

Starting from Scratch

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Starting from Scratch

by [teaberryblue](#)

Summary

A story about Steve waking up in the twenty-first century, insomnia, how supersoldier serum affects one's sensory perception, and finding connections to the past through food.

It stars Steve Rogers and his complete disconnect from the world, Bobbi Morse and her crumbling marriage, Nick Fury and his impressive knowledge of whisk(e)y, and a beat-up copy of The Joy of Cooking.

A Prequel to [1796 Broadway](#). Can be read in either order, or as a standalone, as it should be more or less canon-compliant with all MCU films.

Notes

This fic is slightly non-compliant with Agents of SHIELD as it was written before Bobbi's inclusion on the show was announced, so her backstory is more similar to her 616 one.

I think popularly, the time between Steve's waking and The Avengers is meant to be only a couple of weeks, but I have a hard time believing that SHIELD would have allowed him out and about and living on his own without psychological clearance, so I've extended that time a bit for the purposes of the fic. This story covers about two weeks immediately after his return to the world.

You can find recipes for Apple Cake Cockaigne, chocolate chip cookies, chocolate fondue sauce, and french toast in The Joy of Cooking!

Thank you so much for the beta help, Jaynehat, Greenjudy, TheLiterator, Alephz, MissNikki2U, and Rainproof!

- Inspired by [1796 Broadway](#) by [rainproof](#), [teaberryblue](#)

Steve never liked the taste of alcohol. It might have been Prohibition and the long shadow it cast over American spirits, the syrup and the sting and the soapy juniper of contraband hooch. It might have been the Pavlovian twang of fear of getting caught, the first time Bucky, all of twelve years old, brought home a green glass medicine bottle full of the stuff. It might have been less the taste of booze and more the taste of puke, of acid and the previous meal, of the heady, dizzy feeling that came with drinking too much (and with Bucky, it was always too much.)

It might have been the taste of Bucky's mouth, the second and last time he'd kissed him, at eighteen, just after Bucky had brought home his own paycheck, when they had paid down the rent on their shared room at the boarding house, gone to a bar, come home with blurred vision and a sway to their walk, arms around each other, laughing and singing (and Bucky, like always, making fun of Steve's thin, high-pitched voice). It might have been the way Bucky had pushed him up against the door, roughly, without warning, and, for a moment, Steve had been sure he had done something wrong, that Bucky was uncharacteristically upset, but then his face had been too close, and his mouth had been *much* too close, and then his tongue had flicked over Steve's lips, and Steve had kissed him back, hard, mentally pushing back the terror that he might do it wrong as his mouth filled with the flavor of stinging-sweet corn whiskey, of Bucky's bitter cigarettes.

That was the only time he'd ever really tasted a tobacco cigarette.

They had ended up in a tangle of sheets in their tiny bed, fingers fumbling, Steve's shirt tearing before Bucky tossed it to the floor.

And Bucky had mumbled "Irene," in Steve's ear. The first time, Steve could convince himself he'd misheard, that long vowel was similar enough, maybe he wasn't enunciating his consonants, but the second time, Steve couldn't pretend. Steve didn't know who Irene was; he never heard Bucky say that name before, and he never did after, but neither of them spoke about that night, and they slept with their backs to each other for weeks, grunted their goodnights.

But that taste, the taste of cheap corn liquor, that flavor of ethanol and caramel, always brought back that night, and Steve found himself turning down drinks more and more. It didn't matter. He could never stomach more than one, anyway.

On the road, after the serum, everything tasted better. Captain America was wined and dined at the best restaurants in the country, at charity galas and benefit dinners. He had prime cuts of steak, lobster bisque, bouillabaisse, baked Alaska, all the time a tiny voice in the back of his head asking how he was eating this way when the rest of the country was on rations.

He'd tried, for a little while, turning down the lavish meals, asking for the plainest, most plentiful foods: bread, potatoes, green vegetables, chicken, but it was never enough, and when his managers warned him that the food was going to waste if he didn't eat it, and his hosts didn't like being snubbed, even in the name of patriotic asceticism, he guiltily tucked in.

And he ate more, now, too. Before the serum, he had always tried to stuff himself, bring his weight up, but he could never eat much without getting sick. Bucky teased that the best thing about living with Steve was that he knew he'd always get an extra half a sandwich. Now, Steve found himself eating five, six meals a day, burning through calories like a prime rib was a sprig of parsley.

He didn't need to eat; he could go days without a bite of food, but he would feel lethargic, could feel his body slow down with that uneasy hyperawareness he'd felt ever since the serum kicked in. He sought out calorie-rich foods, which were, of course, the hardest to get during wartime: steak, cheese, chocolate, ice cream. He started noticing differences: before he became Captain America, if someone had told him this chocolate was Swiss, that that chocolate was Austrian, he would have laughed and shrugged and said it was all too fancy for him. Now, he could taste the cocoa content on his tongue, tell if a steak was grass-fed, guess at how long a cheese had been aged. He knew if the vague licorice in the sauce served over his salmon came from fennel, tarragon, or caraway, whether a pie crust was baked with butter, lard, or shortening.

It didn't seem important. He thought it was a side effect of eating such extravagant meals, that this must be how food always was for rich people, and when he was seated at tables with wealthy widows and aging titans of industry, feeling out of place in his new military uniforms that didn't fit very well, because nothing fit his body anymore, because everything was either too tight in the shoulders, hindered full rotation of his arms, made him appear stiff and starched, or too loose through the waist, rumped when he sat, made him feel like a child trying on his father's clothes, everyone around him would talk about the mouthfeel or the finish or the entrance notes, and he felt intimidated by this entire vocabulary he'd never known, and a little uncomfortable that there were people in the world talking about food in such dire tones while Bucky might be risking his life at each and every moment. He learned a dialogue, a few quips he could use to deflect those conversations. He'd smile a lopsided smile and say something like, "well, ma'am, I'm just happy to have food on my plate," or "I'm just thinking about how much our boys on the front are going to love coming home to a delicious prime rib."

They'd given him a vocal coach, trained him up with a lot of hokey lines. He'd learned how to turn a phrase or two that he could just spit polish for any occasion, not knowing that his rushed education in fitting propaganda to social graces would drive his legacy as a larger-than-life caricature of the American Dream, or that that adherents to every social cause imaginable would spend the next seventy years trying to claim him for their own.

He drank a lot of soda. And, now that liquor had no effect of him, never any booze. Booze only ever evoked one memory.

It was useful at charity functions. Cuba Libres were the drink of the hour, so Steve could sip a Coke or a root beer and no one around would be any the wiser.

Sometimes he copped to it, said he wanted to set a good example for the kiddies. No one knew that he couldn't get the taste of Bucky's mouth out of his head.

One day, someone put a spear of pineapple in his drink. He had to ask the waitress what it was-- he did it quietly, under his breath, so that his dining companions wouldn't hear. He'd

seen pictures of them, of course-- and tins of the fruit, but it had always seemed like a luxury they didn't need, especially when neither he nor Bucky had known whether they'd like them.

He eyed the oblong slice of fruit, a little guiltily (how did one get fresh pineapple in wartime?), and, after a moment, took a small bite. It was sweet-- sweeter than he expected, and strongly acidic in a way that made his gums tingle. It crunched, juicy, between his teeth, and he shut his eyes for a moment, trying to find a comparison in his memory for the flavor.

He couldn't.

The weekend that the war bonds tour brought him back to Brooklyn, he took Maddy and Betsy with him out to Coney Island on their one night off, bought them all hot dogs, watched the girls chow down with a look of delight, bit into the end of his, and somehow, it was the best hot dog he'd ever tasted in his life--seasonings blooming on his tongue in a way he never knew they could. The roll tasted like butter and flour and yeast, the mustard was peppery and piquant, the relish was sweet and acetic, the kraut savory with a touch of an earthy flavor.

He hadn't had a proper hot dog in months, save that amazing thing they served him in Chicago, and that was more sausage than dog.

He savored the crispness of the casing, the way it popped, the juiciness of the meat inside.

Maddy reached for his right hand at the same time Betsy reached for his left. He couldn't take them both. He would have, if his right hand hadn't been full of hot dog. He'd watched Bucky do it plenty of times.

He didn't think of the implications of only taking Betsy's. It just seemed more convenient.

When he finished his hot dog, all three of them looking out at the black waves crashing over the sandy beach, and reached his right hand out, too, Maddy stuffed hers in her pocket.

Three nights later, she was gone, without so much as a word to him.

And then he was in Italy. The change took place nearly overnight--being wined and dined as a celebrity in the States to living off soldier's rations in Europe.

He hadn't eaten, those first few nights. Bucky was semi-delirious, feverish, kept asking for him, kept squinting at him, as if he didn't know him, kept asking, "Is it really you?" Steve saved his meals, gave everything to Bucky, until the moment when Bucky stopped, mid-bite, and glared at him.

"I know what you're doing," he said, and thrust the tin plate back at Steve.

"Good," Steve had replied, standing up from his seat at Bucky's bedside. "Means you're well enough I don't need to baby you."

He'd grinned, shrugged, and walked out of the tent, leaving the plate in Bucky's hands as Bucky swore at him from his cot.

The ration kits were basic, edible but either too bland, or too salty, or tasting a little too much like tin cans. Steve had more important things to occupy himself than the taste of his food. Food in camp, when they had provisions and the means to cook it, was somewhat better.

It was never enough food. And too often, they would come across civilians who needed to eat more than he did. On those days, the only thing Steve would keep for himself was the square of chocolate that came in the kits, too waxy, too much milk, simple, American, but still glorious chocolate.

Bucky would save his chocolate, trade it for Steve's cigarettes. He asked, once, if Steve wanted to smoke now that his asthma wasn't a factor, but Steve had shaken his head, and Bucky had wordlessly passed him the chocolate from his rations.

There was one night, after raiding a Nazi-infested farm in the French countryside, that they'd found and released the farmer's family, and in exchange, the incredibly grateful people had given them free run of whatever stores were left. Falsworth had taken over, insisting that they had to have some proper food, which apparently meant frying everything under the sun, while Jones assisted, mimicking Falsworth's accent as they worked.

Bucky had dropped to the floor beside him, sitting with his legs stretched out as he lit a cigarette, his face illuminated in profile, the smoke curling up toward the low ceiling.

"You've got no excuse tonight," he'd said.

Steve blinked, straightened up. "What's that?"

"When's the last time you ate?"

"I don't remember," Steve had answered.

"Yes you do," Bucky had replied. "Your memory's perfect now. You just don't want to tell me."

Bucky had gotten back to his feet, ambled over to Falsworth. "Hey, Monty," he'd said. "Give Cap a cooking lesson, would you?"

And then Bucky was gone, and all the days between finding him and losing him seemed like nothing. The night after he lost Bucky, he had told Peggy that he couldn't get drunk, but he had never explained to her why he had been drinking in the first place, that the sweet, boozy sting had been the only thing he could find that made it feel like Bucky was still there.

Even as Peggy had lectured him, sternly, about the value of a soldier's sacrifice, he had wondered if Peggy could cook, and then immediately felt ashamed, like his mind was shoving her into a role of domesticity she didn't belong in. He had tried to push that last image of Bucky, falling, yelling, out of his head, tried to imagine a world where he and Peggy might have an ordinary life, where he'd come home from a long day at work, wearing a tie, and she'd be...what did women with that kind of life even do? Arrange flowers? Then he laughed at himself, still hoarse, and wondered if there was any kind of world where the two

of them could be what each of them needed to be. He couldn't imagine Peggy arranging flowers unless the flowers were a code; he couldn't imagine himself--

--Well, that train of thought took him down a long, dark road he wasn't ready to navigate.

As the plane went down, Peggy 's voice the only thing keeping him company, the strain to hold back tears evident even through the static of the radio, he consoled himself with the thought of taking her dancing, pulling her into his arms and watching those huge, dark eyes of hers as he trotted out the steps he'd learned in the USO: twirling her, dipping her, drawing her in tight. But even in that fantasy, a corner of his mind whispered that it never would have worked.

And somehow, that made him feel better than dreaming about impossible dances.

Her last words echoed in his head as he came down on an expanse of gray and white and green-black as far as the eye could see, wind rushing in his ears and two dueling images of his future in his head: one, that they didn't know the limits of the serum, that he might well still live; and two, that he had to follow Bucky, always, always follow Bucky.

The first proved to be true, but not in the way he'd ever expected.

He woke up.

He hadn't put up a fight. He'd thought about it, sized up the scenario, seen the snipers' rifles up above --and was that a crossbow?--poking out over rooftops, the teams on the ground in full body armor--black and rigid and alien--and the civilians staring past the barriers. He'd looked down at himself, at his tee shirt and khakis, and knew that it was it was a lost cause, that no amount of serum in his blood would cure a body riddled with bullet wounds. And perhaps a crossbow bolt.

But he didn't betray that assessment. He took a breath, looked directly at the one-eyed man--Nick Fury, Nick Fury, what kind of a name was that anyway?

"You want to tell me why I should go with you?" he asked.

And Fury had cracked a smile. "Because you've already counted the number of men I have on you, and because I have a message for you."

"Yeah?" Steve asked. "What kind of message?"

Nick Fury tossed something in his direction: small and silver, it glinted in the sunlight as it traveled in a graceful arc from Fury's dark, scarred hands to his own.

He caught it, by reflex, the smooth, round shape familiar in his palm: his compass.

"You're late," Fury said.

The world fell away. His chest felt hollow and cold, his knees heavy.

There was a moment when his breath went short, the way it always had when he had been close to an attack.

He ran his fingers over the fastening. He couldn't bring himself to open it. Instead he slid it into his pocket , and put his hands up.

"I'm at your service," he said, a surge of hot pain rocketing through his core, the backs of his eyes flaring and burning, and for a moment he felt as if he'd exploded, as if every tiny discrete part of him was flying away from his center, like stars expanding across the universe in some violent galactic birth.

And then they all returned, and he dissolved into nothing.

He felt his will dropping away, his extremities go senseless, his ability to process emotion draining away until he was just an amalgamation of parts. He felt like a hollow shell, as if his spirit should be floating outside his body, the way some of the soldiers he'd met in infirmaries had described. Instead, he was trapped in his body, his feet dragging too heavy on the ground, a sensation in his rib cage like his chest cavity had been filled with stones, cotton at the back of his throat.

He was ushered into a black car, a huge, hulking thing, shiny and slick, all rounded corners and smooth edges, the inside lined with beige leather, cold air blasting at him from vents, and he fully expected jets to light, to be propelled upward like Howard Stark had always promised, but instead they lurched into traffic so heavy it barely moved.

He stared out the window at the cars--still four-wheeled, but massive, slippery, unadorned, shiny like the shells of beetles in the sun, with thick, black tires and smooth silver hubcaps and not a single one hovering even an inch off the ground. The buildings surrounding him seemed almost surreal: most of the architecture, the layouts of the streets, eerily familiar, but filled with shops, refurbished with facades he'd never seen, covered with lights and signs and posters and who-knows-what-else, so that when he looked out the car window, squinting in the brightness, he felt more disoriented than he ever had been when he'd gone into a new city for the first time.

A sunburst flare off a hulking, mirrored-black skyscraper flashed directly into his eyes.

He squinted, looked away.

When the car stopped, they brought him to an unobtrusive storefront that looked as if had been unchanged for as long as they told him he'd been asleep, with a red and white barber pole that felt, for a moment, like a comfortingly familiar beacon.

"I hate to break it to you, sir," Steve said. "But I don't think I need a haircut."

"How about a shave?" asked Fury.

He followed Fury past the barbers' chairs, through what seemed like a solid wall that metamorphosed in front of his eyes into thick steel doors. Nick Fury watched, with his arms

crossed, the penetrating gaze of his single good eye fixed on Steve, though Steve couldn't make out what the man could be thinking.

Steve slid his hand into his pocket, pressed a finger to the metal compass case until it felt warm to the touch.

Fury brought something to his ear, something that appeared to function like a tiny, black chrome walkie-talkie, and muttered something into it as they walked into a vast hall that was much colder than the barber shop they'd passed through.

He was accosted by a team of doctors-- he wasn't sure if they were medical doctors or scientists, but it didn't seem to matter, they all wore white coats and spoke excitedly to each other, not to him, unless they were giving him an order. Even when the doctors talked about him, they didn't use his name. They called him 'subject,' as in 'subject is experiencing symptoms of dehydration,' an observation which resulted in a clear, flexible cup being thrust into his hands.

He accidentally crushed the first one, sending water in a burst, splashing his face and the white cotton hospital gown they'd given him to wear, spilling onto the grey tiled floor. He hadn't expected the cup to be so flimsy.

He apologized in a blurt of words, hasty and strung together and clumsy, feeling like his tongue was too big for his mouth. He held the second cup more carefully, downed its contents in a single swig that was too cold on his teeth, too metallic at the back of his throat, made his stomach lurch.

"Slow," one of the doctors advised, filling the cup back up, the contents still too chilled, the surface beading with condensation, clammy against his hands.

He sipped this time, slowly, and tested the material of the cup, flexing his fingers against it gently, so it popped in and out.

They subjected him to a battery of medical exams: they put a thermometer in his mouth, peered into his ears and eyes, jabbed him with needles, slapped sticky pads on his back and chest and arms that they informed him were full of sensors, covered parts of his skin in a cold jelly, ran a plastic wand over him and showed him a glowing, fuzzy, green-and-black image that, they explained, was the inside of his body.

An hour after he woke up, his body revolted.

He hadn't been sick since the serum, not even a sniffle, but now his ears started to ring. At first it was a dim buzz, and he thought it was an actual sound, maybe one of the doctors' machines, but it got louder, and as it got louder, his stomach lurched, a rising nausea churning in his gut, and his vision swam until all he saw was blinding whiteness.

He retched.

He trembled, felt his hands grow clammy. He heard voices as if they were speaking through fluid, warped and distant.

"What did you give him?"

"Nothing! I just took the samples we need for--"

"Shit. Did anyone feed him?"

"I thought he didn't have to eat!"

He felt a hand, first heavy on his shoulder, then yanking at his sleeve. "Captain! Captain, when did you eat last?"

He retched, an awful, dry heave accompanied by nothing but acid and water.

"Shit," someone said, and shoved a bedpan into his hands, his hands that felt clumsy and heavy.

He tried to think back. When had he eaten?

He hadn't been hungry, not after Bucky. He hadn't...

He shook his head, and retched again.

"Come on, Captain, what was the last thing you ate? Do you remember?"

His head was fuzzy, the sensation of having to struggle to remember almost pleasant, something he hadn't felt in ages, too many details always too sharply crystallized in his mind.

"Whiskey," he said, finally, remembering, clutching his stomach as his eyes began to refocus. "Whiskey...night...night before last."

The night before last had been sixty-seven years ago.

"Nothing today?" One of the doctors asked. She lowered her glasses, peered over the rims. He couldn't decide if he was imagining the judgmental tone in her voice, or whether it was for the whiskey.

He shook his head.

"Nobody fed him," she said to the other doctor, incredulous.

The other doctor looked him over. Steve took a deep breath, the waves of nausea passing.

They stopped the tests, let him sit in a corner, in a chair made of cold metal and shiny leather, and brought him a tray with a mug of steaming, savory-scented broth.

He lifted it up, the doctors' eyes on him between glances at each other.

"Let me guess," he said. "Slow, right?"

It was plain chicken broth, salty, seasoned with black pepper, parsley, onion, and celery, rich, golden globs of fat floating on the surface.

After he'd swallowed down the entire mug of broth, they gave him a glass of juice.

He set it down on his tray, held it in both hands, peering at the orange color in the glass, tilting it from side to side to see the bubbles form at the edges, then looked up at the doctors again.

"Orange juice?" he asked.

The doctors shrugged.

He took a sip. They'd sometimes had orange juice in the war, but this...this didn't taste metallic, like the cans it came in, it tasted tart and impossibly sweet.

He'd only had orange juice like that twice in his life.

"It tastes like Florida," he said, letting the juice sit on his tongue before he swallowed.

"It's...from Florida," one of the doctors agreed.

He took another sip. "But we're in New York," he said, for confirmation.

"Yes," the doctor said. "You're in Manhattan."

After they fed him a small bowl of rice with butter, they traded him off to a different team of doctors, who put more sensors on his temples, wired to a machine. They started asking him questions, told him it was to test his memory: what was his name? Address? How old was he? What was his birthdate?

A murmur went through the room at his answer.

They showed him a screen, made of glass, like a movie screen, but smaller, with a picture of his brain, showed him how the different parts lit up.

What was his favorite color? What were his parents' names? What was the last thing he ate?

He snorted at that, but answered the question.

Who was the last person he'd spoken with?

His breath caught in his throat. "Next question, Doc," he said.

"It's just a..."

"Next question," he repeated.

After the neurology report, the reflex tests, and a flurry of paperwork, he found himself alone in a cluttered office.

He suspected that he either had enough time to look through the papers or to try to escape.

He ran.

No one stopped him from running, not even the armed guards he spotted in the hallways. People would stop what they were doing, watch for a moment, wait, then go back to work, back to walking busily in the opposite direction, back to conversations on earpieces so tiny that it made them look like madmen talking to themselves.

He had counted paces, knew his way back to that entry, but still he couldn't find it on his return; he found nothing but smooth, seamless black walls, and wondered with a chill down his spine how disoriented he was.

He tried again. He started at the wall, paced away from it in every direction until he reached a dead end, then paced back.

The third time, he had paced the entire building (as far as he knew) and not seen a door or window that led outside the compound.

He slammed full force into a wall.

The wall absorbed the impact, did not reverberate.

His shoulder smarted, and he gritted his teeth against the pinprick itch that accompanied the pain, glared at the wall, put a hand to it, trying to feel for an invisible seam, for something that would activate an opening.

"You lookin' for something, Cap?" asked a woman's voice, behind him. He braced himself, then turned, a hand still up against the cool wall.

"Yeah, you haven't seen a doorless, windowless building around here, have you?" Steve asked, as he turned around to face the woman.

The first thing he noticed was her hair: long, blonde, nearly white, impossibly smooth. She had long, graceful limbs, a muscular physique: he immediately suspected she was trained for combat--a suspicion confirmed by the hint of a shoulder holster peeking out from under her lab coat.

She grinned. "No idea where you'd find one of those."

She thrust a hand out. "Bobbi Morse," she said.

"Steve Rogers," he answered, shaking her hand--she had a firm grip, smiled, teeth showing, made direct and unwavering eye contact, blue eyes gleaming behind white-framed glasses.

"Is that who you are?" she asked. "I couldn't figure it out."

As she lowered her right hand, she clasped it with the left. Steve caught a glint of gold: a wedding band.

"Did they send you to keep track of me, Doctor?" Steve asked, "Or do you have to take me in for more tests?"

She shook her head, shrugged, and removed the coat, slinging it over her shoulder, revealing a plain blue blouse and dark slacks, much more fitted than anything he thought was considered stylish back home.

“I’m off the clock, Cap,” she replied. “Tests are done for today. They’re going to want more psych eval tomorrow, but for now, you’re gonna come with me.”

“Am I?” he asked.

She twisted at her wedding band, absently, tugging it off, spinning it, sliding it back on. “You sure are,” she said. “Look, do you see any other options?”

So he had resigned himself to stay in this claustrophobic maze lit with long, buzzing, greenish lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling.

As she led him down the hall, he considered his surroundings. The lighting fixtures were flimsy, but held up by chains he could use as a garrote if he had to. There were red canisters every few dozen feet, made of metal, painted bright red, looked heavy--he could use those as battering rams, or as blunt weapons. There were electrical outlets, thick metal doors...

Once, he thought he saw Peggy in the hall, a girl with brown curls, red lipstick, and sharp features, and he just barely stopped himself from grabbing her by the sleeve, saying it was good to see a familiar face. His hands went cold, cold enough to shake. His stomach lurched again.

He didn't know whether to believe these people, who told him that this was the future, that the overwhelming blur of a few moments outdoors, surrounded by colors and deafening noise and competing scents of candied nuts and exhaust and smoky pretzels and human sweat and urine and decomposing trash, were aspects of the same world he'd left behind.

Doctor Morse stopped at a door. It didn't look much different from the other doors he'd seen, but she stepped to the side and pulled out a shiny, flat white card that appeared to be made out of plastic. “This is for your door,” she said, and she slid it through a slot on the door. A green light blinked, and he heard a click.

“It’s a key,” he observed.

“Good boy,” she replied, and opened the door.

They walked into a small room: a sofa, a dining room table, a little kitchenette, a large black screen against one wall, a few tables and chairs, all wood and upholstery, all the sorts of things that would have been considered at the height of style when he'd shipped out.

“Looks like you did this place up just for me, huh?”

There were two doors, which he assumed went to a bedroom and a bathroom.

“You want a look around?” Doctor Morse asked.

He shook his head, stepped over to the thick curtains on a runner at the far end of the room. He pulled them back; as he suspected, they covered a blank wall. “No,” he said, and lowered himself onto the couch. “Don’t need one.”

Doctor Morse nodded, and took a seat.

“So what’s your story?” he asked. “What bad luck do you have to pull this detail?”

“I’m S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Nineteen,” she replied. “And I’m doing somebody a favor.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent?” Steve asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “We’d better wait for Fury to explain that one,” she said. “It’s like your SSR.”

“Is it?”

“I guess. Not like I was there,” she replied.

“So you’re an Agent, not a doctor?”

“Who said I can’t be both?”

He frowned, looked her over again. “So you’re supposed to be Peggy,” he observed.

“Excuse me?” Agent Morse asked.

“They assigned a competent, pretty woman versed in multiple skills to show me around,” he said. “They looked at my file. Made an assessment. That’s why you’re here.”

It just made him feel colder, made his throat drier, made him want to shut his eyes and go to sleep. Made him wonder where his Peggy was, whether she was alive. He did the math, decided it was better not to think about it.

“That sounds about right,” she replied. He watched her twist at her wedding ring again.

“Except you’re married,” he observed. “So they weren’t trying to fool me into...”

She looked down at the ring, then suddenly lay her hands flat against her knees. “Sort of,” she said. “Sort of married. We’re not going to put much past you, are we?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I can’t tell about this-- what year is it supposed to be?”

“Twenty-twelve,” said Agent Morse.

“I can’t tell about that. As for the rest of it, I assume you’ve read my file.”

“I don’t actually give a shit about your file, Captain,” said Agent Morse. “All I’m going to do is show you around and make sure you eat. And since it’s getting on dinnertime... What do you want?”

He blinked. “What do I want?”

"Yeah," she said. "For food?"

"I get to choose?"

"Steve, you've been asleep three-and-a-half Rip Van Winkles. You can eat whatever you like."

He had to suppress the urge to ask for a box of raspberry-filled truffles and a vanilla egg cream.

"Whiskey," he said. "Can I get a whiskey?"

"Whiskey?" Agent Morse had asked, with a skeptical look. "I hate to tell you this, Steve, but they told me you couldn't get drunk."

She worried at her wedding band as she spoke.

"I can't," he said. "But all the same, can I get a whiskey?"

"What kind?" she asked.

Steve blinked. "There are...kinds?"

She sighed. "Bourbon, Rye, Scotch, Irish, though technically that's spelled differently. Blended, single malt, small batch, single barrel...and that's before we just talk Scotch, then you've got your Highlands, Speysides, Islays... Here..."

She picked up her phone. "I'm gonna need a bottle of Maker's, a bottle of Old Overholt, Buffalo Trace, Jack Daniel's, Dewar's, Laphroaig, Macallan, Cutty Sark, Jameson. No, it had better not. It's for Crybaby here."

"Crybaby?" Steve asked.

"Code name. You were cryogenically frozen. We were keeping you in Bay B. Crybaby."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me. Thank my ex."

"Husband?" Steve asked, and he glanced at the ring again.

Morse clapped her hands behind her back. "Yeah. So, Soldier, you want something to eat with your whiskey?"

"Yeah, I--" He swallowed. "I'm in New York."

"Yessir, you are."

He took a breath. "Can I get anything?"

"Anything. Within reason. You want a bathtub full of caviar, I'll probably have to shoot you down."

"How do we...there was a deli, down on Houston, made these giant pastrami--"

"Katz's," said Morse.

And Steve felt a sort of break in the tension that had built up in his shoulders, a snap of icy relief.

He sat down, suddenly uneasy on his feet. "Yeah," he said.

He took a breath. "What year is it again?"

"Twenty-twelve. I just said that like thirty seconds ago."

"Twelve, yeah."

"You want corned beef or pastrami? Both?"

"Yeah," Steve said. "Both. Can we..."

"Sorry, Captain," said Agent Morse. "They don't want you outside. Not yet. I'm gonna make your sandwich happen, though. Pickles?"

Steve nodded.

"Rye bread? Kraut?"

"The works."

He took out the compass, and ran his thumb over its lid, slipped it over the closure, let it pop open, long enough to see that the photo inside had been replaced with what was otherwise an exact replica, but newer, on glossy, more reflective paper. It looked wrong. He snapped it back shut, returned it to his pocket.

Still, he was grateful that someone had gone to the trouble to retrieve it.

Agent Morse crossed the room, pulled out that same slick little black apparatus he'd seen Fury carry and murmured into it, like she was talking into a telephone or a walkie-talkie. He couldn't make out that many words, but he was certain one of them was "Stark."

"Howard?" he asked. "Howard Stark's still alive?"

Morse shook her head. "Fraid not. This is his son, Tony. He's been helping fund your recovery. I wanted to get him in here, but it looks like he's out of reach for now."

"That's...nice of him," Steve said, unsure what to make of the idea of Howard Stark procreating.

"It was a condition of Howard's will," said someone from the doorway, a voice that was becoming too familiar already, low and velvety and resonant.

"Director," said Agent Morse. "You need something?"

Nick Fury set down a crate full of bottles. "Somebody told me Captain America needed a drink. Funny, I would have pegged you for a teetotaler. Remember, kids, don't drink, and all that."

"Well, there's usually not much point to me drinking, so I wouldn't say it's a question of vice or virtue," Steve explained. He got up again, walked over to eye the bottles. Something about Fury made him uneasy, like he was going to be caught with his hands in the cookie jar at any minute.

"Agent Morse gave us such an impressive list," Fury said, "I wanted to find out what it was for."

"Just trying to find something familiar. Tell you the truth, Director, I didn't know there were so many kinds. We weren't exactly rolling in dough back there during the Depression."

"Are you looking for something?" Fury asked, tipping the Jack Daniel's bottle up to peer at it.

Fury poured three shots. They clinked the glasses, sucked down their shots. It was too dark, wasn't sweet enough, went down too smooth.

"Yeah," Steve said, and he was surprised to hear himself admit it. "The whiskey we used to drink back home. Clear. It stung. It was sweet. It tasted like caramel corn."

Fury laughed. "White dog," he said. "You're looking for white dog."

"White dog?" Steve asked. "Which one of these is--"

"None," said Fury. "White dog is unaged piece-of-crap shit a step up from rubbing alcohol. Moonshine. We'll see what we can do."

So, that first night awake, when Steve had no one and knew no one, a strange, one-eyed man dressed all in black brought him bottles of unaged whiskey until he settled on the one that tasted the most like what he remembered, an unaged corn whiskey, burning and sweet and viscous all at once. But Fury and Morse had sat with him on a sofa and matched him shot for shot, eaten pastrami and corned beef with him, ordered him a vanilla egg cream, stayed awake even though he knew the alcohol was much stronger for them than it was for him.

He didn't sleep at all. He tried, lay down on the bed that felt as if it had been topped with a down comforter, in the stretchy, incredibly soft pajamas that Morse had described to him as "microfiber," put his head down on a pillow that seemed hard and bricklike at first, but seemed to mold to his head, an indentation forming that cradled his skull precisely.

But it all felt alien.

The bed was too short, his toes edging off the foot of the mattress, so that he had to draw his knees in to sleep, the way he had when he was a child, or in the summer, when his breathing was particularly bad, and .

But he couldn't do it. He lay in the bed for an hour, and finally got up, paced the room, and, with the lights off, examined the space, looking for an exit.

There were no windows. There were curtains hung up against a few of the walls, with lamps behind them, that could be made to simulate daylight, but no actual windows. No laundry chute or trash chute, no large vents of any kind, although there were a few very narrow ones poking up out of the carpeting, that pushed air into the room.

He tried opening the door to the apartment; the door was locked from the outside.

He was still awake four nights later.

Finally, they gave him a pill. To help him sleep, they told him. They sent Morse up to watch him.

"Is this an experiment?" he'd asked Agent Morse, one day, when she supplied him with a set of iridescent plastic discs, one for each decade that he'd missed, and a thin, black rectangular object with a screen. "Are you trying to test my adaptability?"

"We're recording your adaptability," Morse had answered, as she'd put a folded paper sack into the microwave oven and pressed a few of the sleek, numbered buttons. "The discs have movies and music. The tablet's got history. But the rest of it is real."

The microwave began to emit loud popping noises. Steve walked over, observed the bag as it inflated, waited for the microwave to beep. "Popcorn?" he asked.

"Yeah," Morse replied. "It's gonna be hot."

He had pulled the bag out of the microwave, opened it without too much trouble, although some of the hot kernels of popcorn leapt into the air and scattered to the floor. There was an intense aroma, salt and something savory, but not like anything he'd smelled before; the popcorn had an intense yellow color. He frowned at it.

"Diacetyl," Morse said. "Fake butter flavor. The color is beta carotene."

She shoved her hand in the bag. "It's delicious."

On her cue, he ate a handful.

The sheer quantity of salt made him pucker. "How do you..."

The corn was still recognizable, its texture crispy and fluffy in turns, melting against his tongue. The flavor was like nothing he'd ever tasted. It had something of the flavor of beer that had been left to settle too long, blooming on his tongue.

"What's the matter?" Morse asked.

"It's too salty," was all Steve could say.

Two nights later, when his eyes burned and his head swam from lack of sleep, they gave him four of the same pill.

Morse brought him a gift the next day: a sketchbook, and a little paper bag full of pens and pencils. That is, she told him it was full of pens and pencils.

He put it down on his desk.

"What's this for?" he asked her.

"I read your file," she said. "It said you liked to draw. I thought maybe you could use something to do."

"I could use some fresh air and some more information," said Steve. "When's your boss coming back?"

"Good question," said Morse. "He's a busy man."

"You know, I came with him because I was under the impression that we were allies," said Steve. "But it's a little difficult not to feel like your prisoner."

"You're not a prisoner," said Morse. "I mean, I'd be highly skeptical if I were in your situation, but you're not. You're more like a patient. We've got to make sure you're all taken care of."

"A patient can sign himself out."

"Yeah, well, only if he can prove he's of sound mind, and you keep refusing to talk to the psychologists."

It took him two more nights to fall asleep. By the time he finally succumbed, his ears were ringing; he was having difficulty speaking in complete sentences, he kept calling people by the wrong names. They hooked him back up to machines, sticky pads with wires attached, showed him readouts that were supposedly his heart rate, his breathing, his brain function.

His head swam so much that he barely understood a word; his vision blurred in and out so he could barely read the graphs.

The nightmares were worse than the exhaustion.

Bucky fell a hundred times. But sometimes Steve fell, sometimes they both fell, sometimes he pushed Bucky from the train, from a cliff, sometimes there was fire, sometimes it was Peggy who fell.

Sometimes there was no falling, sometimes there was ice, sometimes engines roared in his ears, sometimes his skin peeled away, revealed a distorted red face like Johann Schmidt's.

When he woke, he was brutally hot, sweat beading on his skin, his heart beating fast, much too fast, his pulse pounding so it echoed in his ears and thrummed in his chest.

He couldn't breathe. For the first time since the serum, he couldn't breathe.

He looked at the clock, with its green, glowing, alien numbers: 3:02.

Two hours. He'd only been asleep for two hours.

He thought about trying to sneak out again, but he couldn't imagine where to.

He got out of bed, ambled slowly around the room they'd given him. It was bare, mostly: one drawer of S.H.I.E.L.D.-issued clothing, a small box of his belongings from before, that he hadn't quite been able to bring himself to open, some toiletries, a stack of books Agent Morse had brought, things she said he'd missed out on.

The first time he opened one of those yellowing volumes, the paper brittle with age, and saw the date, 1955, on the flyleaf, he'd shoved it away.

Now, he picked one up, at random.

THE JOY OF COOKING, the title proudly expressed, in a font that looked like an enlarged typewriter, a metallic gold, blazing, on a white cover.

He flipped to the flyleaf, saw that the book had first been printed in 1931. And then, after that, a dozen times. The printing in his hands was from May, 1975.

The book began with acknowledgments; they started off innocently enough, but he found himself wrapped in the description of three generations of family who had worked together over more than forty years on a single cookbook.

His eyes landed on the word '*illustrated*.'

...illustrated and tested by me...

He turned the page to a neat line drawing of a key, then to a picture of a jigsaw puzzle, a scattering of little drawings of food: a hamburger, a wedge of cheese, a slice of bacon, a jar of peanut butter.

He picked up the book in both hands, reading as he walked with it toward the kitchen, set it down on a counter.

So far, he hadn't turned on the oven. The fridge had a few things stocked in it: paper (paper!) cartons of milk, red and shiny and deceptively tricky to open, orange juice in shiny plastic bottles, seedy brown bread, already sliced, in a plastic bag with this funny little pink plastic tab to keep the bag closed, orange cheese already cut into slices, carefully wrapped in individual cellophane sleeves, this wonderful thing called string cheese that was apparently what happened when someone made mozzarella in the shape of a short rope, carrots the size of one of his knuckles, tiny and sweet and crunchy. ("They don't really grow that way," Morse had explained. "They just shave down regular-sized carrots that have a bruise or

whatever." It seemed like a waste to Steve. He said so, but whoever was in charge of stocking his fridge kept putting them in there.)

It only occurred to him now that they hadn't left him anything to cook. After all, most of his meals were still being brought to him, the food in the fridge was for snacking. There was no meat, weren't any eggs.

He opened the cabinets. There were granola bars, nuts, dried fruit--dried cranberries, bright purple-red, sweet and tart and better than any raisin, chewy apricots, banana chips. There were things to cook in the microwave-- more popcorn, and Japanese noodles dried in flat, yellow bricks, sealed in cellophane packages (the first time he'd opened one, he had crunched directly into it before looking at the instructions. It hadn't been bad, but he'd been at a loss when it came to the silver foil flavor packet that seemed to be mostly full of salt).

He sighed, shut the cabinets, looked at the clock again.

3:46. Too early to make a phone call.

He sat down with *The Joy of Cooking* and started to read.

At seven-thirty, he picked the phone up off the table, typed in his pin number (28259), and found the little glowing 'contacts' icon. He tapped Morse's number.

"Yeah?" Morse asked when she picked up the phone, three rings later.

"...Calling at this hour?" a man's voice asked in the background.

"I'm bothering you," Steve said. "I'll...it's not urgent."

"It's past seven," Morse replied. "I'm on duty. What do you need?"

"Does he sleep?" asked the man's voice. "Ever?"

"I have a list," said Steve. "A grocery list. And one other thing. But, like I said, it's not urgent."

"Text it to me," said Morse.

"Text..."

"Messages button," Morse replied.

"Right." said Steve. "I'll...sorry to bother you."

He ended the call, found the icon with the little word balloon on it, clicked it, typed in "M-O-R-S-E" on the tiny keyboard. He never felt more ham-fisted than he did when he tried to use the phone they gave him. It was so tiny, so sleek, and his fingers were so large that one fingertip hit three letters at the same time. He had to type slowly, delicately, and it still took him four tries.

He didn't want to think about how long it took him to type in his list.

Morse sent him a message back almost instantly.

What's Mandrake the Magician? it said.

It's a comic, he typed back.

I'll see what I can do, Morse replied.

He picked *The Joy of Cooking* back up, flipped back to the foreword, pressed his finger to the word "Cockaigne."

When Steve had been learning to draw, he'd copied the pages of the Sunday comics section from the newspaper. His favorites had been the adventure strips: *Terry and The Pirates*, *Little Orphan Annie*, *The Phantom*, *Flash Gordon*.

Just saying the name *Buck Rogers* always made Bucky smirk.

Steve would copy the comics diligently, copy the poses, the facial expressions.

Mandrake the Magician had been one of his favorites, the story of the dashing stage magician who used his showmanship to disguise the fact that his magical powers were all too real as he battled the Cobra's evil shadow organization, bent on world domination.

Bucky had caught him once-- only once-- practicing Mandrake's signature hand-wave in the mirror.

"You think that's gonna work?" Bucky had teased, and Steve had hastily snapped his hand back.

"Maybe," Steve had retorted. "I got bored. I thought maybe I'd develop superpowers."

"We could get you a cape," Bucky had offered. "And a top hat. People would come from far and wide to see your powerful feats of prestidigitation. Who'd you want to hypnotize?"

"I don't think I'm a cape kind of guy," Steve had said.

He had never answered Bucky's question.

Princess Narda, Mandrake's leading lady, had been from the kingdom of Cockaigne. Cockaigne. And now the word might as well be jumping off the page, out of place, in a cookbook, of all places, used to designate the author's very favorite recipes.

He had thumbed through the cookbook, looking for the recipes labeled Cockaigne. There were souffles (he was instantly intimidated by the lengthy section explaining how very sensitive souffles could be), a cold cucumber soup, farina dumplings, some sort of chicken liver dish, a whole-grain bread...

Apple, Peach, or Plum Cake Cockaigne

In the fall, always in the fall, when his mother could buy the bruised apples from the market at a fraction of the usual price, they'd have apple cake. He didn't know if this recipe would taste anything like hers had, but it seemed like a good enough place to start: press the dough into a pan, layer it with fruit, cover the fruit with sugar and butter.

He'd slid the red-ribboned bookmark to that page.

When he'd sent the text message to Morse, his grocery list had contained the items for the recipe. He'd immediately thought better of it, looking at the quantities of butter and sugar the recipe called for, but Morse hadn't suggested it would be a problem.

He started thumbing through the book again, reading the various informational sections, before he found himself on the pages about preparing game, with a detailed illustration of how to skin a rabbit, another showing how to skin a squirrel. There was a recipe for porcupine, a recipe for armadillo, a recipe for beaver tail, and one for peccary, although he wasn't sure he knew what peccary was.

He tried, with a few more false starts, to fall asleep, before resigning himself to the fact that it was late morning and he may as well at least start to try to find a semblance of routine, even in the vacuum that was his apartment-quarantine.

Steve had been washing with a cloth at the sink since he'd woken up, a habit borne of necessity when sharing a bath with a floor full of fellow boarders, that continued in wartime, in the instances when there had been enough water for washing at all.

Here, he had a full bathroom all to himself, all black tiles and shiny chrome fixtures, mirrors and fluffy towels. The pressure at the sink tap, the stunning speed with which the water went from icy cold to scalding hot with just a twist of a single knob, made him think of winters in New York, of his mother boiling water to wash with, of trying to hurry in and out of the bath before the water went cold, of his mother's worried expression as she looked at his protruding ribs and his knobby knees.

He turned on the shower tap.

Water blasted out, steamy and pounding against the tiled walls. He reached a hand out, let the droplets fall against his palm. It was hot, deliciously hot, and he curled his fingers into a fist, so the water ran down the creases of his fingers in rivulets.

He unfastened his pants, stripped, and stepped under the showerhead.

The water splashed in his eyes, streamed down his face. He tilted his head up, let it run into his mouth, swallowed hot water and steam.

He wasn't sure how long he stood in the shower, but the water didn't run cold, just pounded against his skin until it left red, tingling splotches.

"Captain?" Morse called, her voice muffled through the door and the pattering of the shower.

He shut off the tap. Water cooled on his skin; he reached for a towel, patted his hair dry, and knotted the towel around his waist.

Morse peered at him over the rims of her glasses as he left the bathroom. "Very nice," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"You've got this blond Adonis thing going on. Very chiseled-out-of-marble."

She dropped a box onto the kitchen table. "Can I take a picture? Clint's going to be so jealous."

"Clint?"

"My husband."

"Ex-husband?" Steve asked, glancing at Morse's now-bare ring finger.

"Oh," she said, as if the request for clarification surprised her. "No. I mean, yes. Same-- there's just the one."

Steve decided that this was clearly not the safest line of questioning. He cleared his throat. "Go ahead," he said, and waited while Morse snapped his photo. "I don't know about making anyone jealous, though. I try not to get tangled up in that kind of--"

Morse looked up at him, squinted, and then burst out laughing. "Oh!" She exclaimed. "Oh, no, not like that. You're just exactly his kind of eye candy. Hey. I got everything on your grocery list. Except the comics. I'm still working on the comics. I had to order them off e-- from a catalog."

She nodded at the box, and he stepped to the counter, removing the contents of the box before he fully processed what she'd said.

He looked over at her, maybe a little more cautiously than he intended, and then down at the enormous paper bag full of sugar in his hands.

Five pounds. Five pounds of sugar.

"Your husband obviously has good taste," he joked.

"Excellent taste. Terrible judgment."

The apple cake stayed in the oven too long, or cooked at too high a temperature, or something. It didn't burn, but it was dry and a little bit leathery, the apples a little too chewy.

"Caramel," Morse said, as Steve put his fork down on his plate, an admission of defeat.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Caramel. We can save it. Here," she said, and stuck a slab of butter so large it seemed obscene into a pan.

"Caramel, like the candy?" Steve asked. "You know how to make caramel?"

"Sure, just basic pyrolysis," Morse replied.

"You're a doctor...and you cook?"

"I'm a biochemist," Bobbi said. "It's the same thing."

Fifteen minutes later, she had a salted caramel sauce, so smooth and perfectly textured that it soaked into the apple cake on contact, vanished so that the only hint of its existence was a sleek shine on the surface.

"Put that in your mouth," she said, with a grin, her eyes gleaming behind her steam-fogged glasses.

Steve did as he was told. The cake was injected with flavors of brown butter and burnt sugar, melding with the apples and cinnamon, melting over his tongue.

"See?" asked Morse. She took a plate for herself, cut a huge wedge.

Steve took a bite. It still tasted divine. "I don't think I want it the regular way."

"You cook before, Rogers?" Morse asked.

"A little," he replied. "When--before my mother died, I had to do most of the cooking."

"What did you cook?"

"Stew, mostly."

Morse shook her head. "Fucking Irish," she said, and Steve bristled.

"Oh!" Morse exclaimed, putting her hands up. She laughed. "No. It's...nobody's like that anymore," she said. "At least, nobody around here. I'm making fun of your stew."

Steve hesitated. He took another bite of his cake. "Is this like you sending my photo to your husband and nobody backtalking Fury?"

Morse laughed, loudly, uninhibitedly, and pushed her glasses back up her nose.

"Yes," she said. "Exactly like that. You know how to cook anything that doesn't get boiled?"

"Not really," Steve answered. "Not--no," he realized. "Bangers and mash. Kippers. Somebody taught me how to make them in the war. Baked beans. Bacon. Meat pies. Uh. If someone else makes the crust."

"And you just went right for cake?" Morse asked. "No working your way up from the easy stuff?"

"I wanted cake," Steve said, and he took another bite.

The apples had softened and caramelized, the cane-sweet of brown sugar filling his mouth as the fruit dissolved.

"It's pretty damn good for a first shot," Morse replied. "The only thing Clint can make is cookies. He burns *eggs*."

"To be fair, I'd probably burn eggs," Steve admitted.

"You managed cake all right," Morse pointed out.

"I had instructions," Steve replied. "I'm good at instructions."

Morse snorted. "That's not what I've heard."

"I'm good at instructions I trust."

Steve ate half the cake in one sitting. He ate the second half for dinner. He tried to remember the last time he'd eaten something so decadent, so luxurious.

The day before the tour had left for the front, they'd played their last matinee show in New York to a packed house, filled with bright-eyed kids. He'd left by the stage door, still in costume, because he'd learned a long time ago that the kids were always disappointed if a regular guy came out to greet them instead of Captain America.

He had signed glossy photos, let a photographer snap a couple of pictures, and slipped back inside to change into his street clothes.

He had meandered down from the theater, near Times Square, down to Chinatown, the smells of livestock and vegetables wafting in the air, herbs and spices he didn't recognize, the pungent odor of fresh-caught fish. And then he had slipped up into Little Italy, where the market smells took a turn, and now he smelled bell peppers instead of chilies, semolina cakes instead of rice.

He'd poked his head into Ferrara, where the rows of cakes and pastries in their glass counters gleamed like jewels, and Steve wondered what they'd done to win out over the ration. He ordered three ricotta-filled cannoli, the ends dipped in spiced, candied fruit, and sat at a little table, savoring them slowly, licking the filling out of the center of each one, biting into the still-crisp shells, which snapped with a satisfying crunch.

He'd had a cup of espresso, a real luxury in those days, so pricey that he was a little ashamed to order it. He'd sipped at it in between cannoli, alternating bitter and sweet, hot and cool.

In Italy, the only coffee had been canned crystals of instant stuff that had stunk to high heaven and didn't quite dissolve as smoothly in water as it should have. But Steve had drunk it anyway, boiling it until it was too hot to taste. His tongue had stopped burning, no matter how hot his food.

He hadn't had a good cup of coffee since that night. Or a cannoli.

He lay down on his bed, looking up at the ceiling. He barely gave it a try this time: left his clothing on, didn't bother to get under the covers.

He fell asleep.

When he woke, he looked at the green lights of the alarm clock, certain he'd only dozed for a moment. It was hard to tell, in that vacuum of an apartment, where the only light was artificial.

It was five in the morning.

And for the first time in a week, he felt fully alert, aware, awake.

He sucked in a breath, showered again, changed his clothes.

He peered at the empty cake pan, sitting in the dish drainer, if staring at it might will new cake into existence, but he soon gave up, checked the cabinets, ate four granola bars and three oranges, drank a full quart of milk.

The milk came in a plastic jug, instead of glass, and when he opened it and skimmed his finger across the creamline, his fingertip came up a little sodden, but otherwise empty.

He drank from the jug. There was something not-quite-right about the way the milk felt on his tongue, as if it were thinner, less creamy. The flavor wasn't as rich or sweet as he remembered it. But the oranges were divine. Huge, ripe, juicy, the kind of oranges he'd only ever had in Florida, and bigger than even those had been.

He finished the milk and decided he'd stick to orange juice from now on. Orange juice, at least, was better in this day and age.

Steve sat down at the desk that was positioned against one wall. It was smaller than the desks of his day, thin-framed, made from metal with a composite wood top, and it had no drawers to speak of. His tablet was sitting there, barely used. It just seemed like a larger version of the phone they'd given him, but didn't allow him to make phone calls, so it rested on the surface of the desk, screen black.

It did have some slide shows on it, of important news events of the last seventy years, split up by decade.

He'd gotten as far as Hiroshima and slammed the tablet down, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. He hadn't picked it up again, even though Morse had showed him how to play a couple of solitaire games on it. His fingers twitched when he contemplated turning it on again, like he'd touched something filthy.

But the sketchbook and the little paper bag full of drawing supplies that Morse had brought him also sat on the desk, unopened.

He opened the bag, found three felt-tipped pens, labeled on the cap with their widths in millimeters, and a plastic contraption which, after a moment, he determined to be a drafting pencil, with a small case full of leads.

He opened the book, smoothed the paper. It was thick, just slightly off-white, and had just the barest amount of tooth to it. The graphite stayed in place, only smeared a little bit.

He started sketching.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been drawing, but his hand was covered in a thick layer of graphite when Morse buzzed in. He put the book aside.

She was carrying a brown paper sack that appeared to be full of groceries--well, he thought, there was one thing that was still familiar. She put it down on the counter.

"Whatcha been drawing?" she asked, sidling over to him. She dropped onto the sofa beside him, and leaned over his arm to look.

Steve flipped the cover of the sketchbook over, covering the pages. "Nothing," he said. "I mean, it's not very good."

Morse snorted. "They briefed me on you," she said. "I've seen your sketches in your file."

"What?" Steve asked.

"From the war," said Morse.

"Why would anyone keep those?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Did you watch those slideshows?"

Steve shrugged. "I got up to the part where my own people dropped a bomb on a civilian city. The same kind of bomb I risked my life to stop. Wasn't too interested after that."

"Yeah," said Morse. "There's probably a few things you need to know."

"Like what?" Steve asked, and he started unpacking the paper sack Morse had brought.

It was full of groceries: mostly staples and common perishables.

"Well," said Morse. "Give me a question."

There was cream in addition to milk, butter, eggs, onions, garlic, potatoes, carrots, celery, wheat flour, cornmeal. Baking powder, baking soda, cream of tartar, spices. Baking chocolate, a plastic bag of chocolate chips, nuts, coconut. A loaf of sliced bread, a pound of bacon, sliced thin, sealed flat in more shiny plastic.

"What do you do with all this plastic?" he asked, as he unpacked the last item, a small plastic bottle, shaped like a bear, full of honey.

Morse laughed. "You don't want to know."

"I do," said Steve.

"Most of it just goes in dumps," Morse answered.

Steve stared at the bear, gave its tummy a little squeeze. "Really?"

"Really," said Morse.

"Seems sort of wasteful."

"Yeah, uh, if excess isn't your thing," Morse said with a snort. "Be prepared to be totally depressed by the future."

"And I was so optimistic given the lack of windows or personal autonomy."

Morse raised an eyebrow. "You need to talk," she said.

"I'm talking to you."

"You know what I mean. To the doctors. Convince them you're not crazy or a flight risk."

Steve opened the bag of chocolate chips. He put one in his mouth, shut his eyes.

The chocolate was darker, less sweet, didn't immediately fall apart on his tongue like the Hershey Bar squares that had been in his ration kits. Cool at first, it slowly warmed, a little sugary, rich, earthy.

He took a breath when it was done.

"You look like you're having a religious experience," Morse observed.

Steve put another chip in his mouth. "I am."

They made chocolate chip cookies, crisp and buttery, with bubbles of melty chocolate and toasted, golden walnuts hidden inside.

When they were finished baking, Morse pulled the milk from the fridge. She poured a tall glass for herself, but Steve shook his head when she offered him some.

"It tastes wrong," he explained.

"Wrong?" Morse squinted over the rims of her glasses.

"Different. Not enough cream."

Morse grinned. "I'll get you something better next time."

"What happened to it?" Steve asked.

"Homogenization processes. Changes in bovine feeding. Regular antibiotics, dietary supplements."

Steve took another sip. "What else?"

"What else?" Morse echoed. "That's a pretty big question, Rogers."

Steve reached for another cookie. "Space travel."

Morse frowned. "Sort of. We landed on the moon. Other than that, it depends on your clearance level."

He snorted. "Medicine."

"We cured polio," she replied. "Measles, too, except people keep refusing to inoculate their kids."

"Why?"

"Because they're assholes who don't understand brain chemistry or the lessons of history. Tuberculosis is pretty much unheard of in this country, too. Malaria is still a problem overseas. Still working on cancer, but treatment is getting better. But we've got other diseases, too."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "It's the human race," he replied. "Of course we do."

"That's mighty cynical coming from somebody who's supposed to be a symbol of hope."

"A symbol of hope who hasn't seen a single star in a week and a half," Steve answered.

Morse went quiet. She reached for another cookie, stuffed it in her mouth, crunching, and watched him, until she swallowed. "Yeah," she said. "Let me see what I can do."

There were more doctors and more tests. They put those sensors back on his skin, made him jog on a machine with a flat surface and a rotating band that moved toward him, so that he ran in place, red flashing lights indicating his speed, his pulse, the distance traveled, the number of calories burned.

They had him press his eyes up against a stereoscope, identify shapes and colors and words. They shot puffs of air into his eyes, put a set of headphones on him, made him identify tones.

They sat him down in a plush chair and asked him questions. He always changed the subject, or sat silently. They told him it was all right, if he didn't want to talk. So he didn't talk.

Once that he was sleeping a few restful hours at night, they moved him to a sparse room with a narrow bed, hooked him up to more sensors while he slept.

He had nightmares again. He always had nightmares. The night they had monitored his sleep, he dreamed that he was back in Brooklyn, but the space he was in was half his childhood apartment, half the room he'd shared with Bucky. He'd sat down on the bed, and started to sink, kept sinking as a gap in the mattress swallowed him, felt as if he was going to suffocate, until he fell through the other side, into a cold, stone chamber with a frozen river. He knew he was waiting for a boat, that he had to go down the river, but he woke up before the boat ever came.

There had been a little girl waiting with him. He couldn't quite place her, wasn't sure if she was a girl he'd known or seen, or if she was a fabrication of his dream.

The next morning, he sat stoically in an overstuffed chair as the psychologist tried to pry, asked him what he was thinking, feeling. Occasionally he'd give a one-word answer.

He considered pulling out his sketchbook and doodling, but no doubt the psychologist would ask to see the sketches.

Endless drawings of Bucky. Endless drawings of Peggy. Frantic, jerky illustrations as he tried to capture their expressions, the more uncomfortable, intimate ones, the ones he knew he'd never find in a photograph.

"Doctor Morse says you haven't watched the slideshows," said Fury, as he strode into Steve's apartment.

"Good afternoon to you, too, Director," Steve replied. "What else did Morse tell you?"

"To give you these," said Fury, and he pulled out a shiny, black plastic bag. Steve took the bag, and peered inside it, before pulling out the contents.

There was a stack of comic books inside: beautifully illustrated comic books, printed-- even on the insides-- on impossibly glossy paper.

Four of them were Mandrake the Magician books. But the rest of them, every single one of them, was titled "Captain America."

Steve thumbed through them, caught glimpses of his old uniform, and then stopped on a page, a page of a young, pretty couple sitting at a dinner table in a fancy restaurant, holding hands across the table, stars in their eyes.

They were dressed in what Steve assumed were contemporary clothes: he in khakis and a button down shirt, not unlike what he was currently wearing, she in a form-fitting sweater and narrow slacks. His hair was shorter, a regulation military buzz. Her hair was longer, sleek, worn in soft waves. But the man was unmistakably him, and the woman was unmistakably Peggy.

"What is this?" He asked.

He turned the page, watched the couple chat and smile over dinner, before the maître d' passed Peggy a message in some kind of code, the two of them wrapped up their small talk and were quickly enmeshed in a firefight with some kind of evil robot.

He turned the page again, and Bucky was staring at him.

Bucky.

Smiling.

He looked up at Fury.

"Artistic license," the man said, shrugging. "It's a comic book."

Steve shut it with a snap. "I don't want this. How--"

"How *ard Stark*, you mean," Fury replied. "He owned the rights to the characters--"

"People," Steve said through gritted teeth. "We're people, not characters."

"Agent Carter signed her rights away," Fury replied. "As did most of the Commandos. You and Barnes were dead. You want to make me apologize for decisions made before my time, you can go right ahead, but you know damn well that's not what this is about."

Fury took a seat on Steve's couch and gave Steve a pointed look. "I'd love a glass of water, thanks for asking."

Steve felt his shoulders stiffen, but he went to the sink and poured a glass of water. He dropped it onto the coffee table with a thud just short of a slam.

"What's this about, then?" Steve asked.

"You exist," said Fury. "For all those years in between then and now, Stark printed those comic books. Well. He licensed you out to a publisher who printed them. They made movies. A cartoon."

Steve inhaled slowly. "Of me?"

He reached back for the comic book again.

"Of you."

"I don't want to read this," Steve said, running his thumb over the cover, rolling the flimsy booklet into a cylinder in his hands. "I don't...I can't..."

"Yeah, I can understand that," said Fury. He took a sip of water, set the glass back. "But you've got to at least know they exist. You walk out into that world--"

Fury nodded with his head, up and to the left. Steve assumed that must be where the entry was, that they must be underground.

"--you walk out there, you need to know that people are going to know who you are, and people are going to have their own ideas of what that means, and what you stand for."

"Stand for?" Steve asked. "You mean what Captain America stands for, don't you?"

"Sorry to point out the obvious, Cap, but that's you."

"It's a fictional character," Steve said. "You and I both know I'm not standing for anything that condones dropping bombs on innocent people, no matter whose country it is."

Fury was quiet for a moment. "You could go back out there and never don the costume again, Cap."

"Steve," said Steve. "It's Steve."

"Steve. You could do that. There would still be comics. No one-- outside of the people here-- would ever know Captain America came back. People would meet you, make jokes about how funny it was that a guy named Steve Rogers looks so much like *that* Steve Rogers. Live a normal life."

"Director," said Steve. He dropped down on the sofa, beside Fury, leaned back into the cushions, stretched his legs out. "You honestly think there's any way my life's ever going to be normal?"

Fury cracked a smile. "Comics got one thing wrong. You've got a better sense of humor."

"I'm only half-joking," Steve replied. "But I already played at being a puppet in a fancy suit, telling other people's stories and it didn't sit well with me. I'm not going to stand for some comic-book propaganda I don't believe in."

"Think about it this way," Fury said, after a moment. "You sit it out, that's all fine and good. But somebody else is going to be telling folks what Captain America stands for."

"Sounds like they've been doing it for seventy years, Sir," said Steve.

"You know," Fury said. "In the nineteen-fifties, the comics stopped making money. Cap was too much a product of his time, of the war. Our attention shifted. They say someone went to Howard Stark, showed him how badly the comics were in the red, said the publisher wasn't going to renew the license. Stark offered to pay printing costs out of his own pocket. He said there were only two projects he'd never shut down, no matter how much money they lost. R&D, and the comics."

"Well, Howard Stark wasn't always the most practical guy, sometimes," said Steve.

"Maybe not," Fury agreed. "But he was using part of the proceeds-- when there were proceeds-- to fund an Arctic research team."

"Sounds like something Stark would do," said Steve. "Like I said, practicality, not the man's strong suit."

Fury snorted.

"What?" asked Steve.

"Nothing. Starks and strong suits. Funny thing," said Fury. "That's the team that found you."

Steve opened the comic again. "I take it that means these things are popular, then," he retorted.

"You could say that," Fury replied. "His kid-- well. His kid grew up on the things. So did half my agents. They've been...influential, to say the least."

"Are you saying you have a need for a...for a Captain America, Director?"

Fury got up from his seat, leaving the glass of water half-finished on the table. "I'm saying I could find one, if somebody wanted the job. In case you know anybody. It's a pretty big job."

"Yeah," said Steve, and he put the comic down again. "You know me, always out and about. I meet a lot of people; I'll ask around."

Fury looked back at him, shook his head, chuckled, and walked out the door.

Steve stuffed the comics back in their bag, shoved them in a drawer, and picked up the tablet. He tapped the 'on' key, deliberated for a few moments, his finger hovering over the icon for the slideshow titled 1945-1955. He put the tablet back down and opened *The Joy of Cooking*.

Morse had brought him a little stack of brightly-colored paper tabs, with adhesive that clung to one end of the paper, so he could stick them to the pages and mark multiple recipes at once. He checked the ingredients in his fridge, now fully stocked with more fresh produce than he'd seen in one place in years, and went back to the book, flipping through the index to find the entry for "fruit."

But his eyes landed on another word entirely.

He called Morse.

"This is Nineteen," she answered.

"Agent, it's me," said Steve.

"Everything okay?" asked Morse. "I'm on a mission."

"A-- oh," Steve replied. "They--you have a job. Right."

"What is it, Rogers?"

Steve flipped to the recipe. "Have you ever made fondue?"

"What?" Bobbi asked. "You mean like strawberries and chocolate on little skewers?"

"I guess?" Steve answered. "I thought it was cheese."

"Yeah, but chocolate's way more fun. Look, you, uh. One minute," she said, in a breathy, exasperated tone.

"Oh. Uh. Sorry," said Steve.

"Not you," Morse muttered. "Not-- yes, yes it's Captain Fucking America," she said, more tensely, though her voice became muffled and distant. "Would you stop being a child? If I have to--"

Her voice dropped off completely. Steve held the phone to his ear for a minute or so before he tapped the button to end the call.

The phone lit up again ten minutes later.

"This is Captain Rogers," Steve said.

"You're so official-sounding," said Morse.

"You're not on a mission," said Steve.

Morse groaned. "It's a personal mission."

"Husband?" Steve asked.

"Ex-husband," Morse replied, in a deflated tone.

"Agent, I don't mean to be insensitive, but I've gotta ask," said Steve. "Are these the same guy?"

"Yeah," said Morse, quiet. "Same guy."

The phone went silent for a long moment.

"Agent?" Steve asked, unsure if the call had dropped.

"Agent Morse?"

He just barely heard her breath hitch.

"Er. Bobbi?"

"Fuck it," she said. "I'll be over in an hour."

Morse showed up an hour and a half later, in jeans and a sweater, rather than her usual work clothes, her hair tied up in a twist, her eyes rimmed with pink behind her glasses. She lay a cloth bag down on the counter. It clanked, and she began taking out various metal pieces.

"What's that?" Steve asked.

Morse sniffled. "Fondue pot," she answered. "My parents got married in the seventies; they have like six of them. Here, open this."

She gave him a sealed tin, he popped it open to find paraffin and a wick. "Am I allowed to play with fire?" he asked. "Could be dangerous."

Morse shot him a weak smile in response, and shrugged. "This visit's more or less off the record," she said.

"I thought they logged your key card," Steve replied.

"That's the 'less' part, Steve-o."

She pulled out a lighter. "Here. Light her up. They had these in the forties, right?"

Steve snorted and lit the paraffin.

He had to admit that he preferred Morse's take on fondue to the idea of dipping little bits of bread in cheese. They melted chocolate in the little pot, over the paraffin flame, and speared bits of fruit-- the hugest berries he'd ever seen, chunks of pineapple, pear, and melon-- and fluffy white marshmallows on long, slender silver skewers.

Steve held the first skewer out in the air, letting the chocolate set and harden a bit before popping it into his mouth.

The chocolate was smooth, dark, and didn't melt on first contact; he bit through the shell, his teeth closing on the strawberry inside, the flavor of tart juice spreading over his tongue. It took four bites. Four bites to finish a single strawberry.

"Swiss chocolate," he observed, when he'd finished the berry. "You got Swiss chocolate."

"Of course I did," Morse said smartly. "We have to do this right, if it's your first time."

Steve laughed in spite of himself, out loud, and he covered his face with his hand. He could feel his cheeks warm, and the tips of his ears, and he was certain they were pink.

"What?" Morse asked, popping a chocolate-covered marshmallow in her mouth. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Steve said, and he busied himself skewering a piece of cantaloupe, trying to hide his face until he was sure the blush had subsided. "You'd-- you'd have to know somebody."

They ate the entire pot of chocolate, wiping up the remains with fingertips against warm metal.

Steve stuck his fingers in his mouth, sucking the last of it away.

When he looked up, Morse was watching him, a small smile on her face, a little bit wistful.

"You all right?" He asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Just...I've gotta clean this up. Tell me something. Something about before. You had a girl, didn't you?"

She took the fondue pot, scooped up the skewers, and dumped them in the sink.

"I guess," Steve answered. "I wouldn't say 'had.' It wasn't like that, really."

"It never is," said Morse. "Carter, right? The lady who founded this place?"

"Yeah, she--"

Steve guttered the paraffin with its cap.

"She did?"

"Yeah," Morse replied. "Part of why I wanted to work here, really. Place started by a scientist and a lady in the nineteen-forties? Little more progressive than your average government agency."

"Stark," Steve said. He felt a lump form in his chest. "Howard Stark and Peggy Carter?"

"Exactly." Morse raised an eyebrow. "You didn't know? I thought they gave you slideshows or something. What the hell has Fury told you?"

"He gave me comic books," Steve answered. "The slideshows didn't really work out."

"Well, fuck," said Morse, and she wiped her wet hands on her jeans, stepped toward him, hands on her hips. "What are you planning to do, live in this bunker forever with one friend?"

"Are we friends?" Steve asked.

"Well, I'm here on my night off, when I'm not even being paid to visit you?" Morse said, half through gritted teeth. "And admittedly, the other option was staying home and fighting with my husband, but--"

"You want to, uh, talk about the whole--"

"I don't," Morse answered, and she reached for her purse. "You stick around here long enough, Steve, this place is gonna ask for your life."

"Not something I haven't been willing to give before," he said. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"I don't mean bleeding for your country, soldier. They'll take everything. Your faith, your idealism, the people you love."

She took a deep breath, spun her wedding band. "You'll end up fighting just to survive."

"Why do you stay, then?" Steve asked.

"Because I want this," Morse answered. "I want it enough to stick with it when it's awful."

She dug her hand into her purse, drew out a shiny rectangle, and held it out to him. "Hey."

She wiped at her eyes, bumping the rim of her glasses up with her free hand. "I got you a present."

He took the rectangle from her-- it was a piece of cardboard, wrapped in shiny cellophane, and covered with pale, greenish-yellow stars.

"What--" Steve turned it over, the back of the card was blank, white.

"Stickers," said Morse. She pulled out a little, folded bit of paper. "I printed out the night sky over Brooklyn in July." She chuckled, rumbled the paper in between her fingers. "Probably has more stars than the real thing these days. But close enough."

Steve frowned and peeled back the cellophane.

"They glow," said Morse.

"Glow?"

"Here," said Morse. "I'll show you."

They took off their shoes, dropped them at the foot of the bed, and climbed up, Steve marking off the positions of the stars in pencil as Morse followed behind, sticking a star over each little graphite mark.

"He's going to New Mexico," Morse said. "In the morning. For work. I don't know for how long."

"What's in New Mexico?" Steve asked. He finished the stretch of ceiling he could reach from the bed, reached for the desk chair, and dragged it to the next spot.

"It's classified," she said.

Steve shrugged. "So am I, if you haven't noticed."

"Some kind of astronomical anomaly," she said, standing on her tiptoes to reach the farthest corner of Steve's map. "And an artifact."

"What, like dinosaur bones?" Steve asked.

"Like a giant fucking hammer in the middle of the desert," said Morse. "Nobody can pick it up. It's like the Sword in the Stone meets John Henry."

Steve dropped off the chair, let her take over.

"I don't know," she said, as she rubbed her thumb over the surface of each star, sticking the galaxy into place. "Things have gotten...weird, lately. They're giving him more and more dangerous jobs."

"He's another scientist?" Steve asked. "Look, I'm sure--"

Morse shook her head. "Assassin."

Steve took a breath. "Right," he said. "Okay. You-- you know it's going to be okay, right?"

Morse set her jaw. "You just woke up seventy years in the future, and you're reassuring me? Steve."

She finished sticking the stars on the ceiling, and Steve sat in silence on the foot of the bed.

"Things are changing," Morse said. "There...there are people like you in the world."

"How many?"

"I don't know," she said. "There's a man who can turn himself into...a titan. They call him the Hulk. I don't think it's the right word for what he is. There's...Howard Stark's son. Tony."

"I heard about him," Steve said. "It was his team who found me."

"Yeah, but...his heart is powered by an atomic reactor."

"Like a bomb?" Steve asked.

"Same physics, different purpose. He wears a metal suit. He can fly. He's headed off wars singlehandedly. There's a man who...I don't know. They say he can bend the fabric of space and time, just by flicking his wrist."

"That's a comic book character," Steve said, though his arms twitched. "The ones you ordered for me. Mandrake the Magician."

"Doctor Strange," corrected Morse. "And those are just the guys on our side."

She climbed down from the chair, crossed her arms over her chest, and looked over her handiwork.

"Nice job," Steve said, approvingly, and he got up, stood next to her, and admired the makeshift sky.

"Yeah?" she asked. "You think so?"

"Yeah," he said.

She reached for the light switch.

Enclosed as they were-- and underground, Steve had pieced together from these conversations-- when the lights dimmed, the room was plunged into such deep darkness that even Steve couldn't make out anything.

Anything but the stars.

The glowed, green-yellow, faint but curiously alive, electric in Steve's mind.

"How do they work?" he asked.

"Photoluminescence," said Morse. "Strontium Aluminate...it's a phosphor; it radiates light after being exposed to it."

Her fingers found his waist, fingertips catching at the fabric of his tee shirt before her arm slid around his back. He started, tensed, the heat of her hand a shock against his skin.

"You okay?" she asked, and dropped her hand.

"Yeah," he said, and relaxed. "Yeah, great. It's just that the last time anybody touched me who wasn't a doctor or an enemy combatant..."

It had been Peggy.

He went quiet.

"Your girlfriend?" asked Morse.

"I...guess?" he answered. "I don't know. We never talked about that."

"She did," said Morse.

Steve's breath caught in his throat. "How do you--"

"It's in your file," said Morse. "She used to call herself your fiancée, flashed a big ring everywhere--"

"That doesn't sound like Peggy," Steve said, before he realized he'd cut Morse off mid-sentence.

"Because it got her access to the classified documents about you."

Steve pursed his lips, a lump forming in his throat, tears pricking at his eyes. "That sounds like Peggy."

"Yeah," said Morse. "She... You know, she still came by here once in a while when I started."

She put her hand back on the small of his back, firmly, as if she knew he needed the support. "You should have seen her, Steve. She was this tiny old lady, silver silver hair, and she could make Fury cringe like a guilty puppy."

Everything was still; everything was concrete. He couldn't breathe: it wasn't like asthma, painfully inhaling as if through a garden of thorns; his body wouldn't let him take a breath in the first place.

"I know that feeling," he said, when he finally managed to inhale. "She did it to me, too. That's--"

"Yeah," Morse agreed.

"It's why I loved her."

"I know."

And he put his arm around Morse, who felt tiny and breakable beside him in that moment, and the two of them stared up in silence at their artificial sky.

She stayed there that night, after he expressed his concerns about sleeping with a married woman. She laughed and kissed his cheek and assured him that that was really not what she had in mind, and borrowed a pair of his sweatpants, which were comically large on her, and crawled into his bed.

She curled up with a cheek against his chest, and his heart felt tight, his head swam, his mind flickered with images of Bucky, sleeping calmly beside him, his breath a comforting murmur in their creaky secondhand bed, and then, later, curled against his side while they camped in a cave in France, twitching, a troubled look on his face, tiny whimpers crossing his lips.

He reached down, smoothed her hair away from his neck.

"Sorry," she muttered, and moved her head onto the pillow.

"Agent?" Steve asked quietly.

"Did you just call me 'Agent?'"

"Yes?"

"Fuck's sake, Steve, I'm in your bed."

"Morse?"

"Bobbi."

"Bobbi?"

"Yeah?"

Steve took a breath. "Where are we?"

"In New York."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What year is it? Really."

"Two thousand twelve."

"Who's the President?"

"Matthew Ellis."

"What party?"

"Democrat."

"Where did they find me?"

"Off the coast of Greenland."

"What's your husband's name?"

"Clint."

"How long have you been married?"

"Three years."

"Kids?"

Bobbi laughed. "God, no. You...Steve, that's not gonna happen."

He felt the mattress shift as she sat up, heard her legs-- the jersey fabric of his sweatpants rubbing against the sheets as she crossed her feet beneath her.

He followed suit, sat up, too, tugged a pillow into his lap, pulled up close against his chest.

"Even if you stay married?"

"Nope. You know, Steve. Don't be a dumbshit. Don't marry somebody you hardly know."

"Is that what happened?" he asked.

"I've known you longer than I knew Clint," said Bobbi. "If that tells you anything."

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

Bobbi snorted. "Yeah, I'll tell Clint I have someone waiting in the wings when it all goes through. You move fast, Rogers."

"You think this is fast?" He asked. "Come back tomorrow; we'll have a house and six kids."

"And a dog," Bobbi added.

"Sure, a great big one. Bobbi?" Steve asked, pulling the pillow tighter to his chest, the soft, rubbery substance shrinking and conforming to the crevice between his arms.

"Yeah, Steve?"

"Am I dead?"

She was quiet for a long moment, and then he heard her move in the dark, turn over, lie down on her side.

"If you are," Bobbi said, "I am, too. Sometimes it feels that way, doesn't it?"

"I think," Steve said, slowly. "I killed myself. That means everything that comes after is..."

"Well, it's not heaven, mister."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Bobbi was silent again. She reached out a hand, patted Steve's knee. "Go to sleep, Steve," she said. "Don't let your mind run away on you."

He dreamed that night that he was in the trenches in the north of France, that Bucky was still with him, that the stars in the sky were made of plastic, dropped and fell at any moment.

Bucky transformed into Peggy, the stars drew blood where they fell, the gunfire grew louder and louder, and there was Peggy, in denim jeans like the ones Bobbi had been wearing, and suddenly she cracked into a million pieces, and he was paralyzed, unable to do anything as he watched her shatter apart.

He dreamed he was at the gates of Hell, that there were fields of fire as far as the eye could see, and that, like something out of Dante, he could choose his guide. They told him he could choose one, just one, person to keep with him in Hell, and once he'd chosen, he couldn't change his mind.

And then he felt hands on his shoulders, and his legs stopped moving, mid-thrash, and he jerked himself awake.

"Steve?" asked Bobbi. "Steve, you were screaming."

He slowly regained full consciousness, felt the sweat cooling on his skin and saturating the sheets, his heartbeat slowing to regularity.

"Sorry," he said. "Bad dream."

"You say that like it happens a lot," said Bobbi.

"Every night," said Steve. "I didn't know I was screaming, though, or I never would have...I would have told you to sleep in the couch, or..."

"Hey," she said. "Hey. Not your fault."

He heard scrambling beside him, and the bedside lamp flicked on a few moments later.

"Come on," said Bobbi. "We're getting up."

He followed her into the living room, sat down on the stool at the kitchen counter when she pointed to it, and watched as she methodically pulled items from the fridge: eggs, butter, milk, a loaf of bread.

She cracked eggs, poured milk over them, began to stir with a fork.

"What are you making?" Steve asked.

She shot him a lopsided smile and opened the loaf of bread. "Did you guys have french toast back in the '40s?"

"Yeah," Steve said. "But we never had enough, you know, eggs, or..."

Bobbi raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah," he said again.

She nodded at him, and stepped with her bowl of egg and milk toward the stove, too-large pants dragging on the kitchen floor tiles. "C'mere," she said.

He followed her to the stove; she turned it on: the smooth, glassy, black surface lit up with concentric circles of red light. She lay a skillet over the burner-- or whatever passed for a burner-- and cut a pat of butter into it.

"This isn't the best bread for this," she said. "Really, you want challah, or something else dense. Bread in egg."

She dipped the bread into the egg mixture, flipping it so it was covered on both sides.

"And then bread in pan."

She stuck the slice of bread in the skillet, where it sizzled on the black, speckled surface, gradually darkening from pale yellow to golden brown at the edges. She flipped it, let it cook on the other side, then dropped it onto a plate.

"There's maple syrup in the fridge," she said. "The good kind, not fucking Mrs. Butterworth."

There was a note of bitterness in her voice that went well beyond what syrup should have inspired.

One step from the fridge, Steve realized how long it had been since he'd tasted maple syrup.

The memory of it pricked at his tongue: the cloying sweetness, cut by a rich, darker flavor that tasted like nothing else in the world, laced with vanilla and wood and earth and rain.

The bottle in the fridge was small and made of glass, a round bulb with a slender neck, heavy and glistening in his palm. He set it down on the counter, hopped up on the barstool, turned the cap.

The inner lip of the bottle was crusted with brown crystals, winking in the lamplight. He dipped the pad of his index finger down, circled the rim, sticky sugar coating his fingertip as he pulled it away.

He dropped his finger, gently, against the tip of his tongue, and he felt a heady rush at the first hint of sweetness, felt as if he might lose his breath, and the back of his hands itched. He shut his eyes, savoring that taste until the last of the sugar crystals had long been dissolved.

"I hate to break your reverie," Bobbi said, "but there's plenty more where that came from, and your toast's getting cold."

Steve opened his eyes. She laughed, and lay a slab of French toast down on his plate: five, no, six slices thick.

"You want to do the honors?" Bobbi asked.

She nodded at the syrup bottle.

Steve drenched the stack in so much maple syrup that it ran off the plate.

Bobbi laughed again. Her laugh was low, husky, with a glottal upswing at the end that reminded him of Katharine Hepburn, of dowager empresses, of Long Island grandmothers.

She took her own two slices of French toast, slathered them with butter, and stabbed them with a fork.

"I've gotta get out of here," she said. "I need to talk to Clint."

"Husband or Ex-husband?" Steve asked.

"Dunno," Bobbi said. "Depends how he reacts to me spending the night here."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "I'm Captain America. I don't sleep with other men's wives."

"I dunno," said Bobbi. "That sounds pretty American to me, Cap."

"Maybe in some other plane of existence," said Steve. "Not here."

He stuffed his mouth full of French toast and chewed. "Anyway, I've got a girl."

"Yeah?" Bobbi asked.

"Yeah," Steve answered, and he felt his eyes prick and his voice falter, so that the end of the word was a hoarse whisper.

Bobbi put her fork down. "Tell me about her."

"Tell you what?" Steve asked. "She was tall, and--"

"What did you like best about her?"

Steve was quiet for a moment. "Her courage," he said. "And her conviction. Her compassion."

"Nice alliteration, there, Cap,"

"It wasn't on purpose."

"What was your favorite thing to do with her?" Bobbi asked.

"Uh." Steve hesitated. "Strategic planning."

Bobbi laughed. "Real things," she said. "Things couples do. You know."

"I..."

"Jesus, Steve. Dates? You went on dates, didn't you?"

He slid his hand in his pocket, clasped his compass.

"No," he said. "Never went on a date."

"You're kidding, Rogers."

He shrugged. "We were supposed to. Uh."

His heart sank, heavy in his chest, and for a moment, he couldn't breathe. "What day is it?"

"Friday," said Bobbi. "Why?"

"How many days have I been in here?"

"Almost two weeks."

"Yeah," he said, over the lump in his throat. "Tomorrow."

Bobbi put her fork down. "What were you planning on doing?"

"Do you know the Stork Club?" He asked. "It's got to still be around, if Katz' and Lombardi's and Ferrara..."

"The...a club?" Bobbi asked. "I don't know it. Like...?"

"A dinner club. Drinks, dancing, that kind of thing. They were real good to boys in uniform, and, uh, girls, too, I guess. There was a whole squad of fliers, had the club for their mascot, you know? Down on...Fifty-Third, I think it was."

"Never heard of it," Bobbi admitted. "But then again, Clint isn't much of a dinner club guy."

"And, what, you're a dinner club gal?" Steve asked. "Is that the whole problem?"

Bobbi laughed, but as her laugh slowed, she looked away, the corners of her mouth turning down. "I don't know; I've never been to one."

"You should fix that," said Steve.

"Maybe I should."

They finished their breakfast, and Bobbi left Steve sitting at the counter. He got up, washed the dishes by hand, in spite of the fancy dishwasher, and put the food away.

He picked up the maple syrup bottle, gave it a long look.

And then he did something he had never done before in his life.

With a little tremble, a charge of adrenaline that seemed disproportionate to the act, he unscrewed the cap and tipped up the bottle directly into his mouth.

It took him 'til about a half an hour after Bobbi left for him to remember that the next day was Saturday.

Saturday, what?

They'd told him the exact date when he'd first woken up, the month and the day, but that had been weeks ago, when light and sound and the feeling of needles and tape pricking and sticking on his skin had all swirled together into a conflagration of sensory information, too much even for someone whose nervous system had been enhanced by modern science.

Then they'd put him in here, in this tiny space, devoid of any stimulation except what he created.

He had to get out.

He went back to his bedroom, the stars, in the dark, had lost most of their glow, reduced to the merest green glimmer.

And then he thought, what if it was the wrong Saturday? She'd said one week Saturday next? Had she meant the coming Saturday, or the one following? Add a week to that?

He opened the closet. The clothing they'd given him was spare, plain: a few tee shirts, a sweatshirt, a cardigan sweater, sweatpants, khakis, jeans.

No dress slacks. No dress shirts.

The shoes they'd left him with were soft, white sneakers, still glimmering like new, nearly as reflective as the star stickers.

Nothing suitable for dancing.

He looked in the mirror, combed his hair for the first time in weeks. It was shorter than it had been, the last time she'd seen him; someone had cut it while he slept, he supposed, same as they'd trimmed his nails.

He tilted his head to either side, trying to decide if he liked it... not that he thought she'd care; they'd been in the middle of a war the last time she'd seen him, but if they were going dancing, he wanted to be presentable.

He didn't even know what presentable was in this place. All he'd seen was Bobbi, in her jeans and sweaters, and the other doctors, lab coats over soft, bright clothing and sensible-looking shoes. And Director Fury, who was always dressed entirely in severe black, long coat swirling around his ankles. SHIELD agents, in black, form-fitting uniforms made of something thick and protective and had a slight sheen to it, with panels of some kind of body armor that looked almost like leather, but not quite.

He tried on every combination of clothing he owned.

Well. He wasn't sure if he technically owned it, or if it was on loan, or what the exact arrangement was supposed to be. But he stepped in front of the mirror, poked at the waist of

his shirt, which was too loose and rumpled a bit over his navel, tried it with a belt, and then without a belt, then put the belt back on.

He put on his socks and shoes, and sat down on the corner of his bed, trying to shove away the voice in his head telling him that she wouldn't be there, that the time had passed, a lifetime ago.

He took off the belt, untied his sneakers, kicked them across the room so hard that they left a mark on the opposing wall.

She wouldn't be there.

He took off his trousers, folded them neatly, put them back on a hanger, sat back down on his bed, in a tee shirt, socks and underpants, and cried for the first time since he'd woken up, for the first time since he'd lost Bucky.

He cried like he had when his mother died, in long, wracking, silent sobs, and pressed a hand to his chest, waiting for the wheezing to start, but of course it never did. He cried himself out first, his throat choked tight, his eyes burning and dry as paper, his head aching from the tension.

And then he picked himself up, swallowed, went to the kitchen, and drank half of a gallon jug of water, shut off the lights in his bedroom, and lay flat on his back, head propped on his hands, and stared up at the stars.

He spotted the constellations he knew, as misrepresented in size as they were with the stickers: Orion, of course, the easiest to pick out, far at the edge, and both dippers. Casseopeia, Cygnus, like a cross. The tiny M-shape of Andromeda, stretched over her rock, much larger on his ceiling that it should have been.

He was interrupted by a soft tone at the door. He pushed himself up, blearily, and went to the door, peering through the peephole.

"I know you can just open the door, Director," he said, Fury's face distorted and circular in the fisheye of the glass. "And you know I can't."

"Hey, Cap," said Director Fury. He tapped at the door, lightly. "You ready to talk to a therapist?"

"Not really inclined to, Sir," Steve said.

"You watch those slideshows?" He asked.

"Not really inclined to, Sir."

"You know you're making it very hard for me to give you any kind of clearance, here, yeah, Cap?"

"I didn't know that was what was required," said Steve.

"Think about it," said Fury. "Yes, you did. Can I come in?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

The door clicked open, Fury strode in, walked over to the row of still-nearly-full whiskey bottles, untouched since his first visit.

He poured himself two fingers of scotch and sat down, stretching his long legs out in front of himself. "Why won't you watch the slideshows, Cap?"

"How do I know anything on those slides is true?" Steve asked.

Fury chuckled. "Most people would just watch them and get out of quarantine."

"This isn't quarantine," said Steve. "It's prison."

"You want to argue semantics, or do you want to get out?" Fury asked.

"I'm in New York?"

"You're in New York."

"I'll read whatever you want, then. In a library."

Fury laughed, deep and staccato. "Talk to the therapist, and you can go anywhere you want."

"Let me out and I'll talk to your goddamn therapists."

"Cap?" said Fury. "You spent much time in a hospital?"

"Some," said Steve. "When I was a kid, I mean."

Fury swirled his drink.

"One time, and this is a ways back, I did a few weeks' stint in a hospital. You're in this place, it's like a limbo. You stop doing all the everyday things you're used to doing. You get out, everything seems weird. Trains. Grocery stores. Maybe things have moved around a little, maybe there's scaffolding up somewhere it wasn't before."

Steve could see the intake of breath, the way Fury held it for a moment, the exhale.

"It was eerie, Cap," said Fury. "I felt like I didn't know how to be part of the world anymore."

"You're afraid I'm going to have the same problem," said Steve.

"I'm afraid it's going to be worse. We...we don't have any intention of keeping you locked in a box forever. But we want to reintroduce you little by little."

"Yeah?" Steve asked. "And that's why you assigned Bobbi?"

Fury was quiet for a moment. "Agent Morse wasn't assigned to you. Barton was."

"Barton?" Steve asked.

"Her husband."

"Oh."

"You met him?"

"No, he...I thought he was in New Mexico."

"He is. We...reshuffled some things. We'd wanted Morse out there, there's some complications over another lady scientist, thought the two of them might speak the same language. 'Til we realized she's the only person you're talking to. Maybe she speaks a different language than we thought."

Steve felt cold.

"And what, you like the reports you're getting so much you kept her on?"

"She won't tell me a damn thing, Cap. That's how I know you're actually talking."

"It's easy enough for you to say that."

"You know why I'm here right now, Cap? Two weeks, all the woman will tell me is what you fucking *cooked*. This morning, she calls me up, tells me you asked if you were dead."

Steve sat down on the sofa, across from Fury, and realized, belatedly, that he wasn't wearing any clothes apart from his underpants.

"Am I?" he asked.

He stood up again, went to his bedroom, tugged on an undershirt, not that it made much of a difference.

"Is this your idea of Hell?"

"It's nothing," said Steve. "It's just waiting. Purgatory."

"Well, if you want to move on to the afterlife, you're going to have to talk to the doctors."

"Morse is a doctor."

"She's a scientist. Who's having a personal crisis of her own. She needs a friend as badly as you do."

"What happened?" Steve asked.

"That's not my place to say," said Fury.

"He doesn't hit her, does he?"

Fury squinted at the question. "Who?"

"Her husband. The one she's always running away from."

"God, no," said Fury, and Steve felt his shoulders relax, the tension sliding inward, closer to his spine. "I wouldn't keep him on staff. No, they...if it were something like that, it would be easier. The two of 'em are madly in love and make each other miserable."

Steve swallowed and nodded.

"You look like you know the feeling," said Fury.

"No," said Steve. "Not exactly."

"You've been in love?"

"Yeah," said Steve. "Maybe. I think so."

He reached for his pocket before he remembered that his trousers-- and his compass-- were in the other room. He abruptly cut off the awkward motion and rubbed at his thumb instead.

Fury looked at him, long and hard with his one, dark eye.

"She wasn't miserable," he said. "I can guarantee you she was never miserable."

"Yeah?" asked Steve. He rubbed his hands over his face.

"Yeah," said Fury. "She was among friends. She worked with Stark, with your old buddies. She fell in love, got married, had kids. Grandkids."

The corners of Fury's mouth turned up, in a smile. "A couple of 'em even work here."

Steve took a breath. "Yes," he said.

Fury blinked. "What?"

"Yes," said Steve. "I know where you're going with this. The answer is yes. You get me photos, I'll go to your goddamn doctor."

"I'll see what I can do," Fury said, as he cracked a real smile and downed the remaining liquor in his glass.

And when Fury left, Steve picked up the tablet.

He turned it on.

He fell asleep, watching a slideshow about how that guy who had his legs amputated in *King's Row* became President and sold missiles to Iran.

He was certain, in his last thoughts, before he drifted off, that this had to be fake.

"Put these on," Bobbi ordered, the moment she walked in the next day.

Steve was standing at the stove, trying to make a roux that didn't get lumpy or gum up on him. He stopped just long enough to look up that the current incarnation started to brown at the edges.

He sighed and pulled it off the burner, then looked at the large paper shopping bag in Bobbi's arms.

"What's this?" He asked, setting the saucepan full of too-brown roux down on a potholder.

"Clothes," said Bobbi. "Just go put them on."

Steve ran a finger over the smooth black fabric folded at the top of the bag; it was a light but sturdy weave.

"Are you going to tell me what--"

And then he stopped, as Bobbi opened up her own bag and pulled out a pair of shoes. Black and white, patterned like a pair of saddle shoes, with long, elegant heels.

"Just go put them on."

He did as he was told.

There were grey slacks, freshly pressed, a dress shirt of pale blue with the barest of pinstripes and pearl buttons, a tie made of a satiny fabric with a metallic sheen, a blue a few shades darker.

The pants were lower-slung than he was used to, the tie longer and narrower, the collar of the shirt shorter and less pointed, the inseam of the trousers rising higher against his thigh. The silhouette they cut gave him a longer torso, narrower waist and legs. The clothing was worn, but nearly new, a little bit too short in the arms and legs, but not enough to be uncomfortable.

Black dress shoes, that were a tiny bit too small, one heel scuffed, but beautiful leather with long, tapered toes. A matching belt.

And a black jacket with deep purple trim. A SHIELD operative's jacket, black-on-black insignias sewn to the shoulders, the name "BARTON" printed clearly on the breast.

It had a hood.

Steve combed his hair, again, two days in a row, and shrugged on the jacket.

"Hood up," said Bobbi. "Take these."

She held out a pair of dark-tinted glasses; he propped them on his nose.

And then he looked at her.

She was wearing a blue sundress, with a tiny white starburst pattern, that caught her waist and then flared out around her hips. Her shoes, now strapped snugly onto her feet, had impossibly high heels. Her hair was loose, cascading down her back in a spill of golden curls.

"What's going on?" Steve asked.

Bobbi grinned. "I'm taking you on a date."

"Well, Sadie Hawkins, I hate to break it to you, but I'm still in lock-up, here."

Bobbi pulled a smooth, flexible plastic card from her pocket. She handed it over. An unfamiliar face, a muscular blond man, somewhat older than Steve, with a lopsided grin and a black eye, looked back at him, above the line BARTON, CLINTON FRANCIS, and a string of numbers.

"My husband misplaces his ID a lot," Bobbi said. "He's out of town; he won't notice. Hood up," she said.

She tugged a hooded sweatshirt on over her dress, slid her card through the door sensor.

It beeped once, the light flashed green, and Bobbi snickered before holding the door open. "All clear," she said. "Come on."

She ran down the hall, impressively balanced considering her shoes.

Steve shuffled, quickly, after her, popping the hood of Agent Barton's jacket up as he did.

He felt a tingle up his spine, a rush at his back, as he hunched over, face obscured, and watched Bobbi face a completely blank wall.

She eyed the wall for a moment. It appeared to be, like the other walls, entirely smooth, seamless, but she waved a hand along the surface, and a green grid appeared, as if floating in space, entirely formed of light. She tapped in a number, then another, each six digits.

"It's gonna want facial recognition," she hissed, and she pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket--a cut-out photograph of the same man's face as the one on the ID, this time with stitches in his cheek and a bandage on the bridge of his nose. "Suck on the back of this. It'll hold it up."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really?" He asked. "We foil state of the art security by sucking on the back of a photo?"

She snorted. "Yeah, we do. Just cover the edges with your hood, okay?"

"Do I want to know how you know this?"

"Husband," Bobbi replied.

Steve sucked on the back of the photo.

"Hold up your badge," Bobbi instructed.

Steve held up his badge.

The wall vanished.

Bobbi practically dragged him up the emergency staircase ("limited surveillance," she explained), out the back door of the barber shop, and started down the block when Steve pitted his shoes against the pavement and tugged her to a halt.

He squinted up at the sun.

The weather was that temperate, slightly breezy sort that made it hard to tell what time of year it was-- it could have been late March, late September, a particularly cool day in June, though he guessed spring from clothing he saw on passers- by: pastels, light fabrics.

He sucked in a breath and looked up and down the length of the street, paved in fading black asphalt. Traffic lights swung over the nearest intersection, another light, an illuminated white figure, walking, glowed from a post across the street. An unfamiliar scent wafted from the nearest open door: meat, certainly, and beans, and spices he didn't recognize.

"What's that?" Steve asked, nodding at the glass storefront.

"Oh, no," Bobbi answered. "I have an evening planned. An *evening*. We are not getting Chipotle."

"Chip--"

"Mexican. Fast food. Oh, shit, no Mexican food, huh?"

"No, not...fast?" Steve asked. "As opposed to slow food?"

"Yeah, like ah, what would you call it? A lunch counter?"

She stepped into the street, hailed a cab-- a gesture that apparently had not changed.

The cab, though, had: it was all rounded corners, slick glossy finish, a checker motif painted along the side with a geometric effect that made it look as if the checkers were being blown out, broken up, sent spinning. It was topped with a glowing sign--an advertising billboard, Steve realized, for something called "Mamma Mia!"

Bobbi opened the door to the cab. "Steve!" she called with a laugh. "You look like a tourist. Get in."

Steve ducked--he had to duck low--and slid into the cramped back seat of the cab, with its sliding glass between them and the cab-driver, a man with a full beard in a red-gold turban. A bright screen, like the one on his tablet, but larger, featured a man and a woman talking loudly about things to do in New York.

Bobbi reached across him, tapped at the screen, and the voices were silenced.

"Twenty-one West 52nd, please," she instructed the driver.

"You want me to go across--"

"Whatever you want," Bobbi assured him. "You're the driver."

The taxi lurched forward.

He glanced at her. "That's the Twenty-One Club," he observed.

Bobbi shrugged. "I had to look up the Stork Club," she answered. "Turns out it's gone."

Steve looked down, away from her, sucked at his lower lip for a moment, and then watched, eyes glued to the window, as they motored across town. Again, here and there, he thought he caught a glimpse of something familiar, but it was quickly replaced by blank storefronts, brightly-colored cars that reflected the rays of the sun, people on the street wearing such a variety of clothing that some of them looked perfectly ordinary, while others looked like something out of a space-age serial.

And then, creeping up as the view widened with the horizon, he spotted a building he'd recognize anywhere, even if it had been torn from its foundations and planted in a wood, on a mountain, in a foreign city. Enormous windows, lit up from within, the gleaming statue at its pinnacle.

"You okay, Steve?" Bobbi asked, and he felt her hand on his forearm.

"It's just...Grand Central," he said. He coughed a little, realizing that he'd been holding his breath. "It looks the same."

"Yeah," said Bobbi. "It probably looks better inside," she added. "They did a whole bunch of renovations maybe twenty years back, really cleaned up the place. It's gorgeous inside."

"What's that monstrosity?" He asked, craning his neck to look up at a jet black tower that jutted up over the skyline like a claw.

"Stark Tower," Bobbi answered. "It's...not open yet. They just finished construction."

"Stark like Howard? Like his kid?"

"Tony?" Bobbi asked. "Yeah, his building."

"You ever met him?"

"Nah, he's too rich for my blood, anyway."

"Can we..." Steve trailed off.

"Can we what?"

"Go to Chipotle? Whatever that place was?"

"What?"

"I don't want to go to the Twenty-One Club," he said, bowing his head again, worrying his thumbs against one another. "I don't..."

"Chipotle's, like, burritos," Bobbi answered.

"I've never had whatever that is."

Bobbi laughed, a little choked. "I was going to take you out. Fancy dinner, somewhere from your time."

Steve shook his head. "I've been there," he answered. "Back in the USO days. I've never been to Chipotle."

He was quiet for a moment. "And I'm not in my time anymore."

Bobbi frowned. "Fine," she agreed. "But there's somewhere else I want to take you first."

"Sure," he agreed.

"And I had Chipotle for lunch. We're not doing Chipotle. We'll... Something else you've never had. Shawarma?"

"What the hell is shawarma?"

They stopped at the gates to a small, walled patio, littered with aluminum tables and chairs. The brick paving was a latticework of the late afternoon shadows, and bright yellow daffodils grew in shallow stone pots surrounding tall, narrow trees.

Daffodils. Spring. April, maybe.

The walls of the enclosed space spilled over with green, waxy-leaved ivy, and a massive waterfall of a fountain spilled over the back wall, a curtain of water, creating a slow, soft, constant murmur in the background.

Bobbi snatched his hand, tugged him forward, until they were standing on the grey, brick-lined patio.

"You know where we are?" She asked.

He took a breath, looked around, squinted at the door in the southern wall and the painted sign that said "refreshments," even though the door was firmly shut.

"Should I?" Steve asked. "I'm pretty sure I've never been here."

Bobbi chewed her lip. "You know how I said I looked up the Stork Club?"

Steve felt a twinge in the pit of his stomach. "This is it?"

"Yeah," she said, and she pushed her glasses up, eyeing him with furrowed brows. "Is it...you okay, Steve?"

He felt a little of what he had when he'd first woken up. His chest pounded, his head swam, he stumbled back a little.

"I wanted to come here today," he said, quietly. "I thought..."

"Yeah," she said. "I know. Look," she said, and she glanced at the park's only other occupant, a young woman in a green canvas apron, smoking a cigarette while seated along the eastern wall. "If this is too fucked up, we can go somewhere else. But I figured that if you didn't come, you'd regret it."

He nodded. "Yeah," he said. Standing in place, he spun in a circle, looked up at the narrow spindles of the tree trunks that stretched up toward the patch of sky overhead, spun so fast that the sensation would have made him dizzy two-- two?-- years before.

Bobbi stepped back, laughed, stumbled in her enormous heels as one of them caught a gap in the brickwork.

Steve stopped spinning, caught her by the arm and steadied her before she could fall.

She wobbled a little.

"Okay?" Steve asked, as he dropped her arm.

"Yeah," she said, and she caught him in return.

She kissed him.

It took him by surprise, even more than Lorraine had, more than Betsy had. Her lips were soft, the rims of her glasses bumped at his cheeks, and she kissed him gently, feather-light.

He caught at her wrists for a moment before she stepped back, raised an eyebrow at him, consideringly.

He took a breath. "You have a husband," he said, nodding to the gold band she was wearing.

She shrugged. "Ex-husband," she said. "And he'd get it, anyway."

"I'm still in mourning," he replied.

"I know," she answered. "You just look so sad all the time. I'm kind of trying to cheer you up, here."

"Sorry," Steve said.

"It's nothing to be sorry for," Bobbi replied. "Look," she said. "Sit down."

He sat, a little awkwardly, in one of the metal chairs, the legs scraping across the brick, folded his hands together, leaning his elbows against his knees, and squinted up at her, the impression of her lips still fuzzy on his, like a tactile afterimage.

"Yeah?" He asked.

She dragged another chair over to sit across from him, and sat down, holding her purse firmly in her lap.

She toyed with the zipper, fidgety.

"So I Googled the Stork Club," she started, hesitantly.

"You what?"

"Googled."

"Like Barney Google?"

"What? I don't--it's like...a way to look things up. I wanted to take you, and I found out it had been here. But then I started reading stories about the Club and the war, how..."

"The Stork Club boys, yeah?" Steve asked. "Yeah, I remember a lot of them. ...was always good to men in uniform back then."

"Yeah," Bobbi said. "So, I read this story. One Saturday, spring of forty-five, a young lady, a pretty brunette, came into the club alone, said she had a reservation, table for two, under the name Rogers."

Steve took a breath.

"She took her seat, ordered a drink, but her date was late. Ten minutes, then twenty. They asked her if she was okay. She ordered another drink. Half hour went by, forty minutes. They were taking bets in the kitchen, whether she'd been stood up, how long she'd wait."

Steve dropped his head into his hand.

"No, wait," said Bobbi. A dozen roses showed up. No card. The girl's jaw dropped, she said they couldn't be hers. But they'd been told to deliver them to the lady sitting alone, and she was the only one in the place."

"Someone sent her flowers?" Steve asked.

His chest went tight.

"Yeah," said Bobbi. "Ten minutes later, a young man in a uniform saunters in-- black guy--"

"Jones," said Steve.

"Gabe Jones. There are literally no black people in the place, apart from the musicians, but he's in a uniform and decorated, and he says he's with the Rogers party. And by now, everybody's been so eager to see what would happen, nobody hesitated. They took him to his table."

"So you're saying Jonesy horned in on my date?"

Bobbi laughed. "Five minutes later, another guy shows up. Japanese guy this time."

Steve laughed in spite of himself.

"And that had the staff flipping their shit. But he's in US Army duds, and he's got an armful of peonies. And asks for the Rogers reservation. So, what do they do, they send him to the table, the lady jumps out of her seat and embraces him, so they set a place for him. And then--"

"Don't," said Steve. He pursed his lips, rubbed at his temples. "I know. They all showed up, because they knew she'd be there alone."

"Well," said Bobbi. She took off her glasses and cleaned them on the corner of her sweatshirt. "They did. They had to move them to a bigger table. And then finally Howard Stark shows up, with two girls, waves a couple hundred in the air, and asks for a private room-- Steve, you okay?"

Steve realized his shoulders had slumped without him noticing, he'd drawn himself in, wrapped his arms around his waist. "Yeah, I just...give me a minute."

"I'm almost done," said Bobbi. "You wanna hear the end or not?"

"I..." Steve hesitated, looked past Bobbi's shoulders to the fountain cascading in an unbroken wall of water. "Yeah. I guess it's better to know."

"They came back. Every year. Eight PM, the same Saturday every year. Later on, the ones who got married brought their wives. And kids. A lot of really important things happened in that room."

"You might as well tell me," Steve said. He slipped his hand in the pocket of the unfamiliar trousers, found his compass buried there, flipped it open and looked at Peggy's face. "What happened?"

"SHIELD happened," said a familiar, resonant voice, and Steve jerked up at the sound, his chair rattling.

"Sir," he said, clapping the compass shut, clutching it more tightly in his hand.

Fury nodded. "That back room at the Stork Club? That first year? That's where Howard Stark and Peggy Carter, drunk on champagne, first spun up the idea for SHIELD. And the goddamn acronym."

"Morse," he said next, directing his attention at Bobbi. "You're on disciplinary for a week. I'd put you on more for taking a flight risk out without warning or backup and endangering the only living product of the only successful supersoldier serum trials, but this was actually one of your better ideas."

Steve watched as Bobbi let out a sigh of relief, her hands unclenching from fists. "Yes, Director," she replied.

"Now come on," said Fury, nodding back over his shoulder. "Dinnertime."

"Steve wants Chipotle," said Bobbi.

"I don't even know what it--"

Fury laughed, and the sound crackled, echoing off the garden walls. "Not for your first meal out. Come on. I'm buying."

"Yes, sir," said Steve, though he couldn't see how he could refuse.

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