appears to me that you are not taking your assignment here very seriously," he finally said.

She looked up from the notepad where she'd been doodling while keeping a tally of every time he used certain buzzwords and phrases. "What gives you that impression, Senator?" she said as blandly as she could manage while stifling a yawn.

He launched into a convoluted diatribe that pushed her S.H.E.I.L.D. tally to fifteen, Fury to twelve, and her own name at five. Science remained stalled at one, and that had been a point of debate for her to record since he'd only used the term when introducing her to the committee so the meeting minutes included her purpose in attending.

"Are you listening to me, Doctor?"

Megan nodded and glanced up to see him glaring at her. She lowered her eyes so she didn't start laughing at his expression. "I'm just waiting for you to finish pandering for votes."

"Dr. Buchwald, I must insist you show this panel's members the respect they deserve."

She kept her eyes firmly on her tablet. "That's why I'm doodling quietly rather than rolling my eyes and making sympathetic faces at the poor stenographer tasked with recording your endless blathering."

"I'm calling Director Fury to discuss his decision to appoint you science liaison."

"You do that," she replied easily. "You might stop to consider that so far, you haven't asked me a single science question in the two hours we've been here this morning. You've asked me about political decisions, not science. I'm not a politician and I don't want to be. I'm here to explain the science projects at S.H.I.E.L.D. your committee is supposed to oversee. I'm still waiting for you to stop boring us all to death so we can get down to business."

"Do you realize what a coveted role you are currently in?"

Megan shrugged dismissively. "Frankly, these chairs aren't really that comfortable, and it's quite warm in here. Two people sitting near me over-applied their cologne or perfume, which is giving me a headache. I've had to rely on a tumbler of tea to keep me awake and now I'm counting down the minutes until I can use the restroom. While you call this job 'coveted' I can't say I'm really all that desperate to come back. I'm here because Director Fury asked me to see if I could get the sorry lot of you to understand some basic science. I'm willing to teach, but I need willing pupils. I'm still waiting for them to make an appearance."

"Do you have bills to pay, Dr. Buchwald?"

Megan laid down her pen and sat back in her chair. It seemed that things were about to get interesting. "Of course. Most working Americans do." Not that you seem to do much work, she added mentally.

"How do you intend to pay those bills if you are unemployed? Are you depending on your boyfriend to take care of you if you find yourself out of a job?"
"I wish Captain Rogers could be here so you could say that to his face." Megan smiled at the idea. "The fact is that I don't need him to pay my bills. If I lose my job at S.H.I.E.L.D., I'm not going to have any problem finding work."

"You sound quite sure of yourself."

"I am."

"Networking is an important part of securing employment. Are you aware of that, Dr. Buchwald?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand how difficult it is to obtain work when your reputation precedes you?"

"You mean like McCarthyism? You pompous white men love to think you rule the world from your seats in congress, don't you? You sit there and ramble, then go home and fundraise. Meanwhile, millions of Americans go to work every day and do their best to earn their wages in less than ideal conditions. You're so cut off from reality you wouldn't recognize it if it bit you on the ass. Networking is more than slandering the reputations of others, Senator. It's about building meaningful relationships where you give more than you expect to ever get back." She held up her hand when the Senator got ready to interrupt. "No, I'm not referring to your alleged conference table tryst I read about in the Washington Post last week. That was copulation, not networking.

Back to your unspoken threat about my ability to support myself. I'm not a bit worried about my job at S.H.I.E.L.D. In my own networking efforts, I've managed to secure a standing offer to work for Stark Industries, Incorporated. You might have heard of it. In fact, it was hardly more than a week ago that I had dinner with the C.E.O., a Ms. Pepper Potts. She's a brilliant businesswoman and a truly lovely individual. If I accept the offer, the commute to work couldn't be easier, either. I'd just have to hop on an elevator. Given Mr. Stark's own history with Congress, I can't imagine a scenario where something you say will do anything but ensure I get a signing bonus. I digress. You were trying to make a point, and I got us off track. Where were we?" Megan leaned forward in her seat and rested her chin on her hand, feigning interest in Senator Schuman's next comments.

"You were going to explain telomersase to us."

"Telomerase," she corrected automatically as she stood up. "It's about damn time we got around to talking science. Can someone please get me an easel pad and some colored markers so I can draw a chromosome and walk you through this? It's a lot easier to visualize the process if you have a picture to refer to."

An easel pad and easel were procured and Megan pulled a marker from her right boot. She had just started her explanation when Steve rode into the chamber astride Pumpkin, who had red, white, and blue ribbons neatly affixed to her braided mane. It was the perfect complement to his Captain America outfit. A simple bow was attached to her tail, which she continued to swish from side to side, seemingly agitated by the visit to Congress. Megan sympathized.

Smiling, Steve took his foot out of the left stirrup and offered her his arm. Once she was mounted behind him, he gently turned Pumpkin back towards the exit. Pumpkin lifted her tail and left a fragrant pile as her contribution to the morning's proceedings. Megan held back a giggle as she leaned against Steve and murmured to him that it was about time he showed up to rescue her. "I forgot to bring my helmet to work," she added softly, though she was really unconcerned by the oversight. Even if Pumpkin startled, Steve could vault to the ground and take her with him, ensuring she was unharmed.

She never got to hear his reply as he was interrupted by the blaring of her alarm clock. Megan
yawned and glared at the horrid device. She knew that the morning she faced with the congressional committee was going to be a lot more tedious than her dream. Even worse, she'd have to restrain herself from commenting so freely. Director Fury might appreciate her bluntness and occasional snark when she was in his office, but he also expected her to be a professional representative of the agency he led. Even so, the idea of buzzword bingo, solitaire style, did have appeal. She'd have to come up with a good list of terms to use in this morning's proceedings.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Cough... I might have let my frustrations with Congress bleed through. I suppose I should be sorry about that, but the snark is too much fun. Originally, Megan was going to do some of it for real, but as it kept going, it got more and more absurd and crossed the line of what she'd be able to get away with in reality. Pumpkin to the rescue!
When the alarm blared at an unholy hour Wednesday morning, she reached to shut it off and found herself blocked by a familiar wall of warm muscle. Confused, she opened her eyes and squinted at Steve. Her last memory was of going to bed alone last night, tired and grumpy.

Steve pulled her closer and nuzzled her temple as he reached over to the nightstand on his side of the bed and turned off the auditory torture device.

“How freaked out should I be that I slept through your arrival?” she mumbled sleepily as she snuggled against him. She’d missed waking up like this.

“Ya heard me come in. Woke up ‘nough to smile a’mee. B’sides, y’know Jarvis is watchin’ the camera an’security alarms,” Steve told her, his voice low and roughened by sleep. “Don’t expect you t’sleep like a soldier. Should’t haf’to.”

She let his reassurances calm her as she slowly woke up. “Nightmare?” she asked softly. As determined as he’d been to live on his own before they were married, she couldn’t think of any other reason he’d come to her apartment in the middle of the night.

“Worst one yet.”

“Tell me?” she prodded, pressing herself more tightly against him, rubbing his back. He was more awake now. She could feel a subtle change in his muscle tone, and when he started talking again, he used full words.

“You were on the train, too. Somehow, you both ended up hanging off the side. I had to choose who to try to save first. I… I watched you both fall.”

Megan felt the shudder move through him. “I’m glad you came over,” she whispered as she pressed reassuring kisses to his throat. “For the record, had it been real, I would have known you were doing your best. I’m sure Bucky did, too. But it was just a dream. I’m here and I’m fine.”

“I needed to see that for myself.” Steve’s voice was stronger now, though he was still holding her close.

“I know. Nightmares can be funny that way.”

He hummed his agreement and kissed her forehead. “I’ll start breakfast while you get a shower.”

Megan protested as she pulled the covers up to her chin and refused to move out of bed. “Not yet. I haven’t seen you all week.”

“You’ve been busy with the Senate committee.”

“I’ve been back in my office every afternoon trying to heal my brain. I saved all my buzzword tally lists to show you. So far, science is barely getting a mention. We need to squeeze in lunch one day this week.”
“I’d love to, but Fury has had me at the training site in Virginia every day. I haven’t even been at
the Triskelion.”

“What do they have in Virginia they don’t have in their fancy building?”

“Mud. Lots of mud, brush, rocks, and a brutal obstacle course.”

“And you’re loving every minute of it.” She felt him smile against her forehead. He loved pushing
his body to the limit.

“It’s not as much fun in the winter when it’s all frozen over.”

Steve let her push him onto his back so she could fold her hands on his chest and rest her chin on
them, looking at him mischievously. It always amazed her how gentle he could be, yielding to her
most subtle touch. “How about we send the Senate committee down there and you can use them
for target practice in your training drills? Paintball guns shouldn’t do too much damage. And it
would be a lot easier for me to put up with them if they showed up to our meetings with some
colorful bruises and paint splotches on their fancy suits.”

“I don’t think Director Fury would approve.”

“Ask me if I care.”

“I know you don’t. Have you heard anything from our pickpocket friends?”

She shook her head. “The note Natasha composed for me to include with the sample doesn’t seem
to have fazed them much. She’s certain that ordering them to back off is going to help draw them
out, but it’s been quiet.”

Steve played with her hair as he studied her face. “I trust Natasha’s judgment, but maybe they
respect you a bit more after Saturday. Just be extra careful.”

“I am. Maybe next time, though, I should send them a thank-you note for pushing us together.”

“I like to think we’d have found our way all on our own. I was falling for you almost from day one
I was just too scared to admit it, even to myself.”

“Me, too.”

Steve’s stomach rumbled loudly and Megan smiled. “We’ll continue this over breakfast. I know
better than to get between your stomach and food.”

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“Have you slept at all since my parents left?” Megan asked when she finally made her way to the
kitchen. Steve had breakfast well in hand, but there was no hiding the dark circles under his eyes
now that she was seeing him in normal lighting.

Her oatmeal was already on the table and he gave her a tired shrug as he handed her a mug of tea.
“You have to sleep to have nightmares, and I’ve had plenty of those.”

“Apparently, I asked the wrong question. Have you had any restful sleep since my parents left?”
Steve glanced at the clock and nodded, “A little less than three hours, starting when I got here.”

“You’re coming back here tonight and getting a solid eight. I know you want to go back on active duty and you can’t do that as a zombie.”

“I know.” He set his plate, heaped high with eggs and French toast, on the table and pulled her to him. “It’s one reason I came. Besides, I don’t want to scare Dave and Beth Friday night by looking my age.”

She smacked his arm playfully, glad he was feeling grounded enough to joke with her. “Any idea what brought this on? You’ve been sleeping decently enough lately.”

“Greg and I talked some about Bucky and it stirred things up.”

Megan pulled back and looked at him sympathetically. “When you’re in the nightmare, you never stop to consider how impossible that scenario actually is. Bucky was dead long before I was born. That’s my loss, because I really wish I could have gotten to know him. I’d like to think he and I could have been friends.”

“He’d have adored you.” He smiled sadly at the thought of Megan and Bucky meeting. “Guess this way I actually stood a chance.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. Some of us prefer the quiet ones. From what you’ve said, Bucky was not quiet.”

Steve chuckled. “No, definitely not. At least not when he was trying to be charming.”

Megan just smiled. She never wanted Steve to leave Bucky in the past, but she hoped the day would come when memories of his friend didn’t carry so much pain. Even when Steve laughed at a memory, there was anguish in his eyes. She could only hope that as he continued to grieve, he’d finally find a way to balance the joy with pain.

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“Think she’ll like it?” Steve asked her Friday afternoon when he dropped by her office on his way to see Janice. He handed Megan a box that held the framed cartoon he’d drawn for Janice to thank her for the work she’d done on his parents’ wedding portrait.

“I’m sure she will,” Megan said, taking the wrapped package from him and laying it on her desk to open. “You could trace your hand, sign it, and she’d gush over it. I’m sure this is better—”

Megan stopped, stunned as she studied the drawing, then burst out laughing. “Definitely better than a hand tracing. It’s perfect.”

“Are you sure I didn’t go too far?”

Megan shook her head. “No, you didn’t go too far. This has just right hint of naughty but isn’t tasteless. I’d love to see her reaction when she opens it.”

“Come with me,” he said as he looked at her hopefully.

“Nope. She deserves better than me tagging along just to watch her reaction. You can tell me about
it later. But I hope you took a picture of this to save.”

“I scanned it to the computer.”

“Good. Do you mind if I have Jarvis move a copy to my tablet?” Megan smiled as she fingered the wood frame one last time before wrapping the picture up again.

“Go ahead.”

“She’s going to treasure this, even more so because it’s from you, not Captain America.” Megan said as she handed him the package

“She’s one of very few people who seem to realize there’s a difference,” Steve agreed quietly as he looked at the wrapped bundle.

“I know, and that’s not your fault. Just enjoy her friendship as the gift it is. Now scoot so you can give Janice time to gush and still not be late for dinner.”

She watched him go, then sat down at her desk and sent Jarvis a request to load the image to her Stark Tablet. Opening the file, she smiled again at the image. Steve had drawn a cartoon depicting all of the Howling Commandos kneeling around a huge campfire while howling at the moon. Morita was tossing something into the fire, but it was crumpled up and obscured by smoke. Steve and Bucky stood behind them, watching the men they called family. Steve had drawn himself as overly large and with a very confused look on his face. His shield leaned against his leg and he was scratching his head as he said, “Bucky, I still don’t understand why we have to burn our underwear.”

Bucky, on the other hand, looked wise and patient, though his amusement was betrayed by a crooked grin. He had a hand on Steve’s shoulder as he watched the fire burn. “Just be glad they didn’t call us the Impotent Imbeciles.”

A glance at the clock told her she had time to finish revising the report she’d been working on for Nick before it was time to leave. She had generated a list of potential uses for Steve’s cells in the lab, accompanied by her opinion of which projects were most likely to get Steve’s approval. It wasn’t something she felt like doing, but after a week dealing with Congress, she was grateful to be alone in her office.

Reluctantly, she turned off her tablet and picked up the printed draft of her report. Still, her thoughts wandered. There was a very short list of people Steve allowed to see his sense of humor. To the rest of the world, he was Captain America, wholesome and honorable. As much as Steve as those things, too, he was a human being with a playful side that he wasn’t often comfortable showing the general public. Janice was smart and would be quick to appreciate the real gift Steve was giving her. Maybe she’d see if Janice wanted to get together over a cup of coffee sometime. Steve wasn’t the only one who needed friends who were grounded in reality.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry that this is so short and has take so long to write. Real Life has been full of reality, and I’ve had little time or energy for anything creative. Add in holidays and my ongoing job hunt, and I’m amazed I’m still standing. On Thanksgiving day, I did get a huge chunk of a Ballast chapter sketched out, but it's not done. It will overlap the
zoo trip and Steve's nightmare, prompted by his conversation with Greg. I just need an awake brain to work on it!

No idea when I'll have anything else ready to post. I'm just trying to keep my head above water at the moment. Someone, please remove the bricks that were tied to my feet. Treading water would be a lot easier without the extra weight!
Beth and Dave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Megan got to the restaurant, Steve was outside the main doors, patiently posing with fans and signing autographs. To the casual observer, he was fine, but she saw the tension in his shoulders. And when she met his eyes, she could almost hear him pleading for rescue.

"Sorry I'm late, honey," she said, moving in for a kiss without regard to the line of people waiting for their turn to shake hands and get a picture with Captain America. "Been waiting long?"

He shook his head as he squeezed her hand in relief. "They're holding a table for us in the back. I was just waiting for the others to get here. And our wait is over," he said, nodding to the couple walking down the sidewalk towards them.

It seemed to Megan there were a dozen ways this could go wrong and it was starting to head that way fast. She heard some rumblings from bystanders that she'd interrupted autograph time, and from the look of shock on their faces, Beth and Dave had been given no warning of what they were in for, though they clearly now recognized Steve. She tugged on Steve's hand and led him down the sidewalk. "Beth, Dave, it's so good to see you again!" she said brightly, pulling Beth in for a quick hug. "Stick close and I'll get us inside without a fuss," she whispered in Beth's ear. "Steve had them hold a table in the back once he started attracting a crowd."

Beth looked at her, wide-eyed, but didn't argue as Megan looped her arm in Beth's and started them back towards the restaurant entrance. Steve had greeted Dave warmly with a handshake and used that gesture to get them both turned the right way and walking behind the ladies. "Just keep smiling," she heard Steve mutter as they reached the entrance.

Someone held the door and the receptionist Steve had spoken to earlier quickly ushered them to a table tucked in the back corner of the restaurant. Megan took the chair closet to the wall so that when Steve sat beside her, he'd be able to watch anyone approaching their table. "Now that we're away from that zoo, we can meet properly," she said, holding out her hand to Dave. "I'm Megan. It's nice to meet you."

Dave and Beth stood frozen for a second and Megan grinned, looking over at Steve. "I think you broke them."

Steve, however, was looking at Beth. "It looks like congratulations are in order," he said as he reached out and took Beth's hand, admiring the engagement ring she wore on a finger that was visible just beyond the edge of her cast. "I don't recall you wearing this last Saturday."

"I want details!" Megan said. "Sit down and tell us everything." Beth and Dave just stood there, clearly still shocked, while Megan and Steve took their seats. "We'll scold Steve for not saying something sooner. Have you set a date yet? Who proposed? Come on, I'm dying here! Don't make him pull out the kicked-puppy eyes."

Steve protested, "I don't have kicked-puppy eyes."

"Actually, you do," Beth finally said as she sank slowly into her chair. "It's a pretty popular meme."

"She talks!" Megan said, throwing her hands in the air in victory.
"Megan-"

"This is your fault, Steve," Megan said, throwing him a pretend glare. "You're the one who got here too early and attracted attention. You've been hanging around Tony too much."

"You're the one channeling him at the moment," he fired back in a teasing tone.

"No, I'm channeling Pepper. Huge difference." She propped her chin on her hands and looked straight at Dave. "Are you broken for the whole evening? Treating Steve like a normal person isn't supposed to break people. It's a nice change, actually. But if you're going to be broken, we've got a whole comedy routine we can draw on. I'll tell you all the ways I annoy Director Fury at S.H.I.E.L.D., Steve will bore you with tales of woe in the trenches of WWII, and we'll call it a night once we get dessert."

Dave looked first at Steve, who shrugged uselessly, then broke up in nervous laughter.

"Let me guess, you're thinking, 'How is this my life?'" Megan asked as she raised her water glass. "I've been saying the same thing for ages."

"Me, too," Steve confessed, and clinked his water glass to hers. "Welcome to Club Crazy," he added when Dave and Beth both picked up their own glasses and joined the impromptu toast.

It broke the tension.

"Can we back up a bit? I honestly don't remember much that happened right after the accident. Dave told me when he got to the hospital later that you'd called him. How'd you get his number?"

"From your phone," Steve explained. "You told me your security code and Dave's name, so I was able to leave him a message. I'd have gone to the hospital for you except Megan's mother was with me and we've been trying to keep her picture out of the press as long as we can."

"No one would expect you to go to the hospital with her. I was just glad to get the calls. It ended up costing me a customer since Mrs. Stimpson wasn't very understanding, but I'm happy not to have to deal with her any more, truth be told."

"What could be more important than getting to the hospital when a loved one needs you?" Megan asked, feeling her anger rise.

"A leaky kitchen faucet," Beth said blandly. "Clearly, it heralds the end of the world."

Dave laughed. "It was so slight, it barely counted as a leak. At best, it was a slow drip when the hot water was on full blast."

"Heating water on the stove was too much work for her?" Steve asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Pal, putting a bucket under the drip was too much work for her. I told her I'd have one of my crew out to her place in a bit, but I had to get the hospital."

"That seems more than reasonable," Megan commented, though she sensed there was more to the story.

"Mrs. Stimpson didn't think so." Dave's expression darkened as he continued. "She called me a rather unflattering term for a black guy, said it explained my lousy work ethic, and... "He took a deep breath and smiled a bit. "That's when I turned off the hot and cold water supplies under the sink, disconnected the p-trap, and told her I'd fixed it as best I could and there was no charge."
"That showed admirable restraint on your part," Steve said and Megan heard the frustration in his voice. "I'm afraid I might not have been so polite."

"Might not?" Megan sputtered in disbelief. "Your verbal takedown of Agent Dumbass in New York is already the stuff of legend at S.H.I.E.L.D." Megan shook her head and looked back to Beth and Dave. "First week after he was pulled from the ice, some idiot agent was dumb enough to warn Steve that Director Fury, who happens to be black, and Deputy Director Hill, who happens to be a woman, had both gotten their positions via bribes of the horizontal tango sort. He then went on to explain that several agents were looking forward to a coming change in leadership and that rumor had it a decorated General was going to get S.H.I.E.L.D. functioning properly. No one seems to know exactly what Steve said in reply, but witnesses say that when he was done talking, the kid was sobbing and had wet himself."

Steve's eyes flashed. "He had no place being that openly disrespectful of his superior officers. If he wants to be an ignorant bigot, that's his business when he's off duty. In uniform? He needed to keep his mouth shut."

Megan patted his shoulder in hopes of keeping him from getting even more wound up. "Preaching to the choir, Steve."

He shook his head and apologized as he leaned back in his seat. "I'm sorry. It's just after everything we did to protect Gabe and Jim from that sort of nonsense, I'd hoped that mindset was a casualty of the war, especially since we're fighting a racist bigot."

"We have made some progress," Beth said before she closed her menu and took another sip of water. "At least Dave and I can get married. The anti-miscegenation laws weren't struck down until 1967. I'd put money on gay marriage being legal in all fifty states by the end of this decade. Change isn't coming fast enough, but it is coming. Maybe before I die, we'll even get my parents to join the modern world."

"They're not happy you're engaged?" Megan's eyebrow shot up. Anyone with a pulse could see that Dave and Beth were crazy about each other.

"I've been told it's slightly worse than living in sin, but they really want me to find a nice white boy with a college degree, preferably from an Ivy League school, and start giving them cherubic grandbabies."

"Are you folks all ready to order?" the server asked, interrupting at just the right moment. Megan squeezed his hand under the table and saw him unclench his jaw just a bit. It was fortunate that he didn't have Mrs. Stimpson's address or he'd probably go over to her place after dinner and give her a stern lecture. She ducked her head and smiled to herself, skimming the menu quickly as she did so.

As they took turns giving their orders, Steve leaned over and murmured in her ear. "Got that tear-out notebook with you?"

As if she'd leave home without it! She'd learned a long time ago that Steve without a sketchbook was like Captain America without his shield. He always carried a small notebook in his pocket, she knew, but not one with tear out pages. That was one she carried in her purse, for times he wanted to draw something to share.

She slid it to him and then got Beth to tell how Dave had proposed at her hospital bedside. She'd been groggy from pain medicine, he hadn't had a ring, and it had been perfect. "Did you set a date, yet?"
Beth shook her head. "But I did let him talk me into quitting my job and going to school full time so I can finish in two more semesters."

"She comes home so tired from work now it's hard to study, even taking only two classes a term. I've been begging her to let me support us while she finishes, but she finally agreed."

"Sounds like a good plan to me. Where do you work that has you so tired?"

"A big box retail store that Shall Not Be Named," Beth said. "It's not bad, per se, but I'm on my feet all day. The days I have to help with unloading the truck are even more tiring. I don't mind pulling my weight, but I can't sling around heavy boxes like some of the guys do."

"And that's why you gave notice today," Dave said as he put his arm around her. "By the time plumbing wears my body down, you'll be pulling in six figures and I'll be managing my own team, not working on my own or subcontracting under others."

Megan kept the two of them talking while Steve interjected just enough that neither Beth nor Dave realized he was sketching while they waited for their food. Dave was laid back and incredibly easy going, while Beth seemed to be a bit more high-strung. It was fun watching the two of them play off each other, finishing each other sentences and griping about the same things.

"I have to ask which Avengers figure you have to rescue most often from the family commode."

"What?" Steve said, looking up at her, sputtering in disbelief.

Megan shrugged. "I'm thinking the Hulk, since kids probably expect him to punch through clogs so he gets flushed most often."

Dave just laughed, a deep belly laugh that was contagious and brought smile to everyone's faces. "Except the Hulk figure is too big to go down without a fight. Hawkeye's the real problem. That damned bow has a stretchy cord on it, and the way the bow sticks out, it tends to get caught. The worst part is how the cord breaks almost every time I catch it with the snake. So then I end up with crying kids on top of parents upset by the bill." He wiped tears from his eyes and continued. "It didn't used to be so bad. The figures that first came out were junk. They fell apart easily, which made it easier to clear the drains and went downstream. No way I could get them back out, which, strangely, was less traumatic. The new figures? They hold up a lot better, except for Hawkeye's bow."

"Tony will be thrilled you noticed the change in quality," Steve said, setting his pencil down for a minute.

"Why?"

"The first products weren't licensed or authorized. They just started appearing everywhere. Before the attack in New York, the Avengers Initiative was no more than an idea Director Fury had, one the World Security Council was dead set against, so nothing was in place for marketing and merchandising. But the minute Tony saw our images were being used to sell stuff, he got a whole legal team together and secured the rights for all of the Avengers. My case was tricky, given my history with the Army and the U.S.O., but Tony doesn't back down from a fight. Fury got so tired of hearing about it, he got all the rights to my likeness returned to me. Tony's layers set it up so all of the profits from sales of Avenger merchandise go to the charities we each picked. We all get final say on how our images are used." Steve smiled, warming up as he remembered the long legal battle.
"The only thing Tony hates more than rights infringement is shoddy work. When he builds something, he puts it through the most rigorous testing you can imagine. So you can imagine his reaction when he saw some of the first action figures that had limbs popping off if you touched them. I'll tell him about the bow and he'll make sure the toy manufactures come up with a redesign."

Privately, Megan was awed that Steve was talking so much and so freely this evening. All she said was, "You could tell them yourself, you know." She was well aware that Jarvis could provide Steve with the necessary contact information.

Steve shook his head, though she could see a sheepish blush starting to creep across his cheeks. "No fun in that," he admitted when he knew Megan was onto him.

The playful mood around the table was infectious and Dave grinned. "What do you mean?"

"Stark's middle name is Snark," Megan answered. "Steve knows that. I concluded a long time ago that men are all boys in large bodies and never outgrow potty humor. Telling Tony ensures that all of the Avengers hear about this, and the battle of snark, puns, jokes, and cartoons will commence." She looked at Steve. "Don't even try to deny it."

"I plead the fifth."

Beth looked sympathetically at Megan, smiling as she shook her head. "They're really all the same."

"Yup," Megan agreed.

Steve tried to defend himself, "Hawkeye's going to find it funny, too."

Megan rolled her eyes and Beth giggled. "He's a guy. Put it this way, if it were the Black Widow figure with design flaws..."

Steve held up his hands. "She already wipes the floor with me when we spar. No reason to give her cause to hurt me, too."

"Wait, Black Widow beats you at hand-to-hand combat?" Dave asked, unable to keep the awe from his voice.

"Every time," Steve answered. "She's taught me a lot, but I don't think I'll ever be able to take her." He tore the sheet from the tablet Megan had slipped him and passed it to Dave. "Here's my prediction of what your kids will look like. If Beth's parent's say they're not cherubic enough, they're blind as well as stupid. No offense," he added, softening the insult as an afterthought.

"You did this just now?" Beth said, stunned. "That's amazing." Tears sprung to her eyes as she looked at the boy and girl, both about five years in age. Even looking at the image upside down, Megan could see hints of both Beth and Dave in the quickly sketched faces. "You have a gift, Steve. I mean it," Beth told him.

"Thank you," Megan heard him answer softly just before the server arrived with their food.

They had just ordered dessert when Steve's phone buzzed with a familiar tone. "Really?" Megan asked, incredulous that he was being called out so soon. "Exactly how long have you been back on the active duty roster?"
Steve glanced at his watch. "A little over two hours." He kissed Megan quickly then fetched his shield from where it was leaning against the wall by her feet, safely tucked inside a black bag custom made for times he wanted to carry it without attracting quite as much attention. "Don't go to the barn by yourself if I'm not back by morning."

"Promise. Have fun."

He winked at her before turning to their hosts. "I'm sorry I have to cut this short. It's been a lot of fun. I'm glad you're feeling better," he added, looking at Beth before striding towards the exit.

"Does that happen often?" Beth wanted to know.

"Depends on your definition of often. It's... erratic in terms of when he gets sent into the field. But I've been a bit spoiled lately with him being off the roster. Today's the one-month anniversary of his being injured, as a matter of fact." She shook her head in amazement. "It's hard to wrap my head around him going from almost dead to fully healed in such a short time frame. I'll take his dessert home with me and make sure he gets it when he gets back."

"How long will he be gone?"

Megan shrugged. "As long as it takes. I never get details since the missions are classified. Even Steve doesn't get told where he's going until he's en route."

Beth seemed sympathetic. "That has to be difficult."

"He's used to it and I really don't mind. It's not like I'm sitting around twiddling my thumbs all day. Working for S.H.I.E.L.D. gives him purpose and he needs that. I'm just bummed he got called out tonight because I know how much this invitation meant to him."

"Does he like baseball?" Dave asked softly before the silence got awkward.

Megan rolled her eyes. "Lord yes. That boy bleeds baseball. Did you know that some idiot thought it would be a good idea to ease Steve into the current year by putting him in a mock-up of a nineteen forties hospital room with a baseball game playing on the radio? Steve had been in the stands watching the game they were using as part of their charade and recognized it immediately, so that should tell you about how closely he follows the game. Just don't ever ask about his team moving to California unless you have popcorn ready because you'll get to hear an hour long rant that's quite the show, even for a non-fan like me. I don't know if he's gotten caught up on the new teams yet, but he'll happily recite player biographies and stats from back in the day until the cows come home."

"It sounds like you found someone to share your affliction with," Beth told him fondly.

"It's not an affliction! It's passion," he argued. Megan could tell this was a familiar discussion for the two of them. "There's elegance to the game you don't find anywhere else."

Megan held up her hands defensively as she smiled at Dave. "You're not going to convert me. Steve already tried. Believe me, he tried. You'd have thought his dog died from the look on his face when I told him I'd rather watch paint dry than watch a ballgame. And that is any ball game, using any shaped ball."

Beth laughed. "Amen!"

Dave smiled good naturedly, but his voice was hesitant when he said, "Do you think he'd enjoy going to a game with me sometime?"
"He'd be thrilled beyond words." Megan looked down as she debated with herself, then figured she'd beg for forgiveness if necessary. Decided, she blew her breath out between pursed lips. "I've probably said too much already, and if Steve asks, we never had this conversation. "The truth is Steve hasn't made a lot of friends since he came out of the ice. He's really shy and leery of people wanting to associate with him because of his fame. Unfortunately, that U.S.O. tour gave him too much exposure to that type of person. So he buries himself in work and pretends it's enough."

Beth frowned a bit. "What about the other Avengers?"

"They're friends, but also coworkers."

"And that always colors things, just a bit," Dave finished, stating the obvious.

Beth nodded her understanding. "We all seem to get along, so why don't we all get together again sometime soon? I'm going out on a limb here, but I'm guessing you're not overwhelmed with too many friends at the moment."

Megan shook her head and pointed to herself. "Shy introvert who just moved to town in January. But I do make a mean pot of chili."

"We'll bring dessert."

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year everyone! (We're almost there.) May 2016 bless us all with health, contentment, and the company of those we care about.

I'm personally looking forward to what comes next since it was one of the driving forces last January to putting my ideas on virtual paper in this proposed short story. Yeah. Short is a bit of an understatement. I know! Insert eye roll here. What a year. I never intended to write this epic baby (and the spinoff) but it has been a lot of fun and a great comfort as Real Life continues to provide a roller-coaster ride of highs and lows.

Santa failed to deliver a big box of boring.

My husband gifted me with a HUGE basket of different chocolates. As if I needed more reasons to adore him, he gave me a basket of awesome chocolate candy.
“Steve, stop fussing. You’re acting like a grumpy toddler,” Megan told him as he sat slumped in his seat, looking out the window of the Stark jet currently taking them to New York.

Steve frowned and grumbled, “I hate doing this sort of event.”

“I know. But I was able to get some time off, Tony was nice enough to send the jet, and you’ll be sleeping at the tower at night instead of some crummy hotel room. I’m sure we’ll find some time this weekend to relax and maybe even visit Rebecca.”

“That’s assuming I survive tomorrow’s meetings.”

Megan laughed and spoke to the ceiling, “Jarvis, please load some buzzword bingo to Steve’s tablet.”

“I have already done so.”

She patted Steve’s knee, “If I can survive hours of blathering by clueless senators, you can survive a few mandatory meetings at S.H.I.E.L.D. Use your tablet to sketch some cartoons about whatever they’re talking about. You can always claim it’s your preferred method of taking notes.”

“I suppose. I just don’t understand why Fury is so insistent I attend this mystery event this weekend. He won’t even tell me who it’s for, just that he owed someone a favor and was counting on me not to let him down. At least when I was selling war bonds, it was for a cause I believed in. For all I know, this is about keeping the World Security Council off of Fury’s back.”

“Isn’t that a cause you believe in? The work S.H.I.E.L.D. does is meaningful.”

“I’m not as sure of that as I used to be.”

Megan was surprised by the worry and doubt in his eyes when he finally turned to her. “What is it?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on. It’s just a sense that something isn’t right. You know how the air changes when a storm is coming in?” When she nodded, he continued. “It’s like that. There’s a charge in the air but I can’t tell where it’s coming from or what it means.”

“All the more reason to be attentive during the meeting and see what is going on beneath the surface. Who else is attending? What’s the mood at the New York office? Listen to the chatter in the hallways.”

He sighed again. “I feel like I never get to go off duty any more.”

“I wish I could fix that. How about we have Jarvis order your favorite pizza and just hunker down in the apartment tonight? I’m sure Tony and Pepper won’t mind if we cancel our plans to eat with them tonight. They both know all about needing some quiet time. Maybe we can have dinner with them tomorrow evening instead once your meetings are done. Jarvis?”

“Dinner with Sir and Ms. Potts tomorrow evening will not be a problem. I’ve already placed your
Steve finally looked up and smiled a tiny bit. “I’m tempted to ask you to hack into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s servers and generate an Avengers Assemble order, but that wouldn’t be ethical.”

“I must point out that Sir would not limit himself in such a way. Would you like me to monitor the proceedings through your watch and suggest he intervene on your behalf if necessary?”

Megan watched with childish delight as Steve’s inner battle showed on his face.

“You have no idea how tempting that is, Jarvis,” he finally said, “But I don’t want to turn into the boy who cried wolf.”

“Understood. Then may I suggest that you permit me to plan something pleasant for you to look forward to tomorrow evening when you have met all of your obligations for the day?”

Megan bit her tongue so hard she nearly drew blood in her effort to avoid laughing. Jarvis was playing hardball with her and there wasn’t anything she could do about it at the moment.

Steve sighed. “Okay, just promise it won’t be anything extravagant.”

“I promise you won’t even need to leave the tower,” Jarvis replied blandly.

Megan choked on her drink and when she was done coughing up her lung, excused herself to use the bathroom. “Has anyone ever warned you that payback’s a bitch, Jarvis?” she muttered once she knew she was out of the range of Steve’s enhanced hearing.

“I have assisted Sir in a sufficient number of endeavors to verify the truth of that statement, Megan.”

She just grinned. Now all she had to do was come up with proper retribution, if that were even possible with a being such as Jarvis. Maybe Steve would have some ideas when the weekend was over and she could tell him how Jarvis had toyed with her. “It won’t be anything harmful, Jarvis. Just so you know. I never mix fun with harm.” Maybe the reassurance wasn’t necessary, but she wanted him to know there were ground rules she would never violate.

“I trust you Megan.”

She blew a kiss to the closest camera and made her way back to her seat. They’d be landing soon and the whirlwind weekend she and Jarvis had planned for months would finally be underway.

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Megan checked her makeup in the mirror one last time and studied her appearance. Steve was going to be in his military dress uniform tonight, and she wanted to look good in the pictures everyone would be taking. She was wearing her dress from the opening of the Smithsonian exhibit, though she’d decided to just leave her hair down. Satisfied, she headed for the elevator. It was strange, in a way, how quickly she and Peggy had hit it off upon her predecessor’s arrival to the tower. It was one of Peggy’s good days, thankfully, and the older woman had been quite enthusiastic about meeting Steve in private before they joined the other guests.

“Jarvis, take me to Peggy’s apartment, please,” she asked as the elevator doors slid open.

“Certainly. Nearly all of the guests have arrived to the tower. So far, they seem to be pleased with the weekend’s itinerary The youngsters appear to be most enthusiastic about having access to the
swimming pool.”

Megan smiled at the news. “It’s a nice way to ensure they’re all worn out enough to sleep tonight. I just have a hard time wrapping my head around how many volunteers Pepper found to work this weekend as lifeguards and chaperones.”

“Sir and Ms. Potts have worked hard to make this a pleasant and productive place to work and Stark employees tend to be very loyal as a result. These volunteers have simply switched work days and will be given other days off in compensation.”

“I’m glad to hear it since it is taking them away from other things that matter in their lives. I couldn’t have done this without you, partner.

“It has been my pleasure to help you plan this, Megan. I’m admit that I am looking forward to watching everyone interact this weekend. I hope Steve finds it to be a worthwhile experience.”

“Me, too.” When Megan arrived at the door to the apartment Peggy and her children shared when they visited the tower, she heard Peggy’s crisp voice scolding, “Grant, stop fussing. Honestly, if you don’t stop hovering, I’m going to have Anthony move me to my own suite.”

Peggy’s daughter Carolyn opened the door, and Megan bit her lip to hide her grin as she watched Peggy fix her son with a stare she knew had brought more than a few soldiers to heel.

“Mother, I’m just—“

“Grant, I’m going downstairs, not leaving the country. Jarvis will ensure I don’t even leave the building. You will all meet him later.” With that, Peggy marched into the hallway, gesturing for Megan to get a move on. “After you.”

“This bothers him, doesn’t it,” Megan asked softly as they walked to the elevator. Jarvis already had the doors open and waiting.

“I’m afraid it does. Grant has always been protective of his father, and with Daniel gone, he seems to think I’ve forgotten him. As if!” She rolled her eyes. “I’m simply not given to wallowing. Time marches on and all we can do is make the best of it.”

“I wish I could have met your husband. He was a man before his time given how he publicly championed your career.”

“He was a lot like Steve, that way, in his willingness to fight for equality. I truly adored Daniel and we have so many good years together. He understood how I felt about Steve, but never felt threatened by it. Did you know that it was his idea to name our son Grant?” Peggy shook her head. “Grant is married himself, so I keep expecting him to figure out that love isn’t something that runs out. There is always more to give.”

“That would require him to reflect on his feelings,” Megan teased. “I’ve noted that many individuals cursed with the Y-chromosome are loathe to admit to even having feelings, much less think about them.”

Peggy laughed. “I do like you!” Looking down at herself, she smoothed the fabric. “I must confess that I find something very ironic in your own choice of attire for your public debut at the Smithsonian given how similar it is to my own dress. I last wore this outfit when I approached Steve in a bar during the war to inform him of a briefing the next day. It’s held up well despite all these years. I thought of it immediately when I saw you together on television for the opening of the exhibit. I just—“
Peggy’s voice trailed off as they Jarvis opened the doors to the small conference room Megan had prepared. Megan smiled and looked at the room with fresh eyes as Peggy looked around. On one side, there was a small wet bar. It was Stark tower, after all. The lights were low and big-band jazz from the forties was playing softly in the background. Several of the small tables had gaudy, plastic storks on them. On the bar was a hand-done sign for Club Stark. The “a” was crossed out and an “o” had been written above it. Beside it, a simple cardboard clock, complete with movable hands, indicated it was eight o’clock. Between the sign and clock were also two very thick scrapbooks. Inside their pages were the original copies of all of the letters and photos mailed to Jarvis over the last several months for compilation in the books.

“It was actually called The Stork Club,” Peggy finally said, looking at Megan with eyes that were shining just a bit more than usual.

Megan nodded. “I know. But there’s no going back. I thought a playful nod to the past was better than pretending nothing has changed Can I get you something to drink while we wait? He should be here soon.”

“Whiskey, neat.”

Megan poured Peggy’s drink, got herself a glass of wine, and sat down at the table Peggy had chosen. “Are you okay?”

“Nervous as hell,” Peggy confessed, taking the glass from Megan and fortifying herself with some liquid courage.

“The only reason he isn’t is because he doesn’t know what’s coming.” Megan smiled and covered Peggy’s hand with her own. “He’s wanted to come see you, he’s just been afraid to reach out. He says he doesn’t want to disrupt your life, but the dance you two never got has become so much more than that in his mind.”

“A symbol of the road not taken?”

“Exactly. And he keeps working it in his mind like a dog chews a bone. I know this weekend isn’t going to magically fix everything. I think he’s gotten stuck in his grieving, thinking if he lets go and gives in to those feelings of loss, he’ll be giving up on the memories as well as the dreams.”

“It must be hard for him to know we all moved on without him.”

Megan nodded, “It is. On the one hand, he’s so proud of all of you for marching towards the future and building rich lives after war. I also know he’s also jealous of you all getting the chance he didn’t. He wanted to be there for it, too. It’s hard for him to see his post-revival life as a homecoming and his own fresh start when everywhere he turns, he’s reminded of what he’s lost and how much things have changed.”

Peggy looked at her with wise eyes. “This may not be the life he thought he’d have, but I don’t know that anyone really gets the life they envisioned. All we can do is move on and make the best of it. Maybe once he realizes how much he remained a part of our lives, he’ll feel less alone. I was a good idea, getting everyone together this weekend. I suppose at worst, the rest of us will enjoy ourselves. It’s been too easy to lose touch with people over the years. We only get together for funerals and soon, my generation will be gone.”

“Megan, Captain Rogers will be joining you in approximately two minutes,” Jarvis informed them.

“Thank you, Jarvis. How’s his mood?” Megan replied, looking at the closest camera.
“He is quite irritated with Director Fury at the moment. Apparently, today’s meetings were tedious and Captain Rogers has expressed, under his breath, that he resents being signed up for quote, ‘another fundraising dog and pony show,’ this weekend.”

Megan and Peggy laughed, and Megan said, “I still can’t believe we’ve pulled off the surprise. I expect he’ll lose his grumpy face pretty soon.”

“Indeed,” Jarvis replied. “I’ve activated the Rogers protocol for the recordings.”

“Did Steve ever tell you how I fired a gun at him after I caught him kissing another woman?” Peggy asked before taking another sip of her drink.

Megan laughed. “No, but I’d love to hear the story from you so I can make him squirm about it.”

“Her name was Lorraine and while I can’t fault her taste, she had no sense of boundaries. Steve was absolutely flummoxed by women—“

“Still is.” Megan interjected.

Peggy smiled knowingly before she continued, “Steve claims she grabbed him and kissed him…. even so… when he held up the vibranium shield Howard came up with and asked what I thought, I fired four rounds at it and told him it seemed to work. The look of abject horror on Howard and Steve’s faces was something I’ve never forgotten.”

Megan laughed, not finding it difficult to imagine the exchange. “Lorraine… was she Colonel Philips’ secretary?”

“That’s the one.”

“She’s here, along with her two sons. Her husband passed away last spring, I believe.”

Peggy just raised her eyebrow. “I expect she’s on the hunt again. If Steve accuses you of ‘fonduing,’ with Tony Stark, you have my permission to—“

At that moment, the door to the conference room slid open and Steve entered, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Captain Rogers, you’re late again!” Peggy snapped sternly as she got to her feet. “Don’t tell me you couldn’t call your ride. I happen to know your radio was perfectly functional.”

He just stood there, stunned, as he looked at Peggy with disbelief clearly written on his face. “Peggy?” he finally mouthed. Finding his voice at last, he gave her a sheepish look and shrugged, “As it turns out, I’m an awful pilot.”

Megan saw Peggy shake her head slightly as she opened her arms and then Steve was right there, hugging her tightly. Megan brushed the tears from her own cheeks and stood up. “That’s my cue. Dinner is at six, so you have a while to chat and catch up before the food is served. Have fun.”

Steve raised his head from Peggy’s shoulder and seemed to finally realize they weren’t alone. “Megan?” He pulled back just a bit and looked around the room. “What’s going on?”

“We’re having your family reunion this weekend. Until Monday afternoon, you are off duty,” Megan explained.

“I don’t have—“
“The ice didn’t make you any smarter, did it?” Peggy asked as she looked up at him. “You made your own family, Steve. The surviving members of the U.S.O. tour and the 107th are all here. So are the families of the Howling Commandos. They’ve flown in from all over the world to spend the weekend with you. Megan has arranged it so there is no media and no pressure, just scrapbooks, stories, and a lot of good food.”

Steve was clearly still trying to process it all so Megan continued the explanation. “In the movies, we’d have you walk in and find us all there before we told you what this weekend was about. I thought that might be a bit too much to throw at you all at once. Besides, you and Peggy deserved to have your reunion away from prying eyes. The cameras you’ll be seeing later are all provided by Tony so the images can be loaded to Jarvis’ servers. You don’t need to worry about them showing up on the internet,” she said before she kissed his cheek. “You’ve both waited long enough for this dance, Steve. If I find out later that you didn’t kiss her, I’ll break your kneecaps,” she added with a wink before she slipped from the room.

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Chapter End Notes

Here we are, finally, at the reunion weekend. The idea for that, along with Megan fetching Steve's belongings from Rebecca, were the combined motivation for what was to be a short story. Everything else was a way to have them be friends and justify Megan planning the reunion. It kinda sorta got taken over by the characters with me running behind them trying to keep various plot threads straight.

Now that we're here, I'm terrified that it won't live up to the hype. What am I going to have them all do? (Yes, I have plans.) What stories will Steve and the others tell? I don't even have comic lore to fall back on, since I have not read them. Gulp. I am just going to cross my fingers and hope it all works out in the end! Thanks for reading and commenting for the last year!
"Thank you for coming," Megan said as she handed another memory book to a new arrival before she scanned the room and checked for the tenth time that her communicator was placed correctly in her ear. The banquet tables were decorated with an assortment of yellow flowers arranged in simple vases garnished with yellow ribbons. She had been adamant that Captain America's color scheme was not being used for the decor. The room was crowed, but seemed welcoming. She hoped everyone felt at ease.

As soon as Steve joined them, the weekend was going to officially start with dinner. Once Steve had eaten, and he was going to park himself and eat if she had to hold him down herself, the evening was open for mingling. For every other meal, she and Jarvis had planned for him to sit with a rotating subset of the guests so he had a chance to visit with everyone without being rushed. But how was that going to work when there were so many people here?

"Relax," Natasha said softly, pulling her out of her thoughts.

Megan turned back to the table where "Natalie Rushman" had shown up to help distribute name tags and memory books to the last few guests who were making their way into the room. The old time music playing in the background was nearly inaudible over the low roar of lively conversation. Every time she turned around, she saw someone belting out a greeting and pulling someone into a hug.

"Is he here yet?" an older gentleman asked as Megan handed him his book. The name tag he was putting on indicated he was the son of one of the U.S.O. dancers. Jarvis had insisted on engraved metal name tags for everyone. Though Megan had protested due to the expense, she'd been overruled by Jarvis, and ultimately, Pepper. The result, she had to admit, was stunning. Each tag had the guest's name at the top and was fastened in place with a magnet so as not to damage even the most delicate fabrics. Connected to that with simple links was a second, hanging tag that bore an engraved image of the person Steve had known, their name, and their link to Steve, be it U.S.O, military, or family friend. Individuals who had known Steve in his pre-ice life had tags that sported yellow ribbons, making them easy to spot.

"Be patient, John," his mother Irene scolded as she adjusted the ribbon on her nametag. "Steve was always prompt for his call time. He'll be here."

Megan smiled at her, pleased someone Steve had known in person was here. "He's meeting privately with Peggy Carter at the moment. He'll be joining us shortly, once he recovers from the shock of learning what this weekend is all about."

Irene grinned at her. She still moved with a dancer's grace as she took her son's arm and clutched the book Natasha had handed her to her chest. "I'm glad you pulled off the surprise. It's good payback for how he stunned all of us with word of his survival," Irene said before following her family to an empty table.

"Steve owes Nick another ten bucks," Natasha murmured to her. "But you need to breathe and stop fretting. Everything is going smoothly, even if the tables are tiny."

"I specifically asked for smaller tables that seated no more than six," Megan explained. "I hate
banquets where I'm stuck at one of those monstrosities so big in diameter that I can't even talk to people sitting across from me since they're so far away. Smaller groups are more intimate."

"So if everything is as you planned, why are you fretting?"

"Look around. I set out to organize a small gathering and somehow ended up with nearly six hundred guests!"

"Steve will appreciate the blessing of this many people choosing to spend their weekend here." Natasha paused, then added softly. "Not everyone can have something like this. You've done a good thing here. Don't ruin it with worry."

"He's never going to be able to speak to everyone. There won't be enough time."

"He'll find a way to talk to everyone with a yellow ribbon and you know it. They'll introduce them to their families in turn," Natasha reminded her. "Stark Industries hosts events far larger than this one all the time. Everything is going to be fine."

"Listen to her, Megan," Jarvis said in her ear. "It is time to assemble the war veterans for their group photograph. By the time the photographer has everyone lined up, Captain Rogers will be ready to join you."

"Thanks, Jarvis." Megan took a deep breath and tried to listen to Natasha's reassurances.

We need more of you to seat yourselves in the front row," the photographer said, gesturing towards the seats several assistants were setting up adjacent to the four men in wheelchairs. "Keep a spot open in the center for Captain Rogers and fill in the rows, please."

"We've come a long way from Azzano, haven't we, Jones?" Megan heard one man mutter.

"I just wish Barnes could have lived to see this."

Several voices agreed with the sentiment. "Yeah, but at least this way, Cap is spared another lecture on risk taking. Can you imagine what Sarge would have said about the battle against those alien worm things?"

That set off a wave of laughter and friendly back slapping. "He was even better than Philips at bringing Cap to heel."

"I want to hear more about that," Megan said. "Sargent Barnes' sister Rebecca is here, and I know for a fact she'll want more of that back story, too."

One of the men perked up, scanning the room. "Where's she hiding?"

"Oh no, you don't, Jones," a man leaning on a walker said as he cuffed Jones on the back of the head. "If she's anything like Sarge, she'll hit you over your head with that cane before you know it. Behave yourself for once."

"He's here."

Megan watched in fascination as those two words, softly spoken by one in the ranks, made the soldiers all snap to attention, eyes on their Captain. It didn't matter if they needed to lean on a cane, were seated in a wheelchair, were reliant on oxygen, or standing on their own. As a unit, the decades slipped away and they were once again looking towards Steve.
Someone saluted and Steve dropped Peggy's hand long enough to return the salute.

"You're just in time. Once we get the group photo, we can eat," Megan said, smiling at Steve, trying to hide the worry she felt as she looked at him. He looked deeply shaken and it was clear to her that he was barely holding it together and trying not to show it.

"Not spam again, I hope," one of the men joked into the uncomfortable silence. He'd seen it too.

"I'm sure we can make that happen if you want," Megan teased. "Come on Steve, we're waiting."

"We want you front and center, Captain," the photographer said when Steve started to take his place at one end of the rows.

"You get in here with us, Agent Carter. We need one pretty face to keep the camera from breaking."

"You're still an incorrigible flirt, Specialist Nelson. I'd have thought you learned your lesson by now," Peggy said as she smiled fondly at him as she tried to tug Steve forward.

"No, Ma'am. Even my wife says I'm a lost cause."

"I'm amazed you convinced anyone to marry you," Peggy teased.

"So am I." he answered. "My wife's a smart lady, and I can't figure out why she puts up with me."

Despite Peggy's gentle urging, Steve remained frozen in place, openly gaping at the men standing before him.

"What's wrong?" Megan finally asked. There was no point in trying to hide Steve's reaction. Everyone was staring at him, fully aware that something was very, very wrong.

"They told me there was no one left," he finally said softly, though his voice was easily heard in the awkward silence. "I asked."

Megan's blood ran cold as she took his hand and drew him forward. "Is it possible they thought you meant just the Howling Commandos?"

Steve shook his head, eyes moving from one old face to another. These were his men and it was obvious that he still recognized them despite how the years had written stories on their faces.

"I was very specific... they lied to me."

Megan sighed. "I wish I could say I'm surprised."

"Didn't you get our letters?"

That question broke through his shock. "What letters, Jones?"

"I wrote to you, after you showed up in New York and word got out it was you. Thought it might be nice for you to know we still remembered you." He shrugged. "Figured you were just too busy to write back."

Several others joined in, indicating they'd written, too.

"Jarvis? I need to talk to Tony," Megan said softly.
"You glared?" he said, appearing at her side almost instantly. "What's wrong, Cap? It got all dark and broody on this end of the room as soon as you showed up. Don't tell me you're pouting over the color scheme." He pointed at Megan. "She's the one who insisted on yellow."

Megan put a hand on Tony's arm in an effort to head off any more comments that would just add to the tension. "Tony, I'm giving your Christmas present a bit early this year. We just learned that not only did S.H.I.E.L.D. lie to Steve about his teammates in the 107th being alive, but he never got any mail from them. Back in the spring, I assumed the letter Bucky's sister Rebecca sent him got lost in the shuffle. But not even the U.S. postal service can lose this much mail."

"You're asking me handle this? Best. Present. Ever." He pulled out his phone, beaming at her as he did so. He looked at Steve and said, "The Avenger's website I was suggesting is going live this weekend so this won't happen again." He turned away, talking into his phone. "Nicky! What's shaking? Oh, don't get all grumpy on me so fast. What if I just wanted to let you know how much I miss you?" he said as he wandered off, unable to stand in one place for long.

Megan smiled at Steve. "How much do you want to bet your 'lost' mail gets delivered before the week is out? Now get up there so we can get the pictures taken and start eating. Hurry up, because we're all hungry."

"Better listen to her, Rogers. We're not getting any younger standing here," one of the veterans said. He patted Steve on the back once he was in place. "Welcome home, sir."

Natasha appeared and handed Steve his shield. "Don't forget this. You and Director Carter should hold it between you."

Megan watched as Steve pulled himself together and held the shield out for Peggy to grasp. He was back where he belonged with his men at his back and Peggy at his side.

The photographer was efficient and quickly got the shots Megan had requested. She'd even arranged them so the fifteen Azzanni survivors in attendance had been placed closest to Steve. All told, fifty-four of the sixty-one living members of the 107th had made the trip to New York. Seeing them together in uniform brought a lump to her throat. Travel at their age was often a challenge, and they'd made the effort just for Steve. Megan knew that war created bonds she'd never understand herself, but she was humbled to see the evidence of those bonds standing before her. The passage of decades hadn't changed what was important.

After a glance at Megan,—was he asking for permission, she wondered—Steve kept his hand on Peggy's elbow and guided her towards the buffet. Megan smiled to herself as she watched and got behind them in line. Peggy was clearly flagging but was determined to see the evening through. Apparently, she wasn't the only one who'd noticed. "Mother, go sit down and let me fix you a plate," Grant said, appearing out of nowhere. He took his mother's free arm.

"Grant Daniel Sousa, mind your manners and stop henpecking me," Peggy snapped, pulling out of his grasp. "I am perfectly capable of selecting my own food." She moved closer to Steve and gestured to her son. "Steve, this is my overprotective son, Grant. Grant, Captain Rogers."

Megan hid her smile behind her hand as Steve kept his expression bland and shook Grant's hand. "Guess it's lucky for you my middle name wasn't Buchanan."

"Honestly, as much trouble as he gave me growing up, naming him after Barnes might have been the wiser choice," Peggy admitted in a dry tone.
Steve shook his head and grinned as he looked at Peggy. "You must not have been paying attention to Bucky all those times he told you that I was the troublemaker and he was the clean-up crew."

"I saw the two of you in action. You were a matched set."

"Mother—"

"Don't." Peggy's eyes flashed. "One word from me and the entire 107th will spend the rest of the weekend keeping you in line."

"She's right, you know." Steve said, laughing. "What they won't do out of loyalty they'll do out of fear."

"Fear?" Grant repeated, brow furrowed.

"Fear, darling. I was deployed with these boys when they were still boys. I know who frequented the brothels and lots of other details they'd prefer their families never hear about. Just like I know what you and Annie got up to behind the bleachers in seventh grade. Shall I continue to explain?"

Grant turned deep red and Peggy nodded in satisfaction. "Stand down and return to your seat. Hover over your lovely wife if you need to feel useful."

Chastened, Grant slipped away and Peggy continued in a lower voice, "His behavior has nothing to do with you, Steve. Something big is wrong. Grant hasn't been himself all day. It's not like him to act like this, but he's as stubborn as his father ever was and won't admit anything is amiss. He hasn't even confided in his sister, Caroline, and as close as those two are, it's rather alarming."

"Don't worry about me, Peg. I'm sure he'll settle down once you're seated. Don't judge him for noticing you're getting tired."

"I earned the right to be tired after keeping the lot of you in line for so many years." She shook her head wistfully. "If Chester could see you all now…"

"You mean Colonel Philips?" Steve clarified. "I take it you stayed in touch after the war ended?"

"He and his wife became family. He walked me down the aisle when I married Daniel."

"I'm glad. He was a good man." He looked over at Megan and she smiled gently at him, reassuring him that she didn't mind how he was continuing to focus on Peggy. Rather, she found his loyalty reassuring. Steve never forgot about those he cared about. And like Peggy had said, love wasn't a limited resource that had to be guarded jealously for fear it would run out.

"Brother Steven, it is an honor to dine with your brothers and sisters in arms," Thor said as he approaching the table where Steve and Megan had just sat down to eat with some of the 107th.

"Thor?" Steve stood up, gaping, and glanced questioningly at Megan. "How'd—"

"Not me," Megan said, shaking her head as she stood up, too. "I had no idea of how to contact him."

Thor embraced Steve in a bear hug, then turned to Megan. "You must be Lady Megan," he said as he bowed low over her hand. "Heimdall told me of your gathering. I took the liberty of assuming I was welcome as well."

"Of course you're welcome," Megan said, blushing a bit at his greeting. "I just had no idea of how
to contact you. The mail service between our worlds is a bit unreliable.

He laughed. "My Lady Jane has similar laments. It is my pleasure to finally meet the one who has brought my warrior brother such joy."

"It's good to finally meet you. Thank you, for what you did in New York. I'm sure it has been difficult for you to reconcile the brother you love with his actions in recent years."

He nodded as he regarded her thoughtfully. "You are wise and kind as well as beautiful. Steven chose well."

"I'm the lucky one. Come, get yourself something to eat," she said, tucking her arm in his as she led him towards the buffet line. As she walked, she pointed Steve back to his own meal without turning her head and heard a few chuckles from their table mates as she did so.

"Is there anywhere in particular I should sit?" Thor asked her as he looked around the crowded room.

"On a chair, at a table, just like everyone else," Megan replied with a smile as she took him to the start of the buffet. "This is a family reunion, not a state dinner."

"A good choice. I look forward to sharing tales of battle with others who fought beside our Captain. So I do not cause offense out of ignorance, will you please explain how the food is served?"

"This is a buffet, so you just grab a plate and serve yourself what you want. If you have any questions about a dish, the servers who replenish the pans will be able to answer them. Return trips to the buffet for second helpings are expected, but you should take a clean plate each time. The staff will clear used plates from your table if you set them aside. Should you need anything, just ask."

Thor nodded. "Return to your meal, Lady Meagan. We shall speak later this weekend of how you can relay a message to me when I am home on Asgard."

"Steven, may I have a moment of your time?" Thor asked once Steve had finished eating and was starting to drag Megan around to meet people he had thought long dead.

"Of course. What is it?" They stepped away from the others, sensing Thor had serious news to share.

"A gift. As I spoke with Heimdal, I learned of the gifts of memories the others were recording to share in a bound volume. You and I have not known each other long enough for such stories from the past, so I went to my mother, who is gifted in magic. She crafted a spell to call forth a token of fond memories and deliver it to my hand upon my return to Midgard. I know not the significance of what I received, but I trust my mother's magic. May it bring you comfort for years to come." With that, he reached into a pocket of his vest and pressed something silver into Steve's hand.

Megan gasped, suspecting what it was. When Thor removed his hand, she saw she had been right. As if she could doubt, given Steve's reaction.

She put her hand on his arm as Steve just stared at the tags, too choked up to speak. "Thor, there is no gift you could have given him that could possibly mean more. Would you like me to explain what your mother's magic retrieved?"
"If the Captain consents."

Steve nodded as he blindly clutched the tags to his chest and pulled Megan into a steadying hug. Thor moved so he could see Megan's face.

"Those are Bucky's dog tags. Bucky was Steve's best friend growing up. They were brothers in all ways but blood. He died saving Steve's life during the war before falling to his death from a train. His body was never found. Dog tags are worn by soldiers so their bodies can be identified on the battlefield. Most soldiers develop a deep attachment to them and many continue to wear them even after returning home. What you gave Steve is something that Bucky wore against his skin for years and was with him through the end."

"Rebecca," Steve whispered into her neck.

Megan nodded and looked around. Natasha had unobtrusively moved closer and nodded her understanding to Megan before slipping away.

"Who is Rebecca?" Thor asked quietly as he pressed his large, warm hand against Steve's back.

"Bucky's younger sister. Natasha's getting her."

"What is it, Steve?" Rebecca asked softly as she approached. Concern was plain on her face.

Steve pulled back from Megan, wiped his face with the back of his hand, and held out the dog tags. "Thor used magic to retrieve them." His voice was low and choked with emotion, but Rebecca understood.

She reached out and gently fingered the tags but made no move to take them. Finally, she closed Steve's fingers around them and looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "He'd want you to have them. I've had far longer than you to adjust to his absence. Keep them without guilt," she said before flinging herself against him in a hug.

Chapter End Notes

I feel Megan's pain. Vague ideas of a reunion led to questions of exactly how many men were in the 107th regiment and how many of them would still be alive based on survival data of WWII vets. Down the rabbit hole I went... There has also been the consideration of who got married and when, how many kids did they have, when did those kids marry, etc. What started as a vague idea has blossomed into a monster spreadsheet based on census data for average family size, etc. spanning several decades. I confess that I have resorted to rolling a die in some cases to determine how many children certain individuals had, followed by a coin toss to determine gender! Many columns are blank, for sure, but for some key individuals, I'm determined to have names, dates, and details in place even if they never show up in the story... though there are some cases where I had to know the facts to provide some realistic context around the narrative. Those mini-stories are yet to come. You'll learn about them alongside Steve.

If you missed Steve's reunion with Peggy, it's written out in Ballast, the companion story to Roots and Anchors.
Thor? Well, he just showed up unannounced. According to the timeline I keep referring to, the Bi-frost has been fixed and I decided if he wanted to make a trip or two between the realms that wasn't mentioned in the movie verse, I'm in no place to argue with him. Once he showed me what he had for Steve, I melted. So yeah, the tears are all Thor's fault.

Real Life continues to kick my butt, but I continue to plug away at this monstrosity as time permits. The various notes and PMs of support are greatly appreciated. I've tried to reply to everyone and hope I didn't lose a message in the shuffle.

'til next time!
“Jarvis, play some slow songs, please.” Megan murmured as she took Steve’s hand and tugged him towards the dance floor on the far end of the room.

When she felt Steve hesitate to follow her, she turned to him. “Trust me, okay?”

He nodded, still clutching Bucky’s dog tags in his other hand and let her lead them across the room.

Once they were in the darkest corner, she took the chain from him and put the tags around his neck. “Stand close, put your head down, your hands on my waist, and breathe,” she told him quietly, putting one hand on his shoulder in proper form and the other on the back of his neck to pull him closer. “I know you need a few minutes to regroup. Close your eyes,” she told him as she led him in slow, swaying circles. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Thor had divined her intent and was dancing with Pepper while acting as a buffer that deterred anyone from approaching. She mouthed a thank-you to him and he nodded his head regally.

Finally, she felt Steve start to relax under her hands. “I owe you an apology.”

Steve shook his head. “No—”

“Yes, I do. I would have handled this differently if I’d had any idea you thought there was no one left from the 107th. I wanted this to be a nice surprise, not a brutal shock.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“True, but that’s a pretty low bar.”

She felt him nod against her neck. “It’s been good, though. I can’t believe so many people came.”

“The ones that couldn’t make the trip still sent letters and photos to add to the book.”

“Are you talking about the book I keep seeing everyone looking at?”

“That’s the one. I left the originals up in the room where you saw Peggy. Jarvis digitized them, too. Some of the letters were pretty personal and aren’t in the volume we passed out. Jarvis and I got permission to put the rest into a volume that everyone can share. We’ll put together part two using the pictures taken this weekend and mail those out next week. I’m pleased with how they turned out. Jarvis put together family trees for each of your connections so we can all see who is related to whom and how they met you. They’re getting passed around like high school yearbooks. You’ll be signing a lot of them in the coming days, I’m sure. I figured it would make a nice keepsake from the weekend. There are tons of photographs that the Smithsonian team never got their hands on. And everyone signed documents from Tony’s legal team promising not to redistribute or sell the books. I’m sure parts will get leaked, but I don’t think they’ll be turning up on eBay anytime soon.”

“How long have you been working on this?”

“Since I got home from the hospital following the attack. You seemed so happy to have the boxes
from Rebecca I wanted to see if I could do something more. I had the idea of finding the
descendants of the Howling Commandos and getting them together, but I was worried about the
press hearing about it and ruining the whole thing. I wrote to Pepper to ask her advice on security
and she offered the use of the tower. Before I knew it, she’d announced that S.I was covering all
expenses for the whole weekend, including airfare and hotels. My head was still spinning from that
when Jarvis sent me a compiled list of all of the survivors of the 107th and suggested we include
them, too. Things sort of expanded exponentially from there. And despite the fact I’m beyond
angry with how S.H.I.E.L.D. lied to you, Director Fury is the one who guaranteed me that he
wouldn’t send you out on assignment this weekend no matter what came up. Something like this
can’t just get rescheduled and I figured the world owed you one. That whole training assignment
you suffered through today was his way of getting you to New York and keeping you off site while
everyone was arriving.”

“Your sneaky,” he said and held her a bit longer. As the second song ended, he straightened,
kissed her forehead, and took her hand. “Thank you.”

“We all wanted you to have this. I don’t know if you noticed, but we had some of the pictures
enlarged for display. Come tell me about them?”

Steve nodded and let Megan lead him off the dance floor.

*****

“I don’t believe it,” Steve said, staring at a shadow box that had been hung along with the enlarged
photographs. “He kept them?”

“That frame hung in the living room until Papa died. That’s when Mama gave it to me for
safekeeping.”

Steve turned, a stunned look on his face. “Michiko?” He whispered as he opened his arms to her.
The tiny woman embraced Steve like she’d known him all her life. In a way, Megan supposed she
had.

“Papa would have been so happy to know you survived. And of course he kept them. Those are my
baby pictures, Uncle Steve.” Embarrassed, she pulled back and looked up at Steve sheepishly.
“Sorry. That’s what all of us Howler kids grew up calling you.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Steve whispered, running a knuckle along her cheek. “Look at you, all grown up.
Last I knew, you were getting molars and keeping your ma up nights fretting about your constant
earaches and colds. You have his eyes and his smile.” He paused, studying her face critically. “Did
your ma ever say how close I guessed when drawing those?”

Michiko shook her head. “By the time I was old enough to ask, I also knew we hadn’t had the
money or the means in the camps to get pictures. Papa found out how you tried to free us. Uncle
Timothy told him once, and Papa managed to spin a tale that made it past the censors so Mama
knew, and she spread the word through the camp. It gave a lot of people hope that we’d be free
again.”

“What camps?” Megan asked, completely confused by the conversation.
“The concentration camps* President Roosevelt authorized after Pearl Harbor,” Steve explained. “Michiko was born in one, which caused Morita endless worry knowing what he did about the poor conditions.”

Megan gaped at him. “I was a good student in school and I loved history. Why haven’t I ever heard about these camps before now? I would have remembered something that horrific.”

Michiko shrugged one shoulder, “It is always the victors who choose the stories.”

“This story needs to be told. Tony mentioned an Avengers website earlier… we could include a section about the history of Howling Commandos. Would that be okay with you?” Megan asked Michiko.

She nodded. “Papa would approve. When I get home, I’ll see what I can dig up to send you.” Turning back to Steve, she pointed to the drawings in the frame that were arranged in sequential order around a handgun that had a drawing secured behind Plexiglas on the right side of the grip. “How did you go about drawing these? Papa never talked much about the war.”

“As much as he loved the photo he carried of your mother, it wasn’t the right size to use in his forty-five. Originally, Morita had asked me if I’d sketch a version that would fit and I started working on it about the time we got the first letter about you. It didn’t help that the mail was so delayed you were nearly six months old before we found out you’d been born. It really bothered him he was missing the chance to watch you grow, so I told him I’d see if I could come up with something.” Steve looked wistfully at the drawings. “I wish I’d have known to bring my sketchbooks. I could show you…” His voice trailed off as Megan pointed to the locking briefcase tucked under a nearby table. “It seems Megan planned for that, too.” Steve smiled and laid the case on the table. His brow furrowed as he looked at the combination locks.

“Try your birthday,” Megan said, winking at him to remind him of his “new” post-ice birthdate.

Steve opened the case and quickly flipped through the stacks. “You brought all of them?”

“Seemed easiest.”

“Here it is,” he said and quickly found the page he had been thinking of. “I used the photo he had of your mother to try to draw her from different angles. Morita always told me when I had it right. I drew similar images of him when we were in camp resting around the fire. The hardest part was figuring out what a baby your age would look like.” He laughed at the memory. “Pretty soon, we were all on the watch for kids, the younger the better. I can ask for someone’s age in as many languages as I can swear in, and that was true of all the Howlers.” Steve grinned to himself as he showed them several pages where he’d sketched infants and toddlers while noting their ages beneath each drawing. “Once I had a sense of proportions, it was just a matter of taking features from your parents and seeing how they might look on an infant.” He gestured to the case holding the sweetheart grip sketches. “Dum Dum suggested I add devil horns when your first molars came in.”

“I can’t believe Papa shared that with all of you.”

“Are you kidding? Boredom was our second worst enemy. Letters from home brought fresh news and a reprieve from the war. Lots of folks wrote bland, happy tales of home. Your mother and Falsworth’s wife took a different tactic. While Frenchie and Dum Dum got brief updates on how their kids were doing, Falsworth and Morita got detailed stories they shared with the rest of us. They read parts of those letters out loud so many times we had them memorized. We knew your first words, when you took your first steps, and everything else your mother could think to write
about. I distinctly remember Frenchie giving Morita a hard time for fretting so much over your first molars since by the time he got the letter, quite a bit of time had passed. That ended up in a fight Bucky and I had to break up because Dum Dum had been stupid enough to tell your father that by now, you were probably getting another set!”

Michiko shook her head, “I cannot imagine Papa in a brawl.”

“He didn’t fight often, but when he was really mad, a smart man gave him a wide berth.” Steve gazed at the last drawing he’d done of Michiko and added, “He always said when he got home, he was going to be known as your second mother. He didn’t want to miss any more important moments.”

“He kept his word and was often teased for it,” she confessed softly. “I don’t think I’ll ever really understand how much it cost him to defy social norms.”

“He knew what was important. Besides, he was a Howling Commando. We were never good about following rules. He loved you so much. We all did, actually. You kids belonged to all of us.” Steve hugged her again. “I just wish I’d been around to see.”

“Maybe it’s better this way. You have the memories the rest took to their graves. If you tell those stories, we’ll get to know them all over again. I only knew my father as an older man. It’s nice to learn who he was before.”

“I keep telling him he needs to write a book,” Megan said.

“You really do,” Michiko agreed. “Please, Uncle Steve. Share their stories.”

“I’ll try. I’m not a writer.”

“You don’t need to be,” Megan reminded him. “I’ve told you before that all you need to do is get out your sketch book and start talking while you record it. I can transcribe and help polish it up from there.”

“I wish the stories from this weekend were being recorded, too.” Michiko said wistfully as she looked at the sketchbook Steve had shown her.

“They are,” Megan assured them. “I’ll spare you the technological details, but this room is miked to the rafters and there are a zillion software filters at work to separate private conversations from stories that can be shared. One of Stark’s best tech guys, Ray, is personally going to ensure that everything private or sensitive is deleted. From there, only appropriate conversations will get transcribed and sent to their sources for final approval. Ninety-five percent of what is initially recorded will be destroyed before ever reaching human ears. The rest will only be shared later in some form if consent is given.”

“It sounds like a good plan. Now, tell me how you convinced my father to join your crazy group.”

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As Michiko and Steve slid deeper into their conversation, Megan squeezed Steve’s arm and moved away. Despite what she knew, despite everything that had happened so far, seeing Steve meet a woman who had been a toddler to him a handful of years ago drove home just how much he had
missed and what he had lost.

She got a glass of water from the buffet and stood along the wall, watching the guests continue to chat and reminisce.

“Lady Megan, will you honor me with a dance?” Thor asked, appearing at her side and startling her out of her reverie.

Megan nodded mutely and let him guide her to the dance floor. She trusted he’d endured enough awkward dances with inexperienced partners to know how to help her fumble her way through.

As he took her in his arms, he lowered his voice to slightly above a whisper. "I’m going to give you the same advice you gave Steven: put your head down, close your eyes, and breathe."

She barely held back a sob and did as he ordered, allowing him to lead her in slow, gentle circles.

When she had better collected herself, he murmured in her ear. "There is an undercurrent of melancholy here I did not anticipate. I have begun to suspect this is caused by an aspect to Steven’s life that I am unaware of. Will you share his story with me so that I may better understand?"

Megan was stunned for a moment. Having grown up in a world where Captain America was mentioned in every history book, it was difficult to imagine anyone not knowing Steve’s biography. But why would Thor have thought to ask before now? She nodded and gave the condensed version, telling him about the Howling Commandos, Bucky’s death, and his own sacrifice, only to find himself alive and awake in a world that had moved on without him.

Thor nodded once when she had finished. “I am surprised no one thought to share this tale of valor with me. It does much to explain why his aura is both young and old."

"You see auras?"

"Asgardian sight is not as limited as Midgardian sight is. Whether that is based in the body or the mind is something I know not. But answer me this: why is Steven so angry when he is amidst those he once thought lost to him?"

"Because I screwed up. When he woke up from the ice, someone at S.H.I.E.L.D. told him there were no surviving members of his unit. Walking in tonight to see nearly sixty of his comrades waiting to greet him revealed that betrayal in a cruel fashion. Even worse, someone interfered with him getting his mail so the lie was perpetuated until this evening. Had I known...."

"Halt that thought, Lady Megan. That betrayal was not of your doing and should not be allowed to rest on your shoulders. Rather, rejoice in the gift of truth, no matter how late it was in coming, and focus on the healing you are making possible."

“I’m trying. But he got slammed with that right when he walked in and still has the whole evening to get through.”

“He’s an experienced warrior, well accustomed to compartmentalizing his reactions. If he needs a reprieve, we’ll simply ensure he joins you for another dance. Now, do you know the story of that gentleman who glares at friend Steven with so much venom?"

"Noticed that, did you?" Megan smiled into his vest.

"It would be difficult for anyone battle tested to remain unaware of such a threat.”
"Steve had a girlfriend in the war, Peggy Carter Sousa. She’s the one in a red dress sitting next to the man you pointed out. Steve planned to court her properly when the war ended and hopefully marry her. When Steve apparently died, Peggy moved on. Not only did she found S.H.I.E.L.D., she married a man named Daniel Sousa, had two children with him, and lived a full, rich life. That angry man is her son, Grant. I can only guess that he resents the fact that Steve is here while his own father died several years ago."

“The anger that springs from grief can be poisonous. Do you think he poses a risk to Steven?”

Megan shook her head. “Peggy said earlier that he wasn't acting like himself. Peggy is ill and suffers from a disease that is slowly destroying her cognitive functions and erasing her memories. The symptoms can be made worse by exhaustion, which I’m sure she’s suffering from at the moment. I think Grant just resents being here, but he came for his mother. Peggy insisted she was coming no matter what state she was in or what it might cost her. She and Steve hadn’t seen each other since before he went into the ice, and she knew they both needed this opportunity to make peace with the past.”

“So he is motivated as much by his desire to protect his mother as he is angered by his pain. Then I shall simply monitor him from afar and intervene only if he strikes out.” He smiled at Megan. "Surely you have become accustomed to the ways of a warrior."

She nodded, understanding what he meant about monitoring every potential threat in a crowd. Steve did it all the time.

“How can I help make this weekend more pleasant for my warrior brother?”

“Talk to Tony or Bruce. They have something cooked up for tomorrow afternoon, although I don't know what it is.

“Then I shall take your advice and seek their council. I am glad you and Steven have found each other, Lady Megan. Despite the stresses of the evening, there is a joy in his eyes that was not there when I last saw him. When he looks at you, it is clear you are the cause of that change.”

“He just needed a friend. I never expected a conversation over lunch to turn into all of this."

"All the more proof you are worthy of his affections. You see the man behind the shield and make him stronger for it. We should all be so blessed to have someone see us as who we are, faults and all, and love us all the same. Tell me about the plans for your upcoming nuptials."

Megan gaped at him. “Not here. We’re trying to keep it quiet so the press doesn’t intrude and make a mess of everything. Only my parents and the Avengers know we’re getting married.”

“Forgive me for speaking out of turn.”

The way he gazed at her reminded her of a chastened puppy, eager to please and having no idea where he’d gone wrong. “Don’t worry about it. I do hope you and Jane can be in town on New Year’s Eve, though. Steve or I can give you the details when we are somewhere less crowded.”

“I look forward to the conversation. Are you ready to rejoin the masses?”

Megan nodded. “Thanks for the save. I didn’t realize how much I needed that.”

Thor bowed low over her hand and smiled gently. “One blessing of friends is having a companion who can see with clarity when we ourselves are lost in a fog. Now that you are restored, I shall endeavor to swap tales of valor with the heroes of the 107th.”
Megan watched in stunned appreciation as he moved easily through the room, carrying himself with a grace that one didn’t expect from a man of his stature. “How is this my life?” she wondered silently for the thousandth time since she’d befriended Steve.

*The use of “concentration camp” rather than “internment camp” is a hot button for many. Some context: When the U.S. gave in to this racist mindset and imprisoned our own citizens, President Roosevelt himself (as well as the military) referred to these “detention camps” as concentration camps.

I did do some research before using the term concentration camp because I think that label packs a stronger visceral punch than internment camp but wanted to be accurate in using it. I found that the term concentration camp was commonly used in that time, slipped it into the story, and moved on.

Since I posted this, I’ve been politely and gently corrected on my choice of label to use for the camps.

My former students heard me rant plenty about the need for using proper science terminology when discussing biological systems. When it comes to being passionate about using the proper terms to describe things, I get it. I really do! So I went back and dug a bit deeper to decide what I should do about my choice of words.

Many scholars have opted to differentiate between the horrific camps of the Nazis and those of a similar “kill them all” mindset from the centers set up on US soil. In scholarly circles, one uses the scholarly language of that field. Concentration camps refer to death camps, while internment camps refer to prison camps.

But when we get back to Steve Rogers and the story, we have to remember he’s military and from the era those dreadful camps (of both types) were in use. He heard them referred to as concentration camps. That’s the language he’s going to use to talk about them unless someone like Michiko corrects him and says she prefers that he’d call them internment camps. Somehow, I don’t see her asking Steve to change his vocabulary like that. So I’m leaving his words as I wrote them. You’re free to disagree with my choice. I’m okay with that. Personally, I see them as a less deadly version of concentration camps the Nazis set up. But as I understand the definition of concentration camp, the ones the U.S. built certainly qualify. I realize this is not a universal viewpoint, but that’s okay. Discussion about those terms and why one is perhaps more appropriate than the other is a healthy discussion to have and one I have learned from already. Polite conversation about sticky subjects is something I love.

But I’m humbled and over the moon with excitement to have received those comments. You respect my writing enough to point out your issues with my word choice! You told me you understand I really do try to do my homework and get the facts right and, but you’ll help me fix them when I make a mistake. What more can an author ask for? Pardon me while I go swoon in the corner.

Two sources that help explain my position better than I can are available at the following links. Both are personal statements by individuals and the first one is shorter than the second. But both can provide you with some additional context around the use of these words.

I first learned about Sweetheart Grips on the website by Petite-Madame, who does the most gorgeous paintings of Steve and Bucky you ever saw. This image http://56.media.tumblr.com/942aeccb2745ababedcfbf214b524d65/tumblr_o1am6sZE6k1t2f94qo2_ was my introduction to sweetheart grips. The caption by Bucky (not shown in this link) is a hoot. Check out the rest of the website here http://the-life-of-bucky-barnes.tumblr.com I also recommend the associated story on Archive of our Own that tells “the rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey would say. As soon as I saw the painting of Bucky’s gun, I knew that one of the Howling Commandos had to have one Steve drew for him. That led to Michiko’s story popping into my head fully formed. Poor Morita. He had no idea his wife was pregnant when he shipped out, then had to rely on greatly-delayed mail to find out about his precious daughter.

As far as the concentration camps we put our own citizens in, I share Megan’s outrage at how that part of US history isn't taught in school. My first exposure to them was when I read George Takei’s biography (he played Mr. Sulu on Star Trek) where he detailed his own experience in the camps. How can we learn from our country’s past mistakes if those lessons are not taught in school? /kicks soapbox aside. So yeah, there is a bit of real history woven in here. It makes Cap happy!

Thor... he wasn't even supposed to be here and he keeps stepping in to keep things moving along. I’d scold him but he’s just too he's so darn helpful and earnest that I can't stay mad at him for popping up unannounced. After all, he brought Bucky's dog tags with him!
“He looks like he’s barely holding it together,” Kathy murmured as she, Greg, and Megan sat at a table chatting while watching Steve mingle.

Megan nodded her agreement as Thor approached.

“Lady Megan, it appears that brother Steven would benefit from your company on the dance floor.” He looked at Kathy then turned back to Megan. His eyes twinkled as he said, “You never told me you had a sister.”

“What line work on Asgard, too?” Megan laughed as she stood. “Thor, I’d like you to meet my mother, Kathy Johnson, and her husband, Greg.”

“Do you mean to imply that I employ flattery when it is not deserved?” he teased her back. He became serious as he took Kathy’s hand. “It is an honor to meet those who raised Steven’s beloved and have claimed him as blood kin. Would you grant me the pleasure of a dance?” Looking at Greg he added, “Follow us, Son of John, and I will trade you partners shortly. Brother Steven needs your support though he will not admit the depth of his need even to himself. It is well and good he has you both.”

While Thor chatted with her parents, Megan pulled Steve away from those he was chatting with and tugged him towards the dance floor. The fact he didn’t protest told her all she needed to know and soon he had his head on her shoulder once again.

“I am enjoying this. Really,” he told her after awhile.

“I know you are. It’s just a lot to take in. We’ll be done in another hour or so and then you can go upstairs where it’s quiet and get some alone time. I’m getting peopled out, too.”

They danced awhile longer before Thor interrupted.

“Trade me partners, Brother Steven,” Thor said firmly as he deftly swept Megan away and Kathy into Steve’s arms before the younger man realized what had happened.

“Kathy?” he stammered.

“Of course we came, honey,” she said and pulled him into a hug.

As Thor moved her away and gave the two some privacy, Megan saw her mom say something else to Steve that made him nod, bend his head, and pull her even closer.

“There is comfort in the touch of a mother one finds no where else, just as the kind words of a father provide unique nourishment to the soul,” Thor observed softly in her ear.

Megan nodded. “And the love of siblings is precious in its own way.” She felt his shoulder tense under her hand. “We have a saying that it’s okay to hate the sin and love the sinner. Loki has done some terrible things, but that doesn’t mean you have to stop loving him and hoping he’ll make better choices in the future.”
“I see why Steven adores you.”

“I’m the lucky one. I just want him to be happy.”

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“I know that look. Sit down and indulge it,” Megan told Steve as she nudged him towards a new sketch pad lying on a nearby table. “People like to watch you draw, so you may as well give them what they want,” she prodded when she saw his hesitation. When he was settled, she kissed his cheek and moved away, determined to greet everyone Steve might not have time to.

“Brother Steven, you drew this?” she heard Thor question in a booming voice a few minutes later as the finished drawing was passed around. Steve was back on his feet and chatting with a handful of teens who were torn between looking cool (and thus bored in a way only teens can manage), or openly admiring the man they’d grown up hearing about.

Steve shrugged and turned to answer over his shoulder, “I doodle now and then. I have since I was a kid.”

“Doodle?” a veteran of the 107th interjected. “Don’t let him fool you, Thor. Cap’s so called doodles are works of art. Make him show you.”

“Sketchbook show and tell was already scheduled for tomorrow morning,” Megan said. She went over and looked at Steve’s latest work. Having overheard Thor tell some of the 107th of his first visit to Earth, Steve had drawn an irate Thor standing beside his mount bellowing, “I asked for a horse!”

“It’s the best we can do!” the scrawny, pimpled pet store cashier was explaining, gesturing to the fifty-pound bag of dog food lying on its side with a stick horse jammed into one end of the bag and a mop ‘tail’ stuck out the other.

“May I keep this?” Thor asked. “I must show it to Jane.”

“It’s yours,” Steve agreed before turning back to the teens. “Did anyone teach you guys to play poker yet?”

“We’re doomed,” Tony grumbled. “I’m warning you kids now, he cheats. No one can be that unbeatable unless they cheat. We all played poker once. It was after we sent the Chitauri packing and got some sleep—we had a team game while we tried to unwind and process the near-end of the world—I’m telling you, he’s a cheating cheater that cheats.” He sighed and added, “I’ll get the cards and cash so you can ruin another generation’s dreams, Cap.”

“Where’s your evidence?” Steve asked blandly.

“We don’t need evidence. Sargent Barnes told me himself, though he never said how you did it.” Specialist Nelson said then shrugged. “Sorry sir, but that’s what he told me.”

“I don’t doubt it. Bucky always was a sore loser at cards, much like Stark here.” Steve said, shrugging as he moved a couple of tables together and gestured for the teens to sit down. He took off his uniform coat and hung it on the back of his chair before sitting down and rolling up his shirtsleeves. “Tony, what’s taking you so long?”
“Do I look like I have a casino on site? Never mind; don’t answer that. Supplies are on their way, so keep your shield harnessed.”

The whole mood of the room had changed with Steve’s suggestion of a poker game. Megan overheard some of the veterans exchange stories of old card games played under varying conditions as several adults began to gather around the tables where Steve and the teenagers were sitting.

“Okay, who all is playing?” Tony asked as he took a large tray from one of his assistants and headed towards them. “Just put your hand up. No reason we can’t have several tables going at once. If you’ve never played before, we’ll teach you. To make it fun, you each get a tray of coins to place your bets: Susan B. all the way down to good ol’ Lincoln.” Several assistants followed behind him and passed out decks of cards and racks of rolled coins to each interested set of players.

Tony continued, “If you’re out of cash, you’re out of the game at your table. No strip poker, either. I don’t need my eyes scarred. Whoever has the most money at each table after say… five hands?” he asked Steve, who gestured upwards with his thumb.

“Ten?” Tony asked and Steve nodded agreement.

“Winner of ten hands moves to the playoffs. The final winner of the playoffs is already a given, so the first runner up gets a sketch from Steve.” Tony said, looking once more to Steve for approval, which was readily given.

“The first three hands aren’t going to count. They are to teach you how to play,” Steve said once he’d dealt. “I’m going to lay my hand down so I can show you strategy as we go. Speak up with questions; the point is to have fun.”

“Jarvis, screens and mikes please?” Tony asked the air. Jarvis obediently lowered various screens around the room, then used hidden cameras to project a close-up of Steve so everyone would benefit from his instruction.

Megan stood with Greg, her arm around him, as they watched the demonstration game get underway. There were several tables where games were being set up, but mostly it was the veterans, U.S.O. tour members, and their spouses that were playing.

“Do you think he cheats?” Greg asked her softly.

Megan smiled. “At poker? I’m sure of it. But we’ll see if anyone can catch him at it.”

“It was a good idea to engage in a game. The mood in here has become playful,” Thor said softly from behind them. “Even the awkwardness of a transitional age is falling aside as they interact with the Captain.”

“If there is one thing Steve knows how to do, it’s lead people. It’s going to be interesting to see who makes the playoffs.” Megan turned and caught Natasha’s eye. “Aren’t you going to play, Natalie?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I can do that anytime. Watching is far more fun. He’s good at this game.”

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Play progressed with a great deal of laughter and witty commentary by some of the observers. The trash talking between some of the vets was outright appalling, but none of them seemed to take it personally.

Tony, despite his best efforts and intense scrutiny from every angle, was unable to catch Steve cheating even though he won every hand. When the ten hands with the teenagers was done, Steve used his time to play several more hands with the teens but put his own cards on the table so he could show them more strategy. When they were playing better, he pointed out some of their more obvious tells when bluffing.

“I guess you don’t need to scope out the competition since the outcome is rigged,” Tony said from behind Steve’s chair. “Otherwise, I’d say you need to tour the room and see who you’ll be up against.”

“Maybe I’ve played enough that I’m confident in my skills, Tony,” Steve replied evenly. “I even rolled up my sleeves so you can see I’m not hiding any cards.”

“Yeah, like that’s the only way to cheat. Either way, all but the last three tables are done, so we’ll all have our eyes on you.”

“I toured in the U.S.O., Tony. I’m used to the spotlight.”

Tony ranted, gesturing at Steve as he talked to the teens. “Did you kids learn anything from this? Did you see him cheat? He’s smooth, I’ll give him that. Did any of you figure out how he does it?”

“Maybe he’s just that good,” Ronnie said from her seat at the table. “Isn’t that right, Uncle Trip?”

“Could be, Ronnie,” Trip said. He was standing behind her and her sister, Kallyn. "I can’t remember Grandpa Gabe ever saying anything about cheating, though he did tell me Cap won the Howling Commandos several bottles of wine from another unit they met up with.”

“And a night bunking indoors rather than in tents outside, if you’re referring to the time we were in Austria, just over the border from Italy. It was barely a village, not sure it even had a name. I can’t remember what unit it was,” Steve said, as he blindly shuffled and dealt the cards, his eyes focused on the memory. “Anyway, we were trying to make our way back to the 107th, had spent nearly a week hiking in the snow, and those idiots were willing to add their rooms to their ante. Gabe loosened them up while I played it safe, then we took the whole block of quarters out from under them. I thought Frenchie was going to cry. It was the best night’s sleep any of us had gotten in a fortnight.”

“Fortnight? No one talks like that anymore, Cap” Tony said with a raised eyebrow.

“Actually, it’s quite commonly used in England, where Captain Rogers spent quite a bit of time,” Natasha informed them.

“He’s from Brooklyn! No one from Brooklyn says fortnight!”

“I do,” Steve answered, then winked at the teens. “He’s so easy to wind up, isn’t he?”

“I’m stuck on the image of Uncle Jacques being near tears,” Trip cut in looking puzzled.

Steve nodded. “He was tough, but he’d marched most that week on a sprained ankle. I carried his pack, but it was still a brutal hike for him. He more than earned the right to sleep in a real bed for a
night. He hated special treatment, so winning us all some rooms saved his pride.”

“So you admit that you cheated to save his pride?” Tony prodded.

“No, I’m saying that anyone dumb enough to bet their rooms deserved to lose them.” Steve added in a stage whisper, “It’s so easy to get him going, I almost feel guilty doing it.”

Ronnie giggled.

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“Okay, there are fifteen of you, so this won’t take long with Captain Cheater over there. Speaking of whom, get over here, C.C., and take a seat,” Tony said as he gestured to the large table set up in the middle of the room. “You’re all starting with one rack of coins each, just to keep things fair.”

Tony paused as he looked at the gathering players. “We’ll play ten hands so we’re not here all night. Whomever has the biggest pot at the end of those ten hands is the winner.

Megan noted a familiar face walking towards the finalist table and she mouthed a single word question to Steve, who nodded as he tried to hide his own surprise. Apparently he had not yet talked with her this evening and hadn’t realized she was in attendance. Assured she had his consent, Megan turned to her mother. “I already know the winner and Steve does too. Will you go upstairs and get the wrapped picture frame out of your closet? I stashed it there so Steve wouldn’t see.”

“How can you… never mind. I don’t think I want to know how you both know that.” Kathy said.

Megan rolled her eyes. “Steve has played against everyone at that table. He knows how it will end. He’s going to be the runner up, not the winner.”

“I’ll be quick. I have a feeling I don’t want to miss a moment of this.”

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“Just like old times, isn’t it?” Annie said as she sat down beside Steve.

He nodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat. Play got underway and Megan could tell Steve was feeling overwhelmed again. He was quiet for the first three hands, pretending to focus on the game.

Tony asked, “Am I the only one disturbed by the fact we have only two soldiers left playing at this table?” They were already down to six players, and four of them were women. Megan could tell he was tuned in to Steve’s emotional state, though he couldn’t know the cause, and was distracting everyone from in it standard Stark fashion. “I thought no one played poker like a soldier.”

Annie laughed. “Mr. Stark, soldiers didn’t have nearly as much time to practice their game as we did in the U.S.O. Nor did they have the benefit of lessons from Mildred Werner. The only surprise here is that there aren’t more women at the table. I’m told that Agent Carter was too fatigued to
play this evening, or else I’m sure she’d be in the chair where Specialist Martin is sitting. No offense, sir.”

“None, taken, Ma’am. Agent Carter’s reputation is well known and I agree with your assessment of her skills. I played poker against her once and vowed never to make that mistake again.”

“I’m glad to hear some of my instructions stuck with you, Martin.” Peggy added from her seat nearby.

“Your lessons tended to stick, Ma’am, long after the bruises were gone.” He shook his head and looked at Steve. “Never thought I’d have pleasure and misfortune of playing you again, Captain. I’ll console myself with knowing I won’t lose my supply of cigs or prophylactics to you this time.”

“As if he had any use for either,” Tony commented in a snarky tone.

“I’m surprised you’re so willing to admit to your ignorance,” Annie replied smoothly as she dealt the next hand.

“What are you suggesting?” Tony demanded.

“I’m not suggesting anything.” She winked at Steve. “With the way you’ve been playing tonight, I can see you haven’t lost your touch. You always were good with your hands.”

“Wait a minute? You two?” Tony looked back and forth between them.

“We did play a lot of poker,” Steve said as he examined his cards. “You always had a good grasp of the game, Annie.”

“Remember when Cliff found us playing?”

“As if I could forget,” Steve shook his head fondly at the memory.

“He was a real player. Too bad poker wasn’t his game.” Alice, another U.S.O. performer, muttered to Steve’s left.

“He was always easily distracted by your costumes.”

“Stop giving Mr. Stark the wrong idea,” Alice chimed in. “We all knew Steve was smitten with someone else. He was a perfect gentleman on the tour,” she added for Tony’s sake.

“I tried,” Steve agreed. “Besides, it was clear that Annie’s heart was already taken.”

Megan smiled at Tony’s perplexed look as he tried to figure out Steve’s history with the women he’d toured with. He’d succeeded, though, in easing the tension in Steve’s shoulders by getting them to banter a bit.

Conversation paused while they placed their bets and eliminated three players, including Specialist Nelson, by the time the hand was done. Now that they had weeded out the relative novices, they all grew serious and focused intently on the game. Tony, meanwhile, prowled around the table, looking at everyone’s cards and trying to figure out how Steve was cheating.

“C’mon, Natalie, give me a hint at least,” he murmured to Natasha as he passed behind her. Megan grinned as she watched Natasha raise an eyebrow at him.

Steve dealt the next hand and Megan noticed that Annie adjusted her ante accordingly. He won with a four of a kind.
“That can’t be a coincidence!” Tony grumbled.

When the other players dealt, Steve and Annie continued to win, but without phenomenal hands. When it was Annie’s turn to deal, she took out the remaining players with a full house. Now it was just her and Steve and they switched to playing heads up.

“You’re really going to try to break my seventy year winning streak?” Steve asked as he dealt. A hush had fallen over the room as they all watched the two duel for victory. The screens Jarvis had deployed allowed everyone to have an excellent view of the table.

“I’m going to do more than try,” Annie teased as she anted. “I have my own reputation to uphold.”

Steve looked at her with his most innocent expression, but Megan heard the amusement in his voice. “Is that so?”

Neither one lost or gained much ground for several hands. Finally, Annie said, “She taught me everything I know about poker.”

Steve nodded. “She was a good teacher.”

“I see you’ve been putting her lessons to good use.”

“Been trying to. I’m better at being patient and doing everything in the right order.”

Megan bit her lip to keep herself quiet. Annie was just trying to wind Steve up, and she was determined not to help in that endeavor.

“Remember that hearts come before the diamonds.”

“Still need to go to a club.”

“Just be careful to avoid the spade.”

“Used the shield as a spade once or twice. Did the job.”

They fell into silence, each trying to decide how this hand was going to go.

“Well, you clearly got fewer poker lessons than I did,” Annie finally said and laid down her hand to reveal a royal flush. She’d won.

As Steve got up to hug Annie, Megan picked up the wrapped frame that had been leaning against her legs and took it over to them. When Steve and Annie parted, he saw what she was holding and gave her a questioning look that she answered with a nod.

“Seems I’m doomed to be outmaneuvered by all the women in my life,” he said softly as he took the package from her.

“And that’s a bad thing?” Annie teased.

“Hardly. Where’s Beverly?”

“Right here,” Annie’s wife said as she moved to Annie’s side. “It’s nice to meet you, Steve.”

He pulled her into a hug and Megan saw him whisper something in Beverly’s ear, though she couldn’t hear what he said. Beverly just smiled and nodded.
“I was going to send this to you, but it seems Megan knew more about my weekend than I did. If you don’t like it, I’ll do something else, no hurt feelings.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Annie chided as she and Beverly opened the package together.

“Oh—” Annie whispered and covered her mouth with her hand. Beverly smiled and nodded her agreement as Annie flung herself at Steve. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you and Beverly found each other. Milly would be, too.” He stroked her hair. “Where are your boys? Did they come?”

Annie just shook her head.

“They stopped talking to her, after,” Beverly explained. She touched the frame wistfully. Steve had drawn Annie and Beverly together on their wedding day, using their photograph from Facebook as the basis. Behind and slightly above them, an ethereal looking Milly was smiling at the pair and giving her silent approval to their union.

Steve shook his head, disappointment plain on his face. “It seems I’ll be paying each of them a visit, then.”

Annie shook her head. “They’re stubborn. You’ll just be wasting your time. It’s okay. I’ve made my peace with it.”

“It’s not okay, Annie. Besides, I can be stubborn, too. I can’t promise it will help, but I’m going to try.”

Having apparently had enough emotion, Tony pulled Megan aside. “How’d you know Annie was going to win?”

“I’ve heard stories about the U.S.O.’s poker games.”

“So he told you he cheats? He actually admitted it?”

Megan laughed. “He plays the game well. Some of them play it better. Let it go, Tony.”

“It’s not in my nature.”

“Consider it a new challenge, then.” Seeing Tony’s frustrated look, she took pity on him. “They’re friends, Tony. Steve was adrift and alone after Project Rebirth, especially with Bucky deployed. The women in the U.S.O. adopted him as their brother. On the road, they were a family.”

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After the poker game, the evening quickly wound down and guests began to head towards the shuttles that would take them to their hotels. In accordance with their efforts to keep the weekend out of the press, Pepper had insisted on all travel between the towers and the local hotel being by private shuttles. Besides, given the age and medical needs of many of the guests, motorized transport between buildings was the only considerate option.

Steve picked up his shield and new sketchbook before he gave Megan a hug. “Don’t wait up for me. I’m going to talk to Grant and then draw for a bit. What time do we get started again in the
morning?”

“Eight thirty, which includes breakfast. Don’t stay up all night, okay?”

“Promise.”

Satisfied, she watched him wend his way towards Grant. There was a lightness to him tonight that she hadn’t seen before. As painful as some moments had been this evening, she could tell it had done him a world of good to be reunited with so many people he’d known in his old life.

Steve Rogers was finally home.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to Supesfan18 from fanfic dot net for help with the details of poker. Credit goes to SF18 for anything I got right about the game. All mistakes are mine.
Sketchbook Show and Tell

As exhausted as she was, Megan was unable to sleep. She understood that Steve needed time to decompress, but she was worried about him given his penchant for brooding.

"Megan, Steve has fallen asleep on the rooftop terrace. Perhaps you should take pillows and blankets to join him. The chairs can be adjusted into sleeping platforms. Your tablet would be helpful," Jarvis told her.

"Okay," Megan said, puzzled by the last request but unwilling to question Jarvis' wisdom. She took their pillows from the bed, stepped into her slippers, and took two warm throws from the couch. "Jarvis, let my parents know where I am if they ask," she said as she tucked her tablet under her arm and shuffled her way to the elevator.

When she arrived on the terrace, she was surprised to find Thor covering Steve with his cloak. "Lady Megan," he said, nodding to her as he made the chair Steve was on lay flat and moved another into place beside it.

"I didn't realize you were with him. How long as he been asleep?"

"He just drifted off, assisted by some ale I brought from Asgard. Come, take your place beside him." When she hesitated, he gestured to the bedding in her arms. "You planned to join him, did you not?"

Megan nodded. "I wanted to be here in case he has nightmares tonight."

He smiled kindly at her. "And you'll sleep better at his side as well. With your permission, I can ensure his sleep will not be troubled."

"What you do you mean?"

"On Asgard, as on Midgard, an honorable warrior takes care of those under his command. Those in the royal family are gifted with the talent and the knowledge to ensure our brothers and sisters in arms are well rested before a fight and untroubled by their dreams. It is my privilege to offer that protection to Steven this night, as he faces a battle of another sort on the morrow. I can take my rest after the dawn."

"You have to stay awake?"

Thor nodded as he added more wood to the fire then lifted Steve's head so Megan could slide the pillow into place. "Only when I'm older and more skilled as a leader will I be able to provide that protection to my soldiers during my own slumber."

"I guess that's why Jarvis wanted me to bring my tablet. With it, you'll be able to read while you stay awake." Megan studied Steve's sleeping form as she laid one of the blankets over him and spread the other out on the chair beside him. "If we asked him, he'd refuse out of principle."

"He still cannot see his worth and value to those who care about him. He fears being a burden. I knew this when I avoided asking his permission before he fell asleep. But permission is something my conscience demands." He tilted his head. "Why the tears, Lady Megan?"

"You really see him, not the perfect hero the public expects him to be."
"His flaws are also his strengths."

"Permission granted. If he grumbles about it in the morning, the blame will be mine. He'll get over it. He needs true rest, and I'm afraid that he isn't going to get that without your help."

"Then take your place beside him. I'll keep watch over both of you."

"If it won't cause offense, I would really like to give you a hug."

Thor opened his arms to her. "A hug from you could never cause offense, Lady Megan. Affection and friendship are gifts to be treasured."

"I'd like to ask a favor, but feel free to decline," she said into the fabric of his vest.

"What is it?"

"Odds are that with the serum, Steve is going to outlive me. He doesn't deal well with being alone. I'd like to periodically write him a letter and entrust the collection to you. When the time comes, I ask that you can give them to him so he can better recall the good memories that live beyond the pain of grief." Megan shrugged as she pulled back and looked at him. "You'll outlive us all. You're already what, a thousand Earth years old? At least he'll have one friend who understands living on a different time scale than the rest of us."

"I am privileged to have your trust. Write your letters and I will ensure their safe delivery to his hands." He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and led her to the lounge chair. "Worry not about the future, Lady Megan. Sleep and know that all is well."

It was strange to lie down outside under the stars and try to sleep. She curled up on her side and watched the flames lick hungrily at the dry wood. Steve was pressed against her back, his arm around her waist as he lay half on her chair and half on his. It shouldn't have been so easy to slip into sleep, and her last thought as her mind slid towards oblivion, was that Thor was making that easier, too.

It was Steve pulling away from her to sit up that finally roused her. The fact that the sun was shining in her face told her it was morning. She cracked her eyes open and saw that the fire was still burning, having been tended by Thor throughout the night. Apparently, he had worried about her getting chilled despite her personal furnace sleeping right next to her.

"What time is it?" she mumbled and sat up. Greg was there, along with a cart laden with pastries, hot beverages, and fresh fruit. What she wanted to do was go back to Steve's apartment and sleep for a week. Instead, she reached for the teapot, trusting Jarvis had provided her favorite tea.

Thor's gift had taken years from Steve's face. It wasn't natural for anyone to look that rested and relaxed at this hour of the night. It wasn't fair that he could be so alert and happy at this unholy hour. Thor didn't seem the least bit tired, and Greg was cheerful, too. It made her grumpy.

Steve was too rested and happy to be bothered by the information Thor had protected him from nightmares. Either that, or Thor's flowery language diluted the impact of the message. Either way, the conversation quickly shifted to the news that her parents were now part of Jarvis' circle of trusted friends. That Jarvis had chosen to trust them so quickly surprised her, but it was too early in the morning to dwell on it. Right now, her job was to get a shower and get ready for the day. She gathered up the pillows and shuffled to the elevator. "Are we on track for today?" she asked as Jarvis closed the elevator doors behind her.
"All preparations are on schedule. You and Steve both seemed to sleep well last night."

"We did and that may make the rest of this day go a lot better for both of us. Thor isn't at all what I expected, and yet I feel like I've known him forever. It's a strange feeling."

"He has an exceptional talent for putting others at ease," Jarvis confirmed. "Would you like me to arrange for a fire-proof safe for you to store letters in between his visits to Earth?"

"That would be great. Thanks. And remind me we talked about this when I'm actually awake, okay? I'll write the first letter this weekend before we leave."

"What's the agenda for today?" Steve asked her as he joined Megan in the banquet hall and followed her to the breakfast buffet. The room was still mostly empty, though guests were beginning to trickle in, enticed by the smell of fresh coffee.

"Relax, Steve. Jarvis and I decided early on to keep this casual. We thought about scheduling you for sitting with different groups at each meal, but abandoned that idea pretty quickly."

"Why?"

"Because this is supposed to be fun. You're not on tour, you're not beholden to anyone else's timetable. No matter what we do, you'll never have enough time this weekend to catch up with everyone, so we decided it was silly to try to pretend we could facilitate that. This is one big family and we don't need seating charts here. I mean sure, we could have scheduled you for several hours of posing for photos," Megan said, gesturing to the photograph-friendly area still set up on one end of the room. Steve's shield was hanging on the fake wall and there were several stools in place to make it easier to fit several individuals into each shot. "But it's better to let everyone help with the photography and let you just be you. We'll take a few large-group photos tomorrow evening. Beyond that, our plans are pretty fluid." Megan shrugged as she loaded her plate with fresh fruit and an apple turnover that looked like it had come out of a cooking magazine.

"So there's no agenda at all?" he asked as he heaped his own plate high with omelets, sausage, and biscuits straight from the oven. "I'd think people will get bored after a while."

"We have a loose framework. Once you've eaten, I've got a document camera set up for you. Your sketchbooks are all ready to go, and you can decide what to share. But the few sketches you have shown me from those days have always been accompanied by wonderful stories. This can be a time for everyone else to hear about the 'good old days' as you saw them. So many of those here grew up hearing stories about you. It's time to turn the tables and share how you remember their loved ones. Make it a Q&A and pretty soon, you'll be wondering where the morning went."

Steve nodded, looking wary as he filled a second plate.

"Sweetheart, trust me on this. Yes, there will probably be tears shed. But there's going to be laughter, too. And with your permission, we'll include scans of your drawings and transcripts of the conversation in the follow-up book Jarvis and I are putting together. You've said before you wish you could have told the people you've lost how much they meant to you. This is your chance. Your fondness and respect for them is so obvious when you talk about them, and it's what brings your drawings to life."

"Okay. But if this turns into a morning of awkward silences, I hope you have a backup plan in place," he told her softly, mindful of the people starting to join them in the buffet line."

Megan just smiled to herself.
"Steve, if you don't get over here and join us, we'll be forced to get up, do a kick line, and injure ourselves in the process!" an older woman called from the far end of the room.

"Mom!" was the embarrassed comment from the man sitting beside her, making Megan laugh to herself.

"I know I'm your mother, John. There's no need to remind me."

"Irene?" Steve questioned, having glanced at her nametag. He hastily put his plates down on a nearby table and pulled Irene into a hug. "Better a kick line than singing that awful song."

"Now there's an idea!" Anne chimed in from nearby. "Surely Mr. Stark can find a recording of the music for us."

Steve looked heavenward. "Please, no. I'll gladly sleep on the ground for a month if it means never hearing that song again."

"So, how is this going to work?" Steve murmured as he sat down in front of the document camera. The locked case holding his sketchbooks was on the table beside the machine. "Oh," he said softly as several projection screens were simultaneously lowered around the room.

Megan handed him his new sketchbook from the day before, as well as some pencils. "You may find this helpful, too," she said softly.

Steve took a fortifying sip of water from the bottle Megan handed him and opened the briefcase. "I've been informed that it's time for show and tell," he said as Jarvis projected his voice through the room's sound system. "I guess we'll start chronologically and go from there. Jump in any time with your own recollections. In ten minutes, when everyone's asleep, I'll sneak out the back."

That sent a wave of laughter through the room. Steve opened the book and the first page he shared was a drawing of Peggy slugging Hodge. "Anyone want to guess what this is about?"

"I recognize Mom, but who's the punching bag?" Carolyn said.

Peggy's voice was wry, but surprisingly strong. "Dear old Hodge, may the bastard rest in peace. He was Colonel Philips' first choice for Project Rebirth."

Despite Steve's vague mention to Megan about Grant and his wife having to deal with some difficult news, the entire Sousa clan had shown up for breakfast. Even Peggy had been joined them, claiming she'd slept better last night than she had in years and felt fortified for the day. Privately, Megan wondered if Thor had something to do with that.

"He was a bully," Steve said. "This was the first morning in basic. He mouthed off to Peggy and dropped like a stone before he even knew what had happened."

"The experience didn't make him any smarter, either," Peggy added. "He harassed Steve relentlessly."

"Whatever happened to him?" Steve asked, gazing at the drawing wistfully.

"He made it home after the war, got into a nasty brawl in a bar, and died a day later of a cerebral hemorrhage," Peggy explained.

Steve nodded without comment and Megan put her hand on his back in empathy. Even though
Hodge had been pond scum, she knew Steve was thinking Hodge had been someone's son.

He rallied quickly, and flipped to a different page. Megan saw him pause briefly as he turned to a sketch of Dr. Erskine, then continued looking for what to show next. He was easing himself into the process of revisiting his past, and she didn't blame him. Whatever he managed to share was enough. The point was to get him to start reclaiming the happy memories.

"After basic, my life got interesting," Steve said dryly and put up a sketch of the U.S.O. girls backstage as they got ready. The women were in various stages of undress, helping each other fasten the backs of their dresses or applying makeup to each other.

"Wait, they let you hang out with them during costume changes?" Tony asked, looking at Steve with a raised eyebrow. "You scoundrel!"

"He was a perfect gentleman," one of the women who'd toured said as she came to Steve's defense.

"Steve did the fastest French braid you ever saw, and it was never too tight or loose."

"Straight line Steve." Irene called out and all of the U.S.O. crew and Steve burst into laughter.

"It's been a long time since anyone called me that," Steve said, quickly flipping through the book to find the sketch he was looking for. It was a rare drawing in that he'd included himself in the tableau. He was kneeling on the floor in his costume pants and undershirt while he used an eyebrow pencil to draw a line down the back of a woman's leg as she stood on a chair. From the way Steve had drawn the picture, it was clear this was one stop in an assembly line of preparations. Once the leg lines were drawn, pairs of women were applying makeup to each other, while those on the other side of the chair were zipping up dresses and fixing their hair.

"Clue me in. Why the line?" Megan asked. Jarvis obliged by broadcasting her question.

"It was hard to get stockings during the war since all the nylon and silk was being used make parachutes and tents. Lots of women drew the seam and went without. The trick was getting the seam line straight," Steve explained.

"You always had steady hands," Annie called out, loudly enough that everyone in the room could hear her.

"You had your hands on the legs of everyone on the U.S.O. tour?" Tony sputtered, doing his part to keep up the sex-obsessed facade he was known for. Megan knew it was his way of keeping the narrative light so that Steve didn't get pulled down by the weight of his losses. "Why am I just now learning about this? Next you're going to tell me you knit, sew, and do makeup, too."

Steve grinned and leaned back in his chair. "Actually, Tony, you're right on all counts. We usually didn't have enough mirrors back stage, so we all helped get each other ready. I grew up knowing how to do basic mending and knitting. We made our own socks and patched our own clothes. Once the war started, knitting was something most of us did to help make bandages, gloves, and scarves for the boys overseas. I preferred to draw, sure, but I can knit fast enough that I did my part and still had time to draw."

Megan leaned back in her chair and tried very hard not to let her smug feeling show on her face. This morning was going even better than she'd envisioned.

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Steve was picking the next sketch to share when a voice called out, "When did you realize you could use the Captain America persona to make a difference?" Megan couldn't identify the teen,
but figured none of the adults would be so bold.

Steve didn't hesitate. "Azzano. The guys had been through so much, they needed the reassurance that someone was in charge during our march back to camp. I tried not to show I was making it up as I went."

"Maybe that's when you knew, but we figured it out long before that," another voice said, easily heard without Jarvis broadcasting her voice over the speakers. Megan recognized her as Louisa, one of the U.S.O. performers she'd chatted with over breakfast. "We just couldn't figure out a way to get you to the front lines without getting you in a heap of trouble with the army. In fact, I remember the exact day we realized what you were capable of."

All of the eyes in the room turned to her and she smiled, her brown eyes sparkling as she remembered. "It was after the show in Milwaukee, a young widow approached you, desperate to get a picture taken with you. She was about eight months pregnant."

"Katherine," Steve said softly, though Jarvis ensured they all heard him. "Her name was Katherine Wells."

Jarvis, without any prompting, located a photograph of Steve, in full stage costume, hugging a young woman, dressed in a black A-line maternity dress. Steve's eyes were closed, by his empathy for her grief was obvious. Katherine had her cheek pressed against Steve's chest, her expression solemn as she accepted his hug. Like Steve, her eyes were closed.

"I've never seen that photograph before," Steve whispered.

"I'm surprised to hear that, considering how many papers it ran in," Louisa told him.

"Not 'til after the war ended," Annie shared. "That photograph was part of the retrospective Life magazine put out on Captain America. I wonder whatever happened to her."

Megan hid a smile. Jarvis would find out and email them his findings. By lunch time, Steve would know Katherine's fate.

"What was her story?" Megan prompted, getting them back on track.

"She had wanted to get a picture with me to send to her husband. She'd gotten tickets to the show the week before. Two days before, she got word her husband had been killed. She came anyways. Said she'd keep the photo for their child. I talked with her a bit, told her about my mom raising me on her own. We ended up corresponding all through the war. She'd tell me what her son was doing and I'd share stories about my mom making do, working late, and relying on the neighbors. I hope it helped."

"That sounds like every day Steve Rogers. What made this event stand out?" one of the 107th asked.

Louisa explained, "Harold, the tour manager, was dumb enough to try to move things along faster and get everyone on the bus. Steve stared him down while politely telling him that women like Katherine were the the whole reason for the tour, followed by a detailed description of where Harold should go and how he should get there. Steve didn't let them hurry his conversation with Katherine one bit. In fact, I dare say, it lasted a bit longer than it might have just so he could make a point," Louisa said, grinning at Steve as she spoke.

The way Steve had ducked his head a bit told Megan that Louise was spot-on in her assessment.
"That was the first clue, but we knew for sure the next night," Louisa continued. "At the curtain call, Steve went off script and addressed the audience, asking anyone who had lost a soldier to stand. He invited them to a cordoned off area after the show. Harold was frantic by then, since none of this was scripted and the crew wanted us back on the road right after we left the stage. While Harold was sputtering backstage, Steve was giving an impromptu speech that this was the real reason they were there. The families who were standing had already made the greatest sacrifice and it was up to everyone else to dig deep in their wallets and make sure the men still fighting had what they needed to win so they could come home."

Annie added, "We were two hours late leaving town and there wasn't anything Harold could do about it since bond sales that night broke all prior records."

"Don't discount Millie," Steve added. "She put herself out in front, getting that autograph area set up and directing the families down from their seats."

Louisa nodded. "But until then, Millie had been in charge. The night you met Katherine, that all changed. Millie started taking her cues from you, and she never took orders from anyone. That's when we knew what a leader you could be. All we had to do was figure out how to get the army to see it."

"Telling him that a lot of the guys in Bucky's unit were P.O.W.s seemed to do the trick," Megan added. The room erupted in laughter at that comment and Steve blushed a bit, which didn't happen often. Megan patted his knee. "And the rest is history," she whispered to him.

Later in the morning, when Steve decided to take a break and mingle a bit, Megan noticed his shoulders tense as he noticed someone he hadn't met looking at the photos hanging on the wall.

"I've seen you at S.H.I.E.L.D.," Steve said, doing an excellent job of hiding his wariness from his voice. Once they were close enough to see the handsome man's nametag, Megan saw the tension in his shoulders slide away.

"Yes, sir." the man said, smiling broadly as he shook Steve's hand.

"Why didn't you say something, Antoine?"

"Call me Trip; everyone does. To answer your question, I didn't want to impose. Gramps always talked about how you hated the extra attention." Trip hesitated, then added, "Plus, there was a PowerPoint presentation….""

Steve closed his eyes. "I've heard."

"PowerPoint from hell," Megan muttered.

Steve squeezed Megan's hand while he spoke. "Don't make that mistake again. On the worst day of my life, Gabe was there." Seeing Trip's confusion, Steve asked. "He never told you about capturing Zola?"

Trip shook his head. "I know he was part of the mission, but all he really talked about was the zip line from hell."

Steve gestured to a nearby table that was currently vacant and invited Trip to join him, pausing long enough to wait for Megan to seat herself before he sat down himself. "Gabe, Bucky and I took a zip line down to the train. The others stayed up on the mountain, monitoring communications. After Bucky…” he paused, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees as he looked at the floor.
Megan put her hand on his back. "That was the day we lost Bucky. I tried to reach him… watched the whole thing happen. After that, I wasn't much good for anything. While Bucky and I had been fighting the guards, Gabe had gotten to the engineer and stopped the train. He took Zola into custody and got the job done."

Steve shook his head, a shudder running down his spine. "Most of what happened after the train stopped is a haze, but Gabe never left my side until I was back in the base and called in for the debrief. He was upset, too, but he stepped up and took charge. I think he was the one who told the other Howlers what had happened." Steve looked up, holding Trip's gaze with his 'Captain America is giving orders' face. "There's no way to repay what he did, but if you ever need anything, you call me."

"Yes, sir."

"Give me your phone," Steve said, holding out his hand.

Trip unlocked it and mutely handed it over, watching in awe as Steve quickly added his name and number to the contacts list.

"What's your number?" Steve asked.

Trip gaped a moment, then quickly rattled it off, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Steve smiled. "Mine's upstairs. I'll remember the number." Steve leaned forward again, his eyes once more on the floor. "Gabe was a good man," he said softly.

Trip looked to Megan for guidance, hoping he dared asked a question. She nodded her encouragement. "Do you know what Gramps meant when he said, 'Ask 'em to dance'? Growing up, anytime the situation got ugly, Gramps' advice was to 'Ask 'em to dance.' He'd grin, but he never explained it."

The smile that spread across Steve's face was answer enough.

"Do you know what this means?" Steve asked as he sat up straight. He made a twisting motion with his wrist while waving his first two fingers back and forth as he held his hand by his head.

"Need to change tactics," Trip said. "It's part of the standard repertoire of close combat signals S.H.I.E.L.D. agents use in the field."

"I know. And that's your answer."

"Steve, don't be a tease," Megan chided, elbowing him gently. "What's the rest of the story?"

"Need to get one of my sketchbooks." he said softly, leaving Megan with Trip.

"He almost never talks about the day Bucky died," Megan shared in a voice too low for Steve to hear. "Take that as a huge complement."

Trip nodded, clearly still in shock at having a face to face conversation with Captain America.

Steve passed an open sketchbook to Trip as he sat down. In a departure from his unusual style, the drawing was rather crude, showing dancing figures without any details.

"With backup from about a dozen of the 107th we'd managed to break up a Hydra compound in northern Italy and got our hands on all sorts of intelligence. Philips gave us the evening off, and we
headed to the nearest bar. Some of the guys intended to find a brothel if they couldn't charm their way into bed. Others were like Gabe and just wanted to flirt a bit and enjoy a few dances. It was a chance to pretend life was normal and forget about the war for a few hours. Bucky had his eye on a blonde dame, but Gabe was being pestered by a brunette that was pushing for too much, especially when he had his eye on dancing with someone else. Gabe was trying to let her down easy, but they'd all had enough to drink that none of them were as suave as they thought they were being. In desperation, Gabe cut in on Bucky's dance, then kissed him full on the mouth. "Steve gestured to the drawing, and Megan realized he'd sketched Gabe and Bucky dancing.

"What did Bucky do?" Trip prodded.

Steve shook his head, grinning at the memory and indicated with his hand that Gabe should turn the page. In the same style, Megan could see Steve had captured Bucky's revenge. "Bucky took it as a dare, so he spun him around, dipped him, and kissed him with tongue." Steve grinned at the memory. "The whistles from the other guys were deafening. Gabe was barely upright before Bucky threw him over his shoulder and ran out. Bucky carried him a good quarter mile into the woods before he put him down, and Gabe was hollering the whole time about how he was going to get revenge. When I caught up to them, they were both laughing so hard they could barely stand." Steve turned the page in the book Trip held and looked wistfully at the drawing. Bucky was lying on his back on the ground, looking up at Gabe as he clutched his sides in laughter. Gabe was leaning against a tree, nearly doubled over, grinning broadly and laughing hard. Both men looked like giddy teenagers, not hardened soldiers. It was a precious moment of levity that clearly meant something precious to Steve.

"After that, 'Ask him to dance,' was code for switching the rules in a fight and we developed a hand signal for it. Eventually, we worked so well together someone would signal "dance" with a few other hand signals and we'd know how we were to change tactics. Colonel Philips got fed up with the prank wars those two waged, but he never put any teeth behind his efforts to stop it. The team got the job done, and none of the pranking interfered with our work, so while he grumbled and threatened, nothing ever came of it. Gabe, Bucky, and Morita were the worst of the lot, no question."

"Why didn't you sketch them like you normally would?" Megan asked softly, wondering at the crudity of the drawings.

"I didn't want to provide evidence in case someone tried to blue ticket them and send them home."

She frowned. "Blue ticket?"

"Discharge for being homosexual. If you had a blue discharge, you couldn't get work back home," Steve explained softly.

Trip nodded. "If you look at the numbers, there was an unusually high percentage of blue discharges given to blacks. He gazed fondly at the drawing of Gabe and Bucky laughing. "Gramps said you and Sargent Barnes always made sure he and Morita were front and center in any of the group photos you had to pose for. It meant a lot to him."

Steve shrugged. "They were part of the team.

Megan looked between them. "What am I missing?"

Steve smiled sadly at her. "If we didn't put them in the center, it was too easy for them to be cropped out of the shots. We all did our best to make that impossible for narrow-minded newspaper editors back home. If you look at the photos, you'll see we all made a point to put our arm over
Gabe and Morita's shoulders when the cameras were around and get them between me and Bucky as much as we could. It became another game of how to make it impossible for the editors to crop them out. We had to be careful anytime photographers tried to put us into two rows, too, since that made it easier to crop their row out." He looked down at the sketch of Bucky and Gabe laughing. Megan could tell he was reliving the moment in terrible detail. The brief moment of levity had been hard-earned.

"He looks so young. It's hard for me to think of him like that," Trip said, apparently sensing that Steve's mind had wandered off.

"We all were. It's hard for me to think of him as a grandfather." He swallowed hard. "I miss them."

"You were a family," Trip said softly.

Steve nodded. "Only one I had."

"They felt that way, too, you know." Trip told him as he stood up. It seemed to Megan that Trip had sensed Steve's mood heading in the direction of brooding and had decided to intercept him before he traveled too far down that road. "Come on. It's about damn time you met my parents."

Steve nodded and stood up to follow, handing the sketch book back to Megan for her to return to its case.

"Gram and Gramps named my mom Stephanie," Trip said over his shoulder as he led Steve away. "Thankfully, none of the Howler kids got saddled with Buchanan, but there's a distinct trend for president's names as middle names."

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A/N: Steve's conversation with Greg appears in Ballast.

As always, thank you for the notes, reviews, and sticking with me in this journey. While I'd continue to write it just for me, it warms my heart to know that this hobby of mine is something others enjoy.
Megan saw Steve slip from the room after talking to Peggy, having moved on from his conversation with Trip. Clearly, something had triggered him. As much as she wanted to go after him, she knew he’d call for her if he needed company. In the meantime, she decided to see if she could get more U.S.O. stories out of Annie.

"...what happened to her?" Megan over heard the tail end of the question as one of the women pointed to a photograph in the memory book they were pouring over.

"She died eight years ago. Heart attack, if I remember right."

"Mind if I join you?" she asked the ladies Annie was sitting with.

"Not at all," Annie said with a smile. "Pull up a chair. Where is the man of the hour?"

Megan sat down, glad to be off her feet. Even with comfortable shoes, her feet were starting to hurt after so much standing. "He's taking a break for a bit. I saw him slip out a moment ago."

"This weekend must be a bit overwhelming for him," Annie said. "He never liked being the center of attention when we were on tour."

"I don't think he minds that with all of you, but I know he was shocked by how many people are here. And seeing everyone has made the lost years more real."

"He has a lot to grieve for and that loss will always be with him," Annie said as she studied Megan carefully. "But he's also very happy. It's clear to me that you mean the world to him."

"It's mutual."

"Did you really meet him at lunch?"

Megan nodded and told Annie of how she'd first approached Steve in the cafeteria, as he sat alone in a sea of people. "My life has changed so much since I met him back in March, but I wouldn't change it for anything."

Annie gave her a knowing look and lowered her voice. "Is he the one?"

Megan nodded, absently biting her lower lip as she smiled shyly.

"I'm glad. He's so much more confident than when I last saw him."

"He's been through a lot. There are days when I honestly don't know how he bears it."

Annie smiled and covered Megan's hand with hers. "The same way we all do." Her gaze grew distant. "Looking back, I think the U.S.O tour was good for him."

"What do you mean?"

"It gave him time to get used to his new body. I swear, he was like a gangly colt when he first joined us on tour. He grew something like ten inches virtually overnight and still moved like he..."
was smaller and had the bruises to prove it. The dance and acting instructors initially despaired about Steve learning to walk without tripping over his own feet, much less performing on stage. The more he concentrated, the worse it got. What they didn't account for was Steve's determination. He worked his hardest at every task they gave him even though the last thing he wanted to do was perform on stage selling war bonds. Milly wasn't easily impressed, but she saw Steve floundering and decided to step in."

"He told me," Megan said blandly, unsure of how much Beverly knew.

"Don't worry about me, honey," Beverly said with a wicked grin. "Though I'll admit to being a bit jealous of anyone who gets themselves a taste of that." As she said the last bit, she looked knowingly at Annie and then winked at Megan. "But it's clear from the way he looks at you that you're his North Star. Annie, get back to the story. It's a good one."

Reassured, Megan nodded to indicate her continued interest. It wasn't like their companions knew nothing; they'd been there when Steve joined the tour and endured the rapid change in show program as he was incorporated in the performance.

"He broke my heart, actually. It was clear he was painfully shy and unused to getting attention from anyone. It was just a rumor, at that point, that he'd been transformed in some exotic science experiment, but once he confirmed it later, it certainly fit with the fellow who reported for rehearsal. He tried his hardest to follow the director's orders, but he kept tripping over his own feet and stammering his lines. They finally gave him a prop shield with his lines taped inside it so he didn't have to remember them along with everything else."

Annie continued, "He was always polite, but stayed to himself. It was like he was surprised anyone wanted to even talk to him. During breaks, he'd sometimes go sit in a corner and sketch, but he never invited company, you know?"

Megan nodded, knowing too well how introverts like Steve and herself were sometimes perceived as aloof and unapproachable when they were simply overwhelmed and drained.

"Milly watched him for a few days, but it was pretty obvious he wasn't going to try anything. He seemed to recognize her leadership in the group and respected it. That won her over more than anything, I think."

"He was raised by a single mom," Megan said softly. "No one had to convince him of the value of a woman."

"That's part of what makes him the Steve we know." Annie said. "Anyways, we'd had some problems in a few towns when we tried to go out after the shows. We didn't have a lot of time, in most cities, but when we had a chance, we liked to visit the bars, especially the ones where we didn't have to hide. Even in groups, we sometimes ran in to trouble and the higher-ups would have fired us all if we ever got caught in a raid. Milly had the idea of getting Steve to be our chaperone. She figured we'd be safer on the streets and he'd be our alibi that we weren't going to any unorthodox places."

"The spotless, conservative of Captain America was employed for the first time," Megan added, rolling her eyes. She absently noticed the two other U.S.O. performers get up and leave her alone with Annie and Beverly and a part of her wondered if they were bored by the story.

"Steve found it funny, too. When he told us where he'd grown in up Brooklyn and the people he'd known there, it was pretty clear he didn't care one bit about labels. He and Bucky had even gone to a few drag queen shows. Steve said they enjoyed watching live performances as well as going to
the movies."

Annie leaned back in her chair and sighed. "I miss those days. We were so carefree, though we didn't think so at the time. Anyway, Milly had a soft spot for Steve. We all did, I think. But she had a way of looking at you and really seeing you, not just the surface stuff. And she decided it was up to the two of us to help him adjust to his role on the tour. Once we got to know him, and found out what the serum had really done, it became Milly's mission to get him comfortable with himself. We'd sneak into his hotel room after curfew and teach him basic ballet."

"I've never knew ballet was the treatment for testosterone poisoning."

Annie and Beverly both burst out in laughter.

"You're terrible!" Beverly said as she fought to catch her breath.

"I was serious!" Annie said in mock outrage. "Do you have any idea how many hotel doorknobs Steve bent using them as a barre as we tried to help him learn better balance and control?"

Megan smiled. "I believe you."

"Yes, Milly addressed that ailment as well. It was obvious he hadn't the first clue about how to talk to a woman, much less seduce one. Half the girls on tour were eager to bed him, but Milly was different. She didn't want to see him used and cast aside like that. Looking back, I think she was probably bi, but we never talked about it. She knew that she could get the others to back off, so she did."

"Steve told me she offered him a deal packaged as a favor to her," Megan said.

Annie nodded. "That was Milly, through and through. She knew he'd refuse anything that smacked of charity. He didn't need pity, he needed friends. Real friends he could be honest with. She and I tried to be that for him, and the others followed Millie's lead. Once he wasn't a target for their seduction ploys, he started to relax. In turn, we got to know Steve and he became a full member of the team. It wasn't long before he was helping with makeup, zipping costumes, and braiding hair."

"I can see that," Beverly said. "When he showed those drawings, it was obvious you were comfortable backstage together.

"Know what else?" Annie said, lowering her voice to a whisper and leaning forward. "When Steve first showed up for their first—" she hesitated, looking for the right word. "—dalliance, as it were, he came with a sketchbook and spent nearly an hour drawing Milly before she persuaded him to even kiss her. Poor boy. Milly told me later that he was appalled by anything that smacked of a business transaction. It took nearly two months before she didn't have to actively haul him into her bed." She winked. "Funny how he was never once late for their agreed on meeting times."

Beverly turned to Megan. "I should hope he's gotten past that by now."

Megan felt a blush creep across her cheeks, "Well, after Milly died, he decided to go back to his Catholic roots."

Both women gaped at her. "Honey, I can't begin to tell you how unfair that is. Do you want me to talk to him?" Annie offered.

Megan shook her head. "We've found a workable compromise for now." After taking another drink of water, she added in a voice so soft she could barely hear herself, "Before Steve, I was in an abusive relationship. We've both got some stuff we're working through, but we're in a good place."
"Be proud of yourself for getting out, Megan." Beverly said, covering her hand with her own. "I lost a friend to her abusive partner. She couldn't see a way out until it was too late. It takes a lot of courage to stand up like that and take care of yourself."

"Thank you." She ducked her head. "I can't believe I'm even telling you any of this."

"You know that we won't betray your trust because I've kept Steve's secrets for longer than you've been alive," Annie reassured her. "I'll tell you something else. That man will never deliberately hurt you. That's not to say he won't cause you pain, because he's a stubborn, hot-tempered fool who usually dives in before checking the temperature. It's only after the fact he'll realize his initial reaction wasn't necessarily the best way forward. But he also tries to learn from his mistakes and he'll go to the ends of the Earth to take care of the people he loves. Rescuing Bucky like he did is proof enough of that. He's more than worth the heartache he'll bring you, I promise."

"I think so, too," Megan whispered, wiping a tear from her eye. "I think so, too."

Annie studied her for a long moment, then asked, "How is he, really? I can't decide if he's really more settled or just better at burying his angst."

"He's…. better. He really did lose his life when he went into the ice. Most people forget that. He tried to just move on, bury himself in work with S.H.I.E.L.D., and pretend he was fine. I finally figured out he wasn't letting himself grieve his losses."

Beverly nodded in sympathy, "Captain America is supposed to be above all that. I can't imagine the pressure living up to that image has put on him."

"Steve feels things deeply, though," Annie continued. "What made you decide to plan this gathering?"

Megan shrugged a shoulder. "I tried to imagine what I'd want if I were in his shoes, and I got the idea of trying to track down someone in Bucky's family to see if they had any pictures of Steve or Bucky they were willing to let me copy and give to Steve. I found Rebecca and she gave me the box of Steve's belongings Peggy had sent to Bucky's family after his plane went down since she knew they were essentially the only family Steve had. Turns out, Steve had also left a box of family keepsakes and old sketchbooks with Mrs. Barnes before he shipped out. When I saw his reaction to getting his belongings back, I got the idea of tracking down any survivors from his unit and seeing if I could arrange a small get together. I didn't want the press to get involved, so I asked a Stark Industries employee I knew if they had any suggestions on how to keep the gathering private. He connected me to Pepper Potts and things exploded out of control from there." Megan looked ruefully around the room. "Here we are. It's better than anything I could have imagined and I can see a change in Steve already. He's…"

"More at ease," Annie supplied. "Grounded, even."

Megan nodded. "I think he's discovered that while his losses are significant, he didn't lose everything after all."

"How many embarrassing stories have been told at my expense?" Steve asked as he pulled a chair up to the table where the trio was sitting. In his hands he had several of what looked like knitting needles but were pointed on both ends, as well as skeins of yellow and red yarn."

"I wasn't embarrassed by any of it," Beverly said with an impish grin.

"Me either," Annie said before she kissed Beverly's hand and winked at Megan.
"What are you doing?" Megan asked as Steve laid out his supplies.

"Tony seemed skeptical that I can actually knit. I figured a pair of socks will prove him wrong. It doesn't take that long."

"You know he'll wear them every day until they have holes in them, then hand them back and complain that the workmanship was poor and that's why they didn't last long."

"Which is why I'll have another set ready by then," he said as he smiled at her. "I'm better at speaking Tony than I used to be." With a few deft moves, he had yarn cast on to the needles and set to work. He barely looked down as he resumed their earlier conversation, "Now about those embarrassing stories. How much damage control do I need to do? Will it work if I just tell you everything Annie said is a lie?"

"You're going to throw Annie under the bus to spare your ego?" Megan teased. She saw that Beverly and Annie were both grinning at the exchange.

"Well, if the situation—"

Rebecca cut him off. "Steven Grant Rogers, you have some explaining to do," she scolded as she strode over to Megan's side faster than one expected her frail legs to manage. She picked up Megan's left hand and shook her finger at Steve, "What's it going to take for you to say those four words?"

Megan met Steve's eyes and nodded slightly in answer to the question he'd asked with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"Rebecca—"

"Don't you Rebecca me and flash those baby blues like it gets you off the hook."

"Rebecca," Megan said softly, fingering her pendant and holding it up for Rebecca to see. "We've been trying to keep this out of the news. I already had to give up my apartment due to the paparazzi. We're not going to make an announcement until after the wedding."

"Besides," Steve said, smiling at Rebecca's stunned reaction, "Megan works in the lab and the gloves she wears would just get torn up by a diamond ring."

"You're a sneaky cad. You can't keep that sort of news from your family," she said before she put two fingers in her mouth and whistled sharply. The room fell silent as everyone turned in their direction, curious about the disruption. Rebecca didn't need the microphones to carry her voice as she announced, "I just found out these two have been holding out on us. Every time I see Steve, I keep telling him to buy her a ring… It turns out, they're already engaged!" She turned back to the couple, who were now standing arm in arm beside her. "When's the date?"

"New Year's Eve," Steve said, looking uncomfortable. "Been trying to keep the media from finding out."

"Which is why we're keeping it small, my immediate family and the Avengers only," Megan added. "No offense."

The room erupted in applause. When the noise, including a lot of wolf whistles, finally died down, Tony stood up and said loudly "Offense taken!"

"Tony, you're going to be there—" Steve said only to be cut off.
"We're in Stark Tower and we don't do small here. I already checked and the church in Brooklyn is big enough to hold this motley crew. The motel rooms for everyone who is here are already booked so we just need to coordinate flights for anyone who's coming. I'm paying, so you don't need to be feeling guilty about anyone's travel expenses, Cap. There are benefits to being a billionaire; this is one of them. Think of it as a wedding present."

The room erupted into applause again as Megan gave Tony a fierce hug. Reeling from the contact, Tony allowed a stunned Steve to shake his hand. "Okay, enough with the feelings. Don't you have more scandalous stories to tell us? My lord, are those knitting needles? You're actually knitting? You know in this new century; we have machines that do that for us… those are my colors. Are you making me something? Do I need to take back your wedding present? Sit your butt back down and go back to entertaining us."

Laughing to himself, Steve took his knitting supplies back to his earlier seat at the document camera and resumed sharing his drawings. The soft click of steel needles hitting each other was a soft percussion soundtrack.

They had just finished lunch when Natasha, in full Black widow uniform strode in to the room, tablet in hand, and headed straight for Steve. Megan's heart fell and the look on Steve's face showed his own devastation at being interrupted with a mission. Megan was just about to go call Director Fury and yell at him when a video started to play on all of the screens.

There was a photograph of Pepper, Tony, Bruce, and Happy sitting in a conference room holding up a handwritten sign that said "Help!"

Soon after, a masked Hawkeye, bearing the words "Bad Guy" across his forehead," appeared on the screen. "Pretend I just gave you the stupid lecture on how awesome I am and laid out my detailed plans for taking over the universe. You've heard it all before, Cap, so we'll skip to the important stuff. I have two so-called geniuses and two civilians locked in a conference room. Excuse me, I mean cell. You have two point five hours. After that, one cent in an O gets destroyed every fifteen minutes." The screen then showed a penny resting inside a dark chocolate oval. "Tony, that pun about innocents is terrible," Clint said as he broke character. "Anyway the clock starts now."

Natasha handed Steve a tablet as he stood up. "I have your briefing notes, Captain. I'll summarize on our way to the locker room."

By now, Steve was grinning with delight. He looked at Megan questioningly during the video, but she'd been just as surprised as the rest of them. "Not me," she murmured. "This is all Tony and the gang."

"Heaven help us, then," Steve answered, laughing along with everyone else in the room.

"Captain? We're on the clock," Natasha said seriously, her eyebrow arched in feigned disapproval.

"Right," Steve said, retrieving his shield from where is was hanging in the staged photograph area. "Thor?"

At the command, Thor got up, giving Steve a single nod to indicate he was ready. The three Avengers headed for the closest door. Once there, Steve paused and turned to scan the room. "Agent Triplett? We could use your help, too."

Trip sat stunned for a moment, then leapt to his feet with a hearty, "Hell, yeah!" before he ran to join them.
For an excellent read about how Steve might have experienced his introduction to the world of theater on the U.S.O. tour, see this work on this site: The Show Must Go On by Pargoletta. The story does a wonderful job of explaining how Steve learned to use his new body. In the movie, he easily ran and swam after Erskine was killed. I imagine that the more he concentrated, the more he messed up and misjudged distances. That's my head cannon any way. :-)

Chapter End Notes
Expecting Bridezilla?

Chapter Notes

I owe a huge thank you to Holsvick, who has not only agreed to take this monster on as a beta reader, and me on as a friend! I’m truly blessed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the Avengers and Trip left the room, Jarvis took over the presentation. “If I may, I will explain how the afternoon will proceed. My name is Jarvis and I provide communications support to the team. All guests aged four to eighteen should immediately report to the Junior Avengers’ locker rooms to obtain their gear and mission assignments.”

Jarvis paused and waited for the noise to abate. Megan smiled as she saw several parents and grandparents giving high fives and nods of encouragement as the youths stormed out of the banquet hall and headed en masse for the elevators. On the screens, the security cameras showed similar reactions from the kids who had been taking advantage of the alternate activities elsewhere in the tower.

“As I was saying, the elevators are programmed to deliver the Junior Avengers to the locker rooms. They have been assigned to teams and will be briefed on their mission by Captain Rogers.

“All of the adults, including the Bad Guy and his four prisoners, are wearing standard field communicators. The Junior Avengers will not be able to hear their conversation, but it will be broadcast in this room for your amusement. You may be surprised to discover how talkative they actually are on a mission, no matter how often Captain Rogers asks for minimal chatter.”

Jarvis continued, “The Junior Avengers have been divided into four teams in order to balance out their ages and skills. Their individual profiles have been provided to the adult team leaders in their briefing packets while the Junior Avengers will be provided with a general list of tasks they will be asked to complete. They have thirty minutes to study the files and suit up. As adult team leaders, Captain America, Thor, Black Widow, and Agent Triplett will provide logistical support and leadership only. They are forbidden to act on their own if the four prisoners and numerous Cents in an O are to be successfully rescued, although they are permitted to complete some of the tasks assigned to them by the Junior Avengers. Each team is responsible for the rescue of one prisoner color coded as follows: Red: Tony Stark, Gold: Pepper Potts, Blue: Happy Hogan, Red; Bruce Banner, Green.” The image switched to show a mannequin wearing black stretch pants and a colored shirt with the word “junior” embroidered beneath the standard Avenger’s on the left breast. As the mannequin rotated to show the back where the Junior Avenger’s first name was embroidered on the back.

“Our Bad Guy is an expert marksman and will be firing balloons loaded with yellow paint using a modified, tethered arrow. Two direct hits to the torso will eliminate that Junior Avenger from play. A subset of the balloons have been modified with devices that will randomly send them askew so as to provide the Junior Avengers a reasonable chance of success. If any adult is hit twice, they will only be permitted to aid in matters of safety and are effectively eliminated from all other participation.

“Lastly, it is important to note that this is truly a team effort. Every single Junior Avenger will be
asked to perform or aid in a task that is best suited to their abilities and talents. The teams are not in competition with each other and there is no reward for completing tasks faster than another group. To rescue their assigned prisoner, the team must earn ten tokens from a list of physical challenge and ten from a list of mental challenges. Some tasks, such as obstacle courses, may be completed by multiple team members with each one of them earning a token towards their goal. Individuals and teams will continue to attempt each task until they are successful. Each team will be highlighted on a different screen and you are encouraged to move about this room to follow the progress of your family members.

“The recordings of this event, including the video of each team and adult leader conversations, will be distributed to each of you at the end of the weekend on DVD.”

By now, the cameras were showing the three Avengers and Trip in full uniform standing in front of a holoscreen. Trip was dressed in standard SHIELD tactical gear, minus his firearm.

“How were the agents assigned to the teams?” Steve asked as the four looked at the lists of names. His voice was broadcast over the banquet hall’s speakers. Megan could tell he had switched completely to Captain America mode with his focus on his mission.

“Age, skill sets, familial relationships,” Natasha explained, touching something that caused different names to flash as she spoke. She, too, was all business. “We broke some siblings up to minimize rivalries, kept others together to boost their confidence, and then tried to get a reasonable balance of ages. That gives us between twenty-seven and twenty-nine agents per team, so we’ll need to deputize some of them. The four of us will rotate through all of the groups as needed. We also have some S.I staff providing logistic support so the Junior Avengers aren’t kept waiting around for help with their gear.”

“What sort of gear are they going to need?” Trip spoke up, grinning like a kid though it was obvious he was studying the lists intently.

“musical instruments, calculators, climbing gear, lego bricks, safety harnesses, and SCUBA tanks, to name a few,” Natasha answered blandly.

“Lego bricks?” Thor questioned, looking to Natasha for an explanation.

“Lego bricks,” she said, reaching into a pocket of her utility belt and handing over a four block sample. Some consider them to be a toy.”

“Only people who’ve never used them to build a robot,” Tony said. The banquet hall screens switched to a split screen view to show the conference room where he was “imprisoned” with Peppy, Bruce, and Happy. “Besides, we’re licensed characters in some of the sets. It’s only fair we use Lego bricks in some of the challenges.” He rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Just wait until you see what they can do with Mindstorm kits and EV3 sensors!”

Steve nodded absently. “Thor, how about you start in the gym with the red team? They can work on the obstacle courses, sparring with the security team, and complete the math and geometry puzzles. Widow you have the green team in the third floor conference room where the Lego challenges are set up. I suggest having anyone interested in the music, math, and geometry tasks finish those at the same time. Trip, you’re S.C.U.B.A. certified, so you and I can start with the blue and gold teams in the pool. Given the number of J.A.’s who will be deep diving for tokens and working on the obstacle courses, it’s better if we’re on hand to get them to the surface as needed. They may not all pace themselves appropriately in their excitement. I’m sure Hawkeye will be on the move between sites, so provide updates. We’ll rotate the teams between the three sites and finish with Thor taking individuals who choose the wind study challenge to the roof while Trip...
takes the archery team to the target range. Widow and I work with the gymnasts over the pool area where we’ll reconvene for a debrief. Questions?”

“You’re going to put them through a debrief?” Trip asked, looking at Steve in surprise.

“It’s how every mission ends, though I think we can skip giving them a stack of forms,” Steve answered with a smile.

“The best part of being a villain is we get to skip the paperwork!” Clint teased. “While you’re sweating and coaching, I plan to eat my way through the “innocents.” The kitchen crew outdid themselves and used the most amazing chocolate you’ll find this side of the Atlantic. Ask me how I know this!”

Steve finally slipped out of command mode for a moment, which warmed Megan’s heart to see. “Just how long have you all been planning this?”

“Awhile,” Bruce answered. “It’s been a fun diversion from some of my other research projects.”

“Not to mention we knew our younger guests, and Tony, were not going to much enjoy an entire weekend of sitting around listening to adults talk,” Pepper added.

Tony agreed, “Talk is boring. It’s much more fun to build stuff and smash stuff. Right Bruce?”

Bruce gave Steve a long suffering look via the cameras, making everyone laugh.

“Okay then,” Steve said, “The first thing we need to do is explain the mission to the JA’s and get them to assign team leaders who will help each group decide which individuals will tackle each task. Jarvis, have the Junior Avengers assemble in the main gym. We’ll go over their mission briefing and get this started.”

“As you wish Captain,” Jarvis said. His announcement to that effect came over the speakers while he addressed her via the com in her ear. “Megan, the dresses you requested to try are ready for you upstairs. This is a good time since your guests are all entertained and Captain Rogers will be otherwise occupied,”

Megan nodded once, then turned to Annie and Beverly. “Do you two want to join me upstairs for a bit for a secondary mission for my weekend? I’ll explain on the way, if you’re interested.”

Annie and Beverly looked at each other, then back to Megan. “We’d love to. Lead the way.”

The trio slipped from the room and met Kathy, discretely called away from the banquet hall by an S.I. staffer, at the elevators. Once introductions were made, Megan explained, “Pepper arranged for one of her favorite designers to send some wedding dresses over for me to try so the press remains clueless. I’m hoping that with the photos I already sent her showing my tastes, I’ll find my dress today.”

“We’re helping you pick your dress?” Annie whispered in stunned disbelief.

“I can’t think of anyone better, can you?”

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Pepper was waiting for them when the elevator doors opened. “Jarvis said you brought some friends with you,” Pepper said warmly to Megan as she reached past her to introduce herself. “Pepper Potts, lovely to meet you both, though we didn’t get to chat last night.”

“Likewise,” Annie said, taking Pepper’s hand. “I’m Annie and this is my wife Beverly.”

“Do you want anything to drink?” Pepper asked, gesturing to the table nearby where there was a spread of finger foods and beverages.”

“No thank you,” Kathy murmured, eying the racks of clothing. “Those don’t look like wedding gowns.” She turned to Megan. “You’re going with something non-traditional?”

“Hardly,” Pepper cut in. “Those are potential mother of the bride gowns for you. Since we have you hear, it makes sense to get your outfit picked out, too. The wedding dresses are all over there.”

Megan and Kathy turned as one to the other side of the room where three large racks held more potential wedding gowns than Megan knew how to choose from. Beside the racks were standing room dividers to permit the women to change their outfits in privacy.

Unfazed, Pepper continued. “Imani and Dhyana work for the designer I called. I’m not saying who because you’ll just raise a fuss. I’m paying for the dresses, so you don’t need to even think about budgets. Nothing here has a pricetag on it anyway and Imani and Dhyana won’t tell you no matter how much you beg. If either of you can’t find something you like here, speak up and we’ll get more samples brought over from the store.”

“Pepper—”

Annie cut Megan off immediately from where she and Beverly were sitting on a sofa, “You and Steve are two peas in a pod if ever I saw them. You’ll crawl on broken glass for someone else, but get your hackles up if someone tries to do something nice for you. Looking at your mother, you come by that honestly. The only words I want to hear from either of you are ‘thank you’ and ‘I’ll try that dress next.’ Capiche?

“But—” Kathy started to murmur, looking helplessly at Megan.

“You take the mom, Bev. I’ll wrangle the daughter,” Annie said, patting Beverly’s knee before she got to her feet. “Pepper, sit down and rest for once this weekend. I’ve seen enough of Tony to know you have your hands full. We’ve got this.”

“Tony is already plotting a way to hire you after last evening.” Pepper said, sitting down on the sofa the women had vacated. “You made an impression.”

Annie snorted in amusement. “He’s a few decades too late for that. We are basking in the quiet joys of retirement. Besides, I don’t see Stark Industries having a need for poker players on the payroll.” She pulled one of the dresses off the rack and handed it to Megan. “Try this one first. It has a sweetheart neckline that will frame your pendant perfectly.”

Megan stood there, holding the dress awkwardly, while she watched Beverly pick a dress for her mother to try.

“Kathy, didn’t you ever teach your daughter that accepting a gift graciously is itself a gift?” Beverly asked.

“Of course. But, I also…. oh.”
Megan smiled as Kathy realized she’d walked right into the trap Beverly had set.

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“This is the one,” Megan said as she looked at her reflection in the trio of mirrors before her. The dress fit her perfectly, and it already felt like it was hers.

“It’s the only one you’ve tried on, honey.” Kathy protested from behind the screen where she was changing clothes.

“I don’t care. This is the one. I’ll try on every other dress if you want me to, but this is the one I want.” She looked at Annie, a question in her eyes.

“I agree. It suits you.”

The dress was simple yet elegant. The fabric was a plain white satin that flowed into a chapel length train embellished with battenburg lace. Short sleeves and the sweetheart neckline of the basque waist flattered her figure while the lack of other adornments paid homage to the war years Steve had lived through.

“Here, try this with it,” Beverly said as she plucked a veil off of a rack Megan hadn’t noticed and fixed the small metal comb to her head and arranged the fingertip length veil over her shoulders. “What do you think?”

The veil, like the dress, was understated in a way that drew attention to the details. The veil itself was made of a finely woven tulle and had a beaded edge that gradually expanded to a more intricately designed pattern of crystals as it’s greatest length.

“It’s perfect,” Pepper said softly.

Kathy nodded, wiping a tear from her eye as she came to stand beside her daughter. “I suppose it’s high time you had something fall into place without any drama,” she said as she met Megan’s eyes in the mirror. “Though you do know how to take all of the fun out of the afternoon.”

Her twinkling eyes assured Megan her mother was joking. “Really?” she teased back. “You haven’t been looking at the screen then.”

They all turned and saw Steve, wearing his dark blue stealth uniform, bending down in the waist deep water and hoisting a small boy to his shoulders before carrying him to the edge of the pool. Once there, Steve started rubbing the boy’s calf, perhaps massaging a leg cramp.

“Someone needs to get him a pair of swim trunks” Beverly said, winking at Megan for good measure. “It’s a crime that he’s wearing a uniform, though that isn’t one I’ve seen before.”

“It’s his favorite,” Megan murmured, watching Steve take care of the boy. “He wears it on stealth missions for S.H.I.E.L.D. And he has a real swimsuit with him. He wore it when he took my nephews swimming this morning.

“He’s still body shy?” Annie murmured, mostly to herself, though Megan overheard her and nodded.
Jarvis chose that moment to explain what was happening. “The Junior Avengers in the pool are completing an obstacle course,” he said. “Master Thomas was complaining of severe leg pain so Captain Rogers removed him from the pool for his own safety. Agent Triplett is currently monitoring the older participants from his position at the bottom of the deep area of the pool. To date, only two tokens have been retrieved from the twelve-foot dive challenge.” The image on the screen divided into half, and now showed Trip, scuba tank strapped to his back, giving an enthusiastic thumbs up to a teen who was doing her best to reach the bottom.

Annie studied the dress Kathy was wearing. “Kathy, what do you think?”

Everyone shook their heads in unison. “Not the right one for me,” Kathy said, stating the obvious.

“I think it’s the neckline that isn’t flattering on you,” Pepper said from her spot on the couch.

Dhyana pulled a different gown from the rack. “Perhaps this will suit you better.

While Kathy changed, Megan stole another glance at the monitors. Steve was back in the pool, supervising the shallow water obstacle course that had kids retrieving rings from the bottom of the four foot section, swimming underwater for a set distance, and ending in a makeshift nine hole game of underwater golf. Par plus twenty was the maximum score to earn a token and so far, only one ten-year-old had succeeded. “Is that Thomas?” she asked Jarvis quietly.

“Indeed it is. He’s quite the accomplished underwater golfer. Both Haweye and Captain Roger have made comments about his use of geometry to score below par. There is talk about having him try his hand at a pool table just to see what he does.”

“Is Tony already making a position for him in the company?”

“No, only because Ms. Potts forbade any such actions. However, Sir has asked me to evaluate the STEM programs at Master Thomas’ school and make an anonymous donation to the robotics program. In addition, a pallet of art supplies has been ordered and will arrive late next week.”

“I’ve convinced Tony that he needs to support the arts as well as the sciences,” Pepper said softly. “He tends to want to fund future engineers like himself, which is understandable. The breakthrough came when I reminded him of Steve’s experience growing up. His sketch pad let him excel despite his numerous illnesses. Good schools always have well developed arts programs by definition.” She rubbed her hands together, almost without thought. “The best part about having money is having the freedom to spend it in ways that make a difference. Jarvis, please pick a needy school at random and have a matching pallet delivered to the art department there.”

“As you wish, Ms. Potts.”

“Who exactly is Jarvis?” Beverly asked as Kathy came out from behind the screen.

“He’s part of my administrative team here in the tower. He prefers to use the intercoms for communication,” Pepper said as Kathy slowly turned in a circle for their feedback.

“I like the lines overall,” Annie said, tilting her head ever so slightly. “But it’s not quite right.”

“We should remove the gathers under the bustline to make it more flattering on your figure,” Dhyana said. The floor length velvet dress had simple lines: a simple v-neckline, long mesh sleeves, and a cut that skimmed over Kathy’s curves without clinging. “Instead of the gathers, we’ll adjust the cut of the wrap, ensuring you have enough fabric in the skirt to walk comfortably. The overlap won’t open above the knee. We can make a complimentary jacket to wear over it.” As she spoke, Dhyana adjusted the fabric of the skirt with her hands, showing how the fabric overlay
would end at Kathy’s hip rather than her midline.”

“With that small aleration, I’d say it’s perfect, Mom.”

“Can we shorten the plunge,” Kathy asked, pinching the sides of the v together with her fingers to emulate what she was comfortable with.

“Certainly,” Dhyana said, marking the spot with some dressmaker’s chalk before measuring the distance and noting the alteration in a small notebook she’d pulled from thin air.

“I like it,” Pepper said, nodding as Kathy turned around again. “It’s very flattering and elegant.”

“Best of all, Mom, you can wear it again for other occasions.”

“This was far too easy,” Kathy said, shaking her head. “Isn’t this supposed to take longer?”

“Confident women know what they like,” Dhyana said softly before turning to Megan. “Have you selected a color palette yet?”

“Purple and green.”

“Megan, honey, those don’t fit at all with the season. Coming off of Christmas and starting the New Year, tradition calls for winter and holiday themed colors.”

“Purple and green are our favorite colors, Mom. Neither of us give two hoots about what the masses are going to say. I’m sure there will be outrage in some corners that Steve is wearing a tux rather than his Cap uniform. Others will be annoyed we’re not using red, white, and blue for the color scheme. I’m marrying Steve, not a propaganda icon. His tour with the U.S.O. is over. As far as I’m concerned, if he wants to wear orange glitter and duct tape overalls, that’s his choice.”

Dhyana’s eyes widened as she met Imani.’s equally stunned gaze. “That sounds… horrifying.”

“Makes purple and green sound just fine, though, doesn’t it?” Megan said with a wink.

“I agree with Megan on this one,” Beverly said, finally speaking up. “This is a day for the two of you celebrate your union. You should make choices that fit with who you are. All traditions have beginnings. Given the publicity you’ll receive afterward, you may be starting a new one.”

“Would a dark green velvet be okay with you then?” Kathy asked, looking to Megan.

“If that’s the shade you want, sure.” She shrugged and looked around at everyone as the gazed at her with differing levels of surprise. “What? If you’re waiting for bridezilla, please prepare for disappointment.”

“Have you thought about shoes?” Pepper asked, changing the subject.

“I’m wearing ballet flats. Heels hurt.”

“What about your attendants?” Pepper prodded.

“She should wear shoes. Standing barefoot that time of year leads to cold toes and that’s never any fun. I’ll talk to her. First I have to make sure she’s willing to participate. I’ve been a bit preoccupied with this weekend and haven’t asked her yet.”

“Let me know when you’re ready and we’ll have Dhyana and Imani bring dresses for her to try, too,” Pepper offered.
“Okay, but she has such impeccable taste I may just tell her to surprise me.”

Annie laughed softly to herself and shook her head. “You’re something else, Megan.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for it taking so long for me to update this. Real Life gets all the blame. Add in a flare-up of a chronic health condition and a dash of frustration over a job hunt, the start of a new stressful school year for the youngest kiddo… I’m happy to still be standing at this point! I promise I continue to work on the story and WILL finish it. I already have a sequel in the works. So while it may take time to get there, I promise to keep posting updates as I finish them.

Hugs and many thanks to all of you who have commented, subscribed, and sent messages of inquiry. Even the shortest of notes can be a bright spot on a grey, rainy day.

Edited to add: pictures of Megan's dress (not exactly, but showing the bodice and train) as well as the dress Kathy tried on are all posted to Pinterest under my username.
The Junior Avengers

Chapter Summary

Many thanks to Holsvick for pointing out continuity problems and gently nudging me to fill in a few blanks I'd left open.
Hugs and thanks to the rest of you for being so patient as I try to get another chapter done.

As she took off the veil she’d selected, Megan made a mental note to talk to Natasha before the weekend was over. While she didn’t really doubt that the Avenger would accept her request, it wouldn’t be very polite to spring it on her the week before the wedding. Plus, there was the small matter of Natasha ensuring she wasn’t out of town on a mission when her presence at Megan’s side was more important. In the global scheme of things, it was selfish to put her wedding over national security, but Megan disliked how heavily S.H.I.E.L.D. seemed to rely on its top agents. Even agents needed to have the pretense of a normal life now and then.

She glanced at the nearest screen and saw Steve kneeling by the side of the pool. Something about him was off and it alarmed her. “Jarvis, what just happened?” she asked, her current conversation with Annie forgotten.

Steve was frozen in place, looking at his yellow-paint covered shield with a blank stare.

Jarvis answered, “I’m uncertain, Megan. He was fine, and then he wasn’t.”

“Replay whatever happened with his shield on screen, please,” Pepper ordered.

The women all stood and gathered around the view screen, watching intently as Steve got down on one knee and used chalk to make a mockup of part of the underwater golf course. As he drew, he instructed a pair of young boys on how they could bank the golf ball to make a tricky shot.

Out of nowhere, Trip ran up behind Steve, leapfrogged over his back, pulled the shield from its harness as he did so. The agent tucked and rolled on landing, straining to right himself and reach backwards. He shoved the shield up behind him, just in time to intercept the balloon Clint had fired at the smaller boy.

The kids were gaping in awe and cheering as the balloon broke and yellow paint oozed over the shield and sprayed all of them with flecks of yellow. Instead of reacting to Trip or the boys, Steve glanced at the rafters, mouthed “Bucky?” and slowly turned back to the shield.

“Cap, you okay?” Trip was asking softly, holding the shield out for Steve to take. Steve didn't move. His gaze was still blank as he watched the yellow paint drip from the vibranium to a growing puddle on the floor. Finally, Trip just laid the shield down between them and moved the youngsters back a step.

“Trip, don’t touch him,” Clint said as he fired a grappling hook arrow and used his bow to zipline down the cable he’d tied to a ceiling truss.

“That was so cool!” one of the kids whispered as Clint landed lightly on his feet and started
walking towards the group. The youths were oblivious to the tension the adults were feeling.

“Steve?” Clint said, kneeling so he was somewhat between Steve and everyone else.

Just when the tension became unbearable, Steve reached out and ran his fingers through the paint and rubbed his thumb in a small circle against his index finger. “Wrong color for blood.”

“Canary yellow, according to the can,” Clint said casually as he slung his bow over his shoulder. “Totally washable, too. Good thing, since I’m on my way to the conference room to harass the kiddos there.”

Steve shook his head slightly, snapping back to the present and looking straight at Trip. “Gabe did exactly the same thing once when we were in northern Italy. Except he didn’t get yellow paint everywhere.” Getting to his feet, Steve looked at both boys. “You know what to do now?”

“Yes, sir.”

Steve tilted his head towards the pool. “Show me.”

With that, the tension eased. Both boys jumped back into the water and Steve finally picked the shield up from the floor.

Jarvis switched the view back to real time and they could all see that Steve was behaving normally again.

“Does that happen often?” Annie asked softly. Now that the moment had passed, they all wanted to sit down again and were making their way back to the sofa and chairs.

Megan shook her head. “Not that I’ve seen. Mostly, it’s nightmares. I know he’ll get flashes of memory, but I’ve never seen him zone out like that before.” She turned her back to Imani and talked over her shoulder, “Will you unbutton this, please?”

“It fits you well,” Imani observed as she began working on the tiny buttons. “We’ll do another fitting closer to the wedding date, but right now, we only need to add a thin lining to the under edge of the neckline’s lace so it doesn’t irritate your skin. I promise it won’t show from the front. Right now, your skin is turning red in some spots and that will be unflattering in pictures.”

“That wasn’t Steve zoning out, Megan. It was a flashback,” Pepper corrected. “Believe me; I know what they look like.” She gave Megan a knowing look, promising they’d have a long talk about the issue later. “Jarvis, correct me if I’m wrong, but he was looking for Bucky when his eyes were focused on Clint’s position.”

“That is correct, Ms. Potts.”

Megan nodded slightly in reply to Pepper’s unspoken questions. She knew Tony had been a prisoner in Afghanistan, but not much else. It seemed that Pepper had more in common with her than she had realized. Maybe the C.E.O. knew how to convince a person to get help for their P.T.S.D.

Back in her own clothes, Kathy sat down on the edge of her chair, worry lining her brow. “Steve likes to tell me he’s okay. I don’t really believe him but have made no progress in that quarter.”

“He’s so far from okay I’m not sure it can be seen from where he’s standing,” Megan said, rolling her eyes. “But what do I know?” With that, she and Imani stepped behind the screen and Megan slid out of the wedding dress and put her other clothes back on.
“You’ve got him pointed the right direction.” Beverly added. “Maybe he’ll run in to it.”

With a huff of disbelief, Pepper murmured, “Denial is alive and well. Unfortunately, I need to get back to my cell in preparation for my rescue.” She stood and smoothed her skirt. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

The anxiety she felt made her skin feel too small and Megan fidgeted before sitting down next to Beverly.

Beverly patted her hand. “Go on. You won’t rest easy until you check in on him. We’ll be fine. Take some time to go regroup while you can and we’ll see you in time for dinner. We’ll keep your mother company.”

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Megan was in the elevator before she re-evaluated. The last thing Steve needed right now was to have her mother henning over him and eroding whatever defenses he’d erected to keep going. She needed a distraction. “Jarvis, take me to where Tony and the others are located, please.”

“Certainly, Megan. For the record, that is the first time I have observed Captain Rogers experiencing a flashback.”

“That’s good to know. I think we should keep an eye on him in case this is the start of new symptoms.”

“Agreed.”

“How much of our conversation was broadcast to everyone?”

“None of it, Megan. I’m only allowing normal conversations to be relayed over the coms. Unless your comments are clearly addressed to an individual in a different room or are about what the Junior Avengers are doing in their contests, they remain unbroadcast. The same is true for the hostages and the senior Avengers. You should also know that the only cameras active are the ones showing the Junior Avengers in action.”

Megan sagged against the elevator wall, relieved and feeling guilty at the same time. “I’m sorry I doubted you, Jarvis. But isn’t that taxing for you, given everything else you’re managing at the moment?”

“You forget how much practice I have in dealing with Sir. I assure you this is not even a slight challenge for me, though I appreciate your concern.”

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“Got room for one more?” Megan asked as she breezed into the conference room that doubled as hostage central.

“Science Sister! You can’t rescue us prematurely. It’s against the rules.” Tony said as he waved a
“What is all this?”

“Tony’s version of relaxing,” Bruce said softly from a nearby chair. “Do you want some tea?”

“I’m tracking their progress. Look, two kids on team green have decoded their clues for the easiest path up the climbing wall. Team blue is almost there, and red has it solved, too. We didn’t make their biology and math problems challenging enough.”

“Yes, we did,” Bruce replied, his tone easy and relaxed. “We agreed that we should stick with grade-appropriate questions, and we did. The whole point was to give the non-athletic kids a chance to use their skills, too. Speaking of those, I was just listening to some of the violin players. I’m impressed by how well they could sight read that piece.”

Megan accepted the empty mug Bruce handed her and filled it with boiling water from the pitcher he pointed to on the table. “I can’t believe you planned all of this.” The conference room chairs were more comfortable than any conference room chairs had a right to be. Apparently, money made just about anything possible.

“It’s all your fault.” Tony was switching rapidly between camera views. He was currently watching Trip supervise several teens treading water for a set period of time. “Boring. Ohh. Look what Nat’s up to.”

Natasha was perched on a rope ladder hanging over the deep well of the pool. Beside her were two uneven bars, set up so anyone who fell would go for a swim, but otherwise land safely. On the bars, a teenage girl was doing a complex set of moments that resulted in her doing a handstand from the top bar. With her toes, she grabbed a token hanging above her before flipping around again and finally ending up sitting on the lower bar while holding to the other. She was glowing with pride as she took the token from her toes and handed it to Natasha.

In return Natasha handed her a set of handles attached to wheel and pointed to a cable the teen had apparently not noticed before.

“Volume up, Jarvis!” Tony said.

“I get to zip line down?”

Natasha smiled and nodded. “Captain Rogers will catch you at the bottom.” Jarvis adjusted the camera to show Steve standing at the pool’s edge, ready to catch her at the end of her ride.

“This is the best day EVER!” the teen yelled as she launched herself down the zip line. Steve caught her and set her lightly on her feet before doing the same for Natasha.

“How is this my fault?” Megan questioned, smiling as widely as the rest of them as they watched the teen give Steve and Nat high fives before running off to show the token to her teammates.

“You showed us up. That makes you responsible.” Tony pointed at her before going back to watching Steve on the screens. “He was ours first. We met him first. But, in your apartment, and later at the museum, I saw a guy I’d never met before. It got me thinking. I mean, I knew you were planning this. But why? Cap’s fine. They thawed him out and he jumped right back in like he hadn’t even missed a day of fighting.” Tony finally turned from the screen and looked at Megan. “Did you know what I told him when I first met him?”

She nodded. “About everything special about him coming out of a bottle? He told me. It still eats
at him how badly he misjudged you.”

Tony waved the comment away. “Last night, he showed emotion. Real. Human. Emotion. Hey, look at Thor! He’s like a big kid! I think he’s having more fun than they are.” Tony gestured to where Thor was running alongside a six-year-old as the boy tore through the obstacle course in the gym. Thor had his hammer ready and knocked one of Clint’s balloons out of the air as the youngster scrambled up a climbing wall and down a slide. Yellow paint spattered everywhere, but didn’t count as a hit.

Growing serious again, Tony turned back to Megan. “You planned this, not us. None of us even considered it. As I watched him last night, I asked myself how he can be okay. How can anyone go through what he did and be okay?”

“He’s not,” Megan admitted softly.

Tony pointed a finger at her, indicating she’d won a point. “He’s finally letting his guard down around us.”

Bruce finally spoke up. “What Tony is trying to say is that you made us see the difference between Steve and Captain America. We made the mistake of conflating the two.”

“What he said!” Tony agreed. “I can’t believe I missed it.” He gave Megan such a scrutinizing look that she felt pinned in place. “Why didn’t you?”

Megan hesitated, uncertain of how to answer. “I guess because I never paid much attention to the stories. History is written by the victors. By the survivors. I never went looking for more of those stories once I had lunch with him. It didn’t seem right.” Megan shook her head slightly as she tried to clear her mind and break herself out of the invisible bonds Tony had used to immobilize her. “What does this have to do with anything? All I asked was why you planned everything like you did for this afternoon.”

“Steve was most relaxed and at ease in D.C. when he was talking with the kids. I just figured with the dog and pony show you had planned, time with kids would be a good idea.”

“Dog and pony show? You think——”

Tony held up his hands placatingly. “Woah, there. Molten One. Retract the fangs. I know better now. Until last night, that’s what I thought this was. Fancy dinners, lots of pictures… I’m used to that scene and it’s as fake as Loki’s kindness. So, I figured, we figured,” he corrected himself as he pointing to Bruce, “that some play time with the kiddos would be a reprieve from that.”

“It still is,” Bruce said softly. “But it’s a reprieve from heavier emotions.”

“Because you’re helping him grieve,” Tony added.

Bruce nodded. “And giving him what you can salvage from the life he lost.”

Megan looked questioningly at Pepper, who had sat silently watching the entire exchange. “I understood from the beginning what you were trying to do.”

Tony turned to her, surprise plain on his face. “Why didn’t you say so? No one tells me anything!”

Desperate to do something, anything, to change the mood, Megan turned her attention to Happy. “What’s your take on all this?”
He shrugged before taking another bite of his cookie. “Just another day at Stark Tower.”

Megan nodded and turned her attention to her tea.

“Tony, why don’t you and Bruce show Megan what all you planned for this afternoon? It’s a bit difficult to figure out what all of the activity options are from the videos.”

Megan looked up and saw Pepper smiling gently at her. The C.E.O. seemed to understand how rattled she was by the recent conversation.

“Are you saying we should have printed brochures? Jarvis, make a note about the oversight.”

“Tony.”

“Pep,” he said back, stretching the nickname into two syllables as he mimicked her tone. “How fast can we get a batch printed out and sent down to the conference room?”

“Ten minutes, Sir. I’m having them printed now.”

A printer inside a cabinet sprang to life and Pepper retrieved the pages, passing them to Megan before sitting back down.

Megan studied the grid, which had twenty activities divided into two columns. Subsequent pages noted the skill sets, hobbies, and extracurricular activities of each youth and indicated whether Tony or Bruce would develop their puzzles. The first column was labeled physical and detailed different skill tests and obstacle courses the team members could choose from. The second column was labeled mental, and included not only the Lego brick challenges but math puzzles, sight reading music on a player’s chosen instrument, and building the best shaped tent to withstand a windstorm (summoned by Thor) on the roof. Successful completion of some of the mental challenges unlocked clues for the physical challenges, such as a geometry problem unlocking the easiest path to reach the top of the climbing wall.

It overwhelmed her to think of the hours Bruce and Tony had clearly spent on this. Not only had they come up with challenge themes, they’d tended to the details. The challenges had been custom-made with each participant in mind, based on their education, hobbies, and extracurricular activities. Bruce had written math challenges for each child just in case they happened to decide they wanted to pick that activity. With Jarvis managing their distribution, there was zero risk of a fifth grader being asked to solve a trigonometry problem or a tenth grader being asked to do long division. Members of the tower security team had volunteered to spar with the numerous martial arts students looking to show off their skills to earn a token for their team.

“You must have bought out the local Lego store to make this possible,” Megan commented as she laid the papers back down on the table. There were three separate Lego challenges, each requiring a hefty pile of bricks for a single group. Multiplying that… she didn’t want to think of how many Lego kits that entailed.

“Nah, we just got the Lego KidsFest team to come to the tower for the weekend,” Tony explained. “The kiddos don’t know it, but tomorrow afternoon, the whole fourth floor conference room is going to be opened up for that. They’re setting up now. The Lego challenges on the chart are standard Lego KidsFest fare, except for the robot programming activity. Some of the pre-teens and teens go to schools that have Lego League clubs or other robotics after-school programs, so it will be familiar terrain for them to build and program a robot to do a task this afternoon.”

Megan raised an eyebrow as she held back the swell of emotion that was swirling in her gut. “I’m
almost afraid to ask what that task is.”

“Build a robot that can navigate a short maze, ramp, and valley to pick up a token and deliver it to a receptacle,” Bruce said, his voice soft as he looked fondly at Tony. “We thought about a water challenge but were overruled by Pepper.”

“They’re normal kids, which is something you two geniuses sometimes forget.” Pepper said. “If it’s too difficult, they’ll focus on other challenges instead. You two can do harder robot challenges with anyone who wants to tomorrow afternoon.”

“I hate it when you make sense, Pep. I’ve told you that. Stop doing it.” Tony pointed to a yellow-paint splattered teen on the climbing wall as shown on the image he’d enlarged over the conference table. “Is she out? Or is that the first hit?”

Before Jarvis had a chance to answer, a second balloon approached the teen, only to abruptly veer off course and splatter the wall to her left.

“Your balloons keep messing up my perfect aim, Tony!” Clint growled over the coms.

“Wasn’t that the point?” Megan asked slumping in her seat. The energy in the room was changing, or at least her sense of it. Something was different now.

The archer grumbled under his breath then added, “I’m not used to missing, Megan. It’s not fair.”

Tony snorted and rolled his eyes. “I don’t recall us agreeing to make it fair, Bad Guy. We’re the Avengers. We never fight fair. We fight to win. And… she just earned her team a token.” The teen in question had reached the top and was waving her token as she rappelled her way down the wall to the floor where her teammates were waiting to give her hugs and high-gives. “Looks like you’ll be out of here soon, Happy.”

“I’m not in a hurry, boss. You can have me kidnapped as often as you want.”

“Don’t even” Tony snapped, pointing to Megan.

She lifted her head, stunned at his glare.

“I heard that sound.” Tony turned to Bruce. “Did you hear it, too?”

Bruce’s eyes were warm as he looked at her, nodding. “It’s called having feelings, Tony. It’s not a crime.”

“I don’t deal with feelings. I avoid them. No feelings, Megan. They’re messy. You call yourself a scientist and you don’t know this?”

Megan just gaped at him as she felt the tears welling up in her eyes.

“Tony, be quiet,” Pepper said in a soft voice that was no less commanding for its gentleness. “Come with me,” she added, touching Megan gently on the shoulder.

Mutely, Megan let Pepper lead her out of the conference room and to the elevator.

“My office, Jarvis.”

“Certainly. Is there something you’d like me to order for you, Megan?”

She shook her head, holding her hand against her mouth in a futile attempt to hold back sobs. Sobs
that only got worse as Pepper guided her to the sofa in her office and pulled Megan into her arms.

“Let it out,” the strawberry blonde said as she stroked Megan’s hair.

“I don’t... know what’s... wrong with me....” Megan managed to get out as she cried.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. But you’ve been propping Steve up for a long time now, and doing it all by yourself. It takes its toll on a person. This weekend is changing everything. Not just for Steve, but for the team’s dynamics.”

That’s when it hit her. All the swirling undercurrents she’d been feeling were because her unconscious mind had realized what her conscious mind had not. “Not a team anymore,” Megan whispered while she availed herself of the box of tissues Pepper was offering her. “A family.”

“Exactly. One you’re a big part of.” Pepper smiled proudly and got up to fetch a wastebasket. “Contrary to what Tony likes to pretend, we’re all about the feelings. Tony hides them behind snark and gestures. Bruce works quietly. You know the others better than I do.”

“But they’ve all come together for Steve.” Saying it our loud triggered another bout of sobbing. “Why am I such a mess?”

“Because you know we’ll be your buttress while he’s leaning hard on you. Steve has a lot of grieving to do and I don’t see that S.H.I.E.L.D. did anything for him but ask him to fight again. That may be familiar, but it’s not very healthy.” Pepper handed Megan a bottle of water and sat down beside her, setting the wastebasket at their feet. “The boys may not see the merits of recognizing your feelings, but I do. Jarvis can’t be the only sensible one in the tower.”

“I appreciate the compliment, Ms. Potts.”

For reasons she didn't understand, that just made Megan start crying again.

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"Jarvis, please turn out the lights," Pepper asked softly as she got up and went to a cupboard. “Megan, lie down please.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to take a nap while Jarvis and I triage my to do list.” Pepper handed Megan a pillow.

“But—“

Pepper just raised her eyebrow. “In addition to ruining makeup, emotions can be exhausting. Even if you don’t fall asleep, you’ll feel better having had some time to shut down and just rest.” She covered Megan with the lightweight blanket that was so soft it invited you to pet it. As she took Megan’s shoes from her, Jarvis started some instrumental music overlaid with the sound of ocean waves crashing on shore. “Rest. I’ll get you up when the kids, large and small, are done adventuring. We’ll fix your hair and send you back downstairs as if you were there the whole time. No one will even notice.”

“Pepper—” The eyebrow warned her again, but Megan wasn’t deterred, though she allowed Pepper to cover her with the blanket. “Who takes care of you?”

“Happy and Jarvis. Bruce tries to advise Tony. We each do our part in our own way.”

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“Megan, wake up.”

Still drowsy, Megan opened her eyes. Pepper was standing over her, a gentle hand on her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. But it’s nearly time for me to go thank my rescuers. We have time to fix your hair.”

Megan sat up and struggled to think past the cobwebs in her brain. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Do you usually drool when you’re awake?”

Mortified, Megan touched the corner of her mouth and felt the moisture on her cheek.

Pepper laughed. “Just like the rest of us. Let me fix your hair and you can help yourself to a light snack before you head back downstairs. Your makeup is still fine. I have lots of snacks in the cupboard here, and Jarvis can order you anything else you want. Come sit,” she added, gesturing to the chair sitting near her desk.

Megan stretched and obeyed, still feeling groggy. “How long did I sleep?”

“About ninety minutes. Those kids are going to sleep hard tonight. They outdid themselves. It’s a good thing we have an ice cream sundae bar planned for dessert this evening. They’ll need the sugar to keep going.”
Still groggy, Megan just made a non-committal sound.

“All done. Take your time, Megan. You’re not needed anywhere right now. Eat some snacks and you’ll perk up in time to join us for dinner.” With a quick hug, Pepper left the office.

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“Why is Clint helping the kids on the climbing wall? I thought he was the villain.”

“Indeed, he was, until he was disqualified by a counterattack. Now he is only able to assist in matters of safety.”

“How’d they manage that?”

“We have several enterprising Junior Avengers in attendance. Let me show you what happened.” Jarvis switched the screen to show a clip of a thirteen-year-old asking Steve why they couldn’t find something to shoot the paint back at Hawkeye.

Steve smiled mischievously and answered, “That is an excellent point.”

“Captain Rogers, there is an assortment of Nerf weaponry available in the locker room cabinets,” Jarvis told him over the coms.

“Doyle, I’m told that some Nerf weapons are available for us to use. Let’s go check out the supply, okay?” Steve said, perking up even more at Jarvis’ news.

The camera switched to show the pair opening the cabinet to find a large container of purple paint pellets alongside modified Nerf darts. “This is so cool!” Doyle said, barely unable to contain his excitement. “Look, we have a selection of Nerf guns, too, and holsters to carry the clips and darts!”

Steve crossed his arms and leaned against the wall nearby. “Any ideas which one you want to use?”

“This one, for sure. I’ve been watching on YouTube and it’s accurate at a distance,” Doyle said, picking up the N-Strike Elite Retaliator.

“So, you’re going to do this all by yourself, then? Is that a good plan? Snipers must be hidden and Hawkeye knows you’re here. I’m sure he has been keeping track of who is on each team.”

Megan grinned as she watched Doyle frown, considering the problem very seriously.

“We need a plan,” Doyle decided, his voice surprisingly certain. “And if we can modify these, we can shoot from even further away. But it’s going to be tough to reach him since he stays up in the rafters. We need to draw them out.”

“Good point. Let me get you some expert help, Doyle. Hey, Trip, are you at all familiar with how to modify Nerf guns?” Steve asked over the coms.

“Nerf guns? Where are you?” Trip replied, his voice full of excitement.

“Men’s locker room. Send another team in to the women’s and have them meet us in five minutes in the staff break room on this floor.” Turning back to Doyle, Steve added. “I have something I need to fetch, and I’ll meet you with the others. Gather a team, the supplies you need and head out to the hallway. Trip will show you where to go.”

“Jarvis, didn’t Steve just violate the rules?” Megan inquired.
“Technically, though no one complained. I believe Steve’s orders were perceived as suggestions to help Doyle implement his own plan.”

“Fair enough.”

Jarvis skipped ahead, showing them the gathered group of kids who were standing around a table while Trip showed them how to make simple modifications to the darts and Nerf guns to improve their performance.

“What do you think about using this for a distraction?” Steve asked as he held up Megan’s water gun as he entered the room.

Doyle’s eyes grew wide. “You have a super soaker?”

Steve smiled as he laid it on the table. “Actually, this is Megan’s. I believe she’ll gladly share it for the afternoon.”

“Damn right I will,” Megan said more to herself than Jarvis.

“What did you come up with?” Steve asked as he sat down in the nearest chair and watched as the four kids, along with Trip, continued to disassemble the guns. On the video, it was clear that they were swapping out springs and making other adjustments as they went. Trip was constantly checking their work, and alerting them to ways they might break the gun if they were not careful in how they used it.

Doyle, having finished first, looked at the others. “I guess we can use the squirt gun to distract Hawkeye enough to try to hit him with darts. Do you think it will work?”

Steve met Trip’s eyes, then looked at Doyle, shaking his head. “Not by itself. He’s not going to be bothered by getting wet. But if he thinks he’s being hit by paint, or if the rest of you split up and draw his attention away from the person you decide should try for the needed shots while also getting his bow wet and drawing him down to a lower level, then yes.”

“What about asking Thor to help one of us reach the higher levels?” a girl named Sophie suggested.

Trip shook his head. “Against the rules.” He held up a hand to ward off their moans of disappointment. “But no one said adults can’t be spotters and guards if you use ropes to climb up yourselves. If you want us to take hits for you, we’ll be out of play but still able to keep you safe. There is plenty of climbing gear available. You just need a way to get the ropes you’ll use in place.”

“How about we mod some darts to deliver grappling hooks?” Yolanda suggested. “Do we have Internet access in here? There has to be a video on YouTube.”

“If you’ll permit me, I can provide the necessary directions,” Jarvis supplied as he projected a set of detailed instructions in the air above the table.

“I’ll go gather your supplies,” Steve said, pushing himself to his feet as the kids excitedly began to plan their assault in the rafters.

The video skipped ahead again to show Natasha, Thor, Trip, and Steve all acting as spotters for four Junior Avengers as they shot grappling hooks to the rafters and began to climb once the adults indicated the ropes were safely secured.
“What the heck are you all up to?” Clint asked over the coms as he retreated to an even higher perch. “Hey—” he sputtered for a moment. “That’s ice cold!” he yelled to them as he took a direct hit to his back from the super soaker being operated by a fifth youth out of sight of the cameras. Jarvis split the screen to show that it was Kallyn drenching Clint in ice water.

Megan heard a lot of laughter as Clint scrambled to find a different perch out of Kallyn’s reach.

“How!” Doyle shouted and all four of the kids fired as many darts at Clint as they could.

“The Bad Guy has been hit in the torso with five separate paint darts. He is hereby out of play,” Jarvis announced blandly a moment later.

Cheers erupted among the Junior Avengers in every room. Emboldened, they renewed their efforts to earn their remaining tokens as Clint repelled to the floor and shook the hands of the kids who’d eliminated him. “Nice job. I guess we know who to call next time we need backup.”

“Indeed,” Thor said, nodding solemnly. “I will be certain to share tale of your valor with the Warriors Three the next time I return home. Lady Sif will be most impressed with your skills in the use of ice water, young Kallyn.”

The screens went dark for a moment, then showed Clint kneeling in front of a child and signing fluently with her. “Who is that, Jarvis?”

“Shawna Massey, a great granddaughter of Montgomery Fallsworth. Her brother Patrick is behind her, just out of the frame. Shawna was born deaf.”

“What about cochlear implants?”

“She has them, but prefers sign. Her parents are adamant she be given that choice and raised her to be bilingual.”

“Good for them,” Megan nodded to herself. “I bet it’s a nice surprise finding out one of the Avengers knows ASL.”

“Natasha is fluent as well. I believe she will be joining the conversation shortly as she has noticed Clint signing and is making her way across the room. As of now, the hostages have all been freed. The Junior Avengers are being sent to the locker rooms to shower as necessary and don clean uniforms before they queue up. It would be a good time for you to make your way back to the dining hall.”

“Queue up for what?”

“Each of the Junior Avengers will be receiving a thank-you package from the hostage they rescued,” Jarvis answered.

Megan sank back into Pepper’s chair. “Dare I ask what is in the package?”

“Sir and I made some arrangements.”

“And?” Megan prodded, wondering how many thousands Tony had spent.

“Each of them will be receiving a Stark Tablet pre-loaded with educational resources and secured with age appropriate controls. I will continue to monitor their use and adjust the software in cooperation with the parents. I believe that even the most enterprising hacker will find that I am resistant to all attempts to thwart the controls put in place for their own safety.”
“I’ll bet you’re right. And I’m guessing you’re smart enough to tell the difference between age appropriate research on issues of puberty as opposed to searches for pornography.”

“Indeed. I intend to ensure all my young charges get nothing but the most accurate and factual results to all of their searches. I believe some academic articles about the negative aspects of pornography might be an appropriate search result. Scientific data is useless unless it is shared.”

She laughed. “I envision some very disappointed teenagers will be cursing your name in the next few days, Jarvis.”

“I’ve heard it all before from Sir. I am confident that I am up to the challenge. Besides, they’ll have daily screen time limits to ensure they take advantage of the rest of their gift package.”

Megan put down her water bottle before she spilled her drink down her front. “There’s more?”

“Of course, Megan. Have you forgotten the first rule of Stark Tower?”

She picked at the label idly as she tried to quell the storm of emotions raging inside of her. This weekend had her wrung out and drained, and it was only Saturday afternoon. “I’m afraid I missed that memo.”

“When it comes to giving, only excess is sufficient.”

Megan started to laugh, but grew serious. “That…. that really describes Tony well. Pepper, too. What you’ve all done for this weekend…. it’s overwhelming.”

“And our pleasure. In that vein, Sir and Miss Potts made arrangements for each Junior Avenger to receive lessons, equipment, and any needed transportation to the value of five hundred dollars towards their current or indicated interests. For some, it will be music lessons and instrument rentals, for others it may entail tuition for courses at local centers. These youths have a diversity of talents that Sir and Miss Potts wish to encourage and support. Some of them have indicated a desire to try new athletic activities, but have lacked the resources to pay for it all.”

“Public schools are full of athletic and academic programs.”

“Many schools have moved to a pay to participate system where the parents must pay several hundred dollars for equipment and access. Even purely academic endeavors, such as the annual Academic Decathlon often entail travel to competition sites. Rather than single out the families in attendance who are most likely to feel the strain, it was decided to give everyone scholarships.”

Megan couldn't help but think of her nephews and how they would benefit. Fees for summer Cub Scout camp were not going to be an issue this year if Keith decided to attend. She wiped tears from her eyes. “That’s amazing, Jarvis. It’s going to make a real difference for some of those kids. I mean it. When money’s tight, parents have to make tough choices.”

Jarvis didn’t reply but Megan knew he understood what she meant.

After a moment, he continued. “Lastly, each Junior Avenger is receiving a custom set of Lego Avengers, including a Lego figure of themselves in their uniform.”

“Of course they are.” Megan gestured helplessly to the universe. What else was there to do? With all the other individualized details that had been worked in to the weekend, was it even a surprise that the Lego figures had been customized, too? “I can’t thank you all enough for everything you’ve done to make this weekend special, Jarvis. Words are really inadequate, but thank you.”
When Steve finally emerged from the locker room, he was glowing. There was simply no other word for it. Joy radiated from his pores and he seemed relaxed in his own skin. “Megan,” was all he said as he swept her up into a hug and buried his face in her hair.

“Love your uniform,” she murmured, running her fingers along the embroidered “A” on the sleeve of the blue polo he was wearing along with black slacks.

“They got my name right, too.” he murmured into her ear.

“Hmm?” She pulled back and looked at his shirt. It had the standard Avengers logo on the left breast.

He turned around to how her that ‘Rogers’ had been embroidered in black block letters across his shoulders.

“Nice to finally be seen, isn’t it?”

“You have no idea,” he said softly, cupping her cheek in his hand. “What have you been up to this afternoon? You look tired.”

“Nothing much,” she answered with a shrug. “I just picked my wedding dress and took a nap in Pepper’s office. I’m groggy since I just woke up. You?”

“Stopped the bad guys, rescued the good guys. Typical workday.” His smile reached his eyes for once. “After all that work, I’m hungry.”

“Steve, you’re always hungry. Fortunately for your stomach and hollow leg, I hear that dinner is ready.”

“In a minute. We’re all meeting here to greet the kids as they head down.”

At that moment, Trip, Clint and Natasha joined them, wearing their own polo shirts and slacks.

“That was the coolest thing ever!” Trip yelled to the ceiling before giving Steve a high-five. “I want to move in permanently if weekends here are always this much fun.”

“It’s not usually this crowded, but the training rooms are top of the line,” Clint commented with a soft smile.

Natasha looked as composed as ever as she met Megan’s eyes. “Men are simply children in large bodies.”

“I resemble that—”

Clint was cut off by Thor’s booming voice. “My friends! That was a most glorious adventure. You were a most worthy adversary,” he added as he nodded towards Clint. “I am told that we are to retire to the main dining hall to feast and recount our adventures.”

“After we meet the kids,” Steve corrected him, gesturing towards the doors that were begin flung open with shrieking, giggling kids, each carrying a personalized bag with their rewards.

Steve grabbed her hand and all but dragged Megan with him as adults formed a reception line to greet all the Junior Avengers as they poured out of the conference hall. Every time she tried to step back and let him have his moment, he found another reason to touch her and hold her against him.
At one point, he threw a worried look her way and raised his eyebrow.

“This is your time with the kids,” she told him quietly. “I’m fine watching.”

“It’s your time, too, since you made it all happen.” One of the younger kids tugged on his hand, and he added “I want you here.”

Megan gave in at that point and tried to let the kids’ enthusiasm pull her out of her funk.

Chapter End Notes

I've started a new job, which is better than the old job for many reasons except continued crappy pay. But overall, it's a move in the right direction. It also involved a very steep learning curve that took a lot of time and energy. I have hopes I can get back to writing and posting a bit more regularly!

We're done with the afternoon adventures of the Junior Adventures, but Steve's weekend is far from over.
After numerous group photos with every configuration of the Junior Avengers, the “hostages” and the other adults possible, Jarvis began to play different highlights from the afternoon’s adventures while everyone served themselves at the buffet and sat down to eat. The kids were clearly running high on life, and broke out in rowdy cheers any time something on screen caught their attention.

“I never had that kind of energy at their age,” Megan muttered to Steve as she picked at her remains of her meal. The pot roast had been delicious, even if it meant she’d be spending extra hours at the gym to burn off all of the calories from the weekend.

“I never did either.” Steve said, then put his arm around her, pulling her in to kiss her temp. “Thank you for making all of this possible.”

“You deserve every moment.” She chewed on her lip, wondering when she would find the courage to break his heart again.

“What is it?”

“Jarvis found out what happened to Katherine Wells.”

“And?”

“She passed away in May after a sudden heart attack.”

Steve closed his eyes, fighting back tears. “I just missed her.”

Megan nodded. Words felt like an empty comfort and he didn’t need her pretending it was okay when it wasn’t.

“Did she have a good life?”

“She did. Jarvis sent the details in an email. Her life was rich and good, and she was active until the very end.”

Steve sighed. “Would have been nice to see her again. But if I let myself dwell on it, I’ll go mad. I’ll read the email later. It’s been a good day and I want to hang on to that.”

The lights flashed once as he spoke, interrupting their conversation. Megan looked up and saw an elderly woman standing at a lectern. “I’ve gotten permission to monopolize your time while you all eat dessert, so you young’ins will have to sit down and pipe down. I’m eighty-five and I might keel over any minute now. No need to hasten my demise by making me shout over all of you.”

There was a ripple of laughter that swept though the room, followed by quiet anticipation. “I also have to apologize in advance if the quality of this slide show isn’t up to normal Stark standards. My granddaughter Laurel helped me learn to use PowerPoint and it took her a lot of hours to make me semi-competent, emphasis on the semi.”

The woman smiled at them and then looked directly at Steve. “My name is Violet and Chester Philips was my grandfather. Megan was smart and knew we’d never all have enough time this
weekend to tell you all the things we want you to know, so she asked us to write you letters and I’m
told they’ve all been assembled into a scrap book for you. Those of us who felt like showing off
agreed that what we sent could be printed and shared with everyone here, and those are all in that
monster book people keep lugging around. But I thought it might be nice to take a group trip to
Brooklyn and show everyone how it’s changed over the years.”

Megan felt Steve put his hand in hers under the table and she squeezed it reassuringly.

“You see, Grandpa had a strange tradition he kept every year until passed. I didn’t understand it as
a kid, but I came to appreciate it after my son Johnny died in Vietnam. After that, I understood.
And I’ve kept that tradition going with my own kids and grandkids, and I’m hoping you’ll be able
to join us sometime, Steve, when we make our pilgrimage.” She signed and looked at the nearest
screen. “I’m getting ahead of myself. Sorry, Laurel.”

She fumbled with the remote and brought up the first image, one of a very young Private Chester
Philips, standing proud in his military uniform. “Grandpa was born in 1876. He served in China
during the Boxer Rebellion and stayed on to make the military his career. He saw a lot of combat
long before World War Two, but that was the war that seemed to haunt him the most. Every
spring, as close to March third and fourth as he could manage, he made a trip to Brooklyn. And
from the time my mother was old enough to walk, she got dragged along with him. I’m told I
wasn’t even given the luxury of learning to walk first. Mama said she pushed me in a pram down
the sidewalk while Grandpa led us on his annual tour of the neighborhood. Not wanting my own
kids to be spoiled, I did the same to each of them. On screen, there was a photograph of a young
Violet holding her young sons’ hands while they stood on a Brooklyn sidewalk.

By now, Steve had tears streaming down his cheeks. He let go of Megan’s hand and put his arm
around her instead, tucking her against his side while they all listened.

“Grandpa never talked much about the war. But making that trip every year was really important to
him. He didn’t talk, not until I started bugging him. I was a teenager and thought the whole thing
was pointless. Why did he make such a big deal out of walking the same path every single year in
total silence? It was stupid, and I told him so.

Violet smiled at the memory and wiped a tear from her own cheek. “Little did I know! I’ll never
forget how he stood up even straighter than usual, looked me in the eye, and said, ‘Violet, you are
absolutely right. I’ve made a grave mistake that I’ll rectify starting this instant.’” Violet snapped,
imitating Chester’s speech as best she could. “Lord have mercy, he took us back to his traditional
starting point and started to talk. Rather, he started to bark facts at me. ‘Violet, this is the building
Steven Rogers grew up in,” he said, pointing to a decrepit building that looked like a gust of wind
would take it down. “Don’t forget it.” We traced the same route as always, but this time he talked
nonstop, reciting facts, and pointing out buildings he insisted were important. He showed us where
James Barnes grew up, the churches and schools you attended, the hospital where our mother
worked, I swear he pointed out specific alleys that he insisted had some import as being where you
were beaten up.”

“That’s every alley in Brooklyn!” Steve said to the crowd, smiling despite his tears.

“And Grandpa made a point of showing me every damn one and then quizzing me about what he’d
said to make sure I’d been paying attention! The only mercy he had was stopping at Joe’s Diner for
a meal before we trekked out to the cemetery. But I’m getting ahead of myself again. My point was
to torture all of you with photos of how the neighborhood has changed over the years. Once I got
my camera, I started taking pictures.”

With that, Violet got back on track. She and Laurel had assembled sequential sets of images that
showed the same street over a period of time, making note of what building had been of particular
to Steve and Bucky, and therefore, Chester on his annual tour.

Despite the heavy mood that had started the presentation, Violet managed to keep the rest of it
light. She added in her own memories of seeing buildings go up and down as time continued to
march forward. Businesses came and went, glass replaced stone, but the neighborhood maintained
the skeleton of the streets Steve and Bucky had known.

As she neared the end, Violet got serious again. “We always ended up here,” she said, showing a
photograph of the entrance to Green-Wood cemetery. “At the graves of both your parents, he’d
salute and say, ‘It was my privilege,’ and pour whiskey on the ground. He never drank any other
time of the year, but he always had two shots of whiskey at your parent’s graves.” There were two
sets of headstones, shown side by side, the first of the Barnes family, including Bucky’s empty
grave, the other of Steve Rogers’ parents. Violet had cropped the photo to leave out Steve’s own
headstone, still in place.

“Once, before I had sons of my own, I asked him about why doing this every year was so important
to him. He told me, ‘Violet, I let them turn him into a showgirl and I was a damned fool for doing
so. The war could have ended so much sooner if I’d just listened to Carter and Erskine. I’ll never
forgive myself for that. Your generation has to do better than mine did. Don’t ever forget the
Brooklyn Boys. Where you come from doesn’t matter. What you do is what makes the difference.
They were just two boys from Brooklyn. Rogers wanted to save the world and Barnes wanted to
protect Rogers from it. But both men gave everything in their efforts and changed the course of
history. We can do no less.”

With that, Violet set down the remote control and once again turned towards Steve. “He admired
you both so much, though I doubt he ever let you see that. You were never forgotten. Grandpa
made sure.”

Megan was holding back sobs as Steve got up and met Violet halfway, pulling her into a hug. It
was silent for a minute, save the sound of sniffling and noses being blown. Then, applause. As
Megan watched, person after person got to their feet, giving Steve and Bucky the standing ovation
that had been too long coming. Steve had always spoken respectfully of Chester Philips, but had
clearly never seen the Colonel’s softer, nostalgic side. On the battlefield, he’d been the leader his
troops had needed him to be. It was only after the war was over and the high costs tallied that he’d
revealed how much he’d cared about the men under his command. Wherever he was, Megan hoped
that he was at peace.

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Tucked against Steve’s side, Megan let her mind drift for the rest of the evening. She hadn’t
formally planned a program, having wanted to keep the evening relaxed an open for socializing.
Besides, after all of the actives of the day, she didn’t want anyone to overexert themselves trying to
be present for every moment. Many of the guests were elderly and needed the flexibility to retire
to their motel rooms as needed to regroup and recharge.

She needed have worried. Violet’s slideshow had inspired others to take the microphone and relay
their own memories of parents and grandparents who had performed for the USO, fought in the
war, or otherwise crossed paths with Steve Rogers. Jarvis, without being asked, worked his magic
and put relevant images on display as quickly as someone could mention remembering a certain
photo or wondering aloud whatever happened to so-and-so. It amused Megan immensely that no
one seemed to notice what a miraculous feat this actually was, one probably beyond the
capabilities of a mere human. With no more than a name, or sometimes part of a name, and a
connection to Steve, Jarvis produced results within seconds.

“Jarvis is showing off.”

Steve nodded in response to her murmured comment, but was mostly focused on what Frenchie’s grandson was saying. It had something to do with a goat, but Megan hadn’t paid enough attention to know why everyone started laughing. Maybe it was for the best. The past was something she couldn’t share with Steve and it would be silly to pretend otherwise. Honestly, at this point, Megan just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep.

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As the evening wore on, Megan’s thoughts continued to wander. She smiled when Steve laughed but otherwise let the narratives flow over her unheard. Maybe it was because she knew Jarvis was recording it, or maybe it was because she knew this was something she couldn’t really share. It didn’t matter. She was tired and soon, the gathering would break up and she’d be able to go to bed.

She noticed Thor accepting a pair of sneakers and socks from her mother. That was odd. But when he headed towards her, she realized he was carrying her shoes. She sat up straighter, questioning his actions with a look.

“Brother Steven, I’m going to steal Lady Megan from you for a while. I give you my vow she’ll be under my protection until she returns to your chambers later.”

Steve looked at Megan, who shrugged her consent, and then Steve nodded his agreement.

“Anything I need to worry about?”

“Nay, I merely wished to notify you of her departure so you didn’t worry without cause,” Thor said as he handed Megan her shoes. “I am reliably informed that these are more suitable for walking. Your mother promised to see that your current footwear is delivered to your rooms. Will you join me for a time? The night air is most refreshing.”

“New York City air is many things, but refreshing isn’t the word I’d pick,” Megan replied as she quickly pulled the socks on over her nylons and tied her shoes. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Thor led her to the elevators. “Please deliver us to the rooftop terrace, friend Jarvis.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

Megan looked sideways at him. “Did Tony install a track up there? Because as of this morning, it wasn’t exactly blister territory.”

Thor smiled. “Even Anthony has been too busy today to add structures to his domicile. Departing from the terrace will attract less attention.”

Megan nodded, hoping to hide her aversion to flying.

“You have misgivings?”

“I trust you, I’m just not terribly fond of heights. So, I’ll close my eyes and you’ll go fast. Deal?” Megan asked, wrapping her arms around herself.

Thor regarded her with concern. “Are you certain?”

“It’s okay.” With a wave of her hand and a surge of determination, she led the Asgardian out of the
As soon as her feet were on firm ground, Thor released her. Stepping away from him, she looked around at the trees surrounding them. Were it not for the fact they were on a paved, fenced path, she’d think they were in a natural forest. “Central Park after dark? You like living dangerously, don’t you?”

“What danger lurks beneath these branches?”

Megan considered who she was talking to and shrugged. “For you? Probably none. Most New Yorkers know better than to venture into the park after dark. Doing so is an invitation to get mugged, or worse.”

“You're chilled,” Thor said, removing his cape as he stepped towards her. He fastened the fabric around her like a cloak.

It swished around her ankles, just touching the tops of her shoes. Feeling warmer, but slightly trapped by the fabric, she reached out with a hand and found a slit opening with her fingers exactly where she wanted it to be. Intrigued, she held the garment up by a fold, watching as the slit sealed itself when she withdrew her fingers.

“You have discovered its magic.”

Megan frowned. “I always thought magic was simply science we don’t yet understand.”

“What is your aversion to calling it magic?” he inquired, tilting his head with interest.

“It implies there is no way to understand it. Isn’t magic governed by rules?”

“Indeed. Yet not everyone who knows its rules can wield its power.”

Megan played with the disappearing opening again before letting the fabric fall from her grasp. “I submit that they don’t know as much as they think they do.”

“Perhaps.” He held his hands out, showing her his empty palms. “I have no talent for it, so am not qualified to say.”

“Fair enough.” Megan looked around at the undergrowth. “Why did you bring me here?”

“You're heart is troubled and I would call you friend. The normal bonding done either in haste by battle or at leisure over meals at a shared table are not possible when your fight uses the weapon of your mind and my time here is too limited for countless stories told at a feast and with tankards of ale.”

“I’m okay.”

“You stand tall in the face of adversity, yes. Even so, your burdens weigh heavily on you and I fear are mostly unseen by your associates. Perhaps it takes an outsider to your culture, or perhaps it is from my training, but your back strains under the weight it carries. I would know your story that I might offer support and guidance from one who will not judge. Steven’s heart chose well, and I
trust you see his value.”

“I do. Believe me, I do.” He had to believe her. She walked some ways down the path, searching for answers to questions she hadn’t identified. Part of her brain supplied the number forty-two, and she indulged in a mental eye-roll.

“Then what has you so troubled?”

Thor was so gentle as he spoke, so sincere in his concern, it touched something deep within her. “I don’t know,” she confessed as she broke down.

He placed his large, strong hands on her shoulders, turned her gently around, and pulled her to his chest while she cried. He said nothing, simply stood with her, a solid, protective wall of comfort while she cried herself out.

When the outburst had finally eased, he pressed a finger to her lips, correctly reading her intent. “Apologize not for your passions, my friend. Midgardian lives are short, but perhaps richer for their brevity.” With that, he offered her his arm. “Tell me the story of Megan and how she came to love the warrior named Steven.”

Crying must have lowered the last of her defenses, because she found herself telling him all about her life: her struggles in graduate school, her disastrous relationship with the Ratbastard (including how he’d assaulted her), and finally, the complex situation with Steve and their unidentified adversary. Thor asked insightful questions that prompted more in-depth answers, prompting her to reveal things she’d never imagined speaking aloud.

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If anyone had told her she’d one day find herself curled up on a park bench, wrapped in a magical cloak, with her head resting in the lap of the Norse God of Thunder, she’d have suggested they get their head examined. The joke was on her, though, since Thor seemed intent on being both her counselor and massage therapist. He’d spent as much time running soothing fingers through her hair as she’d spent talking. Thor had been silent since she finished her narrative, giving the impression that he was choosing his next words with great care.

“It seems to me that the successful reunion you planned has made you believe Steven doesn’t need you anymore. As Mother has often said, “Once trained, the branches need not be bound to hold their shape.”

It wasn’t fun having your inner truths spoken aloud, and Megan didn’t trust herself to answer.

“Perhaps you’re framing the issue incorrectly. Steven loves you and chooses to align his remaining life journey to yours. Isn’t voluntary companionship a superior foundation to dependency?”

If he was troubled by her continued silence, it didn’t show. Megan closed her eyes.

“I am honored by your trust, Lady Megan. Your journey, though not without rewards, has been quite difficult. It is clear to me you are more than worthy of being a life partner to Steven.”

“What can I possibly offer him?”

“That is the easiest question of all, my friend. Your companionship, your trust, and your love. Those are all he needs, and yet you also give the promise of thoughtful gestures and consideration of his needs as well as yours. You offer a reason to keep fighting and a place to let go of his burning anger for a time and simply be.”
“How can that be enough?”

“You must simply trust that it is. I have finally learned that life is lived in the moments. Those quiet times when your soul is at peace make everything else bearable. A good life is not spent in grand gestures, but in the generosity of the now. Please trust me on this until you learn that truth for yourself. Steven might survive without you, and you him, but together, you will both thrive.”

With that, he got up and offered his hand. “The hour grows late and you are fatigued. I would see you home.”

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“Megan, you should be aware that Caroline and Robert Lutz are in the apartment, speaking with Steve about turning his sketches and memories into a book,” Jarvis warned as she and Thor stepped into the elevator.

“We thank you for your consideration, friend Jarvis,” Thor said. “I suggest you pretend to be asleep while I carry you inside. No one will question your exhaustion after such a long day.”

Megan nodded and allowed Thor to pick her up, bridal style. She laid her head against him and closed her eyes, forcing her body to go limp in relaxation as Jarvis opened the elevator doors.

“Fear not, my warrior brother,” she heard Thor say as he carried her into Steve’s apartment. Conversation ground to a halt and Megan figured Steve was on his feet, heading towards them in alarm. “She is merely fatigued from the day. If you direct me to her chambers, I shall lay her there whilst you continue with your guests.” Thor’s voice was deep and his chest rumbled against her cheek. It was difficult not to smile.

“It’s getting late for us, too,” Caroline agreed. “Robert, I know you’re excited about this project. But the opportunity isn’t going to vanish overnight. Between phones, planes, and computers, I’m quite confident you and Steve will be more than able to continue talking each others’ ears off on a daily basis.”

“Yes, dear.” Robert agreed in a teasing tone.

“And that, Steve, is the secret to a long and happy marriage,” Greg added from the kitchen. “Most of the women I’ve known were far better at managing my affairs than I was. It’s best to let them excel and reap the benefits of living in a happy, well run household.”

“And what exactly would these benefits be?” Megan didn’t need to see her mom to know she was giving Greg a loving gaze despite an arched eyebrow and hand on one hip.

“Orgasms, of course.”

“Greg!” Kathy said sternly. Megan knew her mother was blushing, and the sound of fabric hinted that she’d mock-slapped him with a dishtowel. If Thor didn’t get her to the bedroom soon, she wasn’t going to be able to maintain her charade.

The Asgardian must have figured that out, because he covered the distance in ground-eating strides. She heard the bedroom door close before Thor set her on her feet.

“Megan?” Steve was clearly worried once he caught sight of her tear-reddened eyes.

She put a finger to her lips to hush him and undid the clasp at her throat. The rich red fabric fell away and she handed it to Thor, then hugged him. “Thank you,” she whispered in his ear.
“Sleep well, my warrior sister,” he answered just as softly before his kissed her brow and made his exit.

“I’m fine, Steve. The exhaustion of this week finally caught up to me. What I need now is snuggles and sleep.”

He nodded his understanding and squeezed her hand. “I’ll see them out and will be right back.”

Chapter End Notes

There is a timeline posted under a very creative name "Roots and Anchors Timeline" and within this Roots and Anchors Universe Collection. It was requested by a reader on Fanfiction.net and since I do have all of the major events noted on a calendar, it was hardly difficult to share. There is nothing new or insightful in it.
Steve slipped into bed beside her and put his arm around her waist as he spooned her from behind. “Gonna tell me what’s wrong?”

“Now? It’s late and I’m tired.” Megan murmured, hoping he’d let it go. She was already wrung out and just wanted to sleep.

“You’re going to feel even worse first thing in the morning. I know you’ve been crying. Talk to me.”

“This weekend just stirred up a lot of old stuff. I’ll be fine.”

“What stuff?” he persisted as he pressed his nose to the back of her head. At the same time, he took his hand from her abdomen and ran it down her arm, twining their fingers together.

She was too exhausted to fight him. “I just don’t always see why you want to take me on. You’re not alone any more. Surely other—”

“Don’t say it, Megan.” His voice had a sharp edge, one she wasn’t used to hearing. He moved away from her, just enough to tug on her shoulder and roll her onto her back before he cupped her cheek in his hand. “I know your scars run deep, but allow me the freedom of my own choices. I choose you, not out of desperation, or loneliness, or a lack of options. I choose you because you make me a better version of Steve Rogers than I am by myself. You see me as I am, and how I want to be. I love you, and you’re going to have to trust that I know what I’m getting into as well as you do. I’ve got my own baggage and it hasn’t scared you away, so why would yours scare me?”

With his calloused thumb, he wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Okay?” he asked, his brow furrowed in concern she could see even in the dim lighting.

Megan nodded and closed her eyes as he pressed their foreheads together.

“I’m not going anywhere, Megan. I promise. Now get some sleep. It will all look better in the morning.”

“Speak for yourself, Rogers,” she murmured as she burrowed closer to him and let him hold her close. Safe in his arms, she finally slept.

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Megan managed to get a shower and pull on clothes before stumbling towards the kitchen. Steve, awake and looking far too perky for such an unholy hour, pushed a mug of hot tea into her hands as he guided her to the nearest barstool at the breakfast bar. A quick glance around the room indicated that Thor had already departed for his morning nap. (Nap? Was he staying there again to watch
over them? I don't remember.)

“I’ll have your oatmeal ready in a minute,” he said after pressing a quick kiss to her forehead.

“Your morning cheerfulness is going to get you into trouble one day, Steve,” Kathy said as she leaned on her arms, nursing her own cup of coffee.

“I’ll take my chances,” he said, winking at Megan as she half-glared at him. “She’ll be fine once she gets some caffeine into her.” He set the bowl of oatmeal in front of her and squeezed her hand. “Want some French toast, too?”

“Pardon the interruption, Steve, but Sir is most insistent on visiting you this morning.”

“Let him in, Jarvis. Has he eaten yet?”

“No, sir.” It seemed to Megan’s foggy brain that Jarvis sounded almost resigned. An entire existence spent managing Tony could do that to anyone, she supposed.

“Good, you’re up. Let’s, go kids, the PR team is waiting for you downstairs. Is that coffee?” Tony, coffee mug in hand, bee lined to the kitchen where Steve was working at the stove.

Megan watched as Steve grabbed Tony by the shoulders, spun him around, and marched him to the last remaining barstool. “Sit down and I’ll refill your coffee.”

“No time. Lots of news today, so—”

“Sit down, Mr. Stark,” Greg snapped, handing a fresh mug of coffee across the bar as Steve navigated back to the kitchen. “Didn’t your mother teach you that breakfast is the most important meal of the day?”

“Eat, Tony,” Steve added as he dished out a serving of scrambled eggs to the plate of French toast that was now before him.

Megan blinked. When had he had time to fix the plate? She wasn’t awake enough to deal with this. Feeling a bad mood coming on, she slid from her stool.

“Fine, I’ll talk while I eat. Your mail came from S.H.I.E.L.D. last night. I’ve got a team working through it all and—”

Megan reached around from behind him and clapped her hand over Tony’s mouth. “Talky talky makes me stabby stabby,” she asked holding up Tony’s fork.

He nodded, wide eyed.

Megan shuffled back to her seat and rested her head on her hand while she ate.

Steve set down the spatula. “Tony, when is last time you slept?”

He pointed at Megan as he pressed his lips together.

“Sir has been awake since early yesterday morning,” Jarvis supplied helpfully. “He gathered four of the regular PR team last evening to begin processing your mail, which arrived from S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters shortly before ten pm. He then spent several hours hacking into the digitized records of your original service agreement and talking with his legal counsel, despite Ms. Potts’ insistence that he try to rest.”
Steve closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as he listened to Jarvis’ lengthy summary. “Okay, here’s the plan. You are going to let the ladies eat in peace. Play on your phone if you need to. After I have eaten, we’ll head downstairs and you can tell me what this is all about. From there, the rest of us will head to the main hall for the morning activities and you’ll go to bed. I want your solemn promise that you will rest horizontally in your bed and do your best to sleep until noon. You may join us all for lunch. If you try to wiggle your way out of the spirit or letter of the agreement, I’ll tell Pepper. Do we have a deal?”

Tony nodded between bites. He gestured to the food and gave Steve a broad smile and thumbs up before pulling out his phone and tapping on it with one hand while he ate with the other.

Megan just pressed her fingers to her temples. She felt a Stark-sized headache coming on.

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After a second up of tea, Megan began to feel awake enough to cope with the day. “Ready?” she asked Steve as he finished loading their dirty dishes into the dishwasher.

“Just about,” Steve answered as he refilled Tony’s mug with coffee.

“Leave the rest, Steve. I’m probably going to have more,” Greg said from the living room couch where he was currently reading the newspaper. “I’m sure Kathy will need another dose as well.”

“Okay.” Gesturing towards the door, Steve looked at Tony. “Lead the way.”

He leapt off his stool and held his coffee up as if it were a cross and Megan a vampire. She glared at him and tucked her hand around Steve’s elbow. “Why’d you give Tigger even more caffeine?”

“Chin up, Eeyore. You’ll feel better as the day goes on,” Steve chided her softly.

“I’ll feel better once I vanquish the idiot who thought early morning gatherings were a good idea.”

Tony opened his mouth, looked again at Megan, and promptly closed it again. Smiling as he turned away from her and led them into the elevator Jarvis had waiting, Megan looked at Steve.

“He can be taught!”

“Genius, remember?” Tony said. “But once you see what I have, I’m afraid you’re going to be wide awake.”

“Fantastic.”

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“Take a break, kids. Get some breakfast. Eat sitting down and chewing your food for once. We’re going to be about a half hour. Doors will stay locked if we go longer, so chill.” Tony waved the four staff members out of the room and closed the doors while Steve and Megan looked around at the controlled chaos. There were bulging mailbags stacked on one side of the room, banker boxes stuffed with manila folders on the counter under the windows, and more boxes covering the large conference table. The boxes all had writing on them. Some read “from kids” or “charity requests” while two were labeled “friends/acquaintances?” Megan rested her hand on the lid of the latter, then startled when she heard a heavy file slam onto the table beside her in the only open spot.

“You’re an idiot, Rogers. Or at least you were.”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. “I was unlikely to live another year, Tony. I
wasn’t in a position to negotiate.”

“And too broke to hire a lawyer, too. I know.” Tony opened the file and pulled out several pages to hand to her. “Sit down, Megan. Trust me, you don’t want to read that standing up.”

“It’s written in lawyer speak and it’s not even eight am. Take pity on my non-genius brain and summarize it.”

Tony opened a panel to reveal a coffee pot and all the fixings. “Coffee?”

“I’m have no desire for that vile swill. But if you have tea, I’m interested,” she said, slumping into a chair as Steve took the papers from her.

Steve accepted the mug of coffee Tony offered him and set the papers and mug down long enough to move several boxes to the floor. “Jarvis said you got these hacking S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“But don’t mess up the system the kiddos have going,” Tony chided as he assembled a small tray with a tea cup, saucer, pot of hot water, honey, and cream. He set it down near Megan before slumping into his own chair, positioned across from Steve with Megan at the end, looking back and forth between them. “If you even got a copy, I assume you misplaced it somewhere in Europe. And I wanted to know how Jack Sparrow and company thought they could justify breaking federal law by interfering with delivery of your mail.”

“Who is Jack Sparrow?” Megan asked, rubbing her eyes.

“You haven’t seen Pirates of the Caribbean?”

“Focus, Tony. What did you learn?”

“You’re an idiot. Marrying her helps us exploit one of several loopholes and weak spots in that terrible agreement. Property can’t get married, only people can. Of course, we need to make sure S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t interfere with you getting hitched before copies of your marriage license application get posted to Instagram, but we can manage that. I want to bring in a legal team. My legal team, to be exact. You need a prenup, so we can have them do that, too. But this contract? It’s terrible. And since informed consent wasn’t even a phrase in a thought cloud over their heads, much less a priority, we’ll push that angle, too. I’d like to say I’m shocked Howard went along with it all, but I’m not. It’s too early in the morning to lie about darling Dad’s numerous shortcomings. Though this is a lot more than a shortcoming, biased as I am. Criminally negligent and willfully defiant of any common sense, much less—”

Steve cut him off tiredly. “Tony. There was a war. People were desperate. We were all desperate. I knew I was giving up my autonomy.”

The billionaire turned to Megan. “Given how reckless he can be when he’s not desperate, you should be terrified right now. Because if that’s the sort of document he’ll sign when he’s desperate? That’s desperate to a level that the word desperate doesn’t describe. I’m not sure any word in the English language describes it, and I’m a genius who knows a lot of big words.”

“Steve.”

“What?”

Megan rested her hand on Steve’s and kept her eyes on Tony. “The word you are looking for? It’s ‘Steve.’ Back to the issue at hand: what the hell are you talking about?”
“The military considers your boyfriend to be their property, listed somewhere between their tally of rocket launchers and tanks.”

“Just the serum, not me,” Steve clarified.

“Right. All the better to take ownership of your kids, then, right? It’s pretty tough to separate the blood from a pound of flesh, but that won’t stop them from trying.”

“It’s too early in the morning for Shakespeare.” Megan rubbed her temples. “What else?”

“‘What else?’ she says, as if what weren’t enough. How about it being a lifetime contract?” Tony turned to Steve, “Tell me, Oh Desperate One, did you even read this thing before you signed it? Did you get any legal advice? Did anyone lay out the risks of Project Rebirth?”

“No.” Steve sighed, clearly searching for a way to explain himself. “Things were different back then. Dr. Erskine was giving me a chance when even Colonel Phillips wanted Hodge for the project. I just wanted to make a difference. Nothing would have made me turn down that opportunity.”

“Of course you would say that.”

“Tony, let it go. I’m more interested in the present. What’s S.H.I.E.L.D.’s position on Steve being their legal property?”

“They’re playing kick the can. From what I’ve been able to find so far—Jarvis is still digging—the Army considers him active duty and on loan to S.H.I.E.L.D. The one-eyed pirate has actually been fighting against that position, likely for his own ends. What better way to buy Cap’s loyalty than pretending he’s going to give him autonomy? Several anenids—I mean members of Congress—have weighed in, as has the Secretary of State. The anenids are split, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State are both siding with the Army, the President hasn’t been informed as near as I can tell, and they all want this kept quiet. Since Cap’s been behaving himself and marching to the Dread Pirate Roberts’ orders, they’re biding their time. But I don’t trust anenids to do a vertebrate’s job and I can’t remember when we had actual vertebrates working in government.”

“You’ve gone up against Congress. What do you suggest?”

Megan’s question must have put an electrical charge in Tony’s seat given the way he started to bounce. He looked like a kid on Christmas morning right before getting to open his presents. “Let me turn my legal team loose on this. We’ve got the obvious angle that he gave his life, so the contract is fulfilled. With some creative arguing, I want to get that atrocity of legalese turned into the biggest case study of abuse of government power that the world has ever seen, shred it, and scatter the microscopic confetti so far across the universe that Heimdall can’t find the pieces.”

He grew serious as he turned to Steve. “I want you to promise me that you will never, ever, sign a binding contract without first reading every word, and also having a lawyer you trust go over it with a fine-tooth comb. In this century, the devil lurks in the details and you don’t want to spend decades of your obnoxiously long life fighting in court for what’s rightfully yours. This needs to be settled fast, before the government tries to swoop in and claim they have rights to your kids.”

“The public outcry alone—”

“Except the contract states all information herein is classified,” Tony said, cutting Megan off. “The public also has the attention span of a gnat hyped on caffeine. People will happily slap a supportive bumper sticker on their car. Don’t expect them to do anything requiring actual effort. They’re too
busy living their own lives to worry about yours.”

“How bad do you think this really is, Tony? Is this about sticking it to the government? Or are you really concerned?”

“If I didn’t already have insomnia, that contract would be keeping me up at night. They interfered with delivery of your mail, including mail from individuals they knew were your personal friends and acquaintances. That’s just what we know. What else are they keeping from you? How short of a leash do they really have you on? Your pen pal, Katherine Wells? She wrote to you after New York. Several times, as a matter of fact. And there’s a whole set of notes attached to that file written by a couple of shrinks detailing their assessment of why contact with her would induce a setback in your ‘adjustment’.” The face Tony made as he finished the sentence, complete with air quotes, was enough to turn Megan’s stomach.

The table creaked warningly under Steve’s grip and he pulled his hands back in seeming shock that he’d been gripping the edge that hard. “She passed way in May,” he whispered.

Tony’s voice was unusually soft as he replied, “Jarvis told me.”

Steve closed his eyes, clearly holding back tears and rage.

“Mom always said you can’t be a doormat unless you lie down,” Megan added, putting her hand on Steve’s clenched fist. “But it’s your decision.”

“I normally don’t run from fights, but this is big, and a fight of a different kind.”

“Yeah, Steve. It’s the kind of fight you can delegate. Aside from answering questions from the legal team, giving a deposition, or a sworn statement if it somehow goes to court, you don’t have to do anything but what you’ve been doing. Keep working at S.H.I.E.L.D. for now, lead the Avengers as needed. But don’t let the country you sacrificed your life protecting keep you in chains. And don’t you dare let that Depression era obsession with money sway you. I’m paying for this, not you.”

Steve finally opened his eyes. “I can’t let you—”

Tony held up his index finger, cutting Steve off with a look. “My money. My choice. My source of entertainment. You don’t get a vote in that.” He waited while he let that sink in. “What would Katherine Wells tell you to do?”

“Fight’em with everything I’ve got.” Steve slumped back in his seat, clearly deflated by the entire discussion. “Do it. And salt the fields in our wake.”

“Jarvis, do I own a salt mine? If not, make a note to buy one.”

“A new purchase won’t be necessary sir. You are majority shareholder with—”

Tony waved his hand in the air. “Don’t care. Give the employees a nice bonus for some made-up reason, cook up an explanation to appease the board if necessary, yada yada yada.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“While you’re at it, put together an introductory packet for the legal team, send it to the top three with the standard reminder NDAs, and warn them to be ready to go bright and early sometime Monday afternoon. You’ve got their resumes and case loads, so just… make it work. Open wallet on this one, J. Give’em whatever they need.”
"As you wish, Sir. Shall I involve Ms. Potts as well?"

Tony looked to Steve, eyebrow raised.

"Go ahead, Jarvis. But don’t let her take on more than she has time for."

"Ms. Potts excels at time management and self care, Captain. There is no need for concern." 

“What he said,” Tony agreed, gesturing for the pair to leave. “Time to go mingle and reminisce. I’ll have the legal team scan your personal mail and Jarvis can send it to your tablet when you’re ready. We’re going to keep this room secured and under surveillance 24/7 so we can use all this as evidence.”

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In the elevator, Steve slumped into the corner and looked wearily at Megan. “How mad are you?”

She moved into his arms without hesitation and let herself melt into his embrace. He gave good hugs. “At whom?”

“Me. Them. S.H.I.E.L.D. I don’t feel right subjecting you to this, but I’m too selfish to let you go.”

She could feel the tension in his arms though he still tucked her head under his chin. “I’m not going anywhere.” Neither were they. Jarvis had thoughtfully stopped the elevator when he realized their conversation was solemn in nature. “I’m upset by how you’ve been treated. I’ll always think they should have told you more about the risks, especially since Dr. Erskine knew what had happened before, but like you said, people were desperate. You were desperate, too, and you had no real leverage. You also gave your consent, no matter how ill-informed it was. To me, that puts your experience in a different category than what happened at Tuskegee.

“My only real issue now is the government’s willingness to think they own your forever. I’m with Tony in thinking that contract was fulfilled and ended when you crashed the Valkyrie. No one is property, and no one has the right to insist you work for the Army, the government, or S.H.I.E.L.D. for the rest of your life. If you want to continue as Captain America, it should be your choice and on your terms. At the very least, you should be given a renewable contract for reenlistment for a set number of years like the rest of the armed forces. Figure out what you want, then let Tony’s lawyers get you the best deal they can.”

Steve hugged her tighter and talked into her hair. “I keep half expecting you to ask me to step down.”

“That’d be like asking you to stop being an artist. For now, at least, being Captain America is part of your identity. You need it as much as we need it from you. You’ll know when it’s time to retire and pass that mantle on to someone else. It shouldn’t be up to me to tell you who you should be.”

He held her for a long moment, and when he finally spoke, his voice was thick with emotion. “How I wish you coulda met my ma, just once. You woulda gott’n along like a house on fire.”

“I sometimes feel like I know her, at least a little. She lives in you.”

When Steve didn’t have a reply to that, Jarvis put the elevator back into active service.

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Megan had just finished filling her plate at the buffet and returned to her seat when a deep, gravelly
“Good morning, everyone. I’m Ferris Roosevelt and I’m beggin’ you to indulge an old man as I hijack this morning’s planned program and talk to y’all for a few minutes while you eat your breakfast. I’m gonna further complicate things by sittin’ down. My doc was pretty determined I not make this trip, and I was just as determined to be here, consequences be damned. That said, C.O.P.D. is a nasty bitch that saps my strength, and will be sending me home real soon. As nice as those cigs were to get in our rations, they sure did a number on my lungs, let me tell you.”

As soon as Ferris started talking about sitting down, Megan saw a staff member hustle to get place a comfortable chair in front of the lectern Ferris had originally been standing behind. After helping Ferris sit down and ensuring his oxygen line was untangled, the assistant clipped a wireless microphone to his dress shirt and laid the battery pack in Ferris’ lap before once more melting into the background.

Megan took the opportunity to make an announcement of her own. “Ferris, you take as long as you want. Nothing planned is as important as just being together. The plans were to make sure you didn’t all travel here to sit twiddling your thumbs pretending not to be bored.”

“With this group, Ma’am, that was never a possibility. So, I’m taking you to mean if a few others want to follow my lead, that’s all right with you?” he asked Megan.

“I’d like nothing better,” she replied, sitting back down and snuggling up to Steve as he put his arm around her.

“I’m a farmer, born’n bred in Iowa. I was never interested in fighting and was never much good at it. I just wanted to plant my crops, raise my cattle, and ride my horses. Maybe someday get myself a wife that wanted the same kinda life. Then I got my draft letter.

“Ma sat me down and told me, ‘Ferris, I know our country needs you, and I know you gotta go. But I already buried a brother lost to a war in Europe an’ I got no intention of burying my son to the same. You listen to me and you listen well, because I’m givin’ you for your first and most important orders: you come home alive. You do what you must and I know you’ll do us proud no matter how terrified you are, but you gotta promise me you’ll come home.’”

Ferris paused to cough for a few minutes, waving away the glass of water someone offered him. “I swore I’d do my best and we never spoke of it again. I didn’t run away, no matter how much the fear in my gut told me to disappear and avoid the whole mess. But when I got to London, one of the sergeants pulled me aside and told me not to make friends. He said making friends with the boys I served with would only make it hurt more when they died and do me no help in gettin’ home.

“It worked pretty well. I didn’t want to be there, so it made sense not to form any ties. I just wanted to do what I had to in order to go home. Then I found myself in a section of hell named Azzano and I learned what real fear was. But I kept to my plan. A lot of the fellows I served with had died right in front of me. No one else in my squad survived Azzano. I lay down every night asking my ma to forgive me for failing to follow her only order and go home to her. I’d all but given up. I watched what happened around me, but kept to myself, figuring it was just a matter of time.

“One night, this young idiot carrying a heater shield straight out of medieval times and dressed like Betsy Ross threw up on him ran down the line of cells and broke us all out. On the march outta there, I heard rumors that the idiot’s name was Steve and that he was friends with one of the prisoners. Strangest shit I’d ever heard, but I wasn’t bellyaching about it. I was outta the cell and pointed in the direction of a hot meal if I could just march myself a few dozen miles to claim
Ferris paused and pointed at Steve. “I still never got the story of why you had that heater shield with you, and when I’m done saying my peace, I’d ‘preciate you solving that mystery for me.”

When Steve nodded his agreement, Ferris cleared his throat and continued. “Things got downright surreal after that. I noticed that the others who had been in the same cell as Sgt. Barnes started going up and down the line, making it very clear that the rumors of friendship being the motivation for our rescue was gonna get Betsy Ross’s boyfriend in big trouble for going AWOL, so they had another plan. We were all to say that we were rescued by Captain America, the world’s first super soldier, deployed to change the impossible into the achievable. Anyone who had a problem with that fact would be answering to Sgt. Barnes’ cell mates, and things would be explained to them again, with fists if that helped us remember better.

“So here I am, a rescued POW still behind enemy lines just trying to figure out how the heck I’m gonna get home. And I watched this group of cellmates, from at least four different branches of service from three countries treating each other like brothers. They organized the march, letting Cap here stay with Sgt. Barnes. They pretended to be acting under Cap’s orders while doing said organizing, marching, and standing watch. Looking back, I know it’s because you didn’t have a clue ‘bout what you were doing.”

Steve grinned sheepishly, red in the cheeks as he shook his head.

“That’s what I figured. Anyhow, this group, out of loyalty to Barnes and probably in gratitude for getting our sorry asses out of there… well, the future Howling Commandos devised a plan. On that march, and in the weeks after, they taught Cap how to be a soldier. He taught them how to improvise and strategize in new ways. You do have a natural gift for strategy even if you still haven’t figured out the flag is to be flown, not worn.”

There was a rumble of laughter at that gentle dig.

“At least the new uniform has Kevlar in it,” Clint added from the back of the room.

“Good thing, since it still puts a target on his chest,” Specialist Martin added.

“You boys done?” Ferris asked with mock grumpiness. Once everyone was settled, he continued, “As I was saying, the group that became the Howling Commandos turned themselves into a family. Cap was their compass. Barnes was their heart. From the outside, I watched them laugh together, worry over each other, and conspire to keep everyone’s spirits up while facing impossible challenges. The army isn’t where I died, it’s where I started learning how to live. I started caring about more than my corner of the world. I decided to go against that good advice I got in training and let myself get close to the men I served with. Yes, it made the losses harder, but it also made surviving the days easier because I wasn’t alone. After Azzanno, I was never really alone again.

“When you and Sargent Barnes were gone, that family stayed together. Gutted as they were without their compass and their heart, they pushed on and got the job done, every time. If I’d needed proof they had the right way of it, that was it, right there. They pulled together and vowed to keep on going by using their grief to fuel their determination.

“Because of you, Captain Rogers, I got to keep my promise to my ma and I made it home. I found myself a wife who wanted the same kind of life I did and together, we’ve raised five kids and seen such wonders as a man walking on the moon. I’m glad you finally got to come home, too, Captain. It’s a shame it’s so late coming, and that Sergeant Barnes can’t be here with you. It’s still disconcerting to see you without him watching your back. But I know he’s watching over you,
singing the praises of your beloved for taking over his role in henpecking you. This morning, I just wanted to say thank you. Not just for pulling us out of Azzano, but for indirectly showing me a better way to live. I know my days are winding down, and I wanted to make sure I took the time to tell you to your face that you made a difference in my life.”

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Everyone waited patiently while Steve got up and hugged Ferris, helped him back to his seat, and returned to his place beside Megan.

Steve squirmed a bit, feeling all eyes on him. “What?” he asked them.

“You promised to explain the heater shield,” Megan explained. “Do try to keep up.”

Those sitting close enough to hear their exchange laughed, then settled again expectantly.

“I guess I need a microphone?” Steve half asked, half stated, then stood patiently while one was attached to the collar of his shirt. He slipped the accompanying battery pack onto his belt and sat down again.

“The shield became a symbol by accident,” he began. “On the U.S.O. tour, I was terrified of forgetting my lines, especially since they were constantly getting rewritten. Often, the writers switched things up after seeing how they played with a crowd, and kept on changing them right up to curtain time. I’ve got a pretty good memory, and the serum made it better, but I was nervous on top of being reluctant. The director, who was getting worried my lack of stage skills, on top of being fed up with the constant changes, had the idea of me carrying a prop I could tape notecards to. A gun didn’t fit with the image of a bloodless war they wanted to present, nor would it hide the scripted lines, so they rummaged around the props department came up with the shield. Eventually, the script was finalized, but by then, the handbills and posters showed Captain America with a shield, so I had to keep carrying it.

“I didn’t really have proper combat gear. I was between shows when Peggy told me about the 107th being decimated. From there, I went straight to Colonel Phillips’s tent, and he told me Bucky’s name was on the list of letters he’d written. At that moment, I was done following orders. I packed my coat and the little gear I had, figuring something was better than nothing. I didn’t even realize I’d brought the shield with me until I was on Howard’s plane. I knew he’d be in enough trouble without the army having evidence I’d been there, so I took it with me. It ended up being pretty useful. After we got back to camp, I never saw it again. Wish I knew what happened to it.

“It’s hanging on the wall of my study.” Peggy supplied. “I wasn’t about to let the bottom feeders get their hands on it. You have a better one now.”

“You’d know, seeing how you’re the one who proved it’s bulletproof.”

“You’re still sore about that, Steven? Honestly, the history books never did you justice when it came to your flair for drama.”

“Says the woman who unloaded four rounds into it because she was in a snit.”

“I’m English, Captain Rogers. We don’t have snits.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Peggy,”

“Where’d the new shield come from?” Ferris asked. He looked pleased to have finally head the story of the heater shield.
“Howard Stark.” Steve shook his head in fond memory. “That man just couldn’t sit still. He heard I’d found the heater shield useful in Azzanni and came up with all sorts of crazy prototypes. I pulled mine off the bottom shelf and was surprised how light it was. Once Peggy tested its resistance to bullets, I was sold on it.”

“What made you start throwing it around like a big Frisbee?” one of the teens wanted to know. Megan thought it was one of the Howling Commando’s grandchildren.”

“Drove Sergeant Barnes nuts when he did that, too.” Ferris commented, still connected to his microphone.

Steve looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t know that was common knowledge.”

“It wasn’t. But I happened to be nearby when he was yelling at you for doing it.”

“Which time?” Tripp called out. “Gramps told me it was an ongoing argument between you two.”

Megan noticed Steve’s cheeks flushing ever so slightly at the memories, but he avoided ducking his chin. Instead, he looked at the former soldiers he’d served with. “I blame the boys of the 107th. It’s all their fault, actually.”

“Do tell,” Megan said, nudging him gently with her shoulder.

“I saw a couple of fellows tossing a round pan back and forth one afternoon when they were bored and it got me to thinking. I took my shield out to the edge of camp and started messing around with it. I figured out pretty quickly that it was aerodynamic, and I thought it would be good to be able to toss it to a teammate who got pinned down. So, I practiced throwing it from different angles and distances.

“Bucky wasn’t mad about that. I got the Howling Commandos together and we practiced having me throw it to them so they would be used to catching it and ducking behind it. But one day, I was bored and was wondering how far into a tree trunk I could wedge it. As I messed around, I threw it a bit differently and it ricocheted off the tree instead. It got me wondering if I could somehow use that to my advantage.” Steve shrugged. “I got pretty good at it.”

“And Barnes was pissed every time you did that,” Tripp added.

Steve ducked his head a bit sheepishly. “Well, he wanted me to keep the shield on me so I’d have it for protection when I was taking point. He’d be livid if he saw what Thor, Black Widow, and I do with it now.”

Someone called out, “Care to clarify?”

“Better yet, can you demonstrate?” another guest requested.

Megan saw Steve look to Natasha, who nodded slightly at his inquiring look. “Right after lunch when Thor can join us,” he told them.

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“Okay, first off, it’s going to be just Thor and me in here,” Steve told the audience via the cameras from the sparring gym. He was dressed in his full uniform. It looked to Megan that Thor’s outfit was a bit less ornate than it had been the other times she had seen him, but hadn’t paid enough attention to be sure.
“Even though I’ll be pulling my punches and not throwing the shield as hard as I normally do, there is always a risk of hurting my teammates with this kind of practice. Thor, on the other hand, is a bit sturdier when it comes to taking a direct hit. He’ll be reacting like a non-enhanced person for demonstration purposes but in reality, there’s no way he’d take a fall with the forces I’ll be using. Even so, no one else is allowed in here for their own safety.”

“I’m ready,” Thor said, standing a few feet away with a nerf gun in his hands. “I have my primitive weapon with which I will destroy you after making speeches about my greatness.”

Steve tossed his shield at Thor’s torso, hitting him in the stomach and knocking him off his feet. Thor rolled with it, picking Steve’s shield up as he regained his feet and tossed it back to his teammate. “Thrown at full strength, the Captain could cut a mortal man in half. Such carnage is sometimes necessary, but I have seen him choose to knock men down rather than end their lives.”

“I don’t like killing people,” Steve agreed as he idly flipped his shield over in his hands. “But wars don’t always give us a choice. Another thing I can do is knock a person off their feet.” He threw the shield again, this time in such a way that it hit Thor low on his legs, then flipped upright as the edge caught. It knocked Thor off balance and he fell in a tucked roll that let him tumble right back onto his feet.

“Again, the good Captain is being gentle. I am also trained in how to fall safely and regain my footing immediately.” Thor nodded to Steve, who threw his shield towards the wall. It rebounded and hit Thor from behind. “Enough play. I call forth the robots to be my allies.”

Four padded pillars on wheels emerged from a closet and began to move about the room erratically. “Demonstrate your skills now, my warrior brother!” Thor called as he laughed and ran in a zig zag pattern that put the bots between the two men.

Steve threw his shield as Thor turned and began to shoot darts from his gun. Steve did his own duck and roll as his shield went straight at the first robot, knocking it over as it headed toward the second. From there, it rebounded, forcing the robot to tumble, and hit the wall before landing back in Steve’s hand. He jumped up, avoiding the darts Thor had sent toward his feet, knocking Thor down. The shield took out the forth robot as Steve kicked the last one over from the height of his leap.

The men clasped forearms as Steve helped Thor to his feet. “Want to play ball?”

“Indeed,” Thor answered. As they laughed together, hidden panels opened up in the bots. Telescoping rods extended and retracted once the bots were upright. “Line up, bots,” he ordered.

Steve laid his shield at his feet, painted side down. When the robots were all in a line, Thor was ready, he stomped on the edge. The shield flipped and rose into the air just as Thor took a swing with Mjolnir. The shield knocked the robots down like a set of dominos before skittering across the floor. It came to a halt in the corner.

“We discovered this next maneuver quite by accident when the Captain and I first met. I was in a temper and he told me to my hammer down. Instead, my temper leveled acres of forest. Brother Stark has reinforced this room to contain the shockwave. Robots, display your wares.”

Thor waited until Steve nodded his readiness before lifting his hammer over his head. Steve held up his shield, bracing for the blow. As the hammer struck, glass vases that each of the robots had extended on previously hidden platforms shattered. Tiny shards fell to the floor like dry leaves, which the robots began to gather from vacuum units in their bases.
“The glass gets melted down and used to make more targets,” Tony told the gathered guests. “Betcha you never thought brute force would be so impressive, did you?”

Several of the young people in the room were wide eyed but silent as they nodded their agreement. Megan smiled to herself. It was always fun to watch experts demonstrate their craft.

“Lady Natasha, are you ready to join us?” Thor called.

“If you’re done showing off your muscles,” she teased, gliding into the room with her predatory gait. “Extend platform B,” she said, and along the far wall, nearly twenty feet from the floor, a platform slid out and halted. It was no more than four square feet in size and looked despairingly tiny on the banquet room screens. “Thor, I’ll need a second step.”

“As you command,” he said, nodding regally before taking his place on the narrow end of the room, well away from the platform.

“Captain, I could use a boost.”

“Do you want some mock debris to launch from?”

She shook her head. “Just take a knee.” Smiling confidently, she crooked her finger and beckoned Steve to step follow her, halting him when they were only a handful of paces apart. She looked at the platform that was over Steve’s head, though he was about five feet from the wall. “Here is good.” She turned to the nearest camera. “We’ve done this before. The first time, it was just of the two of us when the Chitauri attacked New York. Adding Thor’s hammer came later, in practice. There are times I need to get high fast. If Iron Man or Thor are otherwise occupied and unable to give me a ride, I get a boost. In combat, I don’t have the luxury of setting this up with safety in mind. In practice, we avoid taking unnecessary risks. Captain Rogers is close enough to catch me if I miss today.”

Steve nodded to her that he was ready and she took another step back from him and bent her knees. “On my mark, Thor,” she said, watching him over her shoulder.

“As you command,” he replied.

“Now!”

Thor launched his hammer, throwing it straight across the room, well over their heads and a few feet below the platform. Once she had memorized the speed and trajectory, she turned to Steve and ran towards him. He dropped to one knee, holding his shield over his head. As she leapt onto it, he stood up, tossing her straight up. She stepped hard on the hammer as it flew past, using it to propel her up to the platform, which she stepped onto before turning and bowing with a flourish. Mjölnir flew in a wide arc back to Thor’s hand.

The banquet hall erupted in whistles and applause, which Jarvis broadcast to the training gym.

Steve put his shield on his back and held out his arms as he smiled broadly at Natasha. She allowed a corner of her mouth to turn up before she dove off the platform, tucked as she did a forward roll, and landed safely in Steve’s grasp.

“You three should take that act on the road,” Megan muttered, knowing Jarvis would relay her comment to them.

Steve shook his head slightly as he set Natasha on her feet. “What’s planned for this afternoon?” He ducked his head so Natasha could whisper in his ear, then turned again to the cameras. “It sure
sounds like fun to me. Junior Avengers, assemble! Line up at the banquet hall doors. Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner have activity sheets ready to distribute.”

A piercing whistle made Megan wince. “You heard the Captain,” Tony said, holding a stack of papers in his hand once he had their attention. “LegoFest is open access to everyone, two floors up. The sheets we’re passing out have two time blocks, so you can each do one activity plus LegoFest, two activities and no LegoFest—I have to add that skipping LegoFest is a crime that will make me weep openly— or all LegoFest. It’s your choice, obviously, but only an idiot would miss out on LegoFest.

“Did I mention that the activities are all led by Avengers, S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, or Stark Industries employees who volunteered their skills? We have string instrument practice with Agent Trip, hand to hand combat, ballet lessons with Black Widow, sign language instruction with Hawkeye, robot building with me and Dr. Banner, math puzzles, storytelling with embroidery with Thor, and a bunch of other stuff I’ve forgotten we planned for. Read the list, pick your favorite, and go build with Lego bricks. Drag your adults with you so they don’t get bored talking about the awful old days. So, shoo! Get your papers and get out of the banquet hall. Locations are all on the sheets, ask any staff members if you have questions, and have fun!”

Megan laughed as she watched Tony start folding he sheets into paper airplanes that he then sent flying towards different kids who were standing in line.

“He’s like a kid,” Steve said as he put his arms around her waist. She startled at his touch.

“I came in the back way,” he told her before she could ask. “Am I supposed to be doing a class, too?”

Megan waited, watching his face as Jarvis answered via the com in his ear. Steve smiled and shook his head. “Jarvis said I’m to mingle and observe. Care to join me?”

“Oh you change out of your uniform. I’ll meet you at LegoFest.” She kissed him briefly, then swatted him on the backside as she went to join the other adults who were heading towards the doors.

Chapter End Notes

The advice Ferris received was inspired by an interview of Claude C. Woodring, veteran of the D-Day invasion of Omaha beach. You can read it here: http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.05288/

I have nothing but deep respect for Mr. Woodring and what he did in service to his country. Nor do I judge him for keeping his walls up and getting through. It worked for him and many others, I’m sure. In the same circumstances, I might very well have done the same thing. I was especially struck because it goes against the stereotypical narrative of “brothers in arms” being “brothers forever.” Every soldier is an individual and every individual finds his own ways to cope. We diminish them by treating them all as interchangeable parts in a romanticized narrative of our own design. That said, Claude’s coping mechanism wasn’t going to be of use to me in the story given what I wanted to achieve. So I asked myself what might happen if a different person were given the same advice, then thrown into Steve’s orbit after surviving Azzano. I envision Ferris surreptitiously watching the Howling Commandos as much
as he could, while continuing to keep his head down and not drawing attention to himself. The more he watched, the more he questioned how well the advice he had been given was really helping him. In those same circumstances, I think Claude would have continued to keep to himself and I absolutely respect that. Ferris chose a different path, because I asked him to.
Megan smiled to herself as she watched two young ladies argue near the doors out of the room.

“I’m telling you, that hammer seemed to violate the laws of physics! Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. That’s not negotiable. When Black Widow stepped on it and pushed off, the hammer’s trajectory should have changed by a lot. It didn’t and I want to know why! Isn’t there a video we can watch of it? Maybe I missed something.” Tugging gently on Steve’s hand, she headed towards the pair. Coleen used her hands like punctuation as she made her argument.

“Coleen, let it go. We’ll watch videos later. Right now, let’s pick an activity we both like,” the other teen said as she rolled her eyes fondly. Giving up on Coleen, she turned her attention to the printed sheets, clearly accustomed to Coleen’s animated manner.

Megan nodded a greeting to the pair, glancing at Tasha’s name-tag as she did so. “I love a good science debate. Can I help?”

“How many hours of video can you produce for Coleen to analyze?”

“I can do better. We have a few minutes, so let’s consult with the experts.” Megan scanned the room, “Thor? Will you join us, please?”

Thor extricated himself from the conversation he was having and headed towards them. “Lady Megan, how may I assist you?”

“Coleen and her friend Tasha have some questions about Mjölnir and the laws of physics as we understand them here on Midgard.”

“Aye. She is a favorite topic of analysis by Brother Anthony as well,” Thor said as he toyed with the hammer in his grasp. “We should include him in this discussion.” Thor bowed slightly and gestured to the two girls, “After you.”

Giggling, they led Thor over to where Tony was showing off his new red and gold socks to anyone who would listen. “Custom made, right here in the tower. Can you believe it? They fit perfectly. How’d he do that?” Tony looked up as the group approached. “I didn’t do it. Unless you have video. Then I did, but for a good reason. Am I in trouble?”

“Nice socks, Tony.” Megan said, then gestured with her free hand at the girls. “Coleen and Tasha have some questions about Mjölnir and physics after seeing Black Widow use it as a stepping stool.”

“Don’t get me started. The Prince of Lightening claims it’s magic. The Chaperone says arguing is bad for team morale. I say it’s rigged. The whole ‘chosen one’ thing is clearly a ploy to make me question my sanity.”

“According to Newton’s third law, it has to change trajectory when someone steps on it.”

Tony pointed to Coleen. “Point to Gryffindor.”

Tasha shook her head. “My science teacher says magic is a name for science that we don’t yet
understand. What would our ancestors think about things like microwave ovens and cell phones?”

“So, all magic is science?” Thor countered.

“Here they go,” Steve murmured quietly to Megan.

Coleen planted her hands on her hips and glared up at Thor. “Do you have a better explanation?”

“Mjölnir moves only for my hand. Since no one else can move her, a teammate’s light step does naught to change her path as she soars thorough the air.”

“What if it’s following an unseen path, sort of like being blown by a solar wind?”

Tasha’s eyes lit up at Coleen’s suggestion. “But more like a river, confined in its banks. The boat can’t leave the river, but goes where the current takes it.”

“So why does it only affect Mjölnir?” Tony asked, clearly intrigued by the idea the girls had proposed, if only because they were brainstorming without restraint.

“It’s not from Earth. Maybe it’s made of an element not found here and that invisible force only affects that element?”

“It pleases my metal-wearing teammate to see you so determined to reduce Mjölnir to less than what she is. Nevertheless, the answer is quite simple. It is magic and the constraints of the spell King Odin placed upon her that guide her flight.”

“I hate to break up the party, but you all have places to be,” Steve reminded them.

Tony sighed dramatically. “See why I call him the Chaperone? Find me later. If we run out of time, email me after you are home. I’ll make sure lightening boy here lets me take Mjölnir to the lab so we can film its path from a million angles while we toss weights at it and knock it off course.”

“You may try,” Thor said, beaming. “I look forward to the day. For now, the Captain is correct that I have a session to lead and must hasten to my station. It was a pleasure meeting you both, Lady Coleen and Lady Tasha.” With a slight bow, he departed, his cape swishing dramatically in his wake.

“My suit doesn’t do that,” Tony said wistfully as he watched Thor head to the elevator, then wait while Jarvis summoned the car.

Steve squeezed Megan’s hand as he shook his head. “No, you tend to clomp around like someone banging on pots and pans.”

“But I can fly. All you have is a giant Frisbee.” Tony was walking backwards in front of them as they all followed Thor.

“Don’t discount the serum.”

“The serum’s benefits are negated by the uniform. What good are washboard abs if no one gets to ogle them?”

“That’s my job and I take it seriously,” Megan said as she winked at the girls, who were not sure what to make of the Avengers’ banter. “They can’t help it. It’s called the W.H.Y chromosome for a reason. I don’t know how Black Widow puts up with the lot of them.”

“She loves us for our charming personalities.”
“That’s Pepper’s job, Tony,” Megan chided him.

“I always figured it was best to simply be grateful and not question her motivations,” Steve said quietly.

“Boohoo-ring!”

Megan rolled her eyes and looked at the girls. “I’m sorry I’ve destroyed whatever mystique remained regarding the Avengers.”

Tasha shook her head slowly, looking from Thor, to Steve, and then Tony. “It’s okay. I think I like the truth better.”

“Wise words for one so young,” Thor said approvingly. “Have you selected your first activity?”

“Agent Triplett is going to work with a bunch of us who play string instruments. I’m not missing the chance to hear him play the cello.” Coleen was practically bursting with excitement.

“And you, Lady Tasha?”

“I was interested in the tour of the garage. I’ve heard Mr. Stark has a Rolls Royce Phantom in his collection.”

“I do, but it’s in California. However, there’s a McLaren 650S Spider\(^1\) downstairs you might find interesting. Happy’s got orders to give anyone interested a ride around the block in the car of their choice.”

“Mr. Stark, I love you,” Tasha said breathlessly before bolting for the elevator.

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“Now I know why Tony loves Lego bricks so much,” Steve said wryly as he approached the life-sized Ironman brick statue placed near the entrance to the room.\(^2\)

“At least this one is quiet.”

Steve laughed. “Until Tony gives them an upgrade. It’s really amazing that this was built out of bricks.”

They wandered a bit, admiring statues of everything from the Brooklyn Bridge to Lightning McQueen. Each seemed more impressive than the last, but nothing compared to the one standing by the exit to the statue area.

“Steve, I want a picture of you with this,” Megan called to him as he kept circling the Brooklyn Bridge statue, marveling over the details.

“What? Oh.”

Megan took out her phone and waved Steve closer to the Captain America statue. “Remind me to get a real camera later and do this again.”

“I’ll try not to,” Steve said, though he was smiling as he struck a pose identical to that of the statue. “Or maybe I will and bring my shield with me.”

“I might insist on the full uniform, just for comparison. We’ll do the same with Tony.”
“Okay. We’ll have Jarvis remind us,” he agreed, both of them knowing Jarvis had heard them and would indeed provide a reminder. “Ready to see the rest?”

“I am. I hear they have a huge pile of Legos.”

“Lego, or Lego bricks, not Legos,” Megan corrected as she took his hand. “Lego is a brand name. Form the right habit now and you’ll be spared the lecture from the grammar police if you ever make that slip in public.”

Steve nodded. “Got it. But I don’t really think—”

Megan looked at him out of the corner of her eye and smiled at his reaction to seeing dozens of kids and adults sitting on a huge pile of bricks as if they were playing on a large sand dune. Most of the kids were digging through the pile, searching for just the right brick for the project that lay in their laps or was held aloft while they dug with their other hand. One was trying to make an angel, lying on his back as he swept his arms and legs through the pile as if it were snow. And a couple were just sitting on the heap in pure joy, gazing about at the riches of Lego all around them.

“I can’t help but think about how much money we’re looking at. Given the cost of even a small Lego set, those kids are literally rolling in a huge pile of money.”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded as he slowly resumed his forward walk. “But you can’t play with money.”

“Very true.” She squeezed his hand then gently pushed him forward. “I’m going to wander around a bit and try to take it all in. Go play.”

Leaving Steve to join the kids on the Lego pile, she turned her attention to the numerous displays. There were scale models of everything from the Brooklyn bridge to Santa’s home at the north pole. One group had built a replica of an LST and created a diorama of the ship pulling up to Normandy beach.

Many of the displays had been provided by local Lego groups, who got together on a regular basis so their inner child could come out to play. In their hands, simple brick construction was elevated to an art form. It was no wonder Tony was so fond of the product. Between the programmable robots, vibrant colors, and endless possibilities for construction, his engineering mind was free to explore rather than invent things from scratch.

All around her, the kids were building and playing. Some were making cars to race on a ramp. Others were adding to an art gallery where each entry was a single flat plate decorated in any way the builder chose. Adults were working alongside them, offering suggestions to improve stability or digging in bins for the brick of particular color or shape that the youngster insisted was necessary.

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When Megan finally made her way back to Steve, he was sitting on top of the pile of bricks as he helping a young boy put the finishing touches on his skyscraper. Pepper was sitting beside him, tablet in hand and clearly talking about something serious while Steve continued to help with the skyscraper.

She watched, curious, as Pepper tapped one last entry into the tablet and tried to stand. In heels, no less. Steve, ever the gentleman, leapt to his feet and offered a stable hand up to Pepper. Once the C.E.O. was safely on solid ground, he turned back to share one more encouraging comment with the boy.
“What’s wrong?” Megan asked as she approached. Pepper’s manner had been too serious and it set off warning bells.

“A housekeeper at the hotel sold the story of this weekend to the press. We figure she saw one of the books. She’s been fired and hotel manager is falling over himself trying to apologize. Pepper wanted my permission to release a press statement. I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“You worked so hard to keep this a secret.”

Megan looked heavenward, wondering when Steve would accept her role as a public figure. “That was so it would be a surprise for you. There’s no way this was going to be kept under wraps forever. It doesn’t matter now. The press can’t get inside, just about everyone here is invested in treating you like a person, and the weekend is almost over.”

Megan held up two Lego figures when his body language said he was ready to argue. “Did you know that you and Superman were fighting crime together? I thought it was neat that you have a removable helmet that can be replaced with hair. Even Lego knows there is a person inside the costume.”

Steve took the figures from her. “Superman, huh?”

“Batman, too. Lex Luthor doesn’t stand a chance. According to the kids, your shield blocks Kryptonite radiation. Too bad the Joker and the Penguin didn’t consider that before attempting a bank robbery. You got there just in time,” Megan said, gesturing over her shoulder with her thumb. “The Bank of Metropolis is safe once more. Commissioner Gordon wanted to thank you personally, so I was sent fetch you.”

“I can’t believe I’m a Lego figure.”

“All of the Avengers are. There has been some griping about the lack of diversity on the team, by the way. Everyone’s white and there is only one woman. The girls are grumping and decided that Catwoman was an Avenger, too. Wonder Woman verified her intentions with the golden lasso so you know you can trust her. That set off a lively discussion about their attire being unnecessarily sexy. Why does Black Widow have a skin-tight suit when you get to wear baggy pants?”

“Natasha can wear whatever she wants for her suit.” He turned the figures over in his hands as they walked. “I have an idea.”

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Clutching a Stark tablet in one hand, a young woman dressed in a dark red tunic and slacks strode over towards Megan. Her navy-blue headscarf was covered in tiny Avengers logos, including a green fist for the Hulk and a red hourglass for Black Widow “I’m Lilly and part of the legal team handling trademarks and copyrights for Stark Industries and the Avengers. Jarvis said you wanted some help.”

Megan shook hands with Lilly, grinning broadly. “I just have to say how much I love your scarf. I have a feeling it’s a popular item.”

“Thank you. It just came on the market, but I think it’s going to be a hit.”

“Steve is talking to one of the Lego builders. He’s got an idea for a custom kit of the Howling Commandos to pass out to the kids he visits in the hospitals. Before the boys get too carried away,
I wanted to get some expert advice so they stay grounded in reality.”

“A Lego Howling Commandos playset currently sounds intriguing. I see why Jarvis pinged me in response to your request for help. One of the things I do at SI is decide which Avenger products actually make it to market. We get a lot of requests, but I’m rather particular about selecting products that are appropriate for their image. Lego bricks are both wholesome and high quality, so I don’t foresee us having any problems. The company has been fantastic in all of our interactions.”

“What happens to the profits?”

“Captain Rogers didn’t tell you?”

Megan shook her head. “He may not know.”

Lilly tapped on her tablet for a moment. “Good point. I’ll be sure to address that with him shortly. I’ve been hoping to get him more involved in decisions about how the Captain America image is used, so this idea of his will give him a good opportunity to get to know me. For now, let’s see what they’ve come up with.”

Steve and Jason were sitting at a small table. Steve had a sketchbook open and was drawing his ideas while Jason held up different sized base plates. “We can use hinged plates so the box lies flat on a hospital tray when it’s open” Jason said, standing up. “Let me go get a sample. Be right back.”

Steve rose as Megan and Lilly approached. Some habits were never going to get trained out of him. Besides, Megan thought it only added to his charm since he combined his manners with relentless advocacy for equality.

“Captain Rogers, it’s a pleasure. My name is Lilly and I’m part of Stark Industries’ legal team. I understand you have a new product line you want to develop.”

Megan pulled extra chairs over as Jason came trotting back with a handful of base plates and hinged bricks.

Jason laid the hinged bricks down so they could all see them.

“What will hold the corners together when the sides are folded up?” Steve asked.

“How about the flagpole type rods? Those could act like pins on the hinge of a door. And when the box is open, those rods could double as fence rails or flagpoles.” Megan suggested.

Jason raised an eyebrow. “You know your bricks.”

“I have nephews. The baseplates are great for storage, but you need a smaller bin that can fit inside the case when closed, but will work as a loose brick container during play. I always grab plastic ware from the kitchen when helping my nephews build from their new sets.”

“How about we design a small mountain that is really a box with a rounded lid? If we keep it wide and shallow, it will fit inside the larger container. During play, it adds to the terrain and saves parents from chasing bricks around on the floor.”

“I like it. Now what about villains? Can we come up with some figures that represent the different diseases these kids are facing?”

“Don’t limit it to diseases, Captain. What are the most feared procedures? Needleman can represent syringes and blood draws, for example,” Lilly suggested.
Jason nodded. “I’m sure the team will love coming up with options for you to pick from. You said you wanted the Howling Commandos, including Colonel Philips and Agent Carter, as well as a customizable figure to represent each patient? What sort of a price point are you thinking of?”

“I have no idea what a fair price is for me to pay.”

“Captain, if I may?” Lilly asked softly, putting a gentle hand on Steve’s forearm. He nodded and Lilly continued. “I get the impression you want these sets to be just for the kids. The problem with that is the hardcore collectors will start pressuring families to sell these figures. Faced with huge medical expenses, in cases where a child dies, some parents will make the logical decision to sell for a price that will turn all our stomachs.

“We can kill two birds here with some planning. Assuming we can secure the rights to the Howling Commandos—and I have little doubt we will though it may take some time—I suggest that we make the basic set available for purchase though the Lego catalog and website. We can set it up so all of your profits go directly to the foundation set up in your parents’ names. In turn, that foundation can be a source of the funding to purchase the sets at cost.

“The sets you’ll get will be different in a few ways. You’ll have a kit to help them each assemble a figure that represents them, a pair of villains of their choice, and a small vehicle, say a tank or a motorcycle from a menu of three or so choices. Even if each element is available online, the process of assembling that child’s set will be an individualized experience at their bedside. The public and collectors can support this endeavor with their purchases rather than being predators targeting families in a vulnerable state. Advertise the fund and add a donation markup to the commercially sold sets. The higher price can be emphasized by the marketing team as a way for the general public to support the purchase of these sets for kids in hospitals. If it takes off like I think it will, these sets are going to be in hospitals across the nation. We can set up a way to deputize people who can nominate kids into the H.H.C. on your behalf.”

“She’s right,” Jason said, looking at Lilly with a bit of awe. “This could be huge.”

“We’re in Stark Tower. Thinking big is what we do best.” Lilly turned her attention to Steve. “Captain, is this something you’re comfortable pursuing? If you prefer, we can keep it small like you originally suggested.”

Steve shook his head. “No, you’re right. There’s always going to be someone who misses the point of a toy intended make a hospital stay less awful. I won’t set these parents up for that sort of pressure. They’re dealing with too much as it is. Tony and Pepper trust you, so I’d be a fool to ignore your advice. If you think it’s going to go national, or even global, let’s set it up to succeed from day one. If you’re wrong, we only lost some time and effort to planning. What do you need from me?”

“Nothing at the moment. I need to do some research about who, if anyone, has the rights to the Howling Commandos and their likenesses. If it’s up to the families, I suspect we’ll have no trouble at all getting permission. If it’s S.H.I.E.L.D. or the army, it might be more challenging, but still doable. I’ll have someone on the team get in touch with the Lego corporate office and ensure that Jason here is given full credit for his contributions. We’ll put together a comprehensive plan and then you and I can sit down to review it and address any issues or concerns you have.

“As I told Megan a little while ago, I’m rather protective of the Avengers when it comes to marketing. We won’t green light this until we’re sure we have it right and you are comfortable with the details.”

“Don’t forget to include crutches, wheelchairs, hats, and missing limbs when it comes to the Lego
figures the kids pick to represent themselves,” Megan added, looking over the sketches Steve had made of possible Lego figure designs for the Howling Commandos. It always amazed her how quickly he could sketch ideas when he was inspired. Her mind kept going back to B.J. and how he might have played with such a toy.

“I like the way you think. If I have any say in the matter, this is going to be the most universally accessible set of figures Lego has ever released. We’re going to make sure each character has a distinguishing tactile feature so even visually impaired kids can identify them. Whether it’s a bowler hat or a radio, we’ll find a way to represent each member of the original team as a unique individual. I’m also going to have someone research what sizes hospital trays typically come in so we can ensure that the case doesn’t hang over the edges and cause frustration.”

Jason looked at her with a bit of awe, “I’ve fallen in love with your mind. Marry me?”

Lilly laughed. “I’m sorry, Jason. I’m already in a relationship. But if you’re interested, I know someone else at on the Stark Industries legal team who is actively dating and getting frustrated with it all. I’d be happy to introduce you.”

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When Megan and Steve made their way back to the main room for dinner, there was a new flower arrangement gracing the buffet table. Nestled in the center was a red, white, and blue pillar candle that had a yellow ribbon tied around it, just above the flowers and far away from the flame. She gave Steve a questioning look and he just smiled a bit but said nothing.

After dinner, when they were all stuffed with food and sleepy with relaxation, the wait staff began to pass out small white candles to everyone. Each had a yellow ribbon tied around the plastic base that would catch any dripping wax. The youngest children were handed battery powered candles that lit up with the flip of a switch. But like the wax candles, they were adorned with a yellow ribbon.

Megan turned her own candle over in her hands. A small metal tag listing the dates of the weekend gathering was attached to the ribbon, right beneath the bow. Steve had clearly had an idea of how he wanted to end the weekend and likely enlisted Jarvis to help him. Taking ownership of the gathering’s close seemed like a fitting end and she sat back to watch it unfold.

Steve tapped a spoon on a drinking glass twice and the room fell into silence, all eyes focused on him as he stood there, looking around at all of them. Megan felt a lump in her throat as she watched. There was such joy on his face and a sense of peace about him she’d never seen.

“The most frustrating thing about this weekend has been not having enough time to talk to everyone,” he began. “I want to sit down with each and every one of you for about a week and talk about everything going on in your lives. You carved out time in your schedules and traveled considerable distances in most cases, and I’ve barely done more than say hello to some of you.”

“That’s why it’s all written down in scrapbooks for you, Cap.” someone called from a distant table. Megan had no idea who it was.

“I know, and I’m grateful for that, but it’s not the same. My missing mail has been located and I’ll be trying to answer all of that in the coming weeks. There’s quite a bit, so please be patient with me as I answer it all by hand. Right now, I just want to thank you all for making this weekend so special.

“I’ll never understand exactly why Peggy and Dr. Erskine picked me for Project Rebirth, but I’ll
always be grateful they did. The Howling Commandos were something special, a team born out of circumstances none of us could have imagined. We became a family and I’m gratified beyond words to know that those bonds endured after Bucky and I were gone. I wish they could all be here, but I know I can speak for all of them in stating how proud we are of the legacy you’ve given us. Friday night, Peggy told me it was about time I got to know the family I hadn’t met yet and that describes this weekend pretty well.”

He paused and looked at the unlit candle in his hands for a moment. “White light has all the colors of the rainbow. To me, white holds all that diversity without calling attention to itself. It holds that truth inside. We’re a diverse group, and that makes us stronger. The yellow ribbon is for those who can’t be here with us today. And the fire? It’s the love and hope and goodness that got us all through some dark times and made the good times better. Thank you for coming this weekend to remind me that I’m not as alone as I thought I was when I first woke up from my nap in the ice.”

Steve grinned impishly as he walked over to the red white and blue candle that had been burning in the center of a floral arrangement all through dinner and lit his own candle as he said, “Avengers, assemble.”

With a few eye rolls from Tony and Clint, a raised eyebrow from Natasha, and genuine, soft smile from Bruce, the Avengers lit their candles from Steve’s and dispersed to spread the flame to each table. Megan could barely see through her tears as Steve lit candles that had been placed in stands on a table well away from the guests who were using oxygen compressors. Those stands had names attached to them and she heard him share that fact with their intended recipients. Soon, the whole room was aglow in soft candlelight.

One of the veterans stood up and started to sing in a soothing baritone. “When fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” As he finished the first phrase, Steve and several others erupted into laughter. Jarvis, ever alert, played the accompanying music over the speakers and pretty soon, everyone who knew the song—mostly Steve and the other veterans—was standing up and singing it. Several glasses were raised and pointed looks directed at Steve as they continued, “Fools rush in where wise men never go.”

Megan tried and failed miserably to hold back her laugh. That was Steve, through and through.

Grinning impishly, he held out his hand to her and pulled her to her feet. She stood there, his arm around her shoulder as she listened to them sing. The room was a blurry vision of flickering candlelight. Listening to the lyrics, it became clear that it was a love song even though it was also being used to tease Steve.

When they reached the phrase, “When we met, I felt my life begin,” Steve turned to her and mouthed ‘again.’

The last strains of music hung in the air for a moment before the room burst into applause and everyone began to extinguish their candles. Megan’s candle was still hot to the touch when Steve turned to her and kissed her softly. “Thank you for making this possible,” he whispered in her ear.

She nodded, too overcome for words. He took her hand in his gentle fingers and guided her towards the double doors closest to the center of the room. Together, they watched as individuals said good-bye to each other, often hugging and wiping away tears, before joining a line that would take them past Steve and Megan on their way out.

It was surreal, how everyone present had somehow agreed on doing so without a word. The minutes flew by, even though every single guest got a personalized thank you from Steve. And
then it was just the two of them standing in an empty room. The weekend she’d worked so hard to give him was over.

Steve held her face gently between his hands and looked her in the eye. “I don’t have the words to tell you how much this weekend means to me. I know you had help, but it has your fingerprints all over it. I can’t repay this. I can’t even try. But if, in our years together, I can make you feel even a tenth as loved and appreciated is I feel right now, I’ll be satisfied.”

Chapter End Notes

1 All car references get credited to my son. He’s into all things automotive and it was obvious that he was the one to ask when I need the names of cool, expensive cars that Tony Stark would want in his collection. If cars are your thing, I hope you enjoy his choices. I just nodded like I understood what he was talking about when he got all excited and started telling me about them.
2 http://www.bitrebels.com/geek/iron-man-lego-build/
3 1 Inspired by this: https://gizmodo.com/incredible-500-000-piece-lego-recreation-of-famous-worl-731108588 LST landing in the Pacific
Megan leaned into Steve’s embrace and buried her face in his neck. “I hate this.”

“I know. But you’ll be glad in the morning.”

“Stop making sense,” she whined as he gave her a squeeze and let her go. Yawning, she slid into the limo and moved across so the others could get in, too. She leaned forward and watched as Steve gave both Natasha and Clint hugs before they got in beside her.

With a final wave, Steve closed the door and nodded to Happy, who was driving the trio across the state line into New Jersey where a small, little known S.H.I.E.L.D. outpost housed several quinjets. Steve was staying behind in New York for the night so as to enjoy an early morning breakfast with those guests who were flying out Monday morning. Megan had to be at work, as did Natasha, who said she was heading out of town on assignment by mid-morning. Clint had offered to pilot them home, though he said nothing about his own work schedule. Megan leaned against the window and watched as Happy took them away from the land of skyscrapers and opulence back to mundane reality.

“Don’t look so glum. Staying over tonight would mean being up at stupid thirty and starting the week exhausted,” Clint chided, nudging her foot with his own. “Flying a quintet directly from Avengers’ tower to the Triskelion can’t change that.”

Natasha leaned forward a bit and reached across Clint to touch Megan’s hand. “You did a good thing in planning this weekend.”

“Thanks.” Megan turned away from the window at last and looked at the two Avengers. “Thank you for all your help making it a success. I wish I’d had the time to visit your ballet session.”

“Jarvis has video.” Natasha shrugged slightly. “It was fun.” She hesitated a moment before adding, “It’s nice to share that skill with people who understand the joy.”

Megan could only assume that was a vague reference to how Natasha must have been trained. Clint was keeping his expression carefully blank, which only reinforced the idea. “The enthusiasm of a child for learning is something our society often manages to kill early on. I think that you bought them some time, since ballet with the Black Widow gives them bragging rights. The boys, especially, need that boost to protect them from teasing.”

“Kids can be cruel,” Clint said, sighing heavily.

“So can adults.” Megan nudged him. “What gave you the idea of building bat boxes and mixing that with sign language instruction?”

“As far as signing, there’s too much to learn to do much in one session, but with a couple of the kids being fluent, it seemed like a good way to mix things up. I put them to work helping me with demonstrating a few common phrases, plus sharing info about bats, and then mostly used the time to demonstrate how you can sign and talk at the same time. Well, if you have a bit of practice. I like working with my hands and bats are cool. Plus, they need the help. White nose syndrome is hitting them hard. Getting a few more boxes into operation can only help.”

“Assuming their parents are on board with it.”

Clint smiled at her. “Jarvis gave each of the kids a list of local places that said they’d welcome an
instillation since not all of them have a place to put them on their property. Between the golf courses, local parks, and a few barn owners, we’ve got them all covered.”

“You continue to surprise me. What other secrets are you keeping?”

Clint smiled wickedly. “If I told you, they wouldn’t be secrets.”

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“Megan, please call me when you wake,” the email from Jarvis read after she turned on her tablet early Monday morning.

That didn’t sound good. Worried, she picked up her phone and called the tower while her tea was brewing in the microwave.

“Jarvis, what’s wrong?”

“Ferris Roosevelt passed way in his sleep overnight. The presence of the coroner at the hotel early this morning attracted media attention, and Steve has already given a statement to the press that he’ll be escorting Ferris and his family home. Funeral plans have not yet been set, but based on the timing, I predict the funeral will be held this coming Saturday. Steve wishes me to tell you that he is coping well and will phone you this evening once you are home from work.”

“We just can’t catch a break, can we?” Megan said softly as she sank onto a stool. “Do you think he’s holding up? Or do I need to beg off of work and fly out with him?”

“You should continue with your normal plans and join Steve at the funeral this weekend. I’ll make the travel arrangements. Thor has already told Steve that he will be escorting Warrior Ferris to his final resting place, and I believe his presence will provide Steve with the necessary support in your absence. I have also taken the liberty of alerting Agents Romanoff and Barton. Agent Barton will be driving you to work today and will discuss your escort home with Director Fury. Before you object, I will remind you that your safety is still a concern. A continued escort will provide Steve with peace of mind.”

“Okay. I’m not going to argue with you this early in the morning. How long until Clint gets here?”

“He asked me to notify him when you were awake and said he could be there in thirty minutes, though he preferred at least forty-five so he could, I quote, ‘Properly caffeinate.’”

“If he gives me forty-five minutes, I’ll have a pot of coffee ready for him.”

“I shall tell him. Have a good day, Megan. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have further concerns, though I do believe Steven is in good hands.”

“Thanks, J.”

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“Where is Captain Rogers?”

Megan looked up from the scientific paper she was reading and mentally took a deep breath as Director Fury pushed her door fully open and barged into her office. “According to CNN, he’s on a farm not far from Harper, Iowa.”

“Don’t get cute with me.”
Megan laid her pen down on her notepad and folded her hands. “There’s nothing cute about it. I haven’t even talked to him since last evening but I know how to operate the radio, a TV, and use the internet. Frankly, I find it galling that you have the nerve to come demand that I tell you where he is as if I were his mother or his keeper. If you have a problem with Steve escorting one of his solders home for the last time, you need to pull up your big boy pants and take it up with him.”

She picked up her pen and bent over her desk once more, trying to find where she had left off reading and connecting it to the current project she was evaluating. Sensing him standing over her still, she made a cryptic note on her tablet and highlighted a topic sentence, pretending she was focused on her work.

“As you were, Doctor,” she heard him say before he swept out of her office.

“Lord, spare me from testosterone poisoning,” she muttered under her breath. At least she had a good story to share with Natasha later.

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“How are you really, Steve?”

His sigh was audible over the phone.

“That good, hmm?” she asked as she flipped her pillow over and turned off the lights. The bed was too big and empty tonight.

“It’s just… I’m not ready for this. I’m still trying to wrap my head around the passage of time most days. And now he’s gone.”

“It’s going to be hard. Tell me this. Is it harder to have talked to him? Or harder when you never got that chance, like with Katherine Wells?”

He laughed bitterly. “When you put it like that…”

“Do you need me there?”

“No, I’m okay. And Thor is surprisingly good at managing this whole situation.”

“He’s a thousand years old, a veteran, and heir to the throne. If he were incompetent, I’d be worried. I saw him on the news earlier giving the press a stern talking to.”

Steve laughed. “We had to talk him into putting a bridle on the horse so the media folk wouldn’t freak out more. He kept saying he didn’t need such complex aides for a retired plow horse in need of exercise.”

“Yeah, but it was really great to watch him riding bareback with another mare on a lead rope while he lectured the media on respecting boundaries. I suspect he rode those horses out there just to be intimidating. What breed of horse are they, do you know?”

“Um… I think someone said a Suffolk? I asked because I knew you’d ask me. All I know is they have feet the size of dinner plates and heads longer than my forearm.”

“That’s typical for draft horses. I’m just having a hard time picturing Thor mucking stalls.”

“I’m not, though he did take off his cape for that. He also milked the resident cows and put me to work repairing the chicken coop. Some of the roof tiles were loose. At least I knew how to churn
the butter without being taught.”

“It sounds like you’re both being useful. That can help all of you.” She fought back a yawn and snuggled more deeply under the covers.

“It just doesn’t feel like enough, you know?”

“It never does. But just being there says a lot to the family. You know that.”

“We should make progress getting the farm ready for fall this week. Lots of little jobs need to be done and Thor went around making a list of stuff Ferris’s wife didn’t notice or didn’t want to mention.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Surprisingly well. Bess told me she did a lot of her grieving already as she watched Ferris’ health decline the last few months. All she wanted was for him to make it to New York since he wanted to go so badly. Since he got that, she said she’s at peace with it all. She said farm life taught her death is normal.”

“That may be, but it doesn’t sound like it’s really hit her yet.”

“It looks like that from the outside. But talking to her? I think she’s really been preparing for this for so long it’s a relief it finally happened, if that makes sense.”

“Wow. I… I can’t imagine.”

“At least she gets to stay here. One of their grandsons is taking the farm over. He didn’t come to New York, so you didn’t meet Jake. He did two tours in Afghanistan and can’t face travel or the city. He’s a good kid. His contract is up next month and he didn’t re-up. Jake and his wife had been talking with Ferris and Bess about moving out here and taking over. Seems like this cinched the deal for all of them.”

“Does he know anything about farming?”

“Nope.” Steve laughed again. “Well, other than basic chores he did during summer visits. But like Thor told him, manual labor is a healthy refuge from nightmares, and there is always something to do. The neighbors have already offered to help teach them what they need to know. I can think of worse places to raise a kid.”

“They have children?”

“Two girls, four and six years old. We kept them busy for about an hour just gathering eggs and petting the barn cats. Thor and I decided we’re going to fence in around the back of the house so they don’t have to worry about the little ones heading out into the pasture by themselves. I figure Thor can use Mjinor to sink the fence posts faster than anything.”

“I love the image.” Megan sighed. “Farm life sounds idyllic until you think about all the work involved.”

“Mm.” Steve said. “Growing up, all we thought about was work.”

Megan stretched under the covers and rolled onto her side. “True.” She heard a horse nicker in the background. “Where are you right now?”
“In the barn loft. Thor and I are bunking out here. They have a house full of people and with all the press attention, neither of us wants to leave the property overnight. It’s not like there are a lot of hotels nearby, either.”

She paused at that, unsure of what to say. It was just so like him.

“It’s warm and dry. It’s no big deal.”

“Maybe not to you.”

“You think our beds were comfortable back in the day?”

“I guess I really never thought about it. I figured in the war, you slept in tents or on the ground. I never considered what sort of beds you and your mom had when you were growing up.”

“Bed. We shared.”

“Oh, bed. Tell me about it. How big was it?” She heard him shift in the hay.

“No comment about the sharing?” he finally asked.

Megan shrugged, though he couldn't see it. “Different time, different rules. I’m sure it helped you both stay warm, though it definitely had the potential for embarrassment in your teenage years.”

“Don’t remind me,” he laughed, his voice low. “About the size of a twin bed, I figure. Wood frame. The cotton mattress was lumpy and hard, but definitely an upgrade from the straw filled one we had when I was younger. We layered them and with both of them together, it was pretty comfortable. Best of all, when it was super cold, we slept between them and stayed warm.”

“When people talk about the good old days, I think they forget those details.”

“Yeah. No one mentions the outdoor privies and other such joys.”

“But you still miss your mom. I bet there are days you’d give just about anything to talk to her again or give her a hug.”

“Yeah.” She heard Steve sigh softly as he shifted around in the loft. “One of my favorite memories is when we were curled up in bed at the end of the day. She’d talk to me in Irish, teaching me the language and telling me about her day at the same time. Her English was flawless, but she loved the Irish language. The English tried to stamp it out so most immigrants didn’t speak it. But my great grandmother? She did. And she said she’d be dead and buried before those damned English heathens make her forget her language. So she taught her kids, who in turn taught Ma, who passed it to me. We only spoke it at night, snuggled together the blankets. Being Irish in Brooklyn back then wasn’t a good thing. But Ma was stubborn and she’d made a promise.” Steve sniffed a little. Megan heard it over the phone. “I think I miss that the most,” he added, his voice barely audible.

“Have you spoken it since she died?” In the silence that served as his answer, she could imagine Steve’s face, his eyes pinched closed, lips pressed together as he shook his head silently. “Then will you teach me? And our kids, someday? I’m terrible at languages, I’ll warn you now. But you have a family promise to keep.” Steve didn’t answer, clearly too choked up to speak, so she took a different tact. “Do you know your great grandmother’s name?”

“Bridget,” he whispered.

“Great grandma Bridget would surely have been proud of your mom for keeping the promise she
made so long ago. You come by your stubbornness very honestly, Steven Grant Rogers. Thank you for sharing that memory with me.” Wiping her own eyes, Megan took a deep breath. “So, you and your mom are tucked into a tiny, lumpy bed. I’m guessing it’s good you had a slight frame, because at your current size, I can’t imagine the arrangement working very well. I have a mental image of this bed being right up against the wall with the headboard in the corner. Who slept on the inside? You?”

“Yeah.”

“She put herself between you and the world. In hotel rooms, my mom always made sure she had the bed closest to the door. Anyone coming for us had to deal with her first. It’s a mom thing.”

“Guess so.”

“Are you going to be okay? I’m ready to get some sleep, but I can stay on the phone longer if you need to talk.”

“Thor’s here.” He paused, hesitating. “You really want to learn Irish?”

“I really do. Can’t promise I’ll succeed, but I’ll do my best. Maybe you and I can take a trip to Ireland someday, see the sights, pay our respects.”

“I don’t know where my family lived.”

“Maybe we don’t need to. Maybe it’s enough to walk on that land and honor their memory.”

“I’d really like that. Oíche mhaith, Megan. That means goodnight.”

“Say it again.”

“Oíche mhaith.”

“Eeeha wuh.”

“Not bad. Now go to sleep. I love you.”

“I love you too, Steve.”

When she woke Tuesday morning, it was to bone deep exhaustion that put molasses in her veins and apathy in her soul. As appropriate as an emotional response would be, all she could manage was disgust with herself. Emotions took energy. She needed that energy to push through. She’d done it before. She would never resort to the bottles of pills hidden in the bottom drawer of her dresser. She didn’t need them. They’d been prescribed at the instance of doctors who didn’t know her. She’d seen the doctors at the demands of friends who didn’t understand her. She was fine. She’d walked this road before and knew it just required extra determination and self-discipline. Meeting Steve had shaken her out of her funk, but it wasn’t a surprise that after the huge reunion event she’d planned had been completed, she’d have a let down. Perhaps the only surprise was that it hadn’t hit sooner.

Going back to sleep wasn’t going to help. It was time to power through.

At work, she was careful to act like her usual self. Activity was her savior. Knowing this, she sent
Beth an email to see if getting together for dinner and a movie at her apartment sounded possible. Beth immediately wrote back that Wednesday evening was perfect and offered to bring dessert. That took care of one evening, at least. Tonight, she’d make sure her apartment was up to company standards. Two evenings filled. Thursday would be devoted to preparing to leave for Iowa immediately after work Friday. The issue of idle evenings was solved for this week. The weekend would be devoted to getting Steve though the funeral and trip home. Problem solved, no medication necessary.

To prove her success to herself, she made sure to fit in a workout in the S.H.I.E.L.D. gym before heading home. She didn’t need pills. Caffeine, a daily to-do list, and discipline were enough.

Her resolve faltered a bit once she was home. Her apartment was really clean enough. Going to bed early was far too tempting. Instead, she powered up her tablet and made herself a list of tasks for the week. That left her with two hours until she could claim it was bedtime. Calling Steve was out of the question. He’d try to get her to open up and then her plan would fall apart. He was far too good at sensing her moods. How should she fill the time?

Inspired, she got out one of her favorite pens, the packet of acid free stationary Jarvis had ordered for her, and wrote her first letter to Steve. In it, she explained her intent and the (hopefully) huge stack of envelopes that Thor had been entrusted to keep until after her death. It was strange, talking to a future Steve who was now grieving for her. It was also oddly freeing. She could encourage him from the grave, teasing him as she did so, and it made her heart light to tell the full story of how she and Jarvis had planned his reunion. She relayed how she’d gone to Nick Fury and demanded Steve get the weekend off.

Her hand flew across the paper, ideas coming faster than she could get them down. It was difficult to slow down and ensure it was legible, but she kept at it doggedly. Well over an hour passed before she was done.

She folded the pages and carefully sealed them in an envelope that she dated below Steve’s name. With any luck, it would be decades before Steve ever held these pages in his hands. If not, at least he’d have the comfort of knowing he’d been her priority for no matter how long they had together.

Wrung out and tired, she sent Steve a text of apology and let herself retreat to bed and the oblivion of sleep.
Girls' night in

Chapter Notes

Surprise! I had a long passage written but I broke it up into smaller, focused chapters. If my luck holds, I may even get a third chapter up in the next few days. :-) Thank you all for the continuing interest in this story.

“Thanks for walking Beth up, Sarge.” Megan said as she gestured for Beth to come in.

“It’s what I do, Megan. You know that.”

She stepped into the hall to hug him. “And it makes people like me feel safe, which I appreciate. Have a great evening.”

He nodded once before she closed the door.

“I’m sorry if that felt too intense, but it’s one of the reasons I moved in here,” Megan explained, gesturing for Beth to sit down and get comfortable.

“No apology necessary. He’s a sweet guy and comes off as protective of residents, not creepy.” Beth said, waving her hand dismissively as she left her covered pan of goodies on the bar and plopped herself down on the couch. “I so glad you emailed me. I have been taking an online class to try to get ahead of things before the fall term starts and it’s kicking my butt.”

“Missing retail life already?”

Beth laughed. “Hardly! I practically skipped out the door on the last day.”

“The chili is done and the cornbread will be out of the oven in a few minutes. Do you want some wine or something else to drink?”

“Wine now and water later works for me. What can I do to help?”

“Get comfortable. I think I can handle wine all by myself.”

“It’s a nice place you have here, even not considering the security detail. How long have you been living here?”

“About a month or so, I think. It was when Steve was laid up in S.H.I.E.L.D. medical after getting blinded in that blast. The paparazzi had my old place staked out, so Clint suggested I move in here.”

“Clint?”

“Hawkeye.”

Beth nodded. “You mean Arms?”

Megan raised an eyebrow.
“What? It’s not like we knew all their names after that mess in New York. So, I came up with my own.”

Megan laughed a bit, poured them both a glass of wine, and joined Beth on the couch. “What other names did you come up with?”

“Hair for Thor. It’s just not fair that anyone has hair that gorgeous without being on a movie set and getting professional styling. I mean, he even has braids! So, I always call him Hair. Mr. Stark is Mouth because that man ever stops talking.”

“True, but he’ll be bummed you don’t refer to him as a genius.”

“As if I’ll ever meet him. Besides, Brainy is my nickname for the Black Widow. There weren’t many clips online of her, but the way she fought it was so obvious she was thinking about everything to maximize her effect and get people to safety.

“Please tell me I can tell her you said this. She and Pepper will absolutely die laughing.”

“Umm…” Beth’s cheeks turned pink as she blushed at the thought. “

“Please?” Megan begged.

“Okay. I guess it can’t hurt since I’ll never meet them.”

“What’s your name for Steve?”

Beth’s blush deepened and spread. “Promise not to tell him?”

“Pepper and Natasha only, I swear.”

Beth nodded as she closed her eyes and whispered softly, “Ass.”

“So fitting for his snarky side, too. How about the Hulk?”

Beth shook her head, prompting Megan to nudge her foot with her own.

“How about an exchange of eye candy for your name?”

Beth cracked an eye open as Megan reached for her tablet, which had been lying on the coffee table.

“Steve has an alternate uniform he wears for stealth missions. Natasha was kind enough to send me some pictures. There isn’t a person alive—male or female—who doesn’t appreciate the design or the resulting view, and that is a quote from the Black Widow herself.” Megan handed Beth the tablet and watched her scroll the through the images of Steve in his dark blue uniform as he first gave directions to his team, then lead them though what Megan trusted was an exercise. Natasha was too professional to waste time taking photos during a real mission. The last image, showing Steve running towards the top of a high wall, using a large truck as his staircase, was her favorite. His shield was on his back, his right arm stretched out a just a bit for balance, and his legs were flexed in mid stride. The view of his backside? There were no words.

“Jolly Green Giant.”

Megan burst out laughing. “I love it. Oh my lord, that is so funny. But why?”

“His smashing is just so pure that I find a joy in it. It reminds me of a toddler.”
“That’s—” Megan paused. “I’m not sure how much I’m allowed to say about that, actually.”

Beth raised an eyebrow but didn’t argue.

Megan sighed. “The situation with the Hulk’s alter ego is…complicated. Moving on, you never told me what you’re going to school for. What’s the plan?”

“I’m double majoring, which some think is incredibly stupid since I’ve been going only part time.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid at all.”

“Thanks. My Mom… let’s just says she thinks the psychology major is a waste and I need to focus just on marketing.”

“But they’re related! Effective marketing relies on an understanding of human behavior and psychology to be effective.”

Beth raised her hands in victory. “Someone else gets it!” she shouted to the ceiling. “Seriously, I’m dragging you home sometime to explain this to my mother.”

“What does Dave think?”

Beth’s expression grew soft. “He’s my biggest supporter. There are ethical companies out there that are really focused on conveying that their brand is backed by an ethical approach on all levels. I’d like to work for one of them, ideally. But Dave says even if I don’t, I can help make sure the marketing plans don’t bend the truth too much. Once Dave has his own stand-alone business going and isn’t just subcontracting for others, he wants me to develop his whole marketing plan, too.”

“I’m sorry your mom doesn’t understand what you’re trying to achieve. Did Steve’s sketches help on the marriage front at all?”

Beth rolled her eyes. “If only. First, I had to convince her I had actually met him. Once she conceded on that front, thank you YouTube, she said he was just being nice and didn’t know enough about the modern world to know what my life with Dave will really be like.

Megan didn’t even try to hide her wince. “Forgive me if I’m out of line, but have you considered sharply curtailing your contact with her? You don’t deserve that sort of toxicity in your life.”

“You sound just like Dave. And yes, I’m getting to that point. I’m this close to telling her she either keeps her negativity to herself or she won’t be coming to the wedding or seeing me again.” As she talked, Beth held her hand up, her forefinger a mere quarter inch from her thumb.

“How has Dave’s family been?”

“Wonderful. I’m rather jealous of that at times. I’m not going to say they’re all starry-eyed, and his mom once said I probably had no idea what to do with Afro-textured hair, but followed up in the next sentence saying she’d teach me what to do when the time came. Mostly, they’re worried I don’t recognize the challenges we’ll be facing.” Beth shrugged. “I know I’m privileged. I know Dave has had to deal with stuff I never did and that our kids will, too. I also know that we’ll get through it. I’m not going to let fear of the unknown destroy my future with the best man I know.”

“Amen.”

The oven timer went off and Megan let the topic die as she went to check the cornbread.
While they ate, the conversation stayed light, moving from one topic to the next without touching on anything serious. More than anything else, that helped Megan feel like herself. “Turn it off and leave the lid off when you’re done. I’ll put the leftovers in the fridge in a few minutes,” she told Beth, who was getting another serving of chili from the crock pot.

“Okay.” Beth set the ladle back in the bowl on the counter. “I’m going to ask and if you don’t want to talk about it, just say so.” Without waiting for Megan to answer, Beth continued, “I don’t watch much news, but on the radio this morning, they were saying one of the soldiers Steve rescued in the war had died overnight after a reunion in New York?”

Megan nodded, pushing her empty bowl back a couple of inches before taking another sip of wine. “Yeah. It was a crappy end to the perfect weekend. Ferris made the trip specifically to tell Steve the difference he’d made in his life. He knew he was sick and on borrowed time. The speech he made Sunday morning brought us all to tears. And now he’s gone, just like that.” She bowed her head, rubbing her forehead with her fingers as she did so. “Steve’s in Iowa now, helping out on the farm until the funeral. Thor went with him since I had to be back at work. The last few days have been a whirlwind and I didn’t want to get too stuck in my own head. It’s one reason I asked you to come over.”

“I’m glad you did. How’s Steve holding up?”

“Okay, I think.” Megan put her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her hand. “The passage of time is never far from his mind, so on the one hand, it’s not a shock to him. But it’s bittersweet to lose one of the guys so soon after seeing him again. It’s not exactly the ending I’d planned for the weekend.”

“You planned it?”

Megan nodded. “A few months ago, I got in touch with Bucky’s sister. Bucky was—”

“I went to the museum last week,” Beth interrupted. “No need to explain that tragedy.”

“Good. So, Rebecca, she gave me boxes of Steve’s things that had been sent home after he put the plane down, as well a box he’d left with Bucky’s mother before he shipped out. Steve’s reaction to getting those things back…. Let’s just say I realized then how deep the wounds went and how little any of us really understand what he’d gone through. I had the crazy idea of contacting the families of the Howling Commandos for a small get together so Steve could reconnect with his past. I was worried about the press getting wind of it and turning it into a circus, so I reached out to Pepper Potts for advice… it snowballed from there.

Megan took another sip of wine while Beth nodded for her to continue.

“She and Tony… I don’t care what anyone in the press has ever said about them. They are two of the most generous, caring people I’ve ever met. Yes, Tony can be dramatic, but it’s a cover to keep some distance from everyone who wants a piece of him. Before I knew it, they’d handed me near total control over a weekend-long event, set me up with staff to organize every crazy idea I had, and bankrolled the entire thing, including travel expenses and lodging for about 600 people. I still can’t believe we pulled the entire thing off as a surprise for Steve. Until he walked in, he had no idea what we’d been up to.”

“It sounds amazing. Did he enjoy it?”
“He glowed.” Megan wiped a tear from her eye and looked at Beth. “I’ve never seen him like that. Yes, there were tears. But there was so much laughter, too. There were stories of the old days, inside jokes people our age didn’t understand, and a sense of witnessing something really special. Peggy and her family came, a lot of people brought mementos with them that were familiar to Steve…. I wish the whole world could have seen it and appreciated it. As it was, we kept the press totally in the dark most of the weekend and by the time the story broke we weren’t trying to keep it as a surprise for Steve, so the leak didn’t really matter.”

“And how are you holding up? Was it awkward meeting the former love of his life?”

“I’m exhausted. Peggy was so gracious and kind, it really wasn’t awkward at all, with her at least. She gave us her blessing, actually. It was really weird, to see Steve talking to old people about things that happened decades ago. On the one hand, my brain knows he had a whole life back then. It’s still weird to see him standing with his peers, looking like he’s the age of one of their grandkids, but talking about things only people back then would know.”

Megan got up and fetched her tablet, pulling up the group picture taken Friday evening. “That’s Ferris, right there,” she said, pointing him out as she passed the tablet to Beth. “He’s the one who passed away Sunday night. These are the people Steve served with that are still alive. The rest of the Howling Commandos are all gone, though their kids came.”

“What I hear you saying is that you’re still learning how to process this.”

“Yeah. Steve, too, but for different reasons.”

“Honestly, I’d rather focus on you right now.”

Megan didn’t know what to say to that, so just stared at her hands.

“Megan?” Beth’s voice was gentle as she put her hand on Megan’s. “I know we don’t know each other well yet. I get that. But I’d like to help. It seems to me you could use someone in your corner.”

She couldn’t argue with that and nodded once, blinking her eyes hard. She wasn’t going to get teary eyed.

“C’mon. That couch is better than these chairs for serious girl talk.” With that, Beth refilled their wine glasses and made her way to the couch, sitting in the corner with her body turned towards Megan and her socked feet tucked under her. “Best part about online classes is wearing comfy clothes all day,” she joked, gesturing to the stretchy black pants she had on. “Did I ever tell you how I met Dave?”

Shaking her head, Megan mirrored how Beth was sitting and tucked a throw around her legs.

“It all started with puppy kindergarten. My former roommate, Robin, had a puppy and was taking it every week to the local pet store for a socialization session. She asked me to come along and help her one week. Anyway, when we got there, way ahead of time like she does, there was Dave, lying on his back on the store floor as the most adorable dog play-wrestled with him. The dog was totally smitten and Dave was completely focused on the dog. Robin was practically drooling over him, but I only had eyes for the dog. After class, he asked me to get a cup of coffee with me sometime. I wasn’t looking for a relationship right then, so I declined.”

“So, it wasn’t love at first sight?”

Beth rolled her eyes and took another sip of wine before putting her glass back on the coffee table.
“As if! I found out later, the dog wasn’t even his! It belonged to his friend, who had an after work meeting he had to go to and asked Dave to take his dog for the socialization. But Dave tagged along for the next three weeks, hoping I’d show up. He grilled Robin about me and said he didn’t want to be pushy, but I had seemed like a person he wanted to get to know. Robin, bless her, stood firm and said I had zero interest in anything but school at the moment. At the time, I’d just moved out of my parent’s house and had gotten a job at that store I won’t name to cover rent while I cut my course load to part time. You’d think I’d have committed a federal offense, but it clinched the deal in my head. My mom is too controlling and dad lets her get away with it. It’s not a healthy dynamic and one I wanted to get away from, so cutting the purse strings for school and getting out from under her roof was the right call.” Beth waved dismissively with her hand. “Anyway, Robin shut Dave down and I thought that was the end of it.”

“So, what changed?”

“I was helping another friend move to a new house we were going to rent together. With four of us, we figured we’d not only all have better living conditions but save some money, too. My lease wasn’t up yet, so they had to wait another two months for me, but they were cool with it. Anyway, as we were unpacking, we found what seemed to be a slow leak from the upstairs bathroom. There was a wet spot on the ceiling downstairs and when we turned the sink on high, it started to drip a few minutes later. Best we could tell, it was a broken pipe in the wall. We weren’t sure if it ran onwards to the shower, so we didn’t want to leave it even for the weekend. The landlord had given us an approved contractor list for emergency repairs. He said to use our judgement on whether to call him or the people on the list. Given the nature of the leak, Andrea called the plumber.

“Dave,” Megan guessed.

Beth nodded. “Dave.” She smiled at the memory. “He was so professional about it all. He clearly recognized me, but he didn’t press. He had to tear out some of the wall, but he found the compromised joint, fixed the pipes, then asked me about Robin’s puppy. While he was there, he offered to do a quick check of the house systems. Andrea agreed and he ended up showing us where the main water shutoff was, showed us the inspection stickers the prior plumber had placed on the water heater, dryer, and boiler. The water heater was going on a decade, and he said he’d put a note on his paperwork indicating that we’d be needing a new one soon and the landlord should start budgeting for a replacement. He then grilled Andrea about the stove, and when she told him it was gas, Dave told us it should be inspected, too, and only by a gas-certified plumber. He took us upstairs and showed us where the gas line shutoff for the stove should be, told us to ask for the inspection certificate from the landlord so we didn’t have to pull the stove out to check it, and made sure we had a carbon monoxide detector on each floor along with smoke alarms. By that time, Andrea was literally swooning. He gave her a copy of the bill, a reference to a trustworthy contractor to fix the drywall once it all dried out, and his business card. What Andrea didn’t see was the card he slipped to me. He’d written his cell phone number on the back with a note saying, “Still would love to meet you for a cup of coffee.”

After Dave left, Andrea was practically ready to offer to have his children. I showed her the card Dave had slipped me and told her I didn’t think he was interested. She flipped out that I already knew him and hadn’t taken him up on the offer.”

“She talked you into it?”

Beth laughed. “More like “Badgered, prodded, and even threatened to revoke the invitation to share the house if I didn’t give the guy twenty minutes of my time. She pointed out that he wasn’t proposing marriage, just asking for a chance to get to know me.” Beth shrugged. “I caved.”
“And?”

“Our first coffee meeting lasted two hours, ending only because I was yawning so badly I could barely keep my eyes open. He called me a cab, slipped the driver two twenties, and told him to keep the change for ensuring I got home safely. He didn’t know where I was living at that point but seemed to sense I’d be uncomfortable with him seeing me home since I barely knew him.”

“It’s okay to be careful with your safety. Surely he didn’t hold that against you.”

Beth giggled. “Actually, he said he was impressed by my caution and wanted to earn my trust.”

“Sounds too good to be true.” Finishing her wine, Megan put her empty glass on the coffee table and rested her head on the back of the couch. It was nice to just relax and talk with someone in a low-key setting.

“The thing is, it just got better from there. Over the next couple of months, he courted me. And I mean courted in the old-fashioned sense of the word. I’ll wager he could teach Steve a thing or two! Once I was comfortable with him knowing where I lived and worked, I got accustomed to deliveries, usually made by a coworker in the area. One day, it was a single flower. The next time, it would be a store-bought bakery item or a small bag of candy. It was never anything expensive, just a token to let me know I was in his thoughts. Each gift was accompanied by a simple note telling me he was thinking of me and wishing me success in my day. He’d drop in quotes from movies and books, jokes about plumbers, anything he could think of that was light, cute, romantic, or friendly without being creepy.”

“What a great story you have to tell your kids.”

“I know. He still does it, too. It’s not as often, because seriously, who can keep that up forever? But a couple of times a month, at least, he tries to surprise me with something. It’s genuine, too. He said he’s just living like his dad taught him, to let the people in your life know you appreciate them and never take them for granted.”

Their conversation kept flowing, switching from topic to topic but never getting dull. Beth was in the middle of telling one of her retail horror stories when the heard a thud on Megan’s balcony.

Megan gestured for Beth to keep talking, so Beth resumed her story while Megan reached under her shirt and unholstered the handgun she had on her at all times. Normally, she put it and the holder in the gun safe when she got home, but today, in her haste to get ready for company, she’d left it on. Beth’s eyes widened a bit, but she kept talking as Megan crept to the balcony doors and moved the curtain just enough to look out.

“Fear not, Lady Megan. It is merely your friend Thor come to check on you.”

Recognizing his voice, Megan flicked the safety back on and opened the curtain as she holstered her weapon. “What’s wrong? What are you doing here?” Megan asked as she opened the door and gestured for Thor to come indoors.

“Be at peace, my lady. Steven worries for you, especially after your brief message in the evening past. I offered to check on you myself and ease his mind.”

“I’m fine, really. I’m just tired from the weekend.”

“His head knows this, but the heart is not so easily convinced.” He smiled at her and then glanced
at Beth, waiting for an introduction.

“Sorry. I wasn’t expecting to hear anyone on the balcony and I was concerned. Thor, this is Beth. Beth, meet Thor.”

Megan watched, somewhat amused, as Beth visibly gathered her wits, pasted a smile on her face, and stood up to shake hands with Thor.

Thor, of course, reverted to his court manners and took Beth’s offered hand in his large one, not to shake but to bow over. “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Beth. It pleases me to see the people I care about spending time with their friends. I apologize for disturbing your evening together.”

Megan bit her lip and turned away for fear she’d break out in laughter as Beth stammered a bit before giving up on sounding coherent. “It’s fine,” she finally managed to say. “You flew here? From Iowa?”

As Megan went to get her phone, she saw Thor holding up Mjölnir.

“Tis but a short journey for me and well worth it to allay Steven’s concerns about his beloved.”

“I suppose for you, it is. Please, make yourself comfortable. I’m sorry that we’re already out of wine.” Beth sank back down onto the couch, clearly not believing what her eyes and ears were telling her.

“I’d like to get two meat lovers pizzas and a two-liter bottle of root beer. Yes, I’ll hold.” Megan rolled her eyes and covered the phone with her hand. “Beth, do want anything while I’m ordering? Thor, don’t even start.” Megan cut him off when she saw him begin to rise from his spot on the sofa once he realized she was ordering food for him. “You eat like Steve does and leftovers from our dinner won’t be enough. Arguing will just make me cranky.”

“Then I will merely thank you for your continued thoughtfulness and generosity.”

Megan gave him a thumb up and finished ordering. After making another call down to the person watching the entrance, letting them know that Thor was present in the building and she was expecting a pizza delivery shortly, she turned off her phone and tossed it back into her purse.

“Okay, now that we have the social niceties taken care of, why are you really here? Does Steve need me to go to Iowa before Saturday?”

Thor held up his hands. “Nay, my friend. I speak only truths to you. Planning and hosting such an event as you did this weekend past is bound to challenge your energies. Your beloved is distraught by the loss of a comrade and has unconsciously turned that distress to concern over your well-being.

“Just as I counseled Steven, I will advise you as well: there is strength in admitting your weaknesses when bearing life’s burdens. Together, you are stronger than either of you are alone.” As he spoke, he held his hands upright, palms facing each other and thumbs touching, then bent at the wrist to bring his fingertips together to make a triangle.

“Isn’t the triangle a common symbol in Viking mythology?” Beth asked. She’d been quiet until then, watching Thor in barely disguised awe.

“Indeed. The Val Knut shows three interlocking triangles, each representing a different aspect of the realms and the strength they each lend to the universe at large. Only in unity can the three sides lend strength to the whole.” Thor said the last as he looked meaningfully at Megan, but said
nothing more.

Perhaps sensing he was reluctant to speak in front of her, Beth stood up. “Where’s your bathroom, Megan? The wine is doing what wine does.”

“Down the hall, last door on the left.”

Once Beth was out of earshot, Thor turned his intense gaze to her once more. “Your friends cannot see the cracks in your facade, but your aura tells the tale. Steven was wise to be concerned, dear Megan. I see the changes even from two days past. Are Midgardian healers so unskilled they cannot rebalance the energies in your brain and ease your suffering?”

“Rebalance the energies… you mean neurotransmitters?”

“Your aura has darkened with despair and discontent. The brightness of your joy is diminished in turn, though you struggle to let it shine. It is a common enough affliction and easily remedied on Asgard. I grow concerned for your well-being if your own healers are not equal to such a task.”

“You think I’m depressed.” Her voice was flat, even to her own ears.

“I know it. Your aura shows this truth plainly to anyone with the eyes to see. My concern lies in treatment so you can continue to use your gifts to their full potential.” Thor sat back in his seat. “I see that my words greaten your distress, so I will merely ask that you think on the matter carefully. I’m certain my mother would be most willing to craft a potion to aid you if I explained the need. Promise me you will consider this.”

Megan nodded, unsure what else she could say. Beth’s return rescued her from any need to come up with something.

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Megan shut the door once Thor was inside. Fortunately, no one else had seen the Avenger wandering the halls. “You look puzzled.”

Thor nodded as he set the boxes of pizza down on the table. “I did as you said and delivered the currency to the courier, telling him it was a token of thanks for his efforts.”

“And?”

“He asked if I’d gotten lost on my way to a Shakespearean festival.”

“He just doesn’t properly appreciate your Babel fish, Thor. Your manner of speaking comes across as very elegant and regal. I’d expect no less from the Crown Prince of Asgard.”

“You know about Babel fish? Others have been mystified when I try to explain the All Speak.”

Megan’s brow furrowed. “We might be pushing the limits of the All Speak. The Babel fish is a reference to a fictional book in which one places a fish in their ear. The fish then acts as a universal translator.” She explained as she got a plate and extra napkins from her kitchen and handed them to Thor.

He nodded his agreement as he sat down at the table and opened the top pizza box, breathing deeply as the aroma hit his nostrils. “Aye. Though not truly a fish, they were so named for their appearance. They were discovered to be symbionts of the Undony, who were once revered for their ability to communicate with all foreigners upon their first meeting. The Undony guarded their
secret carefully, but alas, a great war erupted and both the Undony and their symbionts were lost. In their prime, Undony and their symbionts were highly prized for their use in facilitating trade and brokering peace. The symbionts were but a tiny thing, smaller than a seed of the mustard plant, but well adapted to the habitat of the Undony ear canal. You said their existence was related in a Midgardian mythical story?”

Beth watched them with a look of stunned disbelief from her seat on the couch.

Megan retrieved *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* from her bookshelf. “This isn’t a book of mythology, at least as far as I know. If you tell me that the improbability drive is real, I will have a nervous breakdown, though it certainly would explain a lot. Anyway, that’s first in a series of books written by a British guy named Douglas Adams. You might enjoy it. Feel free to take it with you.”

“Time out.” Beth said, holding her hands in a T. “Babel fish was a website.”

“Named after the Babel fish in the book because the website authors had a sense of humor. You should read the books, except the last one, which ruins everything. Avoid the movie remake and stick to the old BBC recordings. Yes, Beth, in answer to your next question, this is really the new baseline of normal in my life.” Megan ducked into her bedroom for a fresh tablet and pen. “Thor, tell me everything you remember about this Babel Fish.”

“Allow me,” he answered, gesturing for her writing materials. The women joined him at the table, watching as he began to draw a tiny organism that had a passing resemblance to a fish and the larger, greatly furred bipedal host he called an Undony. He ate the pizza with his left hand as he drew with his right, unfazed with the challenge of eating one handed as he worked.

“Does Steve know you’re an artist?”

Thor looked up, surprise plain on his features. “These are mere doodles. I have not one tenth of the Captain’s artistic talent.

“Even so, he might enjoy talking about art with you.”

“I shall keep your suggestion in mind. Perhaps it will provide him with a useful distraction in the coming days.”

“Sketching is one of his best coping mechanisms. I have a new sketchpad and pencils to send back with you. If you can get him to draw, even a little bit, it will help.”

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“I must take my leave before the hour grows too late,” Thor said as he stood up from the table. “I hope my intrusion didn’t disrupt your plans too greatly.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Beth said, having finally found her ability to speak coherently. “It’s been a fun evening. That said, I’m going to head out, too. Megan has to get up early and I’ve got a full day of coursework ahead of me.” She got up and put her shoes on then collected her purse from the hook behind the apartment entrance.

“It has been my pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Thor said. “Although I recognize your competence, I would rest easier knowing you permitted me to see you safely home before I return to Iowa.”

Megan hid her smile as Beth visibly lost and regained her composure. “I drove here. But if you
want to ride home with me and let me introduce you to my fiancé, I’m certainly not going to object.”

“I find that most agreeable. Megan, you indicated you had a sketchbook for Steven?”

“I’ll go get it.” It was a simple matter to retrieve it and a box of pencils from the dresser drawer where she had hidden them. She returned to find Thor posing with Beth as she took a picture of them with her phone. “Give me the phone,” she said with mock sternness as she held out her hand.

Beth’s eyes widened, clearly thinking Megan was upset. Only then did Megan smile as she waved her hand in a shooing motion. “Selfies always look ridiculous. Move over in front of the balcony doors. The drapes over there make a better background.”

Thor led the way, giving Beth a moment to turn to Megan and mouth, “Hair!” It was all Megan could do not to laugh, especially given the faces Beth kept making when they both faced the camera.

She took a series of snapshots, then held Beth’s phone out. “Here you go. Thor, would a tote bag make this easier for you to carry?”

He nodded. “I shall have Steven return it to you.” Seeing the letter with the items she was handing him, he looked at her meaningfully.

“First one. I appreciate it.” Megan turned away before she could get emotional. She had reusable bags in her coat closet and went to fetch one. “Jarvis got me a fire safe, so I’ll add to the collection periodically and pass them on as we cross paths.”

“I am honored by your trust.” He took the bag from her, put the sketch pad in it, and opened his arms to her. Apparently, he’d already put the letter in a hidden pocket. “I promise to keep it safe. May the Fates allow it to remain in storage for a century.

Megan hugged him back. “Thank you, for everything.”

“Remember your promise to consider my words. You matter to me and to Steven.”

He released Megan and offered his arm to Beth. “As we journey, you must tell me about your fiancé so I may greet him as a peer and not as a stranger.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow night!” Beth called over her shoulder as Thor guided her out. Beth mouthed one more “Wow!” and fanned herself when Thor couldn’t see.

“I look forward to it,” Megan answered. Her heart felt momentary light as she shut the door. Beth’s excitement was infectious.
I'm back! The Cap RBB is done and posted, I'm no longer hacking up my lungs, so I now have the time and energy to start wrapping up Roots and Anchors. Thanks for your patience. I was sick for most of the year from October to May... I'm hoping my current case of health sticks around!

While reading her email the next morning, Megan found a brief message from Beth, accompanied by a photograph she had taken of Dave and Thor together the night before. Dave faced Thor in a fighting stance while brandishing a huge pipe wrench. Thor, playing along, held Mjölnir at the ready, prepared to do battle. Any attempt to appear menacing was destroyed by their boyish grins.

“Hair talked to Dave for nearly an hour about different water and waste systems he’s seen both on Earth and in other realms. Dave was in geek heaven. Well worth the sleep loss! Can’t believe I got to meet him!” Beth’s note read.

It made Megan smile to see her new friend so happy. Thor truly had a gift for putting people at ease.

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Megan crawled into bed not long after she got home Thursday evening and called Steve. “How are you holding up?”

“All right. We got the fence in today. All we need to do is put a couple of gates in tomorrow and it’s done.”

Megan cover the phone and sneezed. “I’m sure the girls’ parents appreciate that.” She sneezed again.

“Bless you. Are you sick?”

“Just a head cold, I think. It started this morning,” Megan turned up the dial on her electric blanket before snuggling down under her covers again.

“And you’re already in bed? Are you sure it’s just a cold?”

“How do you know I’m in bed?”

“I hear you moving in bed and the switch for your electric blanket is distinctive. You sound awful.”

“I can’t say I feel very good.” She heard Steve sigh as a door closed somewhere in the background. Where was he? “I’ll be okay.”

“I know you will. What are your symptoms?”
She listed them and heard him sigh again. What was wrong with him?

“I want you to do something for me and you’re not going to like it. But it’s important to me.” In the background, she heard footsteps and a horse nickering

“What? And where are you?”

“I was in the house. I’m climbing into the barn loft at the moment.”

“Any chance that loft is over the horses?”

“Yup. They’re right below me. We’ve been bringing all the livestock in at night so they are safe from the press. Thor chased one cameraman out of the far pasture earlier today. It was a sight to behold, believe me. Jake showed me how to feed the cows, chickens, and horses, though Thor is still in charge of milking. Since the animals all had their evening meal, it’s easier to just keep them in rather than round them all up right before dark.”

“That cameraman could be charged with trespassing. Jarvis can hook them up with a lawyer if they want.”

Steve laughed. “Thor’s approach was direct and terrifying. He got on one of the horses, somehow got it to rear up and paw the air, and then chased that fella all the way to the property line while Thor scolded him. The local police increased their presence and I don’t expect any more problems. But back to you. I want you to stay home from work tomorrow and skip your plans to fly out here for the funeral.”

“Steve—”

“Listen, Megan. You have a luxury right now to take paid time off of work to just be sick. I never had that grown up. Many people still don’t. We’ll never get it for everyone if people with options keep showing up to work sick. You can work some from home if you’re up to it and rest as you need to. I’m okay. Thor’s here and I’m doing all right. There’s no reason for you to expose everyone at work, at the airport, on the plane, and here in Iowa to whatever virus you have right now. I’ll feel a lot better if you’re taking care of yourself and resting.”

“Are you really sure you don’t need me to come?”

“I’m certain. I’ll feel a lot better if I know you’re taking care of yourself. Is it okay if I call Jarvis and tell him to cancel any reservations he’d been working on? Please?”

“Yeah. I’ll see how I feel in the morning before deciding to call off, but I’ll stay home if I’m no better. I’ll rest all weekend. Okay?”

“Fair enough.”

“Oíche mhaith.”

“Eeeha duh, yourself. When you get back, I think I need to learn the alphabet and phonetic sounds. I’m hearing sounds but not really recognizing them. It’s all mashed together.”

Steve’s laugh was soft and low. “I can do that. Sleep well. I’ll check in on you tomorrow.”

****
Megan was curled up on the couch when she heard pounding on her door.

“Open up, Megan. I promise I won’t keep you long.”

Keeping the blanket she was wrapped in around her shoulders, she shuffled to the door and opened it. “Jolanda? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Step aside so I can put this in your fridge,” Jolanda said, pushing her away past Megan as she made a beeline for the kitchen carrying a tower of plastic containers. “Steve called Sarge, who called me, so here I am. The soup is still warm if you’re hungry, but it will keep.”

“Why—”

“Why? Because we take care of each other in this building, if you hadn’t noticed. You’re sick. Nothing helps a cold like homemade chicken soup, no matter what your science degrees say.”

“Actually, it’s pretty valid.”

“You make my case for me. I won’t keep you, because the last thing you need right now is anyone pestering you. If you need anything else, from ginger ale to extra tissues, you give me a call, okay?”

Megan nodded, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I’d give you a hug but I’m keeping my distance. Tuck yourself back into bed. I couldn’t remember if you had my cell phone number or not, so I’ve got it written down for you.” Jolanda waved a paper in the air before laying it on the table. “Call for anything. I mean it.”

With a final wave, Jolanda was gone, pulling the locked door closed behind her.

****

The sound of her phone vibrating on the coffee table woke her. “Megan, call me when you have a minute,” the text from Sarge said.

Megan frowned at the device. This wasn’t like Sarge. With the press of the button, she dialed. “Sarge, it’s Megan. What’s up?”

“I wanted to let you know someone tried to make a delivery. When Wesley refused to let them walk up to your apartment, they took the flower arrangement and left. Reputable florists don’t do that. Wesley said the guy had identification but knew next to nothing about flowers, the delivery business, or even much about his supposed boss. Wesley told me about it and we agreed to let you know.”

“I appreciate it. I’m going to call Steve, just to make sure he didn’t try to send flowers.”

“Good idea. I don’t want you to get worked up, because we’re keeping an eye on things. I watch the news. I know the press is hot to get something on both of you right now and everyone at the front desk knows that, too. But it was irregular and I wanted to put it on your radar.”
“Thanks, Sarge. And thanks for reaching out to Jolanda. She brought over a ton of soup. I had some before I fell asleep and it was exactly what I needed.”

“My text woke you up. I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. I was just dozing.”

“Take care, kid, and let me know if you need anything else. Day or night, you call me.”

“I promise,” Megan vowed before she hung up. She thought about calling Steve, but instead, she called Jarvis.

“I agree this is quite concerning,” Jarvis told her once she’d filled him in. “The most urgent matter is your safety. Would you be comfortable with additional cameras and microphones so I could monitor your bedrooms as well? I am concerned that someone might try to gain entry through those windows. Furthermore, I cannot monitor the balcony, only the entry into your living room.”

“To be honest, I’ll sleep better knowing you’re watching. I admit this has me rattled.”

I also recommend having Sarge open all mail and packages sent to your residence prior to them being given to your care. With your permission, and that of Mr. Stark, I can send a set of screening tools to Sarge to use to check your mail for any hazardous materials. If Sarge is willing, I can also alert him immediately if I detect any abnormal activity inside your apartment, whether or not you are present. Given his service record and the fact he lives on site, he’ll be able to aid you within minutes should someone try to gain entry to your apartment without your permission.”

Megan leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees as she forced herself to take normal breaths. “How can we do all that without putting you at risk, Jarvis?”

“Megan, you are my friend and worth whatever risk this would entail. However, given Agent Barton’s trust in Sarge, as well as his own actions today in ensuring your safety, I believe the quantifiable risk is statistically insignificant.”

She blew her nose yet again and added the used tissues to the growing pile on her coffee table. “I hate being sick.”

“It must indeed be frustrating. Have you canceled your riding lesson for Saturday?”

“Not yet. I need to do that. Remind me later.”

“I could take care of that for you, Megan, using the contacts listed in your phone.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Then I’ll do it right now. Sir agrees with my idea of sending a mail security kit to Sarge, and I’m in currently in a conversation with Sarge about that. He seems to be a good man, more concerned with your safety than his own. I’ll send that, as well as additional cameras for your updated security system directly to him. For now, we can set up your tablet and phone as monitoring devices. I suggest using the tablet in the exercise room and your phone in your bedroom. If you plug them both in, only a sustained power failure would cause an interruption of service.”

“What if an intruder shuts off internet access?” Megan asked as she shuffled to the bedroom to get her tablet charger so they could begin putting the devices in place.

“For one thing, I’ll know immediately and alert Sarge. Your phone, being Avenger’s grade, has a
backup satellite system.”

“How does that work indoors?”

“The camera monitoring your living room doubles as an antenna and router to the satellite. In your apartment, you’re as connected to me as possible without living in the tower.”

“I’m not moving into the tower, Jarvis. Whoever is after me will just go after my family if I try to run and hide.”

“I know. How about a watch like Steve has? At least until this situation is resolved?”

“I’d like that. But I’ve had several people comment on my analog watch. If I stop wearing Mickey Mouse, it might be noticed.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay.” She yawned and stretched. “Once we get my tablet and phone in place, I’m going to bed. Will you let Steve know what is going on and how we have it covered?”

“Of course, Megan.”
The Reckoning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Megan roused when Steve came in and let his overnight back fall to the floor with a soft thunk.

“You look terrible,” he said, brushing the hair back from her forehead. “You have a fever, too.”

“I’m staying hydrated,” she murmured, gesturing to the water bottle on the nightstand.

“If you can manage a quick bath, I’ll draw the water and change your bed for you.”

She smiled a bit at him in the dim light. “You saying I stink?”

“I’m saying I know what it’s like to sweat through everything you own, plus the bedding, and be too sick to do anything about it.”

“Getting clean sounds good. I think I have the flu.”

“I hope you know how much that scares me.”

“I’m being careful, Steve. There isn’t much that can be done that I’m not already doing.”

While she sat up, he started pulling the blankets off the bed and assessing which needed to be washed and what could be used again immediately. “Isn’t there an antiviral for it? I remember reading about one.”

“Yes, but it’s not a cure. I’m also past the ideal window of treatment so taking it now is pointless. As long as I stay hydrated, it should run its course. I’ve also made a big dent in Jolanda’s soup, so I’m maintaining all my electrolytes. I know this probably brings back memories of what the flu was like when you were a kid, but I promise, it’s better now.”

Steve nodded and handed her a fresh nightgown and clean underwear. “It still kills people.”

“Which is why I get my flu shot every year. I’m not in a high-risk group, so this will pass in a few days.” Megan leaned against the doorjamb, watching him try to hide his worry. “I’m not going to object to you staying here tonight, you know. You’ve had a rough week and you won’t rest at your own place if you’re worried about me. I get it, Steve. I’m not dismissing your concerns, just trying to put them in context.”

“I know.”

Megan smiled to herself as she shuffled towards the bathroom. A shower and a change of clothes sounded wonderful, though exhausting. It was nice to be cherished.

****

When Steve returned from S.H.I.E.L.D. Monday evening, the dark cloud of his mood loomed large overhead. Megan stretched and sat up from where she’d been sprawled under a blanket on the couch, watching the history channel as she dozed. “Bad day?”

Steve let his shield slide to the floor in its case. “Fury’s out for revenge.”
“For…?”

“Me being out of town for a week.” He looked at her and let his disgust show. “I was told I’m
giving a speech at the Pentagon on September 11th.”

“Okay.” Megan kept her tone bland.

“A speech they’re writing for me.”

“I see.” Megan flopped back down on her pillow and lifted her feet long enough for Steve to sit
down. “Fury still doesn’t get it.”

He looked askance at her and she saw his despair grow by the minute. He wanted to badly to put
his dancing monkey days behind him, but the public didn’t want to allow him to move on.

“It’s easy enough to give your own speech.”

He shook his head. “What can I possibly say to the survivors and the families of those who died? I
wasn’t around for it. Reading about it after the fact doesn’t carry the same weight.”

“You need to channel a different Mr. Rogers. Fred Rogers, to be specific.”

“Tony’s teased me about him. Something about a Neighborhood of Make-Believe?”

“I’ll show you an episode or two later. For now, you need to know that he believed television was a
medium for doing good. He created a show to talk to children like a caring parent or grandparent
should: directly, honestly, and compassionately.”

“I think I like it already.”

“It’s magic. I enjoyed it growing up, but I learned so much more from it when Carl was watching
it. The themes of the show are timeless.”

Megan shifted and Steve tucked the blanket around her legs. “One of the things he said after the
towers fell, was that when he was a boy, his mother told him that when bad things happened, he
should look for the helpers. Fred Rogers remembered that lesson, and it’s something I make a point
of doing. Bad things happen, but the helpers keep showing up. I got sick, and Thor came to check
on me, Sarge recruited Jolanda to keep an eye on me, and Jarvis kept tabs on me, too. You’re one
of the flasher helpers that shows up when ugly events happen. This speech is a chance for you to
turn the spotlight to the ordinary folks who rose to the occasion. Most of the press spends time
talking about the first responders. Lord knows they deserve our gratitude and praise and no words
can ever give them their due…”

“But there were a lot of other folks who helped each other, and I can talk about them.”

“Which is something you’ll do gladly. Add in a story of a helper you knew as a kid—”

“—And I earn authenticity before turning the spotlight to people I never met.”

Megan nodded and yawned. “Ray can help with the research.”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.” She closed her eyes.

“Thor would never betray a confidence, but he said there were changes in your aura between New
York and when he visited that have him worried. I’m worried, too. I’m not going to press you on it right now because you’re sick and a heavy discussion is the last thing you need.”

She opened her eyes long enough to glare at him. “I’m fine.”

“You’re strong and you’re managing. That’s different from being fine. Take it from an expert on fine.” He said the last word with the same tone she’d used. The tone he’d perfected over the years to deflect unwanted attention. “You’ve called me on my bullshit often enough.” Patting her leg, he smiled. “How does some tea sound?”

“Like heaven in a mug.”

****

*Heading out of a mission. May be gone for several days. Sorry I’ll miss lunch.* The text included an angry face. Given how infrequently Steve used emojis, it told her exactly how sour his mood was. It seemed Fury wasn’t done reminding Steve who was in charge.

She set aside her phone and went back to attempting to triage her email. Missing two days of work shouldn’t make her email boxes swell beyond capacity, yet here she was. It made her low-grade headache throb more insistently.

Picking her phone back up, Megan started typing a text to Jarvis, asking him to triage it for her. Midway though, she stopped. If Jarvis were a person, she’d be violating a million ethics rules by asking him to do her work. This was really no different. No shortcuts.

Sipping her tea, she sent a message to Jarvis asking him to refuse any such request if she had a lapse of judgment in the future.

*“Certainly. Be well, Megan,”* came the reply, followed shortly with, *“Steve asked me to order lunch for you, so please do not be alarmed when you get a delivery of food.”*

Everyone needed a friend like Jarvis, Megan mused. If only he could save her from reviewing Emma’s latest proposal for research using Steve’s cells. The women didn’t know when to quit and Megan was sorely tempted to delete the file unread. Doing so would mean she’d allowed Emma to get to her, and Megan wasn’t willing to admit that, so she vowed to find a reasonable justification for her denial. It didn’t help that Emma was a good writer and had a knack for approaching problems from unique, even ingenious angles. The issue was a lack of ethics, at least as Megan saw it.

*“Dr. Buchwald, I have a delivery for you.”*

Megan looked up at the voice and saw a handsome, athletic man standing in the doorway to her office. “Those are for me?” she asked, feeling uneasy about the flower arrangement the gentleman in question was holding. The flowers were all exotic, and she made a mental note to have Jarvis identify them as soon as she sent him a picture.

*“Said so on the card. I was on my way up to see Fury, so I told the receptionist I’d save her the trip. Where do you want them?”*

Megan gestured to the far corner of her desk. “Thank you for bringing them up. I’m sorry, I don’t think I got your name.”

*“Agent Rumlow.”* He said as he put the vase down, then frowned at her. “You don’t look happy. Is Cap not treating you right and these are his apology?”
She laughed. “Nothing so dramatic. Steve knows I prefer the simplicity of carnations. Plus, they last longer than exotic flowers like these.” She pushed down her feeling of unease and forced herself to smile. “The florist must have given him one heck of a sales pitch.”

“Must be.” Agent Rumlow paused and looked at her with a critical eye. “You think he’s the one?”

Megan smiled. “I know he is.”

“Then why aren’t you planning a wedding?”

“Maybe I am and just waiting for the right time to make an announcement.” She smiled again at him. “Sorry, if you’re fishing for help in the betting pool, you’re going to need better bait. I like keeping my personal life separate from work and the media as far away from my life as possible.”

“Fair enough. Enjoy the flowers.”

Once Agent Rumlow left, Megan opened the card. “You’re never far from my thoughts,” the note read. It was unsigned, but that didn’t surprise her. They weren’t from Steve.

****

Thursday evening, over dinner in her apartment, she broached the subject.

“Someone sent me flowers this week at work. Everyone else assumed they were from you.”

She watched Steve slide immediately into his Captain mode. “But?”

“There wasn’t a card. They weren’t the sort of flowers you’d pick. And your reaction just now?” She sighed. “I left them on my desk and played along when the agent that delivered them said you had good taste. Someone’s trying to scare me. It’s working.”

“It’s probably the same people we’ve been dealt with all along. You’re coping too well, so they’re trying to get to you.”

Makes sense. There’s not much I can do about it either way. Ray’s looked into it. The trail goes cold at the flower shop unless we send someone in to do some in-person digging, which will tip our hand.”

“Keep wearing your vest. Stop putting your lunch in the kitchenette by your office.”

Do you seriously think someone’s going to poison me?

Probably not, but I don’t want you taking chances.

Okay. She shut the fridge and leaned on the doors

Steve hugged her from behind. “It’s hard to be patient. Clint and Nat are still working on this, but it takes time.”

I like it better on TV. Everything gets wrapped up in 40 odd minutes.”

Steve chuckled and she felt it against her cheek as she turned around in his arms. “That’d be nice.” He rubbed her back. “I’ve been doing some reading. I want you to go see a doctor.”

“What for? I’m getting better and there’s nothing they can do about run-of-the-mill viruses.”
“I think you’re depressed.”

When she went to pull away, he held her. “Just listen, okay?” he whispered softly before letting her go. He continued to prove she could always trust him to let her go. In his loosened arms, she stayed where she was, nodding that she was paying attention.

“You’re under a lot of pressure right now. You put a lot of extra time and effort into arranging the get-together NYC. It’s bound to take a toll. You never seem rested no matter how much you sleep and I can see you forcing yourself to go through the motions more and more often. It’s like you’ve lost your spark. It’s been building and I’ve been ignoring it for too long, brushing it off as stress. .until Thor said he was worried, too. He said you have the Soldier’s touch.”

“I’m no soldier.”

“He and I agree that you are, but it often has a price. What it does to you aura is distinctive, according to Thor. Jarvis helped me to research so I understand. There are drugs that can help.”

Megan felt the fight go out of her as she soaked his shirt with her tears. “Go look in the bottom drawer of my dresser. In the back.”

She pulled away and slunk over to the couch, wrapping up in one of the many throws she kept scattered around as she curled her hands around her glass of water and stared into the glass, looking for answers.

Steve sat down and put a plastic bag full of pill bottles on the coffee table before he pulled her into his lap, not even spilling the water. “I don’t understand. You keep picking them up but not taking them, letting your doctor think it’s working?”

“Haven’t seen a doctor since I moved down here. I’ve been getting them by mail order. Never got around to canceling the refills.”

“I think that in order to work, you have to ingest them, not leave them in your dresser.”

“Everyone keeps trying to fix me. I’m not broken.”

“Megan, no!” she felt him shake his head. “It’s not about fixing you. It’s about giving your brain the neurotransmitters it needs. Since your body isn’t making enough of them, they make the ones that are present more effective. How is it any different from someone taking a thyroid supplement or insulin if their pancreas craps out?”

“I shouldn’t need pills to function.”

“The family of not is huge.” He smiled sadly when he realized it didn’t make a lot of sense to her. “Something Ma used to say when I’d complain about life not working the way it should.”

“Along the lines of life ain’t fair?”

“Pretty much.” He rubbed her back. “Did I ever tell you about what Bucky and his family did for me after my mom died?”

Megan shook her head, knowing full well Steve’s memory was too good for the question. His phrasing was a matter of manners.

“I didn’t even let them give me a ride home from the cemetery. All he wanted to do was be with me in my grief, in whatever way I needed, and I pushed him away. I told him I could get by on his
own. Bucky put his arm on my shoulder and said, “The thing is, Steve, you don’t have to.”

And then he left, giving me the space I thought I wanted. He’d stop by on his way home from work, just to check up on me, but he didn’t press. It lasted a week.”

“What happened?”

“Mrs. Barnes showed up the following Saturday morning, pounding on my door like she was intending to raise the dead. When I opened it, she invited herself in and shut the door in Bucky’s face.”

She grinned at the mental image.

“Yeah, that was my reaction, too. Mrs. Barnes told me I was moving in with her family. It wasn’t open for debate and it was time to pack my things. ‘We’ll take everything with us you want to keep. Mr. Barnes is waiting in the car downstairs,’ she said as she opens the door and waved Bucky in. I glared at him, he shrugged it off. At that point, it didn’t matter if it had been his idea. We both knew that no one argued with Mrs. Barnes.

“I didn’t have much. The bed wasn’t worth saving, though I keep the quilt my mother had made. Everything I owned, the three of us were able to carry out of there in one trip and Bucky wouldn’t let me carry anything but the pictures and my sketchbooks.

Steve held Megan, “I hated living with them because I knew I was a burden. But, that winter I didn’t get as sick as I usually did. Their apartment wasn’t as cold. I didn’t miss as many meals. Whenever I got work, I gave Mrs. Barnes all of my wages. She argued, but money was tight and she knew it was the only way I’d agree to stay. It also kept Mr. Barnes quiet about my presence. He was a mean drunk and the war made him drink too often. With me there, he was less likely to get drunk. Looking back, she was right to take me in. Without them, I don’t know that I would have survived another year. Between my health and my grief… willpower alone wasn’t going to be enough.”

“I’m glad you had them.”

“Me, too. My point, however, is that being strong doesn’t mean going it alone. You taught me enough about the science to get me started, and I’ve had Jarvis finding me articles and helping me understand them better. If your brain doesn’t make enough serotonin, why are you so averse to taking a pill to help compensate for that? It’s no different from an insulin injection to supplement a pancreas that’s not going its job right. Will you try them for a month and see if it makes a difference?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Do better. You need your A game right now, Megan. This isn’t the time for pride. I’m just asking you to do the experiment and collect the data.”

She cuffed his arm so lightly the gesture barely made a sound. “No fair.”

Steve just handed her the bag. “Be a scientist.”

“Oh.” Resigned, she opened the bottle and poured one of the tiny pills into her hand while Steve held her water.

After she’d swallowed it and chased it with the contents of her glass, she handed him the bottle of pills. “Happy?”
“Hopeful.”

***

“I feel ridiculous for being so uneasy about this,” Steve admitted softly as he parked the car near the barn Saturday morning.

“Don’t. It’s pretty normal. You haven’t been around horses much. Courtney’s a good teacher and she won’t push you into doing more than you feel comfortable doing.”

Steve nodded, still looking uneasy.

“Just think how happy Amanda will be to hear you finally got on a horse.”

“Take a picture for me to send her parents?”

“Promise.” She took his hand and led him into the barn. It wasn’t fair how good he looked in his jeans and new riding boots.

****

Megan pulled Smokey to a halt and got out her camera as Courtney slowly led Pumpkin away from the mounting block. Steve was completely focused, both hands gripping a handful of mane as the draft horse plodded forward. She snapped a series of pictures before tucking her phone back into her pocket. She didn’t want to make Steve even more nervous than he clearly was. Courtney had left Megan mostly alone as she taught Steve how to groom a horse and tack her up. Steve listened with mission-ready focus, causing Megan to bite her lip in amusement more than once as she overheard him asking questions.

“Jumping out of a plane is easier.”

Courtney stopped Pumpkin and patted the horse’s neck. “Steve, take a deep breath. She’s a horse, not an assassin. She’s half asleep, probably thinking about grazing in the pasture. We put kids who use wheelchairs on this horse. We put kids who can’t sit by themselves on this horse. You’re going to be okay, I promise.”

“She’s so big.”

“Yes, she is. She’s also very lazy. She’s going to do the least amount of work she can get away with doing. I have a lead rope attached to her halter and we’re in a riding arena. Even if she wanted to run, she has nowhere to go. She knows I’m in charge here, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Megan watched Steve nod firmly and try to gather himself.

“Megan, after you warm up, why don’t you work on trotting a full lap in two-point? We’re going to the middle for some standing exercises.”

“Okay.” It was going to be hard to focus on Smokey when she really wanted to watch Steve. On the other hand, she knew her scrutiny wasn’t going to make him relax. Something about being on a horse was frightening him far more than she’d anticipated, to the point she regretted pushing him to give riding a try.

“Take your feet out of the stirrups and let go of her mane so you can put your hands on your thighs. I want you to just sit in the saddle and relax as much as you can. Close your eyes and take three slow, deep breaths.” Megan heard Courtney say as she focused on moving Smokey away from the
rail then back towards it as they walked along the edge of the ring. Smokey always tested her at first, balking at gentle cues for two or three times before concluding she wasn’t going to give up. After the weekly battle of wills was over, he settled down and behaved beautifully. Today, unfortunately, he forgot to count and was still ignoring her.

“Open your outside rein and bump him harder with your inside leg if gentle pressure isn’t getting his attention!” Courtney called. “That’s it! Now praise him. Good. Do that a few more times and he’ll figure out you’re the boss.”

It took only a half lap around the ring before Smokey settled and began listening. Moving into a trot, Megan rose in her stirrups and held herself slightly out of the saddle as Smokey carried her. The goal was to do the same movement to and from the rail but at a trot. Maybe one day, she’d be able to steer, apply her leg, and keep trotting all at the same time.

“Okay, Steve. I’m going to let Pumpkin take a few steps forward. Keep sitting just like you are and pay attention to how her body moves beneath you. You should feel your hips rise and fall on either side as she steps, and you’ll feel her belly swing out and press against each leg in turn. Ready?”

Megan caught Steve nodding grimly out of the corner of her eye, though he kept his eyes closed. It was an unusual approach for a first-time rider, but Courtney had her reasons. She dropped to a walk so she could watch.

“I feel it!”

“Good. In time, if you keep at it, you’ll be able to tell which foot your horse is picking up just from the feel. Just as you can feel your horse, your horse can feel you. If you turn your head, for example, it changes how you’re sitting and tells your horse where you want to go. We can add extra cues, like leg pressure and even mouth pressure with the reins, but it starts with your seat.”

By the time the hour was done, Steve was guiding Pumpkin in large figure eights. The only time he faltered was when Pumpkin stumbled, being too lazy to properly pick up her front feet.

“Next time she does that, feel free to grab mane if you need to put your hand down for balance. Right now, squeeze with your lower leg just a bit, then release as soon as she moves faster. That’s it. Do you feel how she’s taking bigger steps and walking with more purpose? If she thinks about slowing down, squeeze again, then release. You want to remind her she’s a horse, not a zombie. You can give small corrections when you catch it early, which means you have to pay attention to how she’s moving.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“I’ve been riding since I was a kid. Like anything, it takes practice.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing we’ll be back next week,” Steve said. “I’ve found out you can do guided trail ride tours at Gettysburg. Maybe by the time the trees turn, Megan and I can make a day trip out of it.”

Megan moved Smokey into a trot, biting her lower lip to hide her grin.
Sorry it’s been so long. I have a new, slightly better paying icky job, sent a kid off to trade school, had surgery on my hand… you know, just normal life. I hope to get back to posting more often as the story wraps up. Yes, we’re nearing the end. I can’t predict how many more chapters, exactly, but this story ends with the events of the Winter Soldier movie.
“What’s wrong?” Natasha said as she slid into the seat that had her back to the wall.

Megan just raised her eyebrow and folded her menu. “Hi, nice to see you, too. Thanks for not yelling at me for not watching the entrance since I was saving that seat for you.”

“Next time, sit here until I get here. You can’t afford to ever let your guard down.”

“Noted.” Megan studied the agent. “You look tired. Everything okay?”

Natasha bristled for a moment, which for her meant a slight tightening of her shoulders that she deliberately relaxed. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“If you ever need to unload, I’ll listen. You can speak in broad generalities since I know your work is confidential. Work stress often comes in three flavors from what I’ve observed. First you get the cases of the right hand not knowing what the left is doing, second, the so-called experts in charge are so out of touch their directives are irrational at best, and lastly, you have the children in large bodies acting out their issues at work.

“The children have been fighting over who gets the gloves while the overseers want to roll out mittens in a workplace set in the tropics.”

“Corporate communication at its finest,” Megan said, raising her water glass in a toast. “To blanket protection from the damage of bureaucracy.”

Natasha tapped their glasses together and sat back in her seat. “Why am I here?”

“I took the liberty of ordering you a starter salad.” Megan dodged the question, as their server approached and put their plates down. Natasha’s preferred vinaigrette dressing was in a small bowl. “On the side, as you prefer.”

“Drowned lettuce should be outlawed.” Natasha carefully poured the dressing over her salad and picked up her fork. “You’re still dodging the question.”

“Not dodging. Just processing my sadness that you believe I only want to spend time with you when I need help. While I am about to ask a favor, I’d like to think it’s of a different sort than you’re thinking.”

“Is it that surprising, given my line of work?”

“You are my friend.” Megan reached into her purse and pulled out a dark green velvet swatch. “This is the fabric for my mom’s dress, which will be handy so we can avoid clashing. Steve and I picked purple and green as our colors. Pepper’s designer will be happy to see you, but I thought
you might want to go back to your favorite local shop, assuming you’re willing to stand beside me when Steve and I exchange vows.”

Natasha’s face was carefully blank, which was her tell for being surprised. “You’re asking me to be your maid of honor?”

“Yes, though we can drop that dated title and call you an honored witness or whatever you prefer.” Megan laid down her fork and put her hand on Natasha’s. “I’m also apologizing for not being a better friend. I like you for you, not what you can do for me. Going forward, can we have a standing arrangement for a monthly lunch or something we do just for fun?”

Natasha looked down at their hands. “I’d like that. I’m sorry I thought—”

“Nope. That’s on me, not you. I’m going to do better going forward and I’d like you to call me on it if I slip.”

“Friends help each other.”

“Yes. But it’s a perk, not the purpose. I’ve gotten so used to going it alone I’ve developed some bad habits.”

“I’ve never had friends, at least in the normal sense.” She looked at Megan then, green eyes full of honesty.

“Normal is a setting on the washing machine, but I hear what you’re telling me. I suppose it can be disconcerting to have the rules changing on you, and we started out with you helping me out in a million different ways. I think that’s become your love language.”

“Love language?”

“How you show people you care about them. Tony’s is throwing money and inventions at people when he sees a need. Steve is a protector and caregiver. You were raised in an environment where excellence meant survival. So, by training me in self-defense, for example, you’re taking care of me in the language you grew up with.”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it.”

Megan arched a brow. “Are you trying to tell me you never noticed those patterns?”

“My interpretation was different.” She smiled ever so slightly. “Angles to be manipulated and exploited.”

“Knowledge is power. So, will you stand with me?”

“Yes.”

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“What sort of dress and shoes were you thinking of?”

Megan buckled her seatbelt as Natasha started her sports car. “Honestly? I want to leave that entirely up to you. Wear a suit if you prefer. I care more about you feeling comfortable and appreciated. Ideally, you pick something you can wear again.”

“You really mean that.”
“Yes.” Megan put her hand on Natasha’s arm for a moment. “I want you to come as my friend, Natasha, not an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Nat just nodded and pulled out into traffic. “What color?”

“Your choice. Purple and green gives you a wide palette. My mom narrowed it a bit with her dress, but there are so many shades to pick from that don’t clash, I can’t imagine there is a real problem for finding something flattering. If you want to pick something to match your eyes or have your heart set on a pale lavender… it doesn’t matter to me.”

“How about shoes?”

“I recommend wearing them since it’s cold in January. If you want fuzzy bunny slippers, let me know so we can incorporate rabbits in the floral arrangements. I also have no interest in a bachelorette party. Your only responsibility is to talk me down when my nerves hit and help me get into my dress before the ceremony. I’m sure you’re going to be capable of doing both at the same time.”

“Bunny slippers.”

“If you must. Chewbacca is always an option.”

“I won’t do that to you. I am going to take us to my favorite shop in all of D.C. The owner often helps me with attire for missions with rich targets.

****

From the outside, the storefront was hardly promising. It was a wooden door tucked between other shops. The door opened into a dimly lit corridor that ended in another wooden door. This one, however, was half open. From inside, Megan heard the muted strains of opera music.

“I see why you love it,” Megan teased as Natasha led the way.

Natasha hummed a response but said nothing more. Instead, she rapped her knuckles once on the door and was early greeted by a tiny older woman with the carriage of a dancer and a demeanor that insisted you take her seriously. Something about her said that she had seen much and survived even more.

“Natalia!”

Bemused, Megan watched as the grey-haired womankissed Natasha’s cheeks and launched into a flood of Russian.

Still holding her hands, Natasha smiled with genuine warmth and turned to Megan. “This is Ekaterina Kuznetsova, the finest designer and seamstress I have ever known. Ekaterina Aleksandrovna, I would like you to meet my friend Megan Buchwald.¹

“Natalia has never brought a friend to my shop. You will sit there. Drink tea.”

Megan seated herself on the upholstered sofa and watched the older woman duck behind a curtain only to return with a tray of tall glass cups set into decorative metal supports. She watched, mesmerized, as Natasha, sitting beside her, held each cup up for Ekaterina to fill partway with a dark liquid that seemed too rich to drink. When that was done, Natasha added hot water from an ornate metal container in the middle of the coffee table that Megan hadn’t paid attention to before now.
“Do you trust me?” Natasha asked, turning to Megan at last.

“Of course.” Even so, Megan was surprised to see her spoon two large dollops of what looked to be strawberry jam into the cup.

Finally, Natasha handed her the cup, spoon still inside. “Stir it well and let it cool a bit. It’s hot.”

“It smells wonderful.”

“Da. You will tell me your needs.”

“This is confidential, and I trust your discretion. Megan is engaged to marry Captain Steve Rogers on New Year’s Eve and has asked me to stand beside her. Megan picked out her dress when we were in New York, but there is no one else I trust to attire me for this special honor.”

Ekaterina clapped her hands together, beaming in joy. “Young love! I need to see this dress and hear your colors to make something that lets Natalia shine but not steal attention from the bride and groom. Are there other attendants?”

Megan shook her head. “Steve is asking one of his friends to stand by him. We want to keep it intimate.” She took a sip of the tea and was surprised at how well the jam mixed with the flavors in the tea.

“Da. A wise choice. Your beau, he is handsome?”

“I think so. More importantly, he’s a good man.”

Ekaterina laughed. “A pretty face will keep him safe from your anger when he acts like a stupid boy. Now stop stalling. We can drink tea while I look at your pictures. You young people all have your toy phones, so let me see.”

Megan unlocked her phone and passed it to Natasha, who fiddled with it a minute. “May I transfer these to my phone?”

“Of course.”

A few minutes later, Megan was sitting slack jawed as she looked at a holographic image of Steve floating over the phone Natasha had laid on the table. “Tony,” Natasha said in explanation. “There are times his technology comes in handy. As you can see, the groom is handsome by any measure.”

“You’ve won the heart of Captain America?”

“Steve Rogers. Cap is way too uptight for my taste.”

“I’d bed him myself if I were a decade younger. Though I suppose, he’s older than me. Perhaps you’d like to trade my shop for your man?” Ekaterina winked at her. “Enough teasing. We shall talk about dresses!” With a flick of her hand, she swiped the first image away and brought up a photo of Megan in her dress. “Don’t look so surprised. Natalia has shared this toy with me before. Useful, when I must dress her for a mission.” She stood and walked around the table, eying the dress and flowing train from the back. How had Natasha’s phone generated a three-dimensional composite so effectively? Megan suspected Jarvis was silently at work on their behalf. “A good choice. It suits you. Your face is radiant; your body knows that is the dress for you.”

She swiped her hand again. “Who is this?”
“My mother. I have a fabric swatch. It’s a dark green velvet. And before you say anything, the designers are making some changes. Mom wanted a neckline that didn’t plunge as much, and I heard them talking about removing the gathers and somehow finagling it so the skirt was more flattering.”

“Good.” She sat back down. “Let us put Pretty Face back up while we finish our tea. He is going to inspire me.” With another wink, Ekaterina replaced Katherine’s image with Steve before took another sip of her tea. “Yes, I can design something suitable for you, Natalia. Megan, tell me what colors you want.”

“Purple and green are the colors we picked, but I am happy with any shade Natasha feels the best wearing. I want her to feel special and yet have a dress she can wear again.”

“Generous and practical. You like my tea. You value Natalia. I see now why she brought you here.”

“Thank you,” Megan said sincerely. “Can make it look good with bunny slippers?”

****

I have an idea, but let’s look at the fabric I’m thinking of.” Ekaterina stood up and gestured for them to follow her.

“I’m going to defer to your expertise,” Megan said, waving them to go. “You don’t need me underfoot. I have a feeling Natasha doesn’t get much of an opportunity to speak her mother tongue. Don’t stick to English on my account while you discuss your plans.”

Natasha gave her a strange look before following Ekaterina through a door into what Megan assumed was her workshop proper.

She leaned back on the sofa and sipped at her tea, listening to the sounds of the two women speaking Russian in low tones.

Something bumped her ankle and rubbed against it. Leaning forward, she saw a large cat nosing at her shoes. “Hello.”

The blue-creme tortoiseshell flicked its tail and continued its inspection for several moments before hopping up on the couch and curling up against Megan’s leg. After allowing the cat to sniff her fingers, Megan scratched behind the one-eyed cat’s ears and was rewarded by a loud purr as the cat leaned more heavily against her in obvious bliss. “You look like you’ve had a hard life, my friend. One eye, a torn ear… You remind me a bit of my boss. I’m glad you have a real home now.”

****

“Megan, come tell us what you think about Natasha’s selection.”

“That would mean disturbing the cat and I don’t feel right doing that.”

“Vaska?” Ekaterina said, poking her head out.

“It’s like a liquid cat was poured over my lap. Quite the motor, too.”

“I’m so sorry! He’s probably shedding all over you.”

“Accessorizing. All cats know that it is very important for all clothing article to have the proper
amount of cat hair applied.”

“He’s very picky and never comes out when other people are here.”

Megan covered Vaska’s ears. “Don’t call him picky when he’s being selective! He might decide to deposit a hairball in your shoe! I take it you two came up with something you’re both happy with?”

“Da. Come see. Don’t let that grumpy face fool you. He’s quite accustomed to being moved out of the way.”

“He’s so happy right now.”

“He’s a scoundrel is what he is.” Ekaterina fetched a small jar from a nearby shelf and shook it. Immediately, Vaska was on the move, bleating his displeasure at being starved as Megan watched Ekaterina open the jar and gently hand Vaska a treat. “Stop being a nuisance,” she scolded fondly before turning back to Megan. “I have a brush for your pants.”

“It’s fine.” She followed Ekaterina into the small workroom where to bolts of fabric were laid out next to a sketch.

“The drawing is crude but will give you the impression. See? The skirt will be simple, gathered at the waist. The bodice will be open in the back with a simple, sleeveless cut inspired by the neckline of your dress. Over that, I’ll embroider the tulle to make a bateau necked front, wide straps over the shoulder that plunge and merge with the under-fabric at the waist. It is sexy but modest, designed to show off Natasha’s strong arms.

Megan fingered the solid fabric which seemed to be a sort of chiffon. It was dyed the color of concord grape jelly. The tulle was a shade different, but so close that it tricked her eyes into seeing it as darker one moment, then lighter the next. “It’s lovely but I don’t envy you trying to embroider this.”

“I have a machine.” Ekaterina waved a hand. “It is nothing. The pre-made laces I have won’t follow the neckline properly.”

“Can the skirt be full enough to hide slits on the sides?”

“You mean pockets? They are no trouble.”

“Pockets without bottoms, so Natasha can access her weapons.”

Her eyebrow arched up. “Is this a wedding or a battle you are planning?”

“She’s an Avenger. I want her to be as armed as she needs to be to enjoy the day.”

“I see why Vaska came out for you. Every outfit I have prepared for Natasha provided for her weapons. I wouldn’t change that now, even had you asked.”

****

“Ekaterina likes you,” Natasha said as she pulled her car way from the curb and threaded it through traffic.

“I like her. I have the feeling her life is long, complicated story. Given how thick her accent is, I’d say she didn’t come to the U.S. as a child. She seems happy now, though, and I’m glad for that. She strikes me as a good person, someone you can turn to when the world falls apart.”
“Vaska would agree. She found him half dead in the alley behind her shop. It was six months before he let her pet him.”

“He was certainly a lover boy today.” Megan shrugged. “Cats.”

Natasha made a non-committal noise. “Has something changed for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem more settled. Happier, even.”

Megan shook her head. “Still me.” Silently, though, she wondered if the medication was having an effect.

“Whatever it is, keep doing it. It’s a subtle change, but a good one.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

****

Megan was just sitting down to her dinner on Wednesday night when her phone rang. “Hi, it’s Beth. How often does Steve get his plans ruined? Because we’re two for two, and I’m starting to think this is normal for him.”

“Crap. What happened? And please don’t mind me eating while we talk. I just got in and I’m starving.”

“Eat way. Anything yummy?”

“Leftover pot roast with all the fixings.”

“You go, girl! Okay, you know Steve and Dave were at the ballpark this afternoon, right?”

“I didn’t remember it was today, but I know Steve told me they were going. There was a rant about the Yankees, another rant about the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn, and some grumbling about having to find a new team. I mostly tuned it out and made sympathetic noises.”

“I hear you, sister. Do you know how nice it is for me to tell Dave to save up his stat reports for Steve? They have been texting back and forth like two teenagers as Dave tries to catch Steve up on what Dave views as the best current players. It would be fine except Dave tries to pull me into it, ‘Hey Beth, didya know Backstop Nameless from Depression Era Brooklyn had a better RBI than Overpaid First Baseman from Team I Don’t Care?’ I just point to his phone and tell him I’m no longer listening now that he has a ball buddy. What the heck is an RBI? Some sort of sandwich? Do I look like I care? For the last two weeks, I’ve been subjected to the great seating argument, as if I understood the options. If you see the game without baking to death in the sun it is a good seat.”

“All I heard about was how expensive it all is.” She dropped her voice an octave and tried to imitate Steve, “‘Sitting behind home plate shouldn’t cost more than the Barnes family spent on their first car, Megan.’ All I told him was that we all knew a hot dog was going to cost ten times what it should so he should eat a big meal before leaving and quit fussing about it.”

“They take their baseball way too seriously. Even so, I wanted them to have fun. Dave just came home looking like his dog died because halfway through the game, Steve got called out by S.H.I.E.L.D. and had to leave. When does he get to go off duty?”
“He doesn’t. He’s always on call, Beth.”

“That’s ridiculous. I just spent the last half hour going through all the new channels on TV and searching the internet. There isn’t anything big going down that’s in the news. Aliens invading N.Y.C.? I want the Avengers there. There’s nothing in the news. Nothing. What did he get called out for? Surely he’s not the only agent working at S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“He’s the only super soldier. Steve always tells me that if it makes the news, things didn’t go according to plan.”

“That’s awful. One more thing you need to know is that when the game started, Steve had a tiny notebook out and was taking notes like he was studying for a final exam. When Dave asked him about it, Steve seemed stunned. Dave said his face got totally shuttered, he muttered, ‘Nothing,’ and then put the book away. He seemed upset by something, so Dave didn’t push.”

“Good to know. I’ll prod that wound gently in a few days. Tell Dave not to give up on Steve, okay? I don’t get ditched every time we plan something.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re stuck with us. I just feel bad for Steve. It’s not fair to him that he is never off duty. They can try for another game in a few days. Let’s see about the four of us getting together for dinner.”

“Steve’s apartment is well set up for entertaining without us tripping over each other. How about next weekend? Saturday evening? Check with Dave and I’ll check with Steve.”

“It shouldn’t be this difficult to get four people in the same room.” Megan heard Beth’s frustration through the phone.

“Modern life, I suppose. We only fail if we stop trying.”

“Amen. What do you want us to bring?”

“Why don’t we provide the main dish and you bring something for dessert?”

“I like it. When we host, we’ll flip roles.”

“The other rule is that we don’t try to be fancy. Take-out is a valid option. So are casseroles and crock pot meals.”

“Dave has a love affair with his grill, so grilled beast may happen.”

“I love grilled beast. Steve eats anything. Literally anything. He has stories about what he ate during the war that make me gag.”

Beth laughed. “I can only imagine. I promise we won’t go crazy. A lot of what people call fancy food I call gross. I’ll check in with you in a few days. Give Steve a hug from me and I’ll be in touch as soon as Dave and I coordinate calendars.”

After Megan hung up the phone, she tidied her kitchen and wandered the apartment, somewhat at loose ends. She hadn’t sewn anything in a while, so maybe it was time to consider a new project. Steve’s apartment was improving but still needed help. A quilt or large throw was more than she wanted to take on, but maybe some throw pillows would add a splash of comfort and color. She had just pulled out a box of left-over fabrics when her phone rang again.

“Megan, this is Janice, from the Smithsonian.”
“How have you been, Janice?”

“Fine.” She paused for a long moment, before continuing. “I’d feel better if you went over to Steve’s apartment.”

Megan was immediately on her feet and looking for her shoes. “What’s wrong?”

“I just came from there and I don’t feel good about him being alone. He said he texted you that he was home safely.”

“Yeah, he did. I got it when I was on my way home. I figured he’d tumble into bed and call me tomorrow. He always calls if he wants to talk. Texting is his polite way of telling me to leave him alone.” Holding the phone to her ear with her shoulder, she tossed a change of clothes into an overnight bag and gathered her tablet and charger. She had a toothbrush at Steve’s place but needed to take her medicine.

“Look, I don’t want to stick my nose in… but everything I know about him says he’d rather crawl on broken glass than lean on someone he’s worried about.”

“That is an apt description. Why is he worried about me?”

“All he said was that you were under a lot of stress and exhausted. He reached out to me for advice on getting an old paper framed. Said it had started to tear just from him trying to unroll it. So, I offered to stop by after work and take a look at it. I didn’t have anything planned for tonight and I could tell from his voice this paper is really important to him.”

“Keep talking. I’m packing an overnight bag while we talk.” She tossed her medication into the bag and left it by the front door while doing a final sweep of her apartment to turn out lights and check that she had everything.

“Good. When I got there, it was pretty obvious he’d been crying. Points to him for not trying to hide it. The paper? It was full of grids he and Bucky generated to help them play the most complicated fantasy baseball game you can imagine.”

“Crap. This is all about him having to leave the game early this afternoon.”

“I think that started it. Have you seen Twitter?”

“Actually, I haven’t. Why?”

“It’s how I knew about the game. There are several hashtags trending, all around the theme of him not getting to go off duty. One of the fans snapped a picture of him standing up to leave and apparently apologizing to the person he’d gone to the game with. It’s heartbreaking. Anyway, when he got home tonight, he went digging in his boxes of stuff from his life before, hoping he still had their books of player stats and virtual games, and the sheet of charts. He found them, but the chart is in rough shape. It’s on butcher paper and was never made for longevity. It was rolled up, then smashed flat at some point.”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly. He doesn’t care a lot about stuff, but it’s pretty clear that these papers have incredible sentimental value. I got his permission to take it with me, along with the books, and see what we can do to protect them. I know he wanted to mount it as a poster, but I think it’s too fragile. There is someone on staff that I know can get it flattened out, so I’m going to get it scanned and print a poster to display instead. Getting him some acid-free storage containers for the books is about all
we can do for them.”

“I know he’ll appreciate it, but how can you justify using museum resources for that?”

“It’s all in the spin. He may have given me copies of the books you put together for that gathering in New York, on the condition they’re kept sealed for fifty years. There’s no way my boss is going to give me a hassle, trust me.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Megan sighed. “At least he asked you for help.”

“That’s the silver lining. Maybe I am wrong to be calling you, but I hate seeing him grieving alone.”

“Me, too. I’m glad you called. If he asks, do you want me to play dumb?” Megan threw her purse on the passenger seat and started her car. “I can do that.”

“I don’t think he’d buy it.”

“He’d pretend to.”

“I’d rather be honest. Knowing people worry about you isn’t a bad thing.”

“Thank you. For everything. Just… thank you.”

“I’ll be in touch once I’ve got news about the papers. Take care of him, Megan. The more I learn about him… I’ve seen people broken by far less than what he’s dealing with.”

****

“Steve?” Megan called softly once she had the door locked behind her, not sure if he was awake or not. The lights were all out and he didn’t have any music playing.

“Janice called you.” It wasn’t a question.

He was lying on the couch, a pile of used tissues on the coffee table nearby. As she approached, he sat up and wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. Megan straddled his lap and locked her arms behind his head.

Wordlessly, he took the chain and the dog tags it held and slipped it over her head before putting it around his own neck. He fingered them, leaving them outside his shirt. “How can you be so sanguine about this?”

“Oooh. You’re pulling out the big words,” she teased gently, running her finger along his chin before covering his hand in her own. “Because grief is personal. You miss him. I can understand not wanting his dog tags left in some locker or in your dresser when you’re on a mission. You want them close to your heart. When you can’t do that, I’m happy to do it for you.”

“You’re wearing them more than I am.”

“Because we agreed it made sense for me to keep them when I’m not with you. It’s okay. You love him. I love him for what he meant to you. I just wish I had the chance to know him, too.”

He pulled her close and hid his face in the curve of her neck. “I don’t deserve you.”

“It’s not about what we deserve.” She ran her fingers through his hair and wondered how to best help. Crying always left herwrung out, feeling dried out, and battling a stuffy nose. “I’m going to
put on a kettle for some herbal tea. Does that sound good?"

He nodded against her.

“Okay. Go drink some water and crawl into bed. I’ll bring the tea in and rub your back for a bit.”

She knew he needed to unload but wasn’t about to press. With all of the bugs in his apartment, they had a standing rule of never discussing anything important when there.

“Not yet,” he said when she started to get up.

“Let it out,” she whispered into his hair as the tears overwhelmed him once more.

****

He was called out on another mission Thursday morning, so they never got a chance to talk before he picked her up on Saturday morning. To Megan’s’ surprise and delight, they went on a trail ride, mostly on level terrain, but taking a path that went through the woods and across a small stream before looping back towards the barn using a trail cut for the power lines.

The forest was alive with the sound of insects. Occasionally, squirrels could be seen cavorting in the brush and chasing each other up think trunks. A woodpecker could be heard searching for insects. Best of all, she heard no cars or trucks. They were too far from the closest country road for the sounds of traffic to reach them.

Three-quarters of an hour into their mostly silent ride, Courtney pulled her horse to a halt and pointed off to her right. Three white-tailed doe were watching them, ears twitching as they decided whether or not to flee.

Responding to a cue they never saw, the doe furthest from them whirled and took off at a run. Her white tail flashed as she bounded effortlessly up the hill, leading the others out of sight.

Megan squeezed Pippin’s sides gently, urging him forward as Courtney led them out of the woods and along a fence line. With the barn in sight, all of the horses picked up their pace a bit and Megan spent the last part of the ride battling Pippin. He wanted to lead and she was determined to keep him back at a safe distance from Steve’s’ horse. Even though Courtney said Steve’s horse and Pippin were best friends and not likely to kick, Megan didn’t think allowing bad trail manners was a good idea, especially for a horse that was usually ridden by children. Stopping periodically to open up the space wasn’t working, so she took advantage of the grassy area and began forcing Pippin into circles that took him away from his equine buddies.

Resigned, Pippin finally stopped fighting her so much and slowed his walk when she asked. Of course, they were practically back at the barn when the battle was over.

****

“That was more fun than I imagined it could be,” Steve told her as he pulled her into a hug right outside of Pumpkin’s stall.

“So, you finally see the appeal?”

“But you do, but that was fun. Every other time I’ve been tromping through the woods, I was being shot at or training in anticipation of being shot at. This was different.”

“I imagine so. For one thing, we see more deer this way.”
“True.”

“Care to explain why you found it necessary to keep your shield on your back for the whole ride?”

Steve just looked at her.

“It’s gotten to the point where it’s never more than three feet from you at all times. Yes, I’ve noticed.”

“Call it a gut feeling.”

“Okay. How about you stay over tonight and we talk about that gut feeling and the increased brooding.”

He kissed her nose. “You just want me for my body.”

“Actually, I want you because you love to clean. The body’s just a nice bonus. Guy pushing a vacuum is sexy. You pushing a vacuum is sexy to the fourth power.”

“Where does cleaning toilets fall?”

“As long as I don’t have to do it, sexy to the infinite power.”

****

When her apartment was clean, they rewarded themselves with a soak in her huge bathtub. Since their time at the barn, the conversation had been light. Now though, Megan ran her fingers over the edge of the shield that was leaning against the tub. “You usually put this by the bed when you get here. Today, you had it on your back for the trail ride and it’s been in the same room with you. I trust your gut, but I’d like to know more.”

“It’s a couple of things. Maybe it’s just me being sick of this.”

“Sick of what?”

“All of it.”

Megan pinched the bridge of her nose. “Back up. Are you venting or do you think there’s a problem you need to solve?”

He looked at her with confusion in his eyes.

“Do you need to unload frustration about too many missions back-to-back, or are you seriously rethinking your involvement with S.H.I.E.L.D.? If you’re just venting, I’ll listen and empathize. If it’s the latter, I’ll try to help you brainstorm.”

“Both, maybe?”

“Is it S.H.I.E.L.D. or the Captain America image that’s getting to you?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Steven answered without hesitation. He seemed surprised by his own ease answering. “Being Cap is hard, but I’m crystal clear on what he stands for. S.H.I.E.L.D. keeps trying to change that. Even when I was selling war bonds, I believed in the war we were fighting. The Nazis had to be stopped.”

“What’s missing from your clarity of purpose at S.H.I.E.L.D.?”
“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it the nature of the missions? The way they’re planned? Who they target?”

Steve shook his head. “We get briefings. I always know the target and the goal.”

“Do you? Or are you getting just enough to keep you on the straight and narrow?” She held up her hand. “I don’t need your answers. I’m just trying to help you come at this from a different angle. From what I’ve seen at S.H.I.E.L.D., it’s very compartmentalized. I feel deep in my bones that Director Fury is doing what he believes to be right. I also know he’s a man full of secrets. If your gut is telling you something is off, it’s worth listening to it.” She put her hand on his arm. “Can you point to anything that changed? Something that might have set you on edge?”

“The reunion in New York.” Sensing her coming apology, he shook his head. “I needed the kick in the butt. I’ve been going through the motions for too long.”

“Take a month to think about it. Make a list of what makes you happy at S.H.I.E.L.D. and what you’re finding frustrating. What sorts of changes to you want to make? Just brainstorm and jot those ideas down. In a month, you can look it over. I think you’ll find the answer jumps out at you.”

“I’m starting to feel like I’m a puppet and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s pulling the strings.

“Okay. Pay attention to that. Look for the patterns and motivations. Is it you chafing at orders or not being told about the bigger picture beyond the mission?”

Steve’s shudders slumped. “I don’t know.”

“That’s why you’re going to take some time to make some observations and categorize things. Collect the data, then organize it. If they’re pulling strings, pay attention to how they go about it. I can tell you want to make changes, but your gut is giving you a warning not to do that. Hold your tongue. Keep your eyes open and observe. One month isn’t going to change things one way or another.

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The next morning, after Steve parked the bike in the S.H.I.E.L.D. parking lot, Megan “remembered” an errand she wanted to run before heading into the office. Ducking into the Metro station, she took a train to Rosslyn, keeping an sharp eye on the other passengers while pretending to be disinterested and sleepy. The latter, at least, was easy to do. It gave her time to think about Steve.

Ever since they’d gotten back from New York, he’d been different. He was more open about missing Bucky and more willing to talk about his past life. In turn, he had a greater cloud of melancholy about him. It was good that he was finally grieving, but so very difficult to watch. Her instincts screamed to comfort him and cheer him up. It was the last thing he needed. All she could do was honor his pain and let him know she wasn’t holding him to a timetable of grieving. Not even the best of soldiers could walk off that much pain in a few weeks.

After exiting the crowded car, she joined the flow of humanity heading to the escalators and dropped her nondescript paper bag in the trash can. The drop accomplished, she felt a bit of the tension ease from her shoulders.

Something hard pressed into her lower back as a deep voice behind her growled, “Gonna give me a piece of the action, too? Let me see what the fuss is about?”
1 Thanks to bennetttmp339 on Slack. for help with the Russian aspect of the introduction.


Infinity War bored me. Endgame made me angry. I so envy those of you who were able to enjoy it. I wanted to love it. I just didn't recognize the people portrayed on screen as the characters I have grown to love. There were some amazing scenes, but I left the theater disappointed. I guess I'm just ready partial to happy endings.

For the record, my stories always have happy endings. If I ever wrote one that didn't, it would be plastered with warnings. Relax... the good guys and gals are going to continue to suffer terribly, but it will all be okay in the end. I promise.
Megan felt her emotions slide away as the man pushed her slightly to the side, trying to herd her away from the other commuters heading towards the escalator that would take them up to the surface and into the muggy weather clinging to the city.

Faking a stumble, she half turned and slammed her foot down on the man’s shin as she shoved his hands down and away from her. “Fire!” she shouted as loudly as she could and hooked her foot behind his knees she shoved him back, sending him off balance. “This guy has a gun!”

All hell broke loose.

****

“Tell me why you were in the Rosslyn Metro station this morning.” Nick sounded like he was in pain. Maybe it was because of all of the paperwork her little adventure had caused.

“Why does that matter? I wasn’t due at my desk for another hour.” She wrapped her hands around the mug she was holding to try to keep them from shaking. “This tea tastes like kerosene mixed with rodent urine. You’re the director. You should have better tea.”

“Doctor.”

“Director.” She glared right back at him.

“Did you know he had a gun?”

“No. Kevlar vests don’t let you feel objects. But when a sewer worm tries to sexually assault you, a smart woman reacts. Yelling for help doesn’t work. I read that once, so I shouted, ’fire.’ Once I had him off balance I figured yelling he had a gun would get even more of a reaction. I was right.”

“Did he have a gun?”

“I’ve told you a half dozen times already what happened. Asking a dozen more isn’t going to change my answer: I don’t know. He acted out of turn, I reacted to defend myself.”

“Maybe I should let the Metro police deal with you directly.”

“Have you ever been groped on the subway, Director? Have you been told to smile because a ‘pretty thing like you should smile more’? When you go home and it’s dark outside, do you carry your keys so you cause them as a weapon if someone comes after you? Because that’s what women like me do every damn day. I’m not sorry that I defended myself and I’m not going to apologize for making a scene.” Megan slammed the half-full mug down on his desk and stood up.

“I’m done with this. I don’t need to justify wearing Kevlar. I don’t need to justify wearing the same damn outfit and hairstyle every day to annoy the paparazzi. I also don’t need to explain to you or anyone else why I went on the Washington D.C. Metro during the morning rush hour like
thousands of other professional women in this city. If you try to make this my fault or sic Metro police on me to rehash this one more time, you’ll get to see me rehash it on the evening news.”

“Is that a threat, Dr. Buchwald?”

“It’s a promise.” Megan wrenched his office door open and turned to face him. “I’m an employee, not a puppet, and I wasn’t on the clock. You can’t stop me from speaking as a private citizen about events taking place in my personal life. If you try, you’ll have my resignation letter on your desk in the morning.”

With that, Megan left, slamming the door behind her.

****

The adrenaline crash hit hard once she was in her office behind a locked door. She could barely get her hands to stop shaking enough to unlock her phone. “I’m alone,” she murmured to her new wristwatch. Jarvis had made sure it looked exactly like her old one, though it had several new features, most importantly, a two-way audio link to Jarvis. They usually communicated by text, as neither trusted that her office was free of bugs.

“Is there someone that I can contact on your behalf?” Jarvis asked by text he sent to her phone. The only thing that sustained her through the last hour was knowing he had been listening from the moment she had left Steve in the parking lot. He always listened in when she made a drop, but today was the first time anything significant had happened.

“No. Steve and Nat were sent out on a mission. Maria Hill told me Clint was also out of the county. I’ll be okay,” Megan typed into her phone, trusting Jarvis to decipher her terrible typing.

“I will continue monitoring.”

Megan sent him a thumbs-up sign, then allowed herself a small breakdown. If whoever was threatening her had hoped to rattle her, they’d certainly succeeded.

****

“You about ready to go?”

Megan looked away from her computer monitor, trying to shake off the daze she was still in. The entire workday had passed in a grey, fuzzy blur. “I’m sorry, I was concentrating.”

“I could tell. I asked if you were about ready to go. Figured I’d give you a lift home since Rogers. I heard there was a ruckus on the subway this morning.”

“That’s very kind of you, Agent Rumlow, but I can make my way home.”

“I know you can. But I figured I’d do Cap a solid. I’m on one of his teams, you know.”

“I didn’t know that, but my answer is the same. I appreciate the gesture.”
“At least let me walk you to the subway.”

“I’m not taking the subway, Agent. Please pull the door closed behind you. I have a bit more to get done on this before I head out tonight.” With that, she turned back to her computer, clicking her mouse randomly to make it look like she was working. Something about that man was setting her on edge.

Rumlow stood there for a long moment, watching her, before finally nodding once to himself and pulling the door shut behind him.

As soon as he was gone, Megan grabbed her phone.

“I’ve taken the liberty of contacting Sarge. He is on his way to pick you up,” the text from Jarvis read. He’d acted before she even had a chance to ask him for help.

She sent another thumbs up to him and buried her face in her hands.

****

“You are a good man, Sarge,” Megan said as he opened the passenger door to his truck and gestured for her to hop in.

“This is what friends do, Megan.” He gave her a pointed look and closed the door firmly before going around to get in. “Once he’d pulled away from the S.H.I.E.L.D. building, he glanced at her before putting his eyes back on the road. “I’m not complaining one bit. Your friend Ray gave me a buzz and asked me to pick you up, which I’m happy to do. But you don’t look so good. To be honest, you look a bit like some of my boys did after their first exposure to real combat. I know you’re well aware Steve’s playing in the big leagues, and you’ve seen the aftermath of that, so something tells me there’s more going on here than you needing a ride.” He shook his head at her before she could string two words together. “You don’t need to tell me anything, I’m just saying I recognize that look and I want you to know I’ve got your back.”

“I really, really appreciate that.”

“Your friend Ray is worried about you, too. The amount of stuff he’s sent from Stark tower blows my mind. We’re putting it to good use. Security in our building is better than ever. I’m going to assume it’s all related, but it doesn’t matter. We take care of our own.”

“One of the agents tried to give me a ride home tonight.”

“Did he now? Wasn’t that nice of him.” The way he said nice indicated he disagreed with the motive.

“Yeah, what a gentleman. He delivered flowers to my office one time and now I’m supposed to get into a car with him?”

Sarge snorted. “Spoiled white rich boys with perfect teeth don’t understand rejection too well.”

“Truth. He said he’s on one of Steve’s teams, but I don’t know him. Some things have been happening that have me on edge. Ray’s been helping with them, and that’s why he reached out to you. I don’t trust easily, but I trust you.”
“Now you’re just trying to see if you can make me blush so bad you can see it.”

****

“Boys, walk!”

“Megan!” Steve shouted her excitement as he tore down the stairs and bounced off the wall at the half landing before launching himself at her.”

“Hi!” Megan braced herself just in time for his hug. “It’s good to see you. How did you know I needed a hug today?”

He looked up at her with worried eyes. “You havin’ a bad day?”

“A bit. Your hug just made it better.”

“Hug, too?” Seth asked softly, holding back and looking at his feet.

“If you’re comfortable, with that, Seth. I love hugs.”

Steve tugged on her arm. “Do you want a hug sandwich?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what that is.”

“Boys, let’s move back up to the landing so no one takes a tumble.” Jolanda interrupted, waving them to move with her free hand.

“Your mom’s right. Let’s move and you can show me your hug sandwich.”

“It’s not complicated. Seth, you got the front?”

Seth nodded and wrapped his arms around Megan’s waist while Steve hugged her from behind. “See? You’re in the middle of a hug sandwich.”

“I feel very loved. Thank you. That just made my whole day better.”

“We’re going out for ice cream. We did all our chores and even helped Mom with some extra stuff. She said after all our hard work, we should go for a walk, run in the park, and then get some ice cream. Do you want to come with us? I bet you run really fast.”

“Thank you, Steve, but I’m going to stay here tonight. I had a bit of a rough day at work and I don’t want to deal with people right now. Thank you for hugging me, it helps me feel better. Seth, you give excellent hugs. Enjoy your ice cream.”

“Oh, okay, bye Miss Megan! Seth, I’ll race you to the front door.”

“Hold the railing!” Jolanda warned but otherwise let them go. “Are you alright? Do you need a cup of tea and a shoulder? I can move them along and let you know when we’re back.”

“I’m all right, but thank you for the offer. Honestly, I just want to curl up with a book.”

Jolanda gave her a skeptical look.
“I promise, if I change my mind, I’ll knock on your door.”

Jolanda studied her and reluctantly nodded. “We take care of each other in this building.”

“I know and I’m grateful. I’m okay.”

****

“Gonna pull the fire alarm on me?”

The male voice wasn’t familiar, so Megan didn’t look up from her stretching. It was too early in the morning to be dealing with idiots. She needed at least two more cups of tea before she would be capable of polite conversation. Besides, ignoring him was only going to irritate him more.

Exercise was overrated. She could be home in bed, sound asleep. Was she? No, she was in a gym at O’ dark thirty in the morning doing stretches. Wallowing in her misery, she rolled onto her stomach and forced herself into a plank. At the twenty-second mark, she collapsed to the mat, panting from the exertion.

“You can’t even hold a plank for a half minute? That’s pathetic.”

Megan heard a body slam to the floor. “Tell me more about being pathetic, seeing as you’re an expert at it,” Natasha purred as she wrenched the agent’s arm further up his back, causing him to moan. “Uh uh. Use your words,” she added, pushing harder.

“I’m sorry!”

“Yes, you are. You are also going to be helping me train the newest class of recruits. I expect you in their training area at six AM sharp.” Natasha stepped back and watched with detachment as the agent who had teased Megan rubbed his shoulder as he slowly go to his feet. “For the next six weeks, you’re mine from six until noon.”

“Way to go, Jeff!”

Megan watched Natasha turn her disapproving gaze to Jeff’s apparent friend. “You, too, Agent Brooks.”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“I know. When Agent Raines began harassing Dr. Buchwald., you did nothing. That makes you an accomplice, which makes you my other assistant for the next six weeks. Run along now, boys. I’ve got more important things to do than babysit you.”

Megan looked down, braced for Natasha’s lecture once the agents had slunk from the room.

“Ignore them, Megan. They don’t know your worth. Let’s spend today teaching you another option when someone comes at you from behind.”

“You can say it.” Megan sighed and climbed to her feet. “Everyone else has.”

“You got yourself out of a bad situation unharmed. I’d call that a win.”
“I made a scene.”

“You used the tools you had.”

“I feel like I failed.”

“You didn’t.” Nat’s green eyes were sincere. “You never trained for this before. You got away and you did it without getting hurt. I’m proud of you.”

“I just…”

Natasha put her hand on her wrist. It surprised Megan because Natasha wasn’t about comfort or physical contact. “It’s done. Going over it isn’t going to teach you anything new, which means it’s time to move on.”

“Close the chapter.” Megan nodded, willing herself to hold it together. She didn’t deserve Nat’s friendship. “I’m trying.”

“In a little bit, you’re going to be too tired to think about anything.”

If she heard Megan whimper, Nat was too kind to comment, though she did keep her promise.

****

“Steve?” The apartment was silent, save for music softly playing in the background and Megan shook her head at Beth and Dave as they followed her inside. The smell of delicious food cooking filled the air. Leaving Dave to shut the door, Megan went further inside Steve’s apartment.

“Steve?” she called again.

She found him in his living room, perched on a stool, totally engrossed in his art. “Earth to Steve!” She clapped her hands together sharply.

He startled and looked at her with a hint of confusion, then looked at his watch. “I’m sorry. I lost track of time.” With that, he pulled his dust mask off and tossed it on the nearby table, then used a rag to wipe the pastel dust from his hands. “Come on in,” he told Beth and Dave, who were standing back a bit. “Dinner’s about ready to pull from the oven.”

“It smells wonderful,” Beth said. “Mind if I look?” she asked, gesturing to his easel.

Steve shook his head as he reached for the crutches leaning on the wall behind him.

“Your text said you were just a bit banged up.” Megan folded her arms.

“I’m fine.”

“A bit banged up means a couple of bruises, not crutches,” Dave added.

“I twisted my knee.”

“And?” Megan said. A twisted knee didn’t account for the black brace going from mid-thigh to his ankle.
Steve sighed. “And got shot in the leg, but it went straight through.”

She raised her eyebrow.

“Two broken ribs.” It was almost funny, watching him squirm. “Stitches on my cheek.” He sighed. “Okay, the bullet also short of shattered my kneecap, but they pulled out the fragments and used lab-grown coral to lay down a scaffold for it to regrow. I’ll be healed up in a few days. Two weeks, tops.”

“Dude, did you seriously not tell Megan you were hurt?” Dave asked.

“They took me to….” Steve paused, clearly considering what he could say without breaking confidentiality. “There’s a… facility they took me to that’s in the same general region where the op went down. I didn’t get my phone back until we were back in D.C., and by that time, it was a moot point. An agent dropped me off here, I got dinner in the oven, and I’ve been painting ever since.”

Megan pinched the bridge of her nose. She didn’t want to get into it now.

“Why did you call me when Beth was in the car accident?”

Megan looked up, a bit surprised, at Dave’s question.

“Because I knew you’d want to know….” Steve’s voice trailed off and he winced. “I messed up.”

“Yup.” Dave said, popping the p.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make sure someone knows to call you from here on out.”

Megan nodded. “I appreciate that.”

“Who is this that you’re painting?” Beth switched the conversation to safer territory.

Leaning on the crutches, Steve gestured at the canvas. “Bucky.”

“Why does he have wings in your drawing?”

Megan moved so she could look over Beth’s shoulder. The easel had the barest outlines laid down in with pencil, with Bucky’s face mostly finished. On a smaller easel was an assortment of photos and clippings with Bucky in different poses, some closeups of a particular gun, and images of bird wings.

“I keep having the same dream, thought it might help to get it out. Not long before I put the plane down, we had a mission to capture Armin Zola, a high ranking lunatic that had been working with Schmidt, in what we now know was the original Hydra team inside of the Nazi organization. He was on a train, high in the Austrian Alps. Bucky, Gabe Jones, and I rode a zip line down to try to hijack the train. They had high-tech weapons, stuff like no one else had. Blew the whole side of the train car wide open.” As his voice started to shake, Megan hugged him from behind. He covered her hand with his own and gestured again at the painting. “Bucky used my shield to block one of the shots. The force of it knocked him out of the hole. When I got out there, he was clinging to a bar. I tried to reach him… nearly did. But the metal gave way and he fell.”

Dave swore under his breath and crossed himself while Beth moved into his side and hugged him.

“Another six inches… I could’ve saved him.”

“Your head knows you did your best, but your heart won’t let you believe it,” Beth said softly.
Steve nodded and swallowed hard. “It’s my most frequent nightmare. But lately, there’s a twist. I sometimes dream he flies back up from the ravine like some avenging angel.”

“It’s a powerful sketch,” Beth said, studying the reference board. “But why are you doing the face first? Don’t artists usually do all the big stuff first and fill in the fiddly details later?” She waved her hands as she talked, clearly unfamiliar with the proper lingo.

“I’m mostly self-taught, so I don’t know much about the proper way to do stuff. What I do know is that if the face is wrong, there’s no point continuing.”

“That makes sense,” Dave said thoughtfully.

“Second ignorant question: you say you’re painting but you’re using sticks of chalk? Doesn’t paint require brushes and those funny oval boards with a hole in them?”

“You’re thinking of a wooden palette. Those are used with acrylic and oil paints. I’m working with soft pastels. They are pigments mixed with a binder. I grew up using regular pencils, charcoal if I was lucky. We never had money for fancy supplies and paintbrushes were just a dream. Megan’s mom signed me up for a class online using these and I love them. You can blend them—not as much as liquid paint—but enough. For me, it’s a lot like getting colored charcoal to play with. Despite their name, the colors can be vivid.” Steve opened a small drawer and pulled out a paper where he’d painted a purple iris in a vase. “We did this in class last week.”

Beth took it from him and held it so Dave could see it, too. “It’s gorgeous. Why is it shoved in a drawer? This should be framed and hanging up.”

“Too many mistakes. Some of the highlights are in the wrong spot for the light source. The shadow on the front petal is too wide, and the paper got saturated before I got the background done. See, the paper is textured…” he pulled out a tablet and opened it so they could feel. “When you use too much pigment, you fill up the teeth in the paper, and then you can’t add any more.”

“I don’t care that it’s not perfect. I think it’s gorgeous and I want to rescue it from that dark drawer. May I have it?”

“I’ll make you a better one.”

As he moved to take it back, Beth turned, protecting it with her body. “I want this one.”

Megan bit her lip, wondering if Steve’s manners or stubbornness would win. His shoulders slumped a bit. “Okay.” Manners for the victory.

“Excellent. Did you sign it?” Beth peered at the lower right corner. “You need to sign your work, Steve. Even I know that much.”

“I don’t sign practice pieces.” Grudgingly, he held out his hand and looked for something to use. “That looks like a pencil.”

“It’s a soft pastel, honest. These are handy for detail work.” He signed his initials in the corner and handed it back. “Happy?”

“Very. I’ll be even happier when I’m eating. I have no idea what you have in the oven but it smells wonderful.”

“It’s just chicken and potatoes.” He paused a moment. “I have to reheat the corn. I got corn from
the farmer’s market on my way home and cooked it as soon as I got it off the cobs.”

****

“I want the recipe for your ‘Just chicken and potatoes’,” Dave said as he pushed back his plate. “It may be simple food, but I like simple food. I love garlic and dill, but I’ve never had them together like that.”

“Internet recipe.”

“Where so many good dishes come from,” Beth added. “I agree, it was good.” She leaned her chin on her hand. “Is cooking a lot different now than when you grew up?”

Steve laughed softly, clutching his rib when I caused him pain. “Probably not for rich folks. For Ma and me, though, yeah, it was different. We ate a lot of boiled cabbage and potatoes. We were too poor to afford spices, so everything was pretty bland.”

“I thought window gardens were a thing,” Dave said, frowning slightly.

“Had to have windows for that.”

Beth looked surprised. “You didn’t have windows?”

“Not that got any sunlight. Some of the places we lived had windows that opened to an airshaft.”

Steve grimaced at the memory. “The smell those let in wasn’t something I’ll ever forget. When we had an apartment with a real window, sure, Ma would try to grow them in the summers. In general, though, spices were a luxury. Food now is so much better, but I’m just glad I don’t have to go hungry.”

“Did you go hungry a lot?”

Steve nodded to Beth’s question. “Once the depression hit, it got bad at times. Ma used to say she never missed a meal, just postponed a few. After the serum, my metabolism ramped up so much, I had a hard time getting enough rations. Hunger and I have known each other really well for most of my life. Few things make me feel as rich as having a refrigerator and freezer that I can keep full of foods that actually taste good.”

“I can only imagine.”

Steve shrugged at Beth’s comment. “Others had it worse. I knew I was loved. Ma and I didn’t have much, but our home was a happy refuge. Once I moved in with the Barnes family, I appreciated how lucky I’d been.”

“Is that picture in the background Ebbets field?” Dave asked, peering at the poster on the wall.

Megan turned in her seat to look at the wall behind her. The sepia-toned background showed a ball-game in progress. It was overlaid with numerous small grids, the rows and columns headings filled with numbers while the grids themselves had single capital letters each square.

“Dem stinking bums from Brooklyn will always be my team.”

“Janice?” Megan asked softly.
Steve nodded as Dave got up to go look more closely at the poster. “After getting called out that game we went to, I indulged in a bit of self-pity and dug through a box of stuff Mrs. Barnes kept for me. We had those grids on a roll of butcher paper that was rolled up and then crushed. I was afraid it was going to tear if I tried to unfold it, so I called one of the curators at the Smithsonian to see if they could salvage it. Janice said they’re still working on the best way to preserve it, but had them scan it, clean up the background… I guess someone got creative and added the image in the background.”

“It’s perfect,” Megan said softly. “With that background, you know it isn’t even pretending to be the original, but you still have Bucky’s handwriting and the memories of the times you used it.”

“These look like player stats and potential outcomes,” Dave said, looking over the various grids, moving his finger just over the glass as he compared two grids to each other. “What did you use it for?”

“The Dodgers only played on Sundays. We were able to to a game once or twice a month but listened to them on the radio if I wasn’t up to the trip. That left us with a lot of time between games do have our own. We borrowed Mr. Barnes’ slide rule and did a lot of math. I have some of the books we filled with our calculations. Those grids are the result. We’d pick a game and use the records we’d made of each game to see how it might have worked out differently if they switched the order of players at bat, for example.”

“That’s what you were doing with that notebook you had out,” Dave said, pointing at him as he put the pieces together.

Steve nodded. “Force of habit.”

“So then what? A player is at bat, you know their stats, what happened next?”

“We rolled the six-sided die we had. The first roll gave us the row, the second roll gave us the column. That told us what grid to use for that play. From there, we used the batter’s stats on the left and pitcher’s stats across the top to tell us how that pitch ended up.”

“You invented fantasy baseball,” Beth said, a hint of wonder in her voice. “And you didn’t even have a calculator.”

“Slide rules are just as fast if you know what you’re doing. Besides, I’m sure we weren’t the only fans doing something similar.”

“That must have taken you hundreds of hours.”

“I was sick a lot.” Steve said, looking to Beth as he nodded that she was correct. “Lying around in bed can get very boring, even with my sketchbook to entertain me. We’d play for hours, arguing over which players to use next, when to switch out pitchers, whether or not to have them try to steal. We wrote it all down, using the same code and updated player stats after each game we heard. It was a nice way to pass the time.”

“You said you still have some of the books? I’d love to see one and have you walk me through a few plays.”

“We just lost them,” Beth said, leaning towards Megan.

“Better them than us. I’m going to put the leftovers in the fridge.” Megan stood up and picked up the platter of chicken. “Steve, why don’t you set yourself up on the couch. Put your leg up and I’ll get you some ice for it. Dave can take a picture of the poster with his phone to refer to. I know
you’re in more pain than you’re letting on. If you tell me where the books are, I’ll fetch them.”

“Grab the one from my nightstand,” Steve said, not arguing with Megan’s assessment.

“Are you due for another round of pain meds? Or do you need us to go?” Dave asked as he watched Steve heave himself up on the crutches and make his way towards the sofa.

“Stay. I don’t have any pain medication. Distractions help more than anything.”

“We can do that,” Dave promised. “Why don’t you have something you can take?”

“Go get his book, Megan. I’ll start loading the dishwasher,” Beth said, shooing Megan away as they heard a knock on the apartment door.

“Because S.H.I.E.L.D.’s doctors haven’t made it a priority. Fortunately, Steve has teammates who have.” Megan gestured for Steve to sit down as she went to answer it.

“Got here as soon as I could,” Tony said, still in Iron Man suit though the faceplate was flipped up.

“Where is he?”

“Heading toward the couch.”

“You’re the Baseball Buddy,” Tony said to Dave. “Next time, call me. I’ll fix you up with the box seats in Yankee Stadium.”

“And root for the Yankees? Over my dead body!” Steve said from the couch.

“Pain makes you grumpy, so I’ll let that go. Megan? I brought the blue goo, just like you asked. Pepper said I’m not allowed to tease him while he’s hurt, so don’t tell on me.” He turned his gaze to Beth. “Who are you?”

Megan set the box Tony had shoved at her down on the nearest surface. “Beth, the one and only Tony Stark. This is Beth and her fiancé, Dave. Tony, brace yourself.”

“Why?” Tony whined as Megan hugged him fiercely and kissed his cheek. “Ew, ew! Feelings. I don’t do feelings. Steve, make her stop!”

“She can’t hurt you with the suit on, Tony.”

“Not the point, Captain Swiss.”

“Swiss?” Beth asked, brow furrowed.

“American cheese isn’t full of holes,” Tony explained, then cocked his head. “Just a second. Ew. Bugs. I hate bugs. You should have told me you need an exterminator.”

“What are you talking about?” Dave asked, looking first to Beth, then Steve for an explanation.

“Tony, I grew up with cockroaches as playmates. Trust me, I would have noticed an infestation.”

“Roaches are cool. Not in your house, but seriously, awesome bugs. No, I’m talking the electronic kind.” He flipped the faceplate down as he clomped around the living room, moving knick-knacks, feeling around window frames, and adding to a small collection of devices he was collecting in his left hand. Flipping the plate up, he headed right for Steve and dumped a half dozen into Steve’s palm. “This is just from this room. Want me to find the rest?”
“Please.”

“You should call the police,” Beth added.

Dave laughed at that. “And tell them what, honey?”

She looked at him, her face falling. “Is this one of those cases where we have a different set of experiences?”

He nodded. “Mr. Stark seems to have it handled.”

Steve crushed each bug between his thumb and foreigner, systematically adding each to a growing pile on the coffee table.

Megan handed him the composition book she’d fetched and looked at his leg. “You need to change into shorts.”

“You didn’t have to call him.”

“Yes, I did.” She paused and cupped his chin in her fingers. “If S.H.I.E.L.D. won’t do right by you, I’m going to keep butting in and calling the people who actually care about Steve Rogers. Now go change into some shorts.”

Dave picked up on his hesitation. “Go ahead. I got the same teaching on manners from my mother, but you’ve been an excellent host, Steve. I’d rather you trade the slacks for pain relief.”

Megan waited while Steve considered, then nodded slightly to himself. He stood up and started for his bedroom.

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While Steve was busy changing his clothes, Megan got back to putting away the leftovers.

“Give me the containers and I’ll put the food away,” Beth said. “You help Steve.

“Tony, have you eaten dinner?”

“What day is it?” he called back to her from the guest bedroom.

“Better fix him a plate. I’ll load the dishwasher,” Dave added, heading back to the dining table to start collecting their dishes.

Megan got the very large and well-stocked first aid kit out of the kitchen cupboard it was stored in and watched Dave’s eyes go wide. “Yeah, he’s well prepared.”

“But no pain medication.”

“Wrong,” Tony said, clomping back into the kitchen. His suit disassembled and he stepped out of it before suit closed back up and walked to stand with its back against the nearest wall. “No FDA approved pain medication, no S.H.I.E.L.D. approved pain medication. Bruce and I came up with a topical glop that does the job. We’re going to send it through testing for the general public. In the meantime, he can use it.” Plopped himself on a barstool, he picked up a fork and stabbed at the potatoes with his fork. “Bugs are all contained and in a Faraday bag. I’ll take them back to New York and see what they can tell me.” His eyes went wide as he chewed. “These are really good.”
“Steve made dinner,” Megan supplied.

“Of course he did.” The room fell silent. “What? I’m not allowed to assume a guy knows how to cook? I won’t trust him to fly a plane, because he tends to crash those into the ocean, but cooking? With his appetite, takeout would get old fast.”

“I’m learning to fly a quintet!” Steve piped up as he returned to his spot on the couch. “I passed the initial written tests last week.”

“Remind me to stock extra parachutes for the team,” Tony fired back before taking another bite. He looked at Dave, pointing his knife at him. “You’re a plumber.”

“Yes.”

“Talk to me about lead.”

Dave folded his arms across his chest. “You’re an engineer and you need to me to explain lead?

“My bad. Talk to me about the jobs you can’t do when you’re doing the jobs you’re hired to do.”

“There are a lot of older houses around town, and yes, they have lead water pipes. What can I say? I’d love to do whole-home replacements with copper. It’s too expensive.”

“Labor costs or supply costs?” Tony asked before shoveling another bite of potatoes in his mouth.

“Both. Copper pipes aren’t cheap. Labor, insurance, drywall repair for getting at pipes in the walls… it adds up.”

“Dream with me a minute, then. Got your own business?”

“Mostly subcontracting.”

“Okay, if you had your own business, would you offer apprenticeships?”

“I’d love to. But that takes a team.”

“You’re not dreaming big enough. I did my homework on you. You mostly work in minority neighborhoods, right?” Tony straightened up as Dave’s body language became defensive. “Retract the claws. Steve’s a trusting guy. The rest of the Avengers? Not so much. You and the fiancée both checked out. I’m verifying my assumptions that you’re not going into the homes of the rich and famous. You’re going into the homes of black, brown, low-income, and working-class people. Am I right?”

Dave nodded once, stiffly. Beth moved into his side and put her arm around his waist. Seeing that, Megan put the first aid kit on the coffee table and opened it up. “Take that brace off of your leg,” she told Steve as Tony continued what sounded like an interrogation, but experience told her was him thinking out loud.

“I’ve been thinking of a pilot program but haven’t had the right person to help me with it. I’m talking about paid apprenticeships for at-risk youths and non-college track young adults. The local vocational-technical schools offer training, but that doesn’t put food on the table. What if we took plumbers nearing and in retirement and partnered them with those young bodies, one to one? Brains and brawn in each set. The trades are where it’s at, but the kids today can’t see it. Offer a decent wage, let them take money home to their mammas. If the foundation took care of wages, could you find me the workers?”
“Yes. But there are other costs…”

“Billionaire,” Tony said, pointing to himself. “This is pocket change, seriously. Can you help get this off the ground? My lawyers will draw up the paperwork, I’ll pay materials, salaries, and insurance. You run it part-time while you grow your own business. In five years, we expand it or pull the plug. If it goes bust, we’ve fixed a few homes, gotten a few kids further ahead, and you’ve beefed up your resume. If it works, we renegotiate terms with no hard feelings if you want to walk away and do your own thing.”

“I need to think about it.”

“He never stops,” Megan said so softly only Steve could hear her as they worked together to undo his bandages on his knee and apply the blue goo.

“No, he doesn’t. Ten bucks say he came up with that entire plan in the last five minutes.”

“Twenty says he’ll pay off Beth’s student loans and the rest of her tuition. Think Dave will accept the offer?”

“I think he’ll do what you and I recommend since we know Tony better.”

“Smart man,” Tony said, in response to Dave’s insistence he had time to consider the offer. “Impulsive decisions are for people like me. Pepper likes your way better. Your fiancée gets a vote, too. Think about it. What’s your phone number?”

Dave told him.

“Jarvis, you get that?” Tony said turning to his empty Iron Man suit.

“Yes, sir.”

“Text his phone.” Dave’s phone pinged with a new message. “Let me eat before this gets cold, talk it over. Message me any questions, demands, or concerns. You’d be salaried, of course, full S.I. benefits. Paternity leave included, and we let people put non-married partners on their coverage plans. Just so you know, if those sorts of benefits are of interest to you.”

Megan turned back to Steve. “I like them both.”

“Me, too. I know we’re just getting to know them, but my gut says we can trust them.”

“I agree.” Already the tightness around his eyes had eased as the pain-numbing compound did its job.

Megan stripped off the gloves she’d used to spread the goo and handed Steve a telfa pad.

“I’ll see myself out. Thanks for dinner. Stop leaving your legs vulnerable, Rogers. Crutches can interfere with sex against the wall.”

“It’s strong enough to hold me while standing on just one leg,” Megan fired back, winking at Steve as she followed Tony, who was once again in the suit to the door. “Maybe if you’re a good boy, one day Steve will give you some pointers.”

“I don’t need pointers!” Tony sputtered.

“Then why do you keep bringing it up?”
“Oooh.” He turned back to her, face-plate up. “I see what you’re doing.”

“Good-bye, Tony. Stay any longer and I’ll hug you again.”

“Leaving now!”

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Megan gave herself a moment to lean back on the door. Steve was still sitting crossways on the couch, watching everything. Dave and Beth were almost done tidying the kitchen, talking in low tones as they worked.

“Just so you know,” Megan interrupted them. “You’ve have to go all the way past the first landing to keep Steve from hearing you talk no matter how quiet you’re trying to be. He plays dumb for the sake of manners.”

Dave straightened up, acting like a kid caught misbehaving, then frowned. “How the heck do you put up with all that noise? You have to hear every conversation your neighbors are having.”

“And every TV show, argument, or other activity….” Steve let his voice fade. “I’m pretty good at tuning it out. Yes, Tony’s offer is legitimate, he came up with it on the spot, and I think you should accept. We definitely will have your lawyer look over terms and negotiate a contract, but he means well. He also values his independence, which is why he suggested you keep growing your own business at the same time. You’re probably wondering why he’s doing this. The answer is this is Tony’s way of showing affection. His childhood…”

“There’s an entire luggage set of baggage,” Megan cut in as she went back to the couch. “He wants to do the right thing. He cares about other people and making the world better. He remembered you’re in plumbing, had an idea, and ran with it on the spot. I think there is an entire department Pepper set up to manage Tony’s spontaneous projects. She’s the voice of reason and restraint while he’s the one that comes up with amazing ideas and invents things around the clock.”

“I need some time to wrap my head around this.”

“We also don’t have a lawyer,” Beth added as she once more leaned into his side.

“Come sit down,” Steve motioned for them to join him. “If you decide you might want to do this, at least to the point of looking at a contract, I’ll take care of the lawyer.”

“Do we really need one?”

Megan nodded in answer to Dave’s question as they both sat down in the comfortable chairs that flanked the fireplace. “Yes. Tony’s good. His legal team is good. But their primary duty is advancing and protecting the best interests of Stark Industries. Your lawyer’s job is getting you the best deal possible. Tony recently set up each of the Avengers with their own support team, for lack of a better term, to manage the ugly business of being famous. We recently learned of some interference with Steve getting his fan mail, for example.” She waved her hand, dismissing the topic when she saw Beth lean forward in her seat. “They’re paid out of a different funding stream and each team answers to their assigned Avenger. They’ll know who to connect you to and they’re paid to be loyal to Steve, not S.I.”
“I can’t—”

“Dave, let me do this. We can make it an interest-free loan if you want. The only thing you need to decide is if this is the sort of project you want to take on. You’re already planning a wedding and trying to get your own business off the ground. There’s nothing wrong with saying no. Tony made an offer he came up with on the fly and he’ll forget it just as quickly It’s not a mandate.”

“If you could see some of the homes I go into. Their parents are trying their best…”

“I grew up in the slums. I get it. No one should be slowly poisoned drinking the water from their tap. A few more kids would have a chance to learn a trade they might not otherwise consider. It could change the course of their lives. But it doesn’t have to be you running it.”

“I think it does.”

“Enough shop talk,” Megan said. “You need time to think about it. Before Tony got here, you were chomping at the bit to talk baseball. Here is your notebook.” She moved the composition book from the coffee table to Steve’s lap. “You know where the poster is. Knock yourselves out reliving imaginary games played decades ago. Beth and I are going to dish out dessert and sit in the dining room and talk about interesting things like different colors of pocket lint.”

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She and Beth were both on their second serving of brownie pudding when the Steve’s work phone rang.

“You’re supposed to be off the roster!” Megan grumbled as she got up to retrieve the phone from where it was charging on the kitchen counter. “They should not be calling you.”

Steve gave her a placating look and took the phone from her. “Rogers.”

He listened for a moment while Megan loomed over him, arms folded as she scowled. “I’ll find out and call you back in a few minutes. What number do you want me to call?”

After nodding one more time, he hung up and put the phone on his lap. “Stand down, Megan.” He turned to Dave. “That was Coach Johnson. He wants to know if you and I are free tomorrow to visit with the team before they play the Mets.”

“Are you serious?” Dave was incredulous.

Steve nodded and turned to Megan. “You and Beth are welcome, too.”

“I already have plans to scrub the scuff marks from the baseboards in my apartment. I even bought a new pack of magic erasers. They’re all sitting there in a package on the kitchen counter, all pristine and new.”

“Oooh! Baseboard scrubbing. I adore baseboard scrubbing!” Beth added as she came over to where Megan was standing. “Sorry, guys. We have important plans and will have to forgo the testosterone immersion.” She tugged Megan back towards the dining room. “Move away from them. Their affliction might be contagious.”
I have a lot of feelings about all the stuff happening in this chapter. We can chat about it while eating:

Grandma Ethel’s Brownie Pudding

350 degrees F in a 9” x 13” pan. (176.7 deg Centigrade; 23 cm x 33 cm pan)
Bake for 45 minutes.

Sift together: (in my house, that means dump into a bowl and stir it a few times….)
2 cups flour (280 g)
4 teaspoons baking powder (12 g)
1 teaspoon salt (5.7 g)
1.5 cups of sugar (285 g)
1/4 cup of cocoa (35 g)

Stir in: (with a bowl scraper, no electric mixer is necessary)
1 cup milk (235 mLs)
2 teaspoons vanilla (10 mLs)
1/4 cup vegetable oil (60 mLs)

Spread this into the pan. It will be a gooey paste, much thicker than cake batter.

In a separate container dissolve sugar and cocoa into water:
1.5 cups brown sugar (285 g)
1/2 cup cocoa (70 g)
3.5 cups hot water. (828 mLs)
I use a large Pyrex glass measuring cup to heat the water in the microwave for this part.

Once your hot liquid is ready, pour it slowly over the batter/paste. Use a spoon to deflect the flow so you don’t make a crater in the batter!

Bake until the brownie is done and passes the toothpick test.

As it cools, the liquid will thicken into a pudding base. If you are like me, you eat your first serving hot out of the oven, with the brownie crispy on the edges and drowned in a thin pudding that has yet to set up. You will burn your tongue and wonder why you never learn to wait until it cools. But it tastes soooo good you’ll do it again next time.

Metric equivalents for the dry ingredients are from internet search results. In the USA, we’re too dumb to use Metrics. We also use volume measurements for a lot of dry
ingredients. Idiotic, but that’s the system we’ve got. If something seems wonky in the conversion to Metric, I probably made a mistake.
The local schools were back in session. It was the start of a new year. New Year’s Day might denote the calendar year, but in Megan’s mind, the start of school was when the new year really began. New backpacks, pants that were purchased overly long by parents who knew that by spring, ankles would be visible between the hem and now-battered sneakers. That was in theory at least, since today’s youth were permitted to wear shorts and it was still too hot to endure jeans.

It was disconcerting, at times, to realize how different the climate was just a bit closer to the equator compared to where she had grown up. To Megan, the start of school meant fall was here. It meant fog on the ground, overnight frosts, and jackets being mandatory in the early morning. Here, September was just an extension of a sultry summer, though the overnight hours provided some relief from the relentless heat and humidity. It would be some time yet, before the container gardens succumbed to frozen temperatures and the forests began to let go of their foliage. It also meant the season of ragweed lasted longer. With it came watery eyes and fits of sneezing. Maybe trick-or-treating in snowsuits was an acceptable tradeoff for ragweed season ending sooner.

Life was good as September plodded onward. Evenings were often spent riding the tandem bike, this time with Steve in the lead. Now that the outdoor air was no longer laundromat humid, Megan could enjoy herself. They rode for miles, often all the way to Rock Creek Park. When her legs got tired, she just relaxed and enjoyed the view. Steve could pedal all day and possibly all night, before tiring. There was no pressure on her to keep up, a clear benefit to having a super soldier as a fiancé.

As they sat and ate snacks on the edge of the valley trail, she pulled a folder out of her backpack and handed it to Steve. “I want you to read this proposal and tell me what you think.”

“Emma?”

“Emma.”

“You must think it has some merit or wouldn’t be giving it to me.”

“Her proposals are always scientifically sound.” Megan leaned back on her elbows and looked up at the forest canopy. “Why does S.H.I.E.L.D. have a research department?”

“To study things that wouldn’t get attention otherwise.”

“Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division. What part of that implies life science research?”

“The Enforcement part. Some projects are too sensitive for civilian labs, others might be too politically fraught for the military to be seen handling. What happened to Dr. Banner is a direct result of the military not being as proactive as they should have been. The S.H.I.E.L.D. research division is really small, which makes it easier to keep control of it.” He looked sidewise at her. “You disagree?”

“Let’s just say I have more questions than answers. General Ross is more invested in our projects than I think he should be. This proposal is terribly benign. Emma clearly wrote it with an intent to convince me it had the potential to move a lot of basic research forward.”

“Cancer?”

“Cancer, environmental toxins, aging.”
“But?”

“If it’s published, it puts the SGR cell lines out there for others to use.”

“Pandora’s box gets opened.”

“Someone already popped the lid with the genome and proteome work. This would just be admitting we may as well take the lid off entirely.”

“So how is this different?” He held the folder up.

“A lot depends on whether or not this is for internal use only or publication. Your sequence data, as far as I know, has not been loaded to any public database. It’s naive to think that’s going to stay that way. The way this proposal is framed, publication is a natural outcome. Emma is using health concerns to justify the project.”

“I feel like I’m missing something basic here. If the work is justified why are you hesitating? Isn’t this exactly the sort of information that should be shared?”

“Any cell line used in a published study has to be shared with other researchers. There is an entire organization, American Type Culture Collection better known as ATCC, devoted to archiving and managing the sharing of microbiological and cell line collections. Labs also send each other vials all the time. There are a ton of rules and regulations in place and I’m fuzzy on some of them myself since I didn’t directly deal with it, but the bottom line is that once a paper is published in the peer-reviewed literature, you have to share the cell lines you used in the study. It’s the only way for the results to be independently verified.”

“If this project is given the green-light, my cells would be out there in the world at large.”

“Exactly. Maybe they already are, at least in other military research labs. We don’t know. Work on the super soldier project never really stopped. What if this is just another attempt to replicate it but coming at it with an angle I’m not seeing?”

“It was easier back in the day. I figured out pretty quickly I might die from Project Rebirth. No one thought to talk to me about what success might mean beyond winning the war.”

“I included a review article for you to read. It will help give you context for Emma’s proposal.”

“Homework.”

“It’s a short article, as reviews go."

“Did you prepare Jarvis for my onslaught of questions?”

“I think he’s expecting it since I already put him to work on it helping me with it. What I knew about telomeres was pretty basic. The review article focused on laying out the state of our knowledge. There is a lot we don’t know.”

“You’ve taught me that most of science is establishing what we don’t fully understand.” He slid the folder into his backpack, took a last swig of water from his water bottle, and closed the lid. “Ready to walk some more?”

Accepting his hand, Megan let him pull her to her feet. “As long as you’re providing the power to get the bike home.”
On the ride back, Steve glanced back at her and said, “It’s been a month and two days since you started taking an antidepressant. I think it’s helping.”

She glared at his back. This wasn’t something she wanted to talk about.

He let her stew for about a mile. “Nothing to say?”

She still had manners, so she kept her thoughts to herself. She also stopped pedaling.

“Rather unscientific of you to refuse to evaluate the data.”

What would happen if she tried to pedal backward? Would it have an effect?

“It’s your body, Megan. I’m not going to issue ultimatums about medication. It just seems to me that you have a bit more life in your eyes. You seem to be participating in life more and doing a lot less of just surviving. Do you think the medication is helping?”

“I abhor the idea that my quality of life is dependent on pills in a bottle.”

“I can understand that.”

Megan continued to seethe, but felt a twinge of guilt for being so childish. None of this was Steve’s fault. He’d been incredibly supportive. “I guess you can.”

“When I think back to the people I knew when I was growing up, I can think of so many who would have benefited from the treatments available now. An inhaler for asthma still seems like a miracle to me.”

“I guess between the poverty and the veterans from WWI, you saw a lot.”

He shrugged. “Wasn’t anything to be done about it. And as much as I relate to your independent streak, I can’t help but be jealous that all of you have options and treatments I never had. Penicillin and an albuterol inhaler would have let me think I’d live to see thirty without being a burden to everyone.”

“I need to stop being stupid and suck it up.”

“Your feelings aren’t stupid. You and I just happen to have different feelings about that bottle of pills. You see weakness, I see a miracle.”

“I’ll keep taking them.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’m starting to empathize with Colonel Philips.”

Steve laughed. “I think he’d get a kick out of that.”
Despite reassurance from the nurses that today was a good day, Megan was a bit nervous. “Director Sousa, do you mind if I join you?” Peggy was sitting in an armchair by the window, watching the birds at the feeder just outside.

“Megan, what a lovely surprise! Please sit down. I thought we established you were going to call me Peggy.”

“I brought you something,” Megan said smoothly. They both knew she’d used Peggy’s title in case Peggy had forgotten her. There wasn’t any need to state it openly. “It took a bit longer than I wanted to finish this up, but I wanted to deliver your copy in person.”

Peggy accepted the hefty book with both hands. “I want you to know how much we all enjoyed that weekend.”

“I paid with a big crash and got sick on top of it. How about you?”

“Fortunately, I don’t remember!” Peggy smiled sadly. “I was tuckered out and that makes things worse. My daughter was beside herself, but convinced Grant to stay away for about a week. At least, that’s what I got the staff here to tell me. I have a couple of them whipped into shape. I directed a national spy agency, for heaven’s sake. I can handle the truth when I ask for it. Speaking of, how is he?”

“Grieving. I think he’s finally grieving.”

Peggy patted her hand. “It’s hard to watch, I know, but it needs to happen. Is he letting you in?”

“Some. He’s painting a gorgeous portrait of Bucky right now. He’s always dreamed of Bucky falling from the train, but he’s turned that into an amazing image of Bucky with soft, grey wings surging up out of the ravine, a sniper rifle in hand, ready to avenge himself. Right now, only the face is mostly done. The rest is just sketched out, but it’s stunning.”

“Good. If he’s using his art, that’s good.” Peggy leaned back in her seat, eyes focused on a memory. “I found Steve in a bombed-out pub trying to get drunk the day we lost Barnes. It was only time I ever saw him cry.”

“He’s letting himself cry, too. I got it though this thick skull that stoicism at home is stupid.”

“Times are changing, though not fast enough. What about you? Is he holding you up, too?”

Megan nodded. “We’re figuring it out. Seeing you really helped. He’s mostly come to terms with his life changing direction. Bucky’s death is what eats at him.”

“I’m not surprised since those two were thick as thieves.”

“What was he like? Rebecca doesn’t remember the things about her big brother that I want to know. Steve talks about him, but he never explains him. That’s not the right word.”

“I know what you mean. He’s sharing a memory, not filling in the details about his character. The stories tell you part of that, but you’re looking for a perspective that Steve can’t provide.”
“Yes! I know Bucky was a good man. He cared about his family, he worked hard, and he was a loyal friend. I want to know him. Steve needs to talk about him and I encourage that. But I never know how rose-colored his memories are.”

“The only blind spot Steve had was an inability to see Sargent Barnes’ flaws and weaknesses. It may be due to how they grew up.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Barnes was a caregiver.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but you never call him Bucky.”

“That was Steve’s name for him. The rest of us called him Barnes. Three James was two too many. We only used nicknames in the military if the last names were the same.”

“Makes sense.”

“The history books make out like Steve was the leader of the Howling Commandos. That is true, to a point. What they never understood is that without Barnes, there never would have been a team called the Howling Commandos for Steve to lead.”

“Because Bucky picked them?”

“He did pick them, but more because he took care of them. They were a team before Steve joined them. When I first met him, they’d just come out of Azzano. I’m certain he had been tortured and looking back, we should have insisted we send Barnes home.”

“Would he have left Steve?”

“You see the problem, though Barnes hid it well enough. Steve was so used to Barnes being a caretaker that I don’t think he could see the cracks in the armor. Looking back, it’s clear that Barnes acted like a man who knew he wasn’t going home alive. He wasn’t reckless. He seemed… resigned. His sole focus became keeping the others safe. He’d badger Howard for better equipment, then turn around and hound Chester for more rations. It was hard keeping Steve fed and Barnes kept dropping weight to the point I put him on double rations, too. None of the men got enough, but Barnes did his best to get them what he could.”

“He was a big brother who just swapped out his sisters for a new gang.”

“Exactly. It didn’t matter that he was younger than some of them. He bullied and badgered them to tend their gear. He mended their socks, and both he and Steve spent a fair amount of down-time knitting as many wool socks as they could. Howard and I were able to keep them supplied with yarn, at least. Marching everywhere is hard on a soldier’s feet. Trench foot was a concern and Chester was every strict about everyone keeping their feet warm and dry. Barnes took that to a new level. If the men didn’t take care of their boots and oil them, he’d sit up and do it himself. He’d knit fingerless gloves, too. He didn’t sleep much, none of us did. But he went with less.”

“Probably didn’t want to deal with the nightmares. I’m surprised Steve let him get away with it.”

“Steve didn’t let himself see the situation clearly. He needed Barnes to learn how to be a field soldier and Barnes was a master of redirection. He’d put Steve to work developing plans, coordinating supplies, and anything else he could think of to keep Steve too busy to notice how poorly he was coping.”
“Were the rest of them fooled?”

“I doubt it. They’d all come out of Azzano damaged. They also knew they were bonded together in an extraordinary way. Barnes kept everyone at a distance, so I can’t say I really felt like I knew him. He was a master of deflection when he wanted to be. He was a good man, loyal to a fault, and willing to do what needed to be done, no matter the cost.”

“Did he keep Steve at a distance, too?”

Peggy thought a moment. “I think he protected Steve as best he could. There was no point talking about what couldn’t be changed.” She shifted in her seat, clutching the book in her lap as she did so. “Barnes’ gift was in keeping Steve grounded. He had no patience for the propaganda machine. If he thought Steve was being reckless, he had no problem saying so. Loudly, but never in front of the other men.”

“So as not to undermine his authority.”

“Was there anything else you needed, Agent?”

“No, Director. You have been most helpful today,” Megan said smoothly before standing up. “Thank you for making time to talk to me.”

“My door is always open, Agent. Carry on.”

Megan kept her composure until she was in the hallway, where she burst into tears. Alzheimer’s was a cruel disease.

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“The inventor of minky fabric can burn in hell,” Megan told Steve as she looked up from her sewing machine as Steve let himself in, still on crutches, followed by Sarge, who was carrying pizzas. “Hi, Sarge.” She didn’t want to think about how long the two men had argued about who entered first.

“You two enjoy your dinner,” Sarge said, setting the boxes on the table. “Bonus points if you can keep this idiot from getting hurt for a month.”

“I like to set reasonable goals.”

With a cheerful wave, he activated the lock and pulled the door closed behind him.

“Hi.” Steve moved to stand behind her, leaning on his crutches as he put his hands on his shoulders to massage away the knots. “What is minky fabric and why are we sending the inventor to eternal damnation?”

“This.” She handed him a swatch of the soft fabric that made you want to pet it.

“It’s really soft.”

“Yup. I thought it would be a nice backing. But, it’s hell to work with. I spent last night crawling on my hands and knees trying to get it to measure the same size twice before cutting it. I ended up laying the front over it and winging it. When I pinned it, using a pin every single inch, mind you, it
still stretched out even with a walking presser foot. I tried basting it. I tried cursing at it. I finally just cut the damn backing down to size after I had the three edges sewn. I got it on sale, thankfully. It has tons of five-star reviews. ‘It’s so soft! It’s so easy to work with!’ I’m not an expert but I know my way around a sewing machine and this stuff is hell.”

“What are you making?”

“Blankets. The first one, for Steve, is all done. It’s on the couch over there. This one is a weighted blanket cover for Seth. I thought it might help him. Lots of people, especially those with anxiety or autism, find the deep pressure of a weighted blanket comforting. If Steve decides he wants the weighted insert, too, I can slide it into his easily enough.”

“Steve will love this. Where did you find fabric with so many elephants on it?” Steve held the blanket up, admiring the print on the front that had elephants in the forest. The back was made of light grey minky fabric.

“Online. The local fabric store had the tropical fish print I used on Seth’s.” The vibrant pattern was appealing and complemented by vivid blue backing made of the same minky material Megan now hated.

“Can you stop a few minutes to eat? The pizza is still hot.”

“I have two more buttons to put on and I’m done. Start without me.”

“The sewing machine can sew on buttons?”

Megan nodded. “This one can. Grandma didn’t skimp when she bought it. It has every attachment and does just about everything but laundry. Now and then I take it in to get a professional cleaning and tune up and they always try to get me to buy some new-fangled computer-controlled thing made of mother-boards and plastic parts. Yes, I have to put on an attachment to make button-holes, but they can pry that out of my cold dead, hands.” She patted the top of the machine fondly. “This baby has all metal parts and not a computer chip to be found. I’m not going to give it up.”

“I’ll remember not to suggest it. What I would like is to learn how to use it.”

“You want to learn to sew?”

“With a machine. Ma taught me to mend by hand, but the machine looks more efficient.”

“I think it is, but I hate hand sewing. I’ve tried embroidery and cross-stitch, but even sewing a button on by hand gives me the dry heaves.”

“I’ve never seen you sewing before today.”

Megan shrugged as she cut the thread and put the next button in place. “I got away from it for a bit. I get into creative binges where I do one thing for a while and then switch to something else. Sewing is one of them and I’m currently in that mode. I popped into a fabric store last week to get some fray check and was poking around in the pillow inserts when I found the weighted blanket insert. That one was too heavy for Seth, but Jarvis helped me find an in insert for kids, so down the rabbit hole of creativity I went.”

Steve smiled a bit at her. “I’m glad you’re feeling creative again.”

“Me, too, though I still hate needing the pills. Anyway, I was planning on running these down to the boys after I was finished. Want to come with?”
“After you eat.”

“Two minutes. I want to put the cover on the insert and it will be ready to give to him.”

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Once they were settled in bed, worn out from Seth and young Steve’s energy, Megan finally broached the topic that had been nagging at her for weeks. “I want to talk to you about you getting hurt so often.”

She felt Steve tense and put a calming hand on his bare chest. “Calm down, my adrenaline junky.”

“I’m not—”

“You are. Risks give you a rush. The work you do attracts risk-takers. It’s more of a feature than a bug.”

“But…”

“You are also a brilliant strategist. I think you forget to use that skill set in the field and react on instinct when the original plans fall apart in a shifting situation.”

“I take the hard hits so my team doesn’t have to. I heal faster and without scars.”

“Physical scars, maybe. I recognize there is a time and place for that sacrifice. My concern is that it’s your default setting.” She shifted so she could prop her head on her hand and look him in the eye. “You promised me you’d always fight to come home.”

“I will.”

“If you’re killed in action and had no other option, I’ll make my peace with it. But if you die and the debrief shows you had half a dozen options you could have used if you’d just taken a half-second to consider them, but died because you were reckless… it’s going to break something in me. You’ll be saying that I… that we, are not worth that extra second to consider options. I know you’ll fight. I want you to fight smart.”

She could see her words sinking in.

“I’m still going to get hurt.”

“Sometimes. What you do is dangerous. That should be all the more reason to use your brain. You can’t protect your team when you’re reckless. It just increases their risks as they try to then cover you while you’re trying to cover them. I’m asking you to take smarter risks so you all come home.”

“I’ll do better.”

“It’s going to take time. You’ve gotten into a habit. Based on the stories I heard in New York, it’s been a bad habit for some time. Ask a trusted teammate to call you on it with a codeword the others don’t know. During debrief, spend time time evaluating your choices and ask yourself what else you could have considered to make your job less dangerous next time. Mission success is important, and I know you always think about keeping the rest of your team safe. You’re worth the
same consideration.”

He thought about it and nodded once. “I’ll talk to Nat.”

“Good.”

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“I’ll agree to you collecting some preliminary date for two months.”

“That’s it?” Emma sputtered, clearly unhappy with Steve’s limited agreement.

“This is a compromise,” Megan pointed out. “It’s reasonable to get an idea of what you might find.”

“With a limited number of cell lines,” Steve added.

“Oh come on!” Emma rolled her eyes.

“Liver and kidney to start, I think. We know the liver is a self-renewing organ in ways the kidney isn’t.” Steve looked to Megan, silently asking for her opinion.

Emma lunged to her feet, gesturing to Steve angrily. “Does he get to dictate reagents next? Or the size of the petri dish?”

“He is sitting right there,” Megan snapped. “Considering the samples were taken without his consent or his knowledge, I have to say he’s being generous to allow any experiments of any kind.”

“Based on what you tell him to approve!”

“Actually, Dr. Buchwald hasn’t told me anything.” Steve corrected her. “She gave me your latest proposal and asked me to consider it. I know I don’t have much in the way of formal schooling like you both do, but I do know how to read, ask questions, and look things up. Don’t underestimate me, Dr. White.”

Emma squirmed a bit under his gaze, then crossed her arms with a huff. “Fine. You’ll have a formal report in 2 months.”

“Do you know why I was picked for the serum, Dr. White?”

“I have the feeling I’m about to find out.”

“Because I don’t like bullies. Dr. Erskine admitted as much to me the night before the procedure.”

“Are you insinuating—”

“I like to stick to plain facts.” He smiled his most charming USO smile. “I’m old fashioned like that.”

Emma curled her lip in disgust before exiting Megan’s office, closing the door firmly. It wasn’t enough to count as her slamming it, but enough to make her anger clear.
“Is she always so cheerful?” Steve asked in his blandest tone.

“You and I bring out the best in her, it seems.”

“Am I wrong to be cautious?”

“No, Steve. I think it’s fine to start small and see what she finds. If there is something interesting in her findings, we can expand the project. If not, she can consider a new hypothesis and try again. It’s call research for a reason.”

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