

# BROTHERS

T I M O T H Y D U G A N  
*photos courtesy of margaret carter*

The past is already written. The ink is dry.

HARPERCOLLINS  
*United Kingdom*

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In a particular, non-particular order, here are the chapters:

- A Prologue; by Jim Morita
  - *An Acknowledgement*
- An introduction; figuring it all out
- One; politics and war all in one
- Two; success and failure and rain and dreams
- Three; Mary Fraser and the standing stones
- Four; a covert mission and a mustache
- Five; a tale of one city and a boy and a girl
- Six; the telegrams
- Seven; legends and ghost stories
- Eight; the painting in the dirt
- Nine; the long winter
- Ten; a soldier's farewell
- Eleven; the concept of heaven
- Twelve; the end of the war, the beginning of our lives
- A Goodbye; I've bared my soul
  - *A final resting place*

## A P R O L O G U E

T i m o t h y D u g a n i s a n i d i o t . When I asked him why he was writing these “memoirs” he mumbled off about memories and truths and honoring the men we loved so much we can never forget them. I’ll be honest, in the moment, I was convinced, and then he told me he was writing about the stolen paintings and the Bear Jew and I audibly groaned. What a fucking idiot.

I said, no one wants to read that crap; people want to read about the heroics and the lives we saved and the women we danced with, not about a baseball bat covered in blood and Bear trying to shove a painting into his knapsack beside two cans of spam and a Torah. No one wants to know about the stupid shit we’d get up to—that’s not interesting.

Well, apparently, I was wrong. When I told my daughters what Dum Dum was doing, they were elated. According to them, those were the best stories I ever told. Now, I’m insulted, because I have come up with quite a few fairy tales in my time, but according to my girls, hearing about Steve’s gambling woes and Gabe’s telegrams and the boot sharing program—that’s where the real interest is.

I never knew. And maybe that makes me naïve, but I never knew. I always looked at our lives as commonplace. We lived through every day and things were ordinary even as they

weren’t. Things were the way they always were; we were used to it. I woke up every morning and I trudged through the dirt and I killed Nazis. Didn’t seem grand at the time, doesn’t really seem all that grand right now, but I suppose it is.

So, when I read this—really read it from front to back with all of Button’s guts spilled out onto the pages and his messy scribbles in the margins adding things in—I understood finally why my girls would ask for a story about the Commandos almost every night.

Dum Dum was right. It’s not the glory people want, or the official statements or some bigger than life *idea* of seven men saving the world in secret. People want to know that their heroes laughed—not that they bled, though some people may want to knock us down a peg. The real people, the real, good people, mind you, they just want to connect. They want to hear that Steve Rogers never held a baby right and Jacques Dernier loved Jane Eyre and J. Montgomery Falsworth cheated at poker and Gabe Jones fell in love with his superior officer and J knew how to speak six different languages and Timothy Dugan cried about sunlight and I slept right through an entire battle and didn’t wake up until a pretty girl shook me silly.

People want to know that we were and are and always will be *human*. Just plain human. Just stupid boys who loved each other and loved our country and wanted to go home and be happy. Just stupid boys making it through the day, one foot in front of the other, a smile hiding some sadness, a laugh making the day brighter.

My friend, Timothy Dugan, my idiot friend, he really did something here, and I’m glad that you get to read it. I’m glad you get to see us for who we were, who we are, who we’ll always be.

- *Jean Morita*

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A sad reality must be understood if you are to continue reading this book. I typed it out and put notes in the margins where I wanted to add things. I visited Gabe and Peggy in London and they both read it over. I added more. I made the long trip to Fresno where Jim was recovering from influenza and he read it over as well. He wrote the introduction on the back of a magazine clipping. I added more and more and more. I rested my head in New York for several weeks and drank whiskey with Stark. I added more. I was about to return to Scotland when Daphna Morita called me up. I held Jim's hand in the hospital and I read the additions to him and he laughed. When he closed his eyes for the last time, he said he would tell the boys hello for me and I envied him. I edited the book only one last time, before it went to print. Most of this is written as though he is alive and well, laughing at the stupid shit we used to get up to. He has joined our brothers on the other side; I miss him already.

This is for Jim. This is for Jacques. This is for Montgomery. This is for Steve. This is for J. (This is for Gabe too, but I will tell him that in person.) This is for us. This is for you.

## A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

I used to be an only child. Some people get confused when I tell that to them; how can you used to be something so definite? My Ma and Pa didn't have any other children. It's a strange thing to say and yet it's truer than anything else I've ever said in my sorry life. I used to be shorter and skinnier too. I used to be kinder and keener, but those things are likely to change in a man. I went to war as one person and I came home as another. The biggest change, the one I just started with, is that I used to be an only child. The truth is, I found my brothers on a battlefield.

Someone told me once that I should write my memoirs. "What the fuck are memoirs?" I asked. "The story of your life," that fool said to me. "Where you were born, how you grew up, how it led to the man you are now." Now, that shit don't mean anything, if I'm being honest. I was born on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1912 in Boston, Massachusetts. I grew up hard, scraping together two pennies to help my Ma out around the house when my Pa came back from The War to End All Wars shell-shocked and quieter than I had ever known him to be. Seeing my Pa made me want to end his suffering and the suffering of any man who stuttered when he spoke or forgot what he was doing while he was doing it—so I joined a war myself, put on a uniform and trained and shipped out.

Is that what a memoir should be? I've ticked all the boxes, I've given you the basics. But that's not a good story, now is it? It wouldn't be much of anything if I ended it here.

So, let me start again:

My name is Timothy Aloysius Cadwallader Dugan, and I was born when I became a Howling Commando.

In the beginning, Morita asked me what the point of all this was. We know what we know and that should be enough—I'll tell you now, it isn't, it never will be. I have memories within me that are so beautiful, so painful, that if I don't get them out, I'll die from it. Mary says that's dramatic, and it sure is, but it sure is true as well. I am made of memories. I remember the end as though it were yesterday and the beginning like it's still happening; the middle was a dream I had last night. Some days I don't remember what I had for breakfast but you ask me about September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1943 and I'll tell you right down to the very second what song Falsworth got stuck in my head. In all my 73 years of living, I have never forgotten one detail about the time I spent with my brothers. I know and I know and I know and it kills me keeping it to myself.

The truth is, these memories don't belong to me alone, at least not anymore. I have seen the world grasp at the idea of Captain America and his Howling Commandos. I have seen them assign meaning to the wrong things and side step past the truth. Every now and then I correct someone or call them an idiot or watch Carter tell off reporters and laugh to myself, but it never seems like enough. People want to know what Rogers was like, and Bear too. They want to know what Dernier and Falsworth and Jones and Morita and myself were like before the world forgot about us.

They want to know and I want to tell them. I might as well. No one's around to stop me, really.

The truth is, The Howling Commandos belong to all of us, and I was reminded of that some years ago in a restaurant in Manosque, France.

Mary wanted a vacation and the kids would never turn down an opportunity to soak up the sun and visit their Pa's old stomping grounds. We had been on many of these trips before, when James and Hannah were young, but only one with the grandkids. Carter was graduating college that year and Emily was getting married in the summer and Elise was still trying to figure things out. Don't tell the other two, but I've always liked her the most. She reminded me of myself when I was young—rough around the edges and quiet till someone pushed her buttons; eager to jump into something but unsure where her calling was.

She and I took a walk one afternoon and she seemed happy to escape the wedding talk and the graduation celebrations and just wander around with her grandpa. We wandered far and I was starting to get winded so she suggested we get some lunch. I thought we should have gone back to the hotel but I think she was feeling a little out of sorts and I think she needed some space from the constant questions of what she would do when she was finished high school. Her brother and cousin had already accomplished so much in such a short amount of time, and as life and parents would have it—it was her turn now. She was fed up, and I was hungry so we sat.

We started to talk about the past, because it's always easier than talking about the future. (And if I'm being honest with you, over the years, I've found that talking about the past with my children and grandchildren has helped them sort out

what they might want to do in the future. There's a little bit of grandfatherly advice for you.)

I remember it very clearly, that conversation. We talked about how I followed in my father's footsteps and at first, I regretted it. Being in a war was tough and I didn't think I was strong like my father, didn't think I would make it past a month or two. James was an accountant and Elise couldn't multiply to save her life, so that was out. I told her how I regretted it until I met people who helped make sense of my situation—she had heard this before, but of course, in this context, it was different. "You need to find your people," I explained to her. "The people who bring out the best in you. No one ever knows what they want to be until their friends point out how good they are at something." Elise asked me then, "What were you good at?"

I could have said a lot of things. I was good at killing Nazis, I was good at listening to orders and then doing what my gut told me to, I was good at back talking and cursing and handling a situation with brute force. I said none of these things. At that moment, a woman about Hannah's age walked up to our table, crying. She was the owner of the restaurant, I learned a little later, and when she was a child, I carried her out of a basement and into the morning light. After she had sat down and told my granddaughter about the night we snuck into her town and relieved a few dozen Hydra soldiers from duty, we hugged and she cried some more and gave us lunch on the house. She told me that there are hundreds of people, in that town and around the world, who remember me just as she remembered me. She said that it's a shame more people don't know what our unit did during the war—"Quel dommage!"—and that I should tell them.

So here I am.

Here I am trying to figure it all out; trying to decide what I should say and what I should share and what I should show to the world. Let's start with something simple, something we can all relate to and understand.

Let's start with the simple and sometimes sad fact that after all these years and adventures, I still don't quite know where my home is. One might suggest that home is where my wife is, where my children rest their heads at night, where I wake up and eat my breakfast and enjoy my day. But I don't know. (And before we get any further, you gotta understand that my family takes no offence to me saying such things. They know the man I am and the man I have been and surely, they know the man I am still growing into. They know that I love them but that life is more complicated than the simple idea that love stays still, rooted to the ground, unmoving.)

When we were out there in the cold and the rain, Dernier once wished for home and Falsworth answered back to him that we were already there. It was true, I'll tell you that much, at least the way I once understood it. My idea of home used to be this: if you were there long enough, that was where you lived, that was *home*. Course, now it don't make sense. I've been here longer than I was on any battlefield and I still think the war is home. I got to thinking a while back that maybe home is something you take with you. Not a place, but a feeling, a memory, a meaning. Then I got to thinking that home is who you think of at night. To me, that's Mary and the children and their children too. And I don't know—it's all muddled up sometimes. Home is something you can't define because it has no definition. The way I see it now, the way I've seen it for a while now, is that home is what you truly *want*, where you're constantly running towards.

Everyone's trying to get to something, to somewhere they dreamed up, I swear it. Some people move back into the house they grew up in; others trek across the country. Some find a sense of nostalgia in a new place somehow, like they were meant to be there. For me, the trouble is realizing that what I'm trying to get back to resides in such a specific place in my history that it's impossible to return to it. There are too many variables missing to recreate the feeling; there are too many people missing to complete the scene. If you're like me and you're running towards a memory, you ask yourself a lot of complicated questions. Questions like, how do you go back home when home is a person who's gone? How do you find your way when the map's been torn to shreds and the road is dark and the light has permanently faded?

The sad realization is, you can never go back.

You begin to realize that when you start to put roots down, wherever you may do it. You can never go back to the person you were before, back to that innocence and purity, back to that ignorant bliss. And then—you can never go back to the feeling of being in that place either. It lingers, but it's not the same. No two wars are the same, no two deaths, no two lives, no two loves. You can never go back to the same battlefield because it isn't the same anymore. The blood is gone, the bodies, the burned ground from the fires blazing through the countryside. It's all buried or washed away or forgotten. The memory remains but even that fades from your mind each passing day. You can never go back. You can only visit the parts of your heart where the feeling resides and you can hope it doesn't eat you alive. (I'll tell you right now, hope means nothing in this situation; the memories will consume you.)

I should also say—you *should* never go back.

What happened, happened. Touching the same spot in the snow 40 years later will only remind you of that. You can't change the past. You can only stare at it from a distance, write it down in a book, and share it with the world.

Here it is, the simple truth: I miss my brothers.

I wish I could be eloquent and poetic the way Bear would be if he were the one writing this, but the fact is, he ain't here and I ain't Hemingway. I miss my brothers. One by one, they went away from me and fate won't let me see them just yet so all I can do is pour these memories onto paper and miss them out loud. My home is with my back against Dernier's in a fight; skipping stones with Monty; Morita's tin can soup recipes; Steve's haikus about the weather; harassing jones about Carter; J's arms around me, drunk and crying about the stars. My home is the summer of '44, before things went completely to shit, before the long winter, before the train, the plane, and the poker game—before my brothers one by one took their leave to Aslan's country never to return. One day that magic will take me too and we'll join hands and catch each other up and wait for the end of the world, but until then, I will bleed memories of ink and cry tears of text and remember them.

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I ain't no poet—I am writing this for one reason and one reason alone: I miss my brothers.

## O N E

1944 started with a bang, literally. Steve got shot in the shoulder and Bear killed fourteen Krauts with a pocket knife and a broken collar bone. Carter punched Dernier in the nose for talking back at her and Jones decided he was in love with Stark for getting us new guns. That romance didn't last too long, though. I had gotten a nasty cold in December and trying to sneak up on the enemy was difficult on account of all the sneezing. We damn near froze to death even though our trek through France should have only taken a month—we were frequently stalled and more frequently under attack. Our work in the winter was like this: Carter listened to all the radio chatter and reports from her undercover agents. She told us where to be and who to kill and we did just that. However, information wasn't always reliable or accurate. We'd show up to a weapons factory expecting an army and would encounter an accountant. We'd expect to coast through an area marked safe and we would find ourselves ambushed. Many times, we would be double crossed by said agents and would have to improvise. Once, I had to shave my mustache off and fake an Italian accent.

So, '44 started strong.

We were making our way to Upottery by the spring, catching up with different factions and sending letters home

while we could. It was the most we saw of Stark because he had been testing weapons out for the troops. It was the most we saw of other men, as well. They were all glad as fuck when Captain America came around, but we found out fast that not everyone took to us too kindly. And I understood. See, Steve didn't raise through the ranks like most soldiers. He wasn't promoted to Captain because of his excellence on the field. He was on a tour dancing with USO girls every night until he rescued us from that factory. You all know that story so I won't bother to retell it, but it's important for me to point out that after that, Steve was a Captain, and that was that. I'm not sure if there was paperwork involved or if Phillips just shrugged his shoulders and decided Steve could be in charge, but it didn't matter. Some of the men didn't think that was fair. Some of them didn't think the SSR's science project should have had so much power. Then there was the fact that we were able to go where we wanted, when we wanted, and do what we wanted—or so it seemed. We still followed orders from up top but there were seven of us and thousands of them and they couldn't quite see past the privilege we were given.

They—and I say they loosely; not everyone held these ideals—also couldn't understand how a Jew, a black, an Asian (from Fresno, but it was all the same back then), a French and an Italian soldier became part of such an elite and renowned team; and it was all led by an Irish son of a bitch. Now, I know times have changed, but they haven't actually changed that much. I won't disgrace myself by repeating the slurs that were constantly hurled at us or whispered behind our back. They were numerous and unnecessary and though we threw words right back, and threats, and fists, it never did us any good.

In 1944 and in 1986, people are the same. Some are good and some are rotten and it's hard to tell who's who.

People think they know Steve Rogers. It's been 40 years and people think that a glimpse into his life explains who he truly was. The truth isn't all sunshine and daisies like history and politicians want you to think. It's gritty and gruesome and true. That's the thing about history—it's written by people who often times weren't around. Here's a life lesson for you: history is broken telephone. Even if part of it is true, it's only part of it. It's like being surrounded by mirrors. Everything gets smaller and smaller the more you look at your reflection. You can see forever, you can see everything, but after a while, you realize what you're seeing starts to get distorted. You can't look through a mirror and expect the truth—you have to look at the thing itself, as it is. This book is a mirror, and as well as I recall these memories, we're still playing broken telephone.

Not many people looked at Steve Rogers, I'll tell you that much. People looked at Captain America and thought they were one and the same—I assure you, they are not. I also gotta wonder what people saw when they looked at Cap. A few years ago, I read an article by that lady who got a pie in her face, Anita Bryant. She wrote that America was lacking true heroes like Captain America who would surely denounce the deviant lifestyle of gays and lesbians. She, like many others, are adamant that Captain America be a symbol for their idea of what America should be. I suppose what they never took into consideration was that no matter what their ideal was, Steve had his own version of America in the back of his mind.

It's not in my way to tell stories that don't belong to me, but I can guess what Steve's America looked like. It looked like tenement houses and an Irish mother breaking her back for twelve hours a day in a hospital. It looked like cold winters and hot summers and starving in Brooklyn so others could eat. It

looked like a stolen apple you'd repent for in church and stolen kisses you'd pray to have again. J lived in Brooklyn too, and he'd talk about how you couldn't find work and when you did, they never paid you right but you took it anyway or you wouldn't see another penny for weeks. His brother kept taking in stray cats and giving them milk even though there were six mouths to feed and rent to pay. J's father was a hard man—it was the depression but he didn't have to be so hard—and Steve's father wasn't around. Probably better that way. Probably quieter. Steve's America was getting beat up by kids twice his size because he stuck up for the wrong person. He didn't like bullies, he made that clear quite often. His America is the true America, where immigrants, people of color, gays and lesbians and everyone in between lived together in mutual understanding that they were different and the same all at once.

I remember hearing about Arnold Roth. I met him once, after the war. Steve had told me about him, about how Arnie always picked up for him when the bigger kids came looking for a fight. Arnie was big himself, and he was never afraid to stick up for Steve no matter the reputation it gave him. Anita Bryant can run her filthy fucking mouth all she wants about what she thinks Captain America would do but Steve Rogers was friends with Arnie Roth since he was a child, and Arnie and his husband are some of the finest Americans I have ever met.

We met a lot of gay soldiers and lesbians and people who liked both and people who liked no one. Even met a fellow who expressed that he was a woman who had been born wrong. Steve never treated any of them any different than the rest. If they did a good job, he told them so, and if they made a mistake, he held them accountable for it.

Steve Rogers didn't know shit about command, I will tell you that much, but that boy knew a lot about being a decent and caring human being and that mattered more than anything. I tell you right now—Steve would never denounce anyone based on their sexuality, gender, or the color of their skin. Unless they were a racist, homophobic, bigoted asshole, and then yeah, they'd have a real problem on their hands. Those soldiers who had a problem with our unit—they were the problem, in the end. They didn't think that a mixed unit like ours was worthy of the rank we received. They didn't think that we should represent the Allied forces, especially America. They didn't like that we followed orders from a woman, that we respected and worked alongside the gay community, that we took into consideration the lessons taught to us by our allies of color. We were all fighting the same war, at least I thought we were, but some people were fighting something else as well.

In 1955, Monty got married in London in a small, private ceremony. We all flew out there and helped Peggy decorate the backyard with flowers and balloons and a banner that said Mr. and Mr. Falsworth. In 1969, I met my future daughter-in-law, a young Japanese woman with beautiful eyes and a soft voice. In 1974, I attended the Gay Pride Parade in New York with Howard Stark who, now famously, declared that he was somewhat in love with J. In 1978, I attended Harvey Milk's funeral and marched through Castro Street with my children and grandchildren with candles in our hands and sorrow in our hearts. It is 1986 as I write this, and my granddaughter, Emily, is married to a man from Puerto Rico. My grandson, Carter, is married to a woman from India. My favorite, Elise, recently moved to San Francisco to live with her girlfriend, a lovely young lady who cried when she met our dog and has no idea what a hairbrush is.

This is Steve Rogers' America. We're living it just like we were living it in 1944 and like we'll be living it in 2044. Things change, but they never really change that much.

I apologize for talking politics, but let me explain: You'll learn a lot about us if you continue reading this book. You'll learn about the things we loved and the things we hated. You'll learn about the things we did. You may not like us after you read this or you may love us. I can't be sure and I can't make up your mind for you. Still, it's important to me that you know the kind of people we were and still are right from the get go. I don't want to confuse you about our intentions. We were a group of mixed race and gender and sexuality. We were immigrants and minorities and we supported other immigrants and minorities. We came from different cultures and each had unique perspectives about the world. We supported, and we still support, the disenfranchised, the downtrodden, the people society may not have treated so well because—well, we were those people.

I say we but truth be told, I cannot speak for my brothers. I am a white man from Boston; although I have lived alongside people from different circumstances, I can't understand what their experiences were like. Neither can you. The only thing we can do is support them. So, now you understand where I'm coming from as I write this. If you don't support the people I support, if you don't believe that America is a country built on the backs of those people, then you should put the book down and walk away. If you have hate in your heart for people like my brothers then you need not be here.

I promise I'm finished with my ramblings—let's get back to the real story. Let's get back to how our little band of merry men started hating each other right away.

For a month and a half, our home was a tank and our only job was to go from Point A to Point B. After our escapades in France (I apologize for skipping ahead here, but I will return to 1943 shortly), we were ordered to escort the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to a secure airfield before we were able to branch off on our own again. It was not difficult, I'll tell you in truth. Stark had outfitted the tank and though we were going through heavily occupied territory, the only trouble was when Steve was driving and almost drove us right into a farmhouse or a trench or a fucking river. Turns out the government was good at creating soldiers, but not good at training them. Alright, that's not entirely fair—the government trained him just fine, but they didn't exactly train him in the sparkly new body he had which made it difficult for him to do certain things. He had to relearn how to hold a gun and how to hold his body and how to crawl in the dirt. The USO girls had managed to help him stop hitting his head and bumping into walls but that didn't help much on the field. So, he drove us into a farmhouse and that was when the lessons began.

Falsworth taught him to drive (properly); Morita taught him to smoke; Jones taught him how to read code; Dernier taught him French; I taught him a little more about how the Nazi's fought hand to hand; J taught him all about guns. All about guns. Everything. Steve's training at camp was stalled after science took hold of him. They put him on the tour circuit and didn't think he needed to learn more about actual fighting. We filled in the gaps in our own way. We taught him what the front was actually about. To be fair, our front was different from other soldiers. Our front was an absolute secret.

We learned this after we made it to Point B and saw all those men safely to their brothers and Carter ordered us bathed and shaved. (But more on that later, I promise.)

First: we hated each other.

Steve couldn't drive and Jones snored at night. I caught that cold and ruined a half a dozen opportunities for subtlety by sneezing too loud. Dernier muttered in French while he slept and kicked whoever was closest to him. Falsworth didn't clean up after himself when he ate can after can of fucking spam. For the first little while, my own prejudices about Pearl Harbor, I didn't treat Morita with much kindness and J and I butt heads over it nearly every day. Quarters were close and there were too many people around for us to get any privacy. Another tank followed the company so that the men could safely walk side by side between the two machines. We walked during the day so we could stretch our legs and we prayed for safe passage as much as we prayed for a fight to break up the monotony. The trip should have taken two and a half weeks in good weather but of course, that wasn't the case for us. It was raining hard and cold every day when we left in April and the second tank broke down twice. The men were weary and the new guns Stark gave us were stalling when we needed them to fire. A band of Germans cut us off when we were the most exposed, with one tank in the dust and our best men busy fixing the damn thing. They were all tired and losing heart and we were more or less ambushed until we realized that the German forces weren't as large as we originally thought.

It was meant to be a straight shot to our transport but we were attacked in Montauban and that stalled us another two weeks due to the number of repairs we needed to do and the number of supplies we didn't have. We were already two weeks behind on account of the another, smaller attack that hit us when we were first moving out. My cold was getting worse and in Montauban, Steve got shot in the shoulder.

J was in a fouler mood than he ever had been because of that injury, and you could barely hear yourself breathing over the sound of the two of them arguing about Steve's recklessness. I often wondered how they put up with each other for as long as they did. It seemed like a full-time job for both of them. We had heard stories about Steve long before we met him, and it didn't matter that he was a foot taller than described, not one person was surprised when we learned that he was Bear's Steve—the one who caused him grief in all his stories. You'd think J would be grey from all the stress. So, Steve got shot in the crossfire and J ranted and raved about it for a whole week after. We were getting close to each other's throats again and that put another damper on all our moods. No one wanted to hear them argue over something that was done with; we all just wanted some peace and quiet for once.

We got our men to the airfield and we escorted them safely to the base in Upottery and we did so in silence. We hated each other even more at that point and we couldn't help it much—we had been together for eight months by then and although we had successful missions and had made the army proud with the work that we did and we laughed together and made jokes and drank and smoked shared life stories, we did so out of necessity, not because we wanted to know each other. Looking back on it, maybe we were all too scared to share parts of ourselves; I know I was in fear that I would bare my soul and lose a friend the very same day and never be the same again. I wanted to be mean so when someone died, I didn't miss them too much, and maybe I was too mean sometimes.

So, we landed in England and met up with Stark and Carter again and sat around politely drinking and not talking about how we didn't want to go out on our own again and how we had enjoyed the company of the other men so damn much.

We saw Easy Company safely to Upottery and gazed upon the masses, the mess, the mountain of men waiting with war paint on their determined faces, some of them eager and some of them sick with worry and some of them fresh from training and some of them having forgotten all they learned in the two years prior, and we wanted to join them and march into Normandy and destroy the enemy as we knew we could with Captain America on our side and a thousand men with guns and TNT and grenades and endless ammo and no shortage of reasons to make their country and their president and their commanding officer and their sergeant and their families proud. We went up to Phillips and asked us where he wanted us and you could see the moment his heart sank for us and maybe it broke right in half but he didn't have the words to say it so Peggy spoke for him. "This isn't your fight." I can still hear the words ringing in my ear. This isn't your fight. You aren't needed here. Hundreds of these men will die and you can't die with them. You're too important. It sure as fuck didn't feel that way. We felt low, lower than low. We felt greedy and gross being turned away like this while other men were given no choice but to wade into the ocean of uncertainty and gamble with their lives. We were grappling with death, begging to run into his arms and being denied. We didn't want to die, but we didn't want our friends to die either. We could help, we could protect them, having Steve in the fight would ensure a win. We reasoned, we begged, we fought. We lost. Our mission was to follow the trail left by Schmidt, to haunt his footsteps and creep up behind him and dismantle the factories he built while the allies were preparing for this invasion. We were the cleaning crew, the chimney sweepers, the punished officer whose untucked shirt causes him a week in the mess hall scraping plates clean. No one else saw it this way. To them, we were once again the privileged unit, too

good for battle, too good to die. We were protected from high up, we were untouchable, we were *elite*. They hated us and we hated ourselves even more and we hated Carter and Phillips and anyone else who had a say in it. So, they waited for the fog to clear and made their way to Normandy and we drove away from Upottery sick with ourselves, quiet and scared and secretly hoping we'd be redirected toward the fight. We weren't. We were a thousand miles away when it happened, a thousand miles away and unable to save a single soul. We could hear the attack in our nightmares and see the smoke when we woke, sweating and screaming, and we could remember the faces of all the men we met along the way who were now dead or injured or broken on the inside from what they had seen. We could see it all and nothing too and we tried not to think about it but it killed us little by little as each day progressed.

It was June and the sun was warm and our friends were dead and we were in the middle of a field in England smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey and wishing we were shooting guns at the enemy instead of going to a suit shop to meet Stark. But one thing changed then and I'm glad it did—we stopped hating each other, even a little bit. We no longer held ourselves back from one another, either. We shared everything, we had to. We realized then, after Normandy, that we needed each other. We needed to hold on to each other or we'd get lost in the world, lost in the darkness, and we'd never find our way home again. We would live together and die together too and that had to be okay or we wouldn't make it.

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So, the good summer started, and we went into it with smiles on our faces and heavy hearts for our dearly departed friends and we found ourselves in France again but this time, we loved each other, and that made all the difference.

## T W O

I shouldn't say we hated each other; looking back on that, it seems a little untrue although I did feel it some days. What I should say was we didn't have much love for one another. Until the summer of '44, we were more or less just working together the way you work with a fella in a factory or at an office or in a pub. You get along because you both have to do the work and do it well or it'll come up the chain of command that you've been slacking off and you'll be let go from your position and made a fool of. You get along because you see each other every day and sometimes go for a pint after work to end the day on a good note and maybe your significant others know each other too and your children have played together but if one of you ever lost the job, you'd part ways and exit each other's lives easily without any weeping. That was how we were in '43. We did the job and we had a cup of coffee together and we made conversation and knew each other well enough to get through the day. We had eight months of that and then we had nine months of true, honest friendship, all seven of us, and I regret not taking advantage of the time, but that was the way it worked and I am glad with what I had.

The first mission we ever had was a weapons factory in Bonndorf, too close to the Swiss border to be friendly. It a difficult mission according to all the reports we had been given:

the facility was set up waiting for an official go-ahead to begin tests. It was armed with three hundred soldiers, a couple dozen officers, and two top scientists both with a team of ten men. Not exactly a walk in the park for us, if you ask me. Our mission was surveillance; set up a perimeter and keep an eye on who entered and exited the building, what their patrol would be, what their routines were, everything. Of course, what's on paper and what's right in front of your face are two entirely different things. Carter had gotten the intel from a highly-trusted source, only the source had gotten the dates wrong.

We arrived two weeks before the supplies and the weapons and the entire fucking battalion were even due to make an appearance. All we encountered were the two scientists with their teams and two officers sitting in an office playing poker. To say that we were delighted would be a gross understatement. We were ecstatic; we could barely contain our laughter after Dernier and J had made it back from scoping things out. They watched for a whole day, from a distance, and saw no signs of anything remotely threatening. So, we quickly formed a plan and, drunk on the simplicity of our task, sought to overtake the base on the third day of our surveillance.

It was easy enough: when the officers exited the building for a walk, we quickly relieved them of their weapons and consciousness and then continued inside to secure the scientists with them in a locked room. None of those men fought back, which was good for us and good for them; they were old, most of them, and didn't appear to be good fighters; we were outnumbered and even though we could handle the odds, our elation would have surely deflated if they had countered our attack. They didn't and so our plan continued undeterred. Once all twenty-four men were in our custody, we formulated the rest of our brilliantly stupid plan.

Looking back on it, I'm not sure why the brass didn't order us to find another way, or send some proper supervision (at this point, Steve was just as excited about a somewhat solo mission and we hadn't quite realized that none of us were leading this thing; we were all just throwing out ideas and combining them all, which was not very smart), or at least send in some reinforcements. I suppose they didn't have anyone to spare, but we could have been killed or captured and that would be the end of their Very Important Team that they relied upon so heavily to win the war. I digress—we decided that the seven of us were going to capture the entire battalion. Yes. You read that correctly. We, idiots, decided that seven men were going to outsmart and imprison three hundred soldiers. I tell you, we did it. And I'm almost amazed that we did because it seemed like the stuff out of movies you'd watch at the theatre with a girl on your arm and popcorn passed between the two of you. I swear it wasn't, I swear it happened, and the memory is so fresh in my mind, as I am typing this, Mary is asking why my cheeks are so red and flushed and why I'm smiling like a fool.

There were supposed to be two officers and twenty-two scientists waiting at the factory. Course, the soldiers didn't need to know that. What they needed to know was that two officers would receive them and scientists would instruct them on how to test and use the weapons that had been developed. The soldiers, we all agreed and noted, would all be armed and able. That was a hurdle of its own that we would need to overcome. (Again, this was all surprisingly easy; a coincidence, perhaps, but more likely a miracle.) Bear and I had the best German accents; we posed as the officers. Monty and Dernier acted as the scientists, playing up their accents and pretending to be men of great esteem in their countries, collaborating with the true German cause. Rogers, Morita and Jones waited inside.

I should tell you that we had changed the structure of the entrance somewhat to better suit our plan. We constructed a small passageway that would only fit one man and on the sides crafted metal columns with knobs and lights. Stark laughed on the EE-8 when we asked his advice and said he only wished he could be there to help out. So, J and I positioned ourselves to receive the Hydra soldiers. We practiced our double salute and bit our tongues so we wouldn't laugh. We informed the soldiers that the facility had special requirements and the scientists could better explain what needed to happen before they entered. The men were weary from their travels, hungry and eager to get inside to the quarters to sleep and fill their stomachs. They were to be housed in the barracks at the rear of the building but had to pass by the laboratory for an inspection, we told them. Dernier explained using some bullshit Stark told him to say, that the weapons and metals the soldiers were currently carrying would interfere with the reactors powering the facility. We showed them what would happen if they entered the building with weapons—Falsworth brought a "reactor" out to the far field and placed a soldier's gun on top of it. The chemicals we used to create it reacted with the metal and it immediately exploded, sending bullets ricocheting in every direction. That is how we convinced three hundred men to store their weapons in the utility shed. But we couldn't stop there. We were still only seven men against an entire army. That was why our construction was so necessary. The men had to pass by for an inspection, to ensure no foreign metals entered the building. Monty and I passed through and one by one, J and Jacques ordered the men inside. They all followed and on the other side, waiting patiently for them, were the remaining Commandos, eager to take them to their barracks. In truth, the barracks were at the front, the lab in the back, and we made sure everything was secure.

Three hundred soldiers, two high-ranking Hydra officers, and twenty-two scientists. They were our first prisoners and we fed them and kept them well until we were able to pass them off to our own leaders who would imprison them properly. It was a massive hit to Schmidt's army—to lose so many men after losing the factory in Austria would take its toll immediately. They could create weapons, still, but we were taking the men that would fire them and Schmidt was not at all pleased.

Unfortunately, we would find ourselves unhappy as well. This mission, successful as it was, would ruin everything for us for the immediate future. We had deluded ourselves into thinking that everything would be this easy, had convinced our idle minds that we would be handed victory after victory and would have to work little to gain much. We were happy and humoring ourselves by guessing what our next task would be. Where would they send us? Surely to some town with a small Kraut problem that we could stamp out in a few hours, or else to protect a group of men who didn't need protecting. Maybe we would be asked to do more surveillance on a factory with no inhabitants. We were looking forward to the future.

What a slap in the face we got. And well deserved too.

We had no respect for command and no real sense of responsibility. We were our own bosses at that point and that would do no one any good when we came up against a real threat. We had duped the Krauts into surrendering and had duped ourselves into thinking we were clever and cunning and able to do so again—we sure as fuck were not able to recreate that success, at least not so easily and not on such a grand scale. From them on out, it was beaten into us until we understood fully what it would cost for us to be victorious.

And it would cost a lot. It would cost us our bodies and our minds and our souls as well. There was a price to pay for every success we had. We would always lose something, whether it was a night of good sleep or a warm meal or a hot shower or blood or teeth or the tip of your finger or the nerves in your shoulder from where a bullet cut clean through, you would lose something every time. Every fucking time. We lost and we lost and we lost until we finally won and by then, it didn't feel like winning at all. Each mission after that first one got harder and harder and that was why, by '44, we resented each other the way we did. We fumbled and we failed and we fucked up until Phillips asked us what the fuck we were doing and demanded we come back to England for a face-to-face reprimand.

So, we spent a month doing paperwork in a shitty town that rained the whole time. It was March and the snow had left us but the rain came down hard and cold and miserable. I had that cold and everyone was on each other's nerves because we couldn't get anything right and we were being punished for it by writing reports by hand. The first battle we won felt like a lifetime ago and our joy during those few weeks was long since gone. England was hell even though we were nowhere near the war and no one was shooting at us and we got to sleep in real beds every night. Our every move was being questioned and we needed to seriously reevaluate the inner-workings of our team.

We saw a lot of Carter then, who was more pissed off than anyone that we kept making mistakes and couldn't get our act together. She was probably disappointed, but sometimes Peg would look at you in this way with her jaw set and her eyebrows raised, judging, and even if she wasn't actually angry, you felt the fire from her eyes and you stayed out of her way. She looked at me like that every day and I turned in the other direction; truly, let me side-step here to just say: what a wonder.

Now, I shouldn't say we were a complete failure. We certainly were not. But we were careless and disrespectful and we took risks we shouldn't have; it may have gotten the job done but the recklessness we possessed was unacceptable. I know that now. I should have known it then, but there were so few limits imposed upon us that we felt free, we felt like we could take on the world, and we sure wanted too.

Now we were stuck in England, working off our missteps by getting numb in the fingers. Some days, Phillips had us run drills for the hell of it. We would run up this steep fucking hill in the pouring rain, touch a fucking rock, and run all the way down again. It was a shit time. It was the worst time I have ever had in England. And I love England. Now, I've had good times and I've had bad times but one thing remains true: if you've ever been to England, fuck the rain. I mean that—fuck it. Fuck it on a good day when you have a pint in your hand and fuck it on a bad day when you can barely stand. Fuck it when you're indoors with a dame and fuck it when you're in a trench. It's all the same. (I'm a regular Dr. Seuss).

Fuck it when you're fighting Krauts  
Fuck it when you're passing out  
Fuck it if you're with your friends  
Fuck it but it just won't end  
Fuck it in the morning sun  
Fuck it when it jams your gun  
Fuck it in the afternoon  
Fuck the evening brings monsoons  
Fuck it in the bitter night  
Fuck the rain, fuck it right

Okay, enough of that.

Hell, even Steve once wrote a haiku about it. It went something like this:

What the fuck is this?  
Everything on me is wet.  
This is fucking hell.

We used to say there wasn't a greater pair than Steve Rogers and rain. He'd get so hurt about it and as much as I hated it too, I loved teasing him more. Truth is, that kind of rain seeped into your clothes. You'd feel it long after it was gone. It would be a beautiful day and you'd shiver and miss it. (You should know this, I'll tell you—war is like rain). It gets into your soul and you ache to be rid of it, but when it's gone, you don't know what to do with yourself. 40 years and I'm still fighting a war in some way. 40 years and I'm still in a rain-soaked field, gun in my hand, looking for the next fight. We lived in that rain majority of the time. Lived in that hell and didn't complain. That was our life. That was the life of everyone at that time. We lived in the rain, we died in the rain. When times were tough, we cried in the rain. When we could spare a second or two, we sang and we smiled and we laughed and we loved. But it still crept into our bones. It ruined us. Carter once asked, tongue in cheek, a smile on her face, if we would like umbrellas. Well, that wouldn't be very inconspicuous, so we just got down on our hands and knees and we crept in it like we always had and we ran up and down that hill and we hated it and we loved it all the same.

In late April, we were relieved of our secretarial duties and joined Carter in a town that had lived in the rain same as we had and you could tell by looking at them that their bones were weary and wet. They looked sad and scared and secretive.

I didn't see it right away like Bear had—many of the townspeople were Jewish or Roma, living in poverty on the edge of Southleigh. They were happy and they were starving and even though we were only passing through, the few nights we stayed there reinvigorated my desire to serve in the army and save the world. Maybe that was Carter's purpose for bringing us there. Maybe she wanted us to see why we were fighting; it would make us realize that care was of the utmost importance—the lives we gambled with weren't only our own.

It was there that I realized with surety that I wanted to be a father. All those children clambering at my feet and I picked every single one of them up into my arms and whispered a prayer over them that they would be safe after we had gone. I thought of our failures and our successes and I hoped to God the war wouldn't touch these people and that we could play some part in ensuring it would stay away.

Morita played soccer with some of the young boys and girls and Bear the baby whisperer rocked a little girl in his arms. Ignore all the other stories you hear of him—The Bear Jew and Black Death and The American Devil—he whispered into an infant's ear sweet songs of his childhood and you knew the man was one of God's angels; plucked from Heaven to smite the sinners and sing to future saints. He held a crying baby and they cooed in his arms, curled up and sleeping fast as they were to weep. Lord—and then there was Steve, Baby himself and not a way with one of them. If you wanted a child to cry, you gave it to Steve. If you wanted wailing and kicking and fussing, you let him near. He almost dropped a kid on her head once, claimed she was wiggling too much.

Truth was, he was nervous, new, a child still growing.

I wish he could have had kids—it would have been a sight: Steve crying in a corner because his baby wouldn't calm and Bear would rush in and rock it in his arms and save the way.

In this daydream of mine, we are all at home safe and sound and home is a rain-soaked Brooklyn skyline. It is a Sunday afternoon. Wives are in the yard, having a glass of wine, watching the sun slowly disappear; husbands are playing catch with young daughters and teaching whoever will listen how to grill a burger to perfection. The sun is orange and pink in the distance and the porch light is on. Steve is wishing his child would take to him and we're all laughing, reminding him that babies never were his area of expertise. One by one, we drift off to sleep or retire to the den to play cards and put the kids in their beds for the night. (Like our real tradition, this is the week we spend all in one place holding onto each other for another year longer). I imagine my eldest is on my lap looking up at the stars. Dernier is scooping ice cream for the boys who want to stay up late with their Papas. Mary and Peggy are stretched out on the couch watching a film. Stark has little Tony bouncing on his knee as they look for something to take apart; Bear's passed out with a little Rogers in his arms dreaming that this were real.

If only.

I could write another whole book on my dreams, my wishes, my wants. That would be the fiction, I'm afraid—that would be the sad tale that will never come true. Maybe it happened, someplace else. Maybe it's happening right now. In some other universe, some other plane of existence.

They had their happy ending, one way or another.

I read *Frankenstein* in a foxhole in France. By that time, I had seen enough of war and I felt more like the creature, the wretch, that was brought to life by an arrogant school boy with no respect for humanity, no respect for the natural order of things, who just wanted to play God. I had seen so much death and pain and seen so many friends walk away with a smile on their face that would never reappear and I wondered how a world could exist where that happened and where children were slaughtered and where mothers and fathers and daughters and sons never saw each other again. I wondered on that, sitting in that foxhole, freezing my toes off, and I thought back to that town in Southleigh and I thought of how lucky we were to have seen it when we did, before we were destroyed by the killing and the dying and day after day of gunfire and grenades. I thought about how Bear played with that baby girl and how we had been so arrogant and careless with so many lives simply because we didn't understand what we had gotten ourselves into. In France, I was the creature; in that town, we had all been *Frankenstein*.

Ain't nothing wrong with that—everyone fucks up, everyone learns from their mistakes, everyone grows and gets older and wiser and better. We were young and wild and we lacked direction and we suffered because of it. This is already a sad story so I promise, I won't dwell on it if you won't either. I'll move ahead and tell you about the good times and the laughter and how we stole paintings and killed Krauts and everyone was happy and no one thought about dying or that we wouldn't make it home or that we wouldn't be without each other.

If I had known then what I know now, I would have been a different person altogether. We needed to fail, only then could we appreciate the success that came to us and appreciate each other and appreciate the lives that we were able to live, even for a short while.

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“Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death—a state which I feared yet did not understand.”

## T H R E E

When you love someone, I mean really, truly love someone, you tolerate just about any kind of stupidity they throw at you. When you love someone, really, truly, madly, the way I've seen people love each other, the word tolerate doesn't even factor into it; you adore their stupidity, you long for it, you can't get enough of it.

I met Mary on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1944, and the first thing she did was slap me across the face.

I should explain: we were fresh from a success in the Danish Straits. Miss Union Jack herself managed to intercept communications between Zola and Schmidt about a castle they were inhabiting with a small band of Hydra soldiers. Schmidt hadn't been present until a few short days before we arrived and stormed the place, destroyed an exo-skeleton suit and an armored vehicle Zola had created, and escaped with precious moments to spare. That all sounds simple and quick and Jones has informed me that I skimmed over a lot of important details, but in my opinion those are battle details that are not as important as personal details, of which I have spared none and intend on sharing with you as often as they come up; please remember, they will come up often as this is a personal story and Jones is an old idiot.

Anyway, as keen as we were to kill Krauts and dismantle Schmidt's operation, one base at a time, it was difficult to do so when Hydra was creating suits that could move on their own and guns that could fire without a trigger man and they weren't the least bit sorry if they blew up their own facilities as long as they took some of us down with them. Originally, it was just the seven of us meant to take the castle, but Carter thought we needed extra hands, so she set us up with a couple lads: Sam Sawyer, Percy Pinkerton and Jonathan Juniper. We joked that they were starting a superhero group, the way their names were, the way the comics would name their characters. Happy, Pinky, and Junior accompanied us to Denmark and together, we took the Hydra soldiers into custody and escaped while Steve slowed some device from exploding. The castle went down and Schmidt managed to escape our grasp yet again. Success and defeat rolled into one.

We had been benched for a month and finally, we were victorious—despite the obvious setback. We lost the castle, lost any chance of Stark understanding what they were creating there, and lost Schmidt yet again. Junior got hit with a ricochet, Happy suffered a shoulder wound, and Dernier had a broken nose. But we won, all the same, and I was happy to brag about it. I was bragging when we made it to the town of Maastricht in the Netherlands; an odd place to call safe considering it was actually under German occupation at the time of our arrival. On the road we took there, we found many of the houses were in ruins and once we were situated, we stayed with a family whose relatives had been bombed out of their home in Liège. It wasn't the most ideal place to lay our heads, but we did as we were told and set ourselves up and Steve and J thatched the roof and Morita and I fixed the leaky pipes and we lived there for only a week but it was nice and comforting and it felt something like Boston at night.

The family we stayed with were Yancy and Theodora Wehrens and their four children and Yancy's sister who had two children and a husband who had passed the year before. We figured we could make their lives a little easier while we snored on their floors and ate their food and argued about who was taking watch lest the NSDAP return to the town and discover that the Dutch resistance had managed to take it back from their hold and now Captain America and his merry band of idiots was resisting with them.

Mary was a nurse far from home when we got there, and she had been stationed just outside of Maastricht but was called in by Peg herself because no one else had tended wounds from Hydra weapons and Junior's leg looked like it might get infected, but we weren't sure from what because we had cleaned and cared for that sucker and he had only had it for half a day. So, here I was bragging that we were winners, and our new friend was writhing in pain, telling us how he was heating up from the inside despite a fever and how we should take the leg despite any obvious signs it needed amputation. He was in the house when Mary came and I was smoking a cigar, telling Dernier that it was just a scratch and he shouldn't be such an infant when she slapped me so hard across the face, I swear I saw the past, present and future all at once and I tell you, it all looked bleak.

It looked bleak because Yancy started laughing and rattling on in Dutch and Mary started cussing me out in some language I didn't understand with stars and birds circling my head the way they do in cartoons. (It turns out, she was speaking English but her accent was, and still is, so thick that it took several dumbfounded minutes for me to realize it, and it took Theodora another few awestruck minutes to translate Mary's verbal beating.) She didn't like how flippant I was, she didn't like that I didn't trust my fellow soldier's word, and she didn't like

that I was bragging about having won something when I was about to lose something all in one day.

She was right then and she's still right now, every time.

Junior would have died if not for Mary, and I would have been sorry as hell and stupider still for not listening to him. The Hydra scientists in the castle were using specially designed weapons that delivered a toxin when they made contact; it wouldn't show up on the skin, but it would get into the bloodstream, destroy you from the inside out. Mary saw to it quickly and I collected myself and saw to it that I apologize—to her and Junior as well. I apologized every day that week even though she wouldn't hear any of it. I apologized in the morning and at lunch time and in the evening after supper. We all ate together in the Wehrens' backyard at a long table and I sat across from Mary each night and poured her wine and passed her bread and cheese and apologized and every night and narrowed her eyes at me and scoffed and I lived for it.

When I was fourteen years old, I had my first taste of love. Etta Hatherly was six years older than me and she used to sun bathe outside with no shirt on. I tell you, I spent every day that summer looking at the freckles on her back, counting myself lucky that I could see them at all. That ain't nothing compared to sitting across from Mary watching her hate me more and more with each passing day.

On our last night in Maastricht, I found her by the water, smoking a cigarette, looking up at the night sky. She permitted me to stand with her for a while and then asked if I wanted to go for a walk. It had rained that afternoon and the fog was still heavy in the air and the water was dirty and grey and I had never felt so pure before in my whole life.

Mary told me I should write her, and apologize in every letter and that maybe she would find it in her heart to forgive my immaturity and that maybe we could be friends one day. She said that she would leave the next morning as well, back home to Broch Tuarach, to see her sister and her brother and to wait out the war in an office, typing letters for dead soldier's families. She said she would only forgive me if I lived and visited her one day and made my final apology in person. Mary said, and I remember the way she said it too, all quiet and smiling like the Cheshire cat, with a dart between her lips, staring at me with those beautiful brown eyes, she said, "I will never type your name, I swear it, Timothy Dugan, and if I ever have to, I will refuse." Since that night and to this day, any letter she ever wrote me was addressed from Mary Fraser, to her Button.

And I'll tell you one more thing, before I move on to other adventures and more explanations and musings of a sad man—I love my brothers, but the greatest adventure of my life has been being in the presence of my darling wife, my beautiful Mary Elizabeth Fraser-Dugan.

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If you've been to Scotland, you've heard about faeries.

On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1948, a woman was found wandering the road after being missing for two years. The headline read "Kidnapped by the Fairies?" It was such big news and I was in Lallybroch at the time so Mary and I travelled to Inverness to see the stones and the press and wonder about the woman and her family who were conveniently mum about the ordeal, as one would expect, and apparently traveled to America shortly after. I thought about that quite often after the fact, however, because in Inverness, I heard J's voice speak to me, and it started me on a path that took me these forty years to walk.

It was late at night and Mary was sleeping—we had rented a room for the weekend and drank far too much wine and had almost entirely incapacitated ourselves with drinking and dancing. Mary had, at least, and I was restless. We weren't married just yet, but I had a ring in my pocket that I had been carrying with me for a whole year and a half and I was waiting on the right time to make a fool of myself. (When I finally proposed, she thought I was joking and slapped me in the face again.) So, I walked back to the standing stones at Craigh na Dun and was musing about how to ask Mary for her hand when I heard voices on the wind. I was drunk and still thinking about

the woman and the faeries and I laughed to myself about it some until I heard it again, more distinctly. I called it a ghost later on, when I described it to Mary, and perhaps she thought I was afraid of it, but I wasn't. I called it a ghost because it felt familiar. I closed my eyes and listened and I could hear Bear as though he was standing right beside me. He said, "It's cold, Button." He said, "They found me first." He said, "I'm all right now."

I will never forget the sound of his voice; I will never forget the way he laughed and the way he cried and the way he said my name—Button, or Tim, or Dum Dum, didn't matter. I remember it like it was yesterday. I hear it every day. I don't know what I heard standing at those stones but I'm sure it was him, one way or another, speaking to me. Maybe the faeries found him too, and he was trying to tell me. Don't know of any faeries in those mountains, but just to be sure, on my 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday, I traveled back up to that same spot and walked along those train tracks—the train doesn't pass by that way anymore—and I thought about that day. Then I walked to the bottom again and down to where he could have fallen—could have landed, I mean. I had lived twice as long as he did and still couldn't offer no closure. What did I think? That I would get down there and his body would be at the bottom, eyes closed like he was sleeping, like it had just happened and it was 1945 again and we were searching with tears in our eyes. Did I think he would be alive, waiting for me, cold, surrounded by creatures of the forest, smoking a cigarette, asking why it took me so long? What a fool I am. What a fool I've always been. I think about Craigh na Dun a lot and how I heard his voice and how I should have ended my search for him right then and there, but it just didn't feel right and I still can't explain it. I've looked for J in every city I ever stepped foot in and every small town I ever passed through and every new friend I ever made and every star I ever saw.

If you've ever been close to death—real close, close enough to embrace her—you know that your life doesn't flash before your eyes like they tell you it does; your dreams do.

The first time I almost died, I saw Mary. What a sight to see so close to what I thought was going to be the end. If she was the last thing I laid my eyes upon before I went into that great unknown, well, I'd consider myself a lucky man. That was the spring of '44 when a bomb tore through the Wehrens house while everyone was down at the train station saying goodbye to the nurses and we were all packing up to return to England. Falsworth and I were in the house when the Germans attacked and I was blown right to the back of it while Monty was caught under an armoire that squeaked. I saw Mary in a white dress and the fellas throwing rice in the air and I thought for sure, that was the end, but death didn't take me that day. In '45 when our keep turned over and I blacked out for thirteen minutes, I saw Steve and J, alive and well, helping me out of the wreck. And in '82, when my heart decided to give me another scare, I dreamed that the war had been won by the nine of us—no friend left behind, just nine fools around a hospital bed telling Rogers off for being so overdramatic.

My dreams are a cruel joke and I am a masochist. I have memorized every one. Truth is, every dream is something that already happened, I'm just still longing for the reminder; I'm living in the past.

If you're reading this, and at this point, I think I can say with confidence that you're not likely to put the book down; if you're reading this, don't live in the past. I have spent my whole life looking back and although I cannot honestly say I regret it, because I don't, I can admit that I have taken for granted the beautiful life in front of me and I don't want that for you.

Remembering is one thing but living there?—where you can never return? It's best to leave it alone.

(I've gotten sober and I said some time ago that I would like to avoid that. Every now and then, I ask Mary or Hannah to read over what I've typed and if either of them start crying, I think shit, I better shift gears; alternatively, if James reads something and starts to cry, I think shit I better continue.)

I never wondered or worried about how I got so lucky. The answer was in front of me every damn day. Truth is—all of us would have died in that factory in Austria, one way or another. They kept taking men off to other rooms to poke 'em with needles or torture them for information or just kill them out of sight to avoid a riot. The ones that didn't die on their tables died in their sleep after they had been returned to the cells. At least there was a kindness in going like that. And then there was us, the worker bees. I saw so many friends fall dead of exhaustion, dehydration; they weren't starving us, but it sure was close. They'd shoot a man for disobeying orders and shoot him again for getting blood on their uniform. Bear already had pneumonia and half of us were sick with something, so, it didn't matter what we did, we knew we were gonna die in there. But then we didn't. Then Captain America himself came and rescued us and I ain't bragging, I ain't pretending I'm special and no one who was holed up in that place waiting to die should be pretending either. We would have died in there, but Steve Rogers was so determined, so thick headed, that he would do anything to save—well, you ought to know who by now. Ain't no secret. That man would do anything for J. They were best friends, brothers; Steve loved J more than any other person in the whole world. He's the only reason any of us lived another day.

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I read somewhere that love is a bridge. Steve loved J so much that he saved all our lives and that, in turn, made us love him. Mary loved the Beatles and for some reason, that made me love them too because I saw the way her eyes would light up when their songs would come on the radio and she'd tug me up to dance and there was no way in the world I couldn't love that feeling. Dernier's wife loves cats and I have never seen him even care for one before but that thing will sit in his lap every day and purr and he'll scratch under its ears till it falls asleep. Jones used to hate writing telegrams and lugging the phone box everywhere and having to decipher all the codes and gibberish, until he started talking to Peggy and fell in love with her voice and her corny jokes and her smile; he said he could hear it over the phone sometimes so he wanted to answer every call that came our way just for the chance to speak to her. People love things all the time and through that love, they learn about other things, and have new experiences, and see the world in a way they didn't before; all because of love. People love their children so they take them to Disneyland and feel like children again and they're happy.

Love is a bridge. Don't ever forget it.

## F O U R

After Maastricht, we had plans to set up in Étretat but that all got blown to hell and we ended up in a shitty situation in Bellegarde-sur-Valserine—sitting like ducks waiting around for the Nazi party to knock down our door. We were essentially waiting for orders and orders refused to come. It was in that time that we learned the strangest things about each other, some of which are secrets I will take to my grave and others I will freely share because the world needs to know that on a nightly basis, Dernier would close his eyes and open to a new page of Jane Eyre in his mind; he had read it so many times over the years that he practically had it memorized and could, and would, at random recite great passages from his favorite chapters. I should say, every chapter was his favorite and he seemed to have a passage for every situation we were in and would let us know it in an annoyingly prompt fashion. It was there that we met Nancy Wake in passing and Bear nearly cried himself to sleep that night because she barely looked at him. She wasn't impressed with any of us, and Jacques lamented on it through the words of Charlotte Brontë and I swear to God, we all thought of a dozen different ways to kill him.

It was there that we also learned about Bear's family and I certainly didn't envy him shouldering so much responsibility, but I did feel a pang of guilt that I never listened to a word he

said (even though he was right most of the time) on account of my wanting to be in charge even though Steve was in charge. In those early days, I didn't think it was all too fair that J was second in command, and I thought it had everything to do with him being Steve's best friend and overlooked his obvious proficiency in the field. (I should give myself *some* credit here: I listened to him mostly, and I trusted him enough, but I was sore about not calling any shots, as I'm sure the other lads were at some times, too.) We started learning about each other in a way that we didn't necessarily want to, if I'm being honest; we learned who was best to be on watch with and who would chat a little too much, and who was likeliest to eat all our rations, and who enjoyed the sauce a little too much on a weekend pass, and we especially learned why Jones had suddenly stopped hating all the calls we received and why he was so keen to head up our end of communications. We learned about Steve, mostly, because he was eager to get us to like him more, and later talks with Bear would explain that neither one of them had many friends besides each other; Steve was always picked on and Bear always stuck up for him—in earlier years, that made them social outcasts, though in the years leading up to the war, they had their own circle of acquaintances who didn't bother with childish misgivings.

We also learned about Monty in that time, when we chanced a trip to a local pub and he paid more attention to a fellow soldier than the girls in the town who we had all been eyeing. I had my heart set on Mary, and in the letters I sent her during that time, I remember distinctly telling her about how I charmed a girl on Jim's behalf, wanting nothing else than to see her again. I was trying to make an impression, really. And the town left its impression on me, as well. It was there that we started seeing other soldiers more frequently, and there where we got our assignment to escort the 101<sup>st</sup>.

That was where it began: in a pub in Bellegarde-sur-Valserine, where it was still cold from the winter and the rain froze your toes. Despite the presence of the NSDAP, the French Resistance had plastered Captain America posters all over the town, and by the time we were ready to leave, each of them had a funny mustache and devil horns. We met with some of the 101<sup>st</sup>, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, and the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, many of whom were with us in Austria. We got around those men and cramped ourselves into our tank and battled through Montauban and made it to La Bastide-Clairence and by that time, we were so sick of each other, we were all willing to parachute into Normandy despite not being trained for that sort of mission. We were denied, as I've told you, and we sunk away from Upottery and our friends with our hearts heavy and our heads noisy and a new appreciation and understanding that we were on our own with each other and we needed to make that situation work, come hell or high water or Hitler himself.

We stayed in a villa in Dawlish after we met with Carter and Stark to go over our new mission parameters: the infiltration of a theatre during opening night of a Nazi film. You've heard the story, I'm sure—it's been told so many times with so many variations I can't even remember what really happened. Peggy tells it well, because she put together all the mission reports and went over that paperwork so many times, I'm sure she was sick of it by the end even though I know it greatly amused her. Hell, even Howard's retold it a few dozen times only in his versions, he's always the one who saves the day. Jacques tells it one way and Morita another and Jones remembers too few details and Falsworth too many and over the years, we've all told some version of it that clashes with the actual event. If J were here, he would probably know best, but I'll try.

It was the middle of June and we were just starting to get warm again. The nights weren't as brisk as they had been in April nor as wet as they were in May. Winter was no longer clinging to the air and we were free to roam around the villa while we prepared for the mission. Roam may not be the appropriate word considering we were only given three days to prepare, but it was more than we had been given the whole time we were in the field, so it felt like a necessary holiday and we took to spending most of the day outdoors, basking in the sunlight and smoking in the gardens. Our task was split into three groups with myself, Falsworth and J together meeting an undercover agent and two soldiers; Morita, Jones and Dernier were going to a nearby building for surveillance and backup, and Rogers was accompanying Carter to a party. Josephine Baker had returned from Cairo for a short period of time to meet with several contacts who claimed to have information about Hydra, particularly what Schmidt and Zola were up to. We hadn't completely lost their trail, but it was faint, and Carter had exhausted most of her field agents when Baker approached her about a growing rumor. Unsure about how to meet discreetly, Carter came up with the plan to attend one of Zouzou's (that was her code name while we knew her) parties with Steve and claim it was a recruiting ploy to mingle with celebrities and dress fancy and drink lots of alcohol.

Unfortunately for him, Steve wasn't all too involved in missions like this one, and we had quite a few after this success in Paris. We should have been resentful, and I often wonder why we weren't, that he was across town dancing with Peggy and meeting celebrities and we were risking our necks to kill some Germans, but for some reason, the thrill of this mission was enough for us that we didn't even consider the danger and instead dove head first into it with great enthusiasm.

Peggy even had to tell us off for being a little overzealous, but none of us argued, and none of us were sorry. So, while I regale you with this tale, I must admit and am sorry to say, I can't recount the events of Steve's weekend. Like I said, he was at a party, no doubt chatting it up with some pretty actresses and musicians, and we were getting shot at, but regardless, our weekend was spectacular.

I have to interrupt myself for a brief moment to explain a few things. (You see, Mary has just been reading over this chapter and has rolled her eyes several times, so I'm adding to clarify.) I can imagine what you must think about us by now; I realize how we must sound, how *I* must sound. Like an idiot reliving his glory days and exaggerating the pleasantries. All I've told you are the big events, the stuff that made it into the history books and newspapers and turned from casual conversation to myth to legend. I've told you about all the great adventures and spaced them out so it must seem as though we were waiting around in a posh hotel room waiting for a fight and were only called on when we were needed. I assure you, that is not the case. We did our time in trenches and foxholes, digging through the mud and crawling in it too. The problem is that I'm scared and sad and I'm trying to be brave. These big adventures—I'm tired of them. They feel like they happened to someone else and I'm only recalling the memory as they told it to me. So many people are part of them now, and that has become our legacy. When James was in high school, his text book had an entire chapter titled "The Big Events: History's Heroes, Captain America and his Howling Commandos" that covered most of what I've told you so far. I'm just adding my own details, free of academics. It takes a lot more effort to tell you about the quiet moments—the ones that break my heart.

I remember then like they happened this morning, and I'm telling this story in chronological order, in my own sort of way. I promise, I'll get to those moments soon. First, in the light of the moon on a beautiful night in June, I shaved my mustache and put on a Nazi uniform and we set out.

My German was on par with Monty's but Bear's was remarkable, honest to God, a thing of beauty. I need both hands to count the languages J spoke with no accent, like he had been born with the words in his head and didn't need to learn anything at all—English, German, French, Yiddish, a little Dutch if I recall, Irish on account of how much he had picked up from Mrs. Rogers, and of course, Italian. Languages came easy to him, and it was his job to communicate with the agent we were meeting, since her English wasn't the best and we needed to be as discreet as possible. We met in a tavern on the edge of town and kept it as casual as possible: just a few proud Nazi soldiers on the town with a beautiful blond. She came accompanied with two other undercovers, two British soldiers who were personal friends of Peg's. The first soldier acted as the woman's companion, and we acted as though we wanted nothing more than a pint of beer and friendly conversation, which is exactly what we intended on having. Of course, I could ramble on about the best laid plans of mice and men and you could predict where this is all going and you can close the book and pretend no one got shot, but someone got shot so I better hurry it up and explain.

According to their intel, A Nazi propaganda film was being premiered at a local theatre. Because of the nature of the film and the press it would bring, many high-ranking officials (both NSDAP and Hydra) would be in attendance. There were six of us, and we never even got to the exchange of information

we so desperately needed—the location of the theatre—because an *actual* group of Nazi soldiers walked into the tavern and decided to celebrate something or another while we were still there conducting our business. You can see how this could be problematic. We needed privacy and they were curious about us, wondered where we had come from, what company we were in, why none of them knew any of us. We had answers, of course, we had prepared for this, but we didn't want to draw attention to ourselves, so J and the British soldier did the talking and we assumed everything would be okay and we could go about our business, finish our beverages, and be on our way. The agent was uneasy and I could feel her leg shaking under the table beside mine, but there was nothing to be done about it. A Nazi officer had approached our table and sat down, inquiring about our travels and our guest. The German we were with finally spoke up, revealing her identity: she was a moderately famous actress, and he had hoped that was enough information to gain our privacy back. It wasn't.

I can't tell you who shot first, but I can tell you that the officer was on his way away from our table when he suggested we buy him a drink and one for Bear, who he had apparently taken a liking to, and one for the actress. The British soldier, a handsome man with a wide smile, motioned to the bartender for three drinks and the officer immediately reacted. Luckily for us, Monty's finger had been on the trigger of his pistol since the officer sat down, J was always quick to the draw, and I turned the table over in time to shield us from the onslaught of bullets that came from the Nazis. To make a long story short, our British friends weren't as lucky as we were, Jones and Dernier busted down the door and rounded up the remaining Nazis, and our actress friend had a bullet in her leg that Morita bandaged up.

And that was only the beginning.

If you've heard this story, you know that it continues like this: Because the British soldiers were supposed to pose as Italians with the actress to gain access to the film premiere, and they were now dead, we had to think on our feet. I won't even sugar coat it and tell you that we drew short straws. Gabe is black and Jim's from Fresno and neither one of them look very Italian. Dernier was in charge of explosives and we needed him behind the scenes, so J, Falsworth and I finally realized why Stark had us all fitted for suits even though Steve was the only one going to parties—never say the United States government doesn't think of everything, or at least Peggy Carter does.

I recall Bear telling us since he spoke the most Italian, he would do all the talking, and then greeting some Nazi stiff with the most unconvincing, American buongiorno I had ever heard in my whole life in the middle of a Saturday evening. I couldn't even be embarrassed, I was too busy telling the guy my name was Alfredo. Lucky for us, he wasn't anyone important, and we were able to go on with the rest of our mission. Peggy's telling me that this information is still highly classified, but I can't rightly see why. Most everyone knows what happened that night and those who don't know the details at least know the gist of it:

We blew the building up.

Later, in the news, it was reported as a gas leak, and the Germans hushed it up and didn't dare mention that it was a such an important premiere. They didn't report how many aristocrats were in attendance or how many Nazis or how many soldiers. They didn't report how many celebrities we killed that night or how that would affect their recruitments. While Steve was across town dancing with Zouzou and Peggy and Howard, we blew up a theatre full of people and didn't feel bad about it.

Maybe I'll break a few hearts when I say this, or else burst a few bubbles: Steve Rogers killed people. He killed them with guns and with fire, with his shield, with his bare hands. Steve fought and he battled and he came out bloody. His hands were as dirty as the rest of ours and at the end of the day, it didn't matter, nothing mattered. Didn't matter if a man had a wife or a child or an army waiting for him at home. If he had a gun pointed in a direction it shouldn't have been pointed at, Steve killed him, and that was the end of it. We compromised—sometimes in ways that made us not sleep so well, but we did it so that people could be free.

This reminds me of a time when we were discreetly passing through a German town and were forced to stay the week to resupply. They didn't know we were soldiers, but they knew we were Americans. We claimed to be scientists working with the German army, but they must have seen through us. Not enough that they called the NSDAP on us, but enough that they spat in the streets when we passed them. In those days, the Germans in that town knew one thing and one thing only: Hitler. They knew Hitler was right, Hitler was almighty, Hitler was God under their roofs and in their churches and to their children. People embroidered swastikas on their clothes and marched proudly through the streets and when the soldiers brought Jews through from the work camps, they watched like they were at the zoo and the animals were putting on a parade. They watched as starving men and women and sometimes children were whipped for walking too slowly and they did next to nothing. They didn't seem hateful or racist, not the way you see sometimes now when there are riots in the streets, like with Arthur McDuffie or what happened in Lawrence. But here's the thing: those are the people you have to watch for. The indifferent. The people who don't do anything good and stand silent while others do everything bad.

Those people were content to let Jews be dragged into work camps and then concentration camps and then to their deaths. They let it happen as long as they didn't have to follow.

I hated them. I hate them still.

Those were the kind of people in the theatre that night. Steve was mad as hell when we reported back to him—according to him, we should have singled out the Nazis and the scientists or taken them prisoner, and I remember J arguing with him over it for days afterwards. Those people may not have killed, they may not have held a weapon or wounded anyone, but they still had blood on their hands. They were still supporting a broken system that put their own people at risk and if Steve didn't see that then maybe he wasn't fighting the same war as us.

J saw things differently, I know that, and he felt things more intensely than we did at the time. In the end, what happened, happened, what was done was done, and we couldn't go back and change things. You learn quickly in war: the past is just something that's over. We blew up the theatre and that was the end of it and the beginning as well.

Sometimes I have to stop and wonder. how do you live with yourself after that? Maybe you've done some fucked up things in your life too and yet you wake up every day and live with yourself. How? I'm still trying to make sense of why I'm here and some people ain't. I'm still trying to understand my luck. I'm not a good person—none of us are. I'm the monster in someone else's story. I'm the ghost that haunts someone else's dreams. I've been told I'm a hero, but the blood on my hands tell a different tale. I'm still here wondering how I can look myself in the mirror after all the men I've killed. Truthfully, it was easy. It was easy for all of us. You need to understand something if you're going to continue reading: we did what we had to.

Carter gave us a place and a name and we did our job because it needed to be done. Nazi scientists needed to be killed or they would continue developing weapons and testing them out on children; Nazi soldiers needed to be killed because they would continue rounding people up into work camps and beating them to death; Nazis needed to be killed because they would continue to destroy the world we lived in and they would leave nothing in their wake of ruin and wreckage. The Howling Commandos killed for hire and for hope and for home, and we were proud of it.

After the theatre in Paris, we gave our reports and Peggy scolded us and we were nursing bruises that we had sustained during the mission—a broken finger here, a bullet graze on the leg, or my and Dernier's particular beauties, bruised ribs because we were too close to one of the explosives he was so fond of. We were in a little hotel where Zouzou was staying the night and it was a Sunday; I remember Howard ironically proclaiming that he wouldn't drink on the Lord's day and then proceeding to drink me under the table; someone was playing the piano in the hotel lounge and Peggy was wearing a red dress that matched her lipstick. Jones couldn't keep his eyes off of her no matter how he tried. I shouldn't speak on it and she'll surely have something to say when she reads this (she had a lot to say but allowed it anyway) but they disappeared some time during the night and we didn't see them again until well into the next day. Steve was still sulking about the mission, whether because he didn't think we handled it well or because he wasn't involved, I don't rightly know, but he sat in a corner most of the night until J tugged him up and said, "Suck my dick, Rogers—you were at a party and I got shot at," and help me God, we couldn't stop laughing even though we had been beat to hell and our ribs were caving in.

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We danced all night, and that is what I remember most from that mission—not the headlines we saw in the weeks to come that were full of lies, not the glory and gore of it all, not the gunshot wounds and undercover agents and poorly spoken Italian. It's like looking in that mirror I talked about earlier. Nowadays the image of that weekend is so distorted; I've looked at it through the eyes of so many people I no longer know what I'm looking at. But the dancing—the dancing I can see as though it's happening right now in front of me. Steve is rolling his eyes but he's letting J lead anyway, and I'm swaying to the music with my arm over Morita's shoulder, and Howard is joining the pianist while Monty pours him a drink. Dernier is spread out on a chaise holding his chest like it hurts, and I'm sure it does, and we are laughing anyway. Somewhere in the hotel, Gabe Jones is falling deeper into love than he's ever been. The sky is black and the stars are out and it almost feels like we're normal people living a normal life. It almost feels like we can grow old together and settle down and do this every day. We know that's not the case, but we cling to it anyway, and we laugh.

## F I V E

I awoke on that Monday morning feeling like a new man, and aching like an old one. We were all sporting bruises and welts, cuts and scrapes and loss of hearing, but when we left Paris behind us, we were in good spirits and we didn't mind that we were falling apart at the seams; we had clean clothes and new boots and a jeep to carry us on. Steve had picked up a bike with a few tricks up its sleeve and we all took turns riding it through the stretch of French countryside we were on though Rogers was most comfortable on it and then J, who seemed to like driving it in the mud to piss his partner off. We were well into enemy territory after long stretches of farmland but when the day got hot and we started sweating, no one thought much of it for J to be taking off his uniform until it was too late. Something I noticed or perhaps remembered long after the war was that occasionally, he would burn up like a lot stove; it came on too fast to be a true fever, and it never lasted very long, but it took hold of him and gave him the sweats, used to make him a little delirious if I'm remembering correctly. He'd forget where we were and what we were doing; all that mattered was getting cool, stopping the heat from reaching his heart. I heard him say that once, talking to Baby about how his heart was on fire. Looking back on it, most of what that boy spoke was poetry and prose, but the fevers scared me some, scared him more.

On this particular occasion, we were resting our heads and having some grub. We were partially hidden by trees that backed onto a thick forest but the jeep couldn't back all the way into it and Steve had gone around to see how far it went. J started complaining about the heat and it was uncomfortable, I'll give him that, and we thought he was having a laugh when he said he needed to take his clothes off. That was when we all recognized that this was one of his fits and immediately tried to calm him. Well it was no use—he started taking his gear off, even let his rifle fall to the floor like it meant nothing to him (and Vera meant everything to him) and tugged at the buttons on his jacket, nearly ripping them off when he pulled. He got it off and started on his clothes. Monty must have helped him because they came off easily and quick and he ended up with the heap of them in his arms, shaking his head at the whole ordeal. It was an ordeal, honestly, J always made it one even though he'd barely remember afterwards. So, there he was, in his shorts with a vest on. He had taken his socks off so they wouldn't get dirty and then lied down in the cool grass hoping it would help. His breathing was more even and I remember Morita feeling his forehead, hand on his chest and a worried look on his face. Bear seemed so peaceful breathing deep on the green grass, his hands tucked under his head with that Cheshire Cat grin across his mouth. I remember Gabe took a picture of him then; it's still hanging in one of the frames at his and Peggy's house.

It was only later that we spoke out loud about what was happening to him, and theorized about it over whiskeys in Monty's cottage or Dernier's farmhouse or the estate. It was only after we lost him, and we would get drunk and wonder how and if we could have saved him that we talked about the fevers—how the things they did to Bear in Austria could have caused them.

And honestly, it made sense. Before we were captured in Azzano, Bear was a delightful guy, not to say he wasn't afterwards, but he was changed somewhat. We all were, but the changes in him were subtler, more nuanced than the nightmares we would get and the occasional tremor or jump that might be caused by gunfire or bombs that were too close. Sometimes I'd be in the middle of a fire fight and I'd lose my nerves and I'd need a shake to snap me out of it. J was different; he felt everything all the time, that never stopped. The way we talked about it afterwards, it was like he always had that laboratory in the back of his mind; it was always with him, and sometimes it came through a little more aggressively than other times. It came through in that field and it would have been alright only it came through at the wrong fucking time.

Steve came running back from his perimeter search, shushing us and motioning over to the other side of the forest beyond where we could see. He had spotted German artillery while he was walking, hidden by the trees, in a similar situation as our jeep. They had tanks that couldn't be concealed and foot soldiers that were resting up, same as us. We must have come up on the hill and just missed them, too preoccupied with getting some food in our bodies. Now the question was: do we engage? We were heavily outgunned, by Steve's estimation, but there was nowhere to run without being seen. If they came around the tree line, they would spot us, and if we started up the jeep and the bike, we would be heard. So maybe the question was less, do we engage? and more: how do we engage?

We began like this: Bear and I went through the thicket of trees, hoping to get a better look at our enemies. Steve pushed the bike around and the boys geared up the best they could, taking what they could carry and what would be most effective, which meant that Dernier tucked a couple dozen grenades away.

The plan of attack, like most of our plans if I'm being honest, was simply to attack. The Germans would be caught off guard. We were lucky they didn't have a soldier or two patrolling the area, but perhaps we had just missed them. Luck, as it seemed, was ever on our side. So, we made our way through the trees while the boys came around the far side. Bear and I began our attack from higher ground, perched up in trees like we'd taken to doing whenever the landscape allowed for it. We started picking the Krauts off one by one while Steve started the bike up and spun around them like a ballerina, throwing the shield at their most powerful guns to disarm them. There were two stationary tanks and fifty men that found their guns quite quickly once our attack began. It's hard to describe a situation like that—I almost want to say you had to be there, but that's lazy narration.

Our shells were falling from the treetops, hitting the forest floor faster than we could pick off soldiers, but we made a good dent in their ranks, enough to scatter and confuse them. They were facing fire from all fronts and couldn't get into proper formation. We were behind them, Steve was circling them, and then we saw from way up high that Monty and Morita had managed to overtake one of the tanks; Dernier and Jones were punching their way to the officers. I want to say we were graceful in our efforts, but we weren't. We were bloody by the end of it on account of how close we needed to get. I ended up jumping down from the tree and engaging some of the soldiers while J continued to shoot from above—he was a better shot than all of us combined and he was watching Rogers the whole time, making sure no soldier got too close to him. Steve was focused on the machine guns they had set up while Jacques and Jim used one tank to fight the other. They took a shot and it shook the forest floor, nearly knocked J out of his tree, and managed to get the attention of the remaining Krauts so we could finish the job.

It was chaos, truly. In the midst of the burning, J was still shooting Krauts who were running into the field to get away. I could hear the rifle above me as I pushed a man against a tree, making contact with his jaw. I hit him hard and I hit him again and again until it knocked him out or killed him; I didn't stick around to find out. Instead I moved onto another target, one who was running at me ready to shoot but conveniently out of bullets. I had enough to finish him cleanly but I used my fists instead and got him on the ground before I even reached for my gun. I liked to do things dirty in those days; it made the war feel real, like something you needed to fight with your whole being, like something that was in your face, not far away, easily won with a great weapon like the one they used in Japan later on. That ain't no way to win a war. I fought on the ground and Steve knocked his way around with the shield—a neat little trick we used to do sometimes was Cap would hold the shield at the right angle and one of us would shoot it; the bullet would ricochet if we did it right and the enemy would be confused as to where the shooter was. Worked some of the time, but it was more for our amusement than anything else. We'd take turns throwing the thing too, just for kicks, to see how it felt in our hands. It was always too bulky in my opinion, and I never maneuvered it right. Like most things, J was a natural with it, and he and Steve used to fight with it between the two of them like it was nothing; used to toss it back and forth like a frisbee or Steve would crouch down and shield them while J shot over his shoulder. I always liked watching that, and I know I'm not the only one. It was something, watching the two of them fight together. At the moment, I'm getting sentimental and recalling an event with a sword, but I'll get to that eventually, for now, I should stay on task, though it's always difficult once the memories come flooding back to me like the waves of the Étang de Lindre.

Let me get to that. It wasn't difficult after the tanks were blown to bits and we had taken care of most of the soldiers who fled; I'm sure Steve would have preferred to take prisoners, but we didn't have the time nor the patience for an extraction. We were on our own and base wouldn't be contacting us for another three days, so we rounded up the men who managed to escape, shot them quick and clean, and piled the bodies on top of the tanks. We set fire to the beasts and moved out quickly in case the flames attracted more soldiers, and a day later, we found a cozy spot in Lindre-Basse, right along the water. We were on our way to Lemberg where Schmidt had apparently set up another factory. That was the intel Zouzou had given Steve and Peggy; that was the factory that Howard was looking to infiltrate so we could learn more about their weapons.

Now this story is a strange one, and I'm not sure how to go about telling it. It requires a lot of explanation; it requires a lot of introductions. For starters, I should introduce our Jewish friend who we met on the road, whose name shall remain a secret, but we can call him Abe. I should also stress that there are moments in war that define your presence on the battlefield. Moments when you know you are needed where you are. It is easy to lose sight of things; sometimes you just don't realize how easily things come and how easily they go. Now, you already know that we all had the opportunity to go home after Austria—or if you don't, then you do now. Phillips took each of us aside and told us plainly: this is your choice. A lot of men took that choice, and I don't fault them for that, nor do I think less of them for it, nor should you. Sometimes bravery is taking care of yourself, saying goodbye to the field, boarding a plane and going back to your family. Sometimes bravery is letting go and trying to pick up the pieces of your life while you still can. Some men went home, and that was that, but we stayed.

We chose to fight with Steve and to fight in secret and that was a choice that we sometimes regretted and other times felt like it wasn't a choice at all. We were needed here. Our Jewish friend reminded us of that.

We met him while securing the perimeter in Lindre-Basse, found him asleep in the trees, half starved to death and burning from the heat. We didn't know at first where he had come from or why he was there but once we got him into clean clothes and assured him he was safe, he got to talking. And boy, what a tale he told.

I wonder sometimes about what we did in those days and how right it was and how wrong it was at the same time. I contradict myself, I know. I've said before how it doesn't matter, how we did what we did so people could be free and safe, but now that I'm older and the war isn't in front of me, I wonder how true that still is. We killed people; every day, we took a life in some way or another. Maybe we didn't fire the gun right away, but we carried the bullet all the same. I was a killer and I was proud of it. If someone was going to kill me, I was going to kill them first. I was going to carry a bullet for every Nazi and every Nazi sympathizer I met. They all deserved to die in my opinion, but what if I was wrong. What about men and women who didn't think they had a choice? Wisdom tells me that there is always a choice. They should have died rather than fight on the wrong side; they should have recognized that they were on the wrong side to begin with. But I don't know. I killed children—young boys who had been forced into it, young girls who were protecting their families and the only lives they had ever known. I killed anyone who stood on the side of the devil and watched him and helped him burn the world to the ground.

Maybe I ain't so sorry after all.

I know Steve was; it never sat well with Monty and Morita either. Gabe had a different perspective seeing as his family started in a plantation and still wasn't given the respect they deserved. I knew he looked at what the Nazis were doing and saw history repeating itself in a lot of ways and he was fighting to prevent that. Jacques and I once sat together and talked about our motives for joining the war and for staying in the war. The truth wasn't always so simple; our reasons changed with every new experience.

At first, it was revenge—we wanted to fight the men responsible for our capture and torture, the men responsible for taking innocent lives. We were angry and we wanted justice. Later, or perhaps simultaneously, we couldn't believe there were people in the world who were being subjected to the kind of shit we saw every day. Whole towns bombed to hell, people starving in the streets, hiding for fear of imprisonment, and don't get me started on the camps. We learned about them too late and never stopped thinking about them. I still dream about those people; I still dream about the camps.

We were angry and in disbelief. We started wondering how we could save the world one fight at a time. We started asking what we could do. When we met Abe, we were in this frame of mind.

He came out of the forest like a wild animal, afraid because he had heard our voices, but unsure of where they were coming from. He was alarmingly bad at being inconspicuous. He hadn't eaten in days and he had showered long before that, too. He hadn't risked bathing in the pond for fear that someone would come along, but we had the area well secured and gave him clean clothes when he was through. We had extra boots and warm blankets and he was grateful to get even a crumb from us,

but we gave him a whole loaf of bread when he left us; cold meat and cheese and small cans that he could carry with him that wouldn't weigh him down. If you looked at him from the corner of your eye, he looked like J (and later we would mistake him for J's younger brother as well) and perhaps that was why we took him under our wing for that short while. He repeatedly told us he didn't want to be a burden, but he was a Jew on the run and we were in the business of saving people. He and Bear spoke together at night, laughing about one thing or another, and whispering Yiddish songs around the fire. We didn't linger too long in that spot, but we took Abe with us when we left. We were on our way to Lemberg and we would sort something out for him when we got there. Peggy would surely help him out, get him papers, send him to Brooklyn and give him a home away from the one he lost. We were convinced we could save this boy, even though we had a mission to complete and Nazis to kill and danger was following right behind our footsteps.

When we walked, he would tell us of a girl he loved, who had had left behind. She was German with beautiful blond hair and a father who painted houses for a living. Her mother swore too often but had kept him in their basement and fed him cold soup all winter and cried when he left; quiet in the night, leaving the girl with only a kiss on her forehead, too scared of what would happen to them if he was found and not scared enough of what would happen to him.

He never made it to Lemberg, not because anything happened to him (I will save you the suspense and tell you: he lived, and lived well) but because he wanted to spare us as well. Maybe he didn't understand that we could save him. We awoke one morning to find that he was gone and J was quiet about his leaving. Presumably he allowed Abe the dignity of his choice, and we didn't fault him for that.

We arrived in Lemberg with heavy hearts, anxious and scared for our new friend but resolved to know that he had a choice, and he chose for himself. We arrived at night and camped just outside the town, along a line of trees. Two of us were sleeping, I can't remember which two. Two more were playing cards, I was reading a map, and a short way away, Steve and J were throwing Steve's shield back and forth, seeing how far they could throw it and the other could still accurately catch it. I remember watching this in awe; neither of them ever missed. It was Steve who heard the plane.

It wasn't a raid but it flew close enough to be one. One plane pursued by two others. The first plane was German, the second was American, the third was Howard Stark. As we all became alert and the sleeping men woke, J dared Rogers to throw the shield at the German plane to see if it would make impact. Someone, somewhere sounded a siren and Steve threw the shield. I want to say that he hit the target, that he was that good, but he didn't. A fourth plane arrived over the tree line and shot at the American, setting the plane on fire. Howard shot at the Nazi and it, too, went down.

We learned why the chase had happened in the morning when we reached the factory, a safe point Peggy had marked for us. Howard debriefed us and we settled in. We needed supplies and were told that the town had numerous shops and grocery stores where we could get what we needed. They were not friendly to the Allies, in fact, they were mostly aggressively anti-American and pro-Hitler (this is the town I described earlier), but we would pay for goods and services, and they were poor so the choice laid in front of them was an easy one. We went into the town with a list for us and a list for Howard and that was when we saw her.

I don't know how, but it was like Bear just knew.

He walked over to a young girl with blond hair and asked what her name was. Let's call her Elle. I don't think he asked her about Abe, but he knew from the moment he saw her that she was the girl he loved. Maybe that's what they talked about that night when Abe left us; maybe that's why he left at all. He had lived in Lemberg, had left Lemberg, and we wanted to take him back. He couldn't risk it and he certainly couldn't face Elle, not after the way he had stolen away in the night and barely said goodbye. Elle was with a boy around her age who was skinny and had legs like bean poles. Bear bought him an apple and the look of delight on his face was enough to incite me to buy him some more. The boy was starving—not in the way Abe was, but the way a child who has several siblings would be, and J would know about that. Eventually, Elle's father came over to ask who J was, and he introduced himself and made up some story, I'm sure. In the end, after an hour of conversation while I checked items off our lists, Bear bought some paint. I don't know what they talked about and I don't need to know: our hearts were lighter when we went back to the factory that day with cans paint in the jeep and smiles on our faces.

We left two days later and did not return for many months. By that time, we had several successful missions and were as close as a band of brothers could be. I will share those details after I complete this story because it is important that you know how it ended; it is important that you know it wasn't all happy but not all sad either. When we met with Carter in Heppenheim, she asked why we had so much paint. It sat in the jeep for three whole weeks, untouched, until she had it removed and used to camouflage our artillery. When we encountered Lemberg again, we were walking through town because the jeep was full of weapons and things we had collected from a city not

far from there. We would not have known it was Lemberg if not for the paint. The shop where J and I had encountered Elle and her father and the young boy was gone, but the sign remained; debris on the ashen ground. The street where we bought our food was gone; the starving boy was gone; the Nazis who spat at us and the man who spoke the little Yiddish he knew and sold us paint for a cheap price even though he should have charged us extra—it was all gone. There were paint cans cluttering the street where someone must have cleared it to the side. There was blood everywhere and signs of bodies being moved from where they must have lain in the night when the bombs fell.

At first, we thought J was having another one of his fevers; he began screaming, such a harrowing sound that it pulled us all from the daze we had been in when we halted our steps. He screamed and sobbed, throwing aside black and blue paint, causing the contents to spill onto the ground, mixed with the blood of indifferent people. It stained his clothes and burned his skin. It dug under his fingernails. In the distance, he saw the girl—she raised her hand in a motionless wave. Like Bear, she too had the remains of her life on her skin, still dirty from dust and dirt and death; he had her father's paint seeping into his.

Things come easily, and then they go just the same

J carried Lemberg on his skin for another two weeks, refusing to remove it. Stark flew us to France and he washed himself clean of it finally, but I think he carried that with him for a long while after.

Years later, after the war, I learned that Abe found Elle safe and sound. He had endured the camps and the long, lonely road of hiding who he was. She had lost her whole family; except him. They have two children; they have four grandchildren.

When we saw that, when we saw Lemberg torn apart, we reached an all-time low. When we saw up close what the war was doing to people, to its own people, we realized. The reason we were fighting, the reason we kept fighting: we were grieving.

We lost something in Austria—we all did. Even Steve lost something that day, and he hadn't even been imprisoned with us. From that moment on, we were mourning it, whatever it was, trying to come to terms with what had happened to us. We fought because we had to make sense of our lives in some way and this was the best way we knew how. We fired our guns and set off our explosives and we killed Nazis because it was what we had to do to grieve. The loss of innocence or freedom or life—whatever it was—we had to bury it and say some words over its grave and pour whiskey out for an empty seat at the table of our regret and sorrow. We had to carry it on our backs until it became too heavy and then, when we were able to finally put it down, we realized we had accepted it; it was part of us now and then we fought for that too.

J put it best; he said it better than I can. His reason for fighting is the loveliest reason of all, so I will share it with you.

In J's pack, among his belongings, tucked away in that book he loved so much, was a letter he hadn't been able to send. It was addressed to his sister and part of it was written to his mother. When I gave the letter to his sister, she laughed at his opening line (it read: Dear Asshole.) They almost had the same laugh and I almost fell in love with her. If I hadn't promised my heart to Mary, I would have given it to her instead just to keep some part of him at my side. She and her mother read the letter and handed it back to me and I've been able to hold onto it since. Here is the best part:

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You tell mama, or let her read this, I'm sure she will anyway: love is a bridge. She asks me every time why I'm out here, why I didn't choose to come back home after azzano, so mama, let me tell you; love is a bridge. Love can take you anywhere, it can connect you to other people and other things you never even dreamed of, that's how amazing it is. But the thing is, the krauts burned all those bridges and now the people can't get nowhere. So that's why I'm here, that's why I can't leave. Cause I got bridges to build.

## S I X

Well, I am embarrassed. How could I have been so careless in my narration? I got so caught up in the emotions of our moral dilemma and forgot about *what* was happening. Let me clear that up for you because I'm sure you're wondering. Bear slung a rifle over his shoulder, picked up a box of ammo from the jeep, walked through the trees, climbed a tree, and played target practice with Nazis while still only wearing his shorts. Maybe it was the urgency of the matter but he hauled ass into that forest with not a care in the world. At least he had the common sense to wear his helmet. That is an image of him I have in my head that won't ever go away. I pull it out sometimes and have a chuckle to myself. It sits there with Jacques, sick with fever in a foxhole, mumbling under his breath the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of his favorite novel—"My home, then, when I at last find a home,—is a cottage; a little room with whitewashed walls and a sanded floor, containing four painted chairs and a table, a clock, a cupboard, with two or three plates and dishes, and a set of tea-things in delf. Above, a chamber of the same dimensions as the kitchen, with a deal bedstead and chest of drawers; small, yet too large to be filled with my scanty wardrobe: though the kindness of my gentle and generous friends has increased that, by a modest stock of such things as are necessary."—and Falsworth running through the German forces and under heavy fire to

deliver a message, and then running back because he is an idiot. It sits with memories of Peg casually shooting over her shoulder and causing a barrel of fuel to explode and Howard dropping the shield on his toe while trying to impress a nurse and Gabe falling asleep in the middle of a fight because the tank was warm and he couldn't hear what was going on outside. It keeps those memories company in my mind and I miss them less that way.

While I'm at it, I should also tell you that our mission to infiltrate the factory in Lemberg had already been completed by the time we got there. Peggy had gone ahead with Howard to set up camp in a nearby inn, and Carter, feeling bored of sitting on her ass, decided to get a closer look at what we would be up against when we arrived. In true Margaret Carter style, she got bored of watching, too, and single-handedly took out the twelve men guarding the factory. When we got to Lemberg, the allies controlled the facility, Peggy had moved on to Johanniskreuz, and Howard shot down the plane carrying Schmidt's plans. A win for us all.

Now, I've met a lot of great women in my lifetime; before and after the war, and of course, during. Don't mistake my meaning here: my Mary is a marvel, a firecracker, a strong and intelligent soul who can be a bit of a sociopath at times and I wanted very much to dedicate an entire chapter about her. In my own sneaky way, I already have, but any more and she would flay me alive. She is a very private woman and threatened to have my nuts in a jar in the pantry if I wrote too much about her. So, while we're on the topic of greatness and while I have your attention for a little while longer, we should talk about Peggy Carter.

You should know—if you ever meet Peggy, this chapter will serve as a guideline of what not to do when you meet Peggy Carter. Read it well and then read it again: it will help.

When we first met, I had already heard all about her, so I didn't make the same mistakes other men did. That is—I didn't underestimate her, I didn't undermine her, and I treated her like a fucking human being with equal value to all the other people risking their lives to save the world. I never quite understand why it was a difficult thing for others to do, but somehow it was. What other commanding officers had to do on a daily basis, Peggy had to do twice, with a smile on her face, ignoring the stupidity surrounding her, with a few dozen people questioning her every move, and while wearing heels.

When she was at Camp Lehigh working on Rebirth with Phillips and Erskine, she had to answer to all sorts of assholes and had to shout over all of them for her voice to be heard. It didn't change much even when Steve proved worthy of saving a whole group of POWs or when we started winning the war one fight at a time. Peggy was still fighting her own battles against all the men who tried to take over the operations she was more or less entirely in charge of. She oversaw everything and yet, her name wasn't on anything, and it was a damn shame.

Steve had talked her up on the walk back to camp after Austria and by the time I took my cap off and saluted her, I was aware that she wasn't one to be trifled with. Truth is, I was raised to respect every person I ever encountered unless they gave me a solid reason not to, and my mother stressed to me that women in any position should be, and were, equal to any man in the same position. I grew up with a father who was shell-shocked from the war and a mother who worked two jobs, sometimes three, to support us. I never saw her position in her household as less than my father's; she brought the money home and he made me breakfast in the morning, packed my lunch for school, and cooked us all a warm dinner at night. My family wasn't typical of that time, but we worked just fine.

They used to call it war strain, or war neurosis, and while I was on the field, they started calling it combat exhaustion. These days soldiers are treated for post-traumatic stress disorder and given real treatment—Pa used to knit while he watched TV and would sometimes forget that dinner was in the oven, so he set the timer to go off every ten minutes. I used to have a cat, a calico named after Bear, that always seemed to know when I was feeling bad. She would sit in my lap and snuggle right up to me and purr.

Things changed in the 50's after Peg and Howard started working together in a more official and better funded capacity. We didn't take it so seriously back then, but once doctors started noticing more and more soldiers experiencing personality changes and problems coping that resembled the shell-shocked soldiers of The Great War, it became a priority to understand what was happening to our men. Peggy was on the front lines once again, in a different but equally important way. She saw personally to a lot of those guys, the ones who just needed to talk and the ones who couldn't speak at all, they were so shook up. It was Peggy, really, who pushed the doctors and the researchers, who poured her own money into the studies that were being done to gain a deeper comprehension of what was wrong. You probably grew up with The Bear Act, probably never even considered where it came from, probably never put it together how important it was because by Vietnam, it was already practiced law. I sometimes wonder—if The Bear Act had been around in '43, we wouldn't have been able to fight alongside Steve and eliminate Hydra; at the same time, if it had existed, Bear would still be alive. It's a double-edged sword and the what ifs don't change a thing. If the world was then the way it is now, a lot would have been different. We may not have had a war at all, but then, a lot would be the same too.

I'm getting ahead of myself. You all know what an impact Peggy has had *since* the war, but let me tell you about her effect *during* the war, because you bet your ass it was great.

It was early on, so let me rewind a little to December of '43 when we were in a forest in France playing baseball with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. That was the first time we encountered them, or what they were before the whole team assembled and restructured for Normandy. J fell in with Ware and Plaudo and they painted his face, offered to shave his hair like theirs. Too many talks about the stars put Rogers in a sour mood; he was buried in a sketchbook out by the back of the camp where no one could see him. It wasn't that Rogers didn't like new friends and he'd never turn his nose up at anyone, but on days like this, I think he got a little restless. These were hard, cold days and he could never sit by the fireside and enjoy little pleasures like the rest of us. He was always thinking ahead, thinking too much. It was that night that we all started calling him Baby, because he'd argued with Bear and all we heard was Baby this and Baby that.

J was a sweet talker when he wanted to be and he alone could drag Steve back from one of his moods. He'd charm the lot of us, me included, and no matter how mad you were or sad or scared, J would talk you down from it with a smile on his face that lit up the damn sky while the Krauts were bombing the whole place to hell, and you'd be okay, yeah, you'd be just fine.

Now, unbeknownst to us, whenever a man questioned Peggy, she would claim to be acting on Captain Rogers' orders to the point where even if she hadn't spoken to Steve personally in a month, people still believed her. We were only a month into working together as a team, and we still disliked each other, but we listened to orders and Peggy took our eagerness to please the

brass as a green light to use our status to her benefit. It never hurt anyone and in fact, it probably saved a few lives because Peggy knew what she was doing, she just didn't always have the authority to do it—but with the good Captain's go-ahead, she was in the clear.

J was the one who gave us all nicknames while we were on a makeshift baseball diamond with Colonel Sink, himself. It ended up being crucial to our survival out there; they never knew how many of us there were if they intercepted a wire because there were so many pet names circulating the airwaves. They must have thought we had an invisible army creeping through those mountains. Gabe was Beauty, Falsworth was Brave, Morita was Blossom and Dernier was Bottom. I ended up being Button and of course, Rogers was Baby. J threw in a few more to confuse people but those were consistent. Peggy and Howard even had their own nicknames, but those weren't as consistent or well-liked as ours. Stark was often called Stink for the fun of it. J didn't have a name until we split from the 101<sup>st</sup> and ran into some Nazi soldiers while we were crossing into Czechoslovakia. That was a few months away and I apologize for jumping around, but it's important to establish these things early on so you're not asking me questions later.

So far, Peggy had been communicating with us what our Very Important Missions would be, passing that information to us through the official channels and personnel, usually Phillips. He would approve her plan of action, and from what I saw, he would usually sign off on whatever she thought was best—he had a whole other army to command and wasn't all too able to micromanage our band of idiots as well. Peggy took the grunt of that work and Phillips was happy to let her do it, but some of the other officers weren't. We were traveling together for that first little bit so our orders came directly.

We were with General Giraud and General de Gaulle who were busy making bombs with some SOE agent, Miller, and our Generals were arguing about who should kick in the door of an abandoned Hydra facility. Steve was still in a mood and was sulking in his tent so J and I attended the briefing. It was customary that one of us be there, and usually it was Steve, but he was a brat and hated the bickering of the Generals so we faced them for him and laughed about it later. We never understood how so many men with the same agenda could argue about such stupid and petty things. In the midst of the dick measuring, Peggy proposed that we send a scout team ahead instead of the whole company we were with, in case there were remaining Hydra soldiers in the area or in case our information was incorrect. The French seemed to like this idea—no need to risk their men if we weren't absolutely sure—but some American hothead opened his mouth and said the wrong thing.

We never understood it because the answer was clear: listen to Peggy. She made the most sense in those meetings and proposed the most practical plans and yet, she was nearly always shot down for some idiot idea that would put more men in the line of fire. Sure, they had all fought in some way or another, but they weren't risking their skins like we were every day. Peggy fought more than all of them combined, and they still didn't want to listen to her. It was a damn shame, really, and I wish they had known it then. On this particular occasion, though, Bear was just as irritated as Steve and having him there during that meeting meant that about four superior officers threatened to have him court martialed for insubordination.

What happened was this: Peggy made her suggestion and someone (I'm sure it was Sobel) said, and I quote, "If we wanted a lady's opinion, we'd ask about the laundry."

And that, friends, is not how you speak to Peggy Carter.

I never knew what made him snap. Maybe it was the day: he was tired and Steve had worn him out mentally, arguing about stupid shit, he had to stand quietly and listen to people argue about more stupid shit, it was cold and the coffee was burnt and even though they initially didn't like each other, J would never let anyone speak ill of Peggy. So, he asked if he could speak freely, and was granted that allowance. He stated that he was attending the meeting in Steve's stead and that he had the authority to speak for Steve, and that the group known as the Howling Commandos would, under no circumstances, be joining the company when they overtook the facility unless Agent Carter was apologized to and was able to oversee the mission. It was, to say the least, a bold move. Of course, I'm still not sure if what he said was accurate. Surely, Peggy didn't outrank the men in the room, and surely Bear didn't actually have the authority given to Steve, who again, didn't outrank the Generals. But the words were said and Sobel (I'm convinced it was Sobel) seemed to immediately see all the flaws in every plan concocted for that mission if we weren't on hand to help.

You see, the plan, however it eventually got sorted out, was to use the Commandos as a rallying force against the Nazis. This was heavily occupied territory and even if the facility was abandoned, there were likely Nazi soldiers nearby with a vantage point. Word would spread that Captain America himself was knocking down doors and rounding soldiers up to be allied prisoners. Then, if there were soldiers remaining, it would make sense to send us in; the special team would not only be more skilled and prepared over the tired and overworked soldiers who had been fighting to reclaim the position in Manosque. They needed us, and J knew that, and exploited it as much as he could. Now, it could have backfired, and it certainly looked like it would, but as always, as I would learn soon, luck loved J.

Luck loved him so much so that when Sobel started arguing with him, and got in his face to shout about his audacity, J didn't get punched in the face. I certainly would have hit him. He had the balls to look right through a commanding officer and ask Peggy how she managed to curl her hair so beautifully every day. Someone suggested that the Commandos sit this one out but he only shrugged and said that would be okay, and started to leave. In desperation, they called him back. (I should mention that I had remained rooted to my spot wanting neither to piss anyone off nor to miss any of this action.) Bear asked what shade of lipstick Peggy was wearing, what her favorite perfume was so he could buy it for her for Christmas, and was starting to tell her that he had seen a lovely restaurant down the street if she wanted to get a bite when someone had the sense to fetch Rogers.

And by sense, well, I can't say it did any good. Maybe they expected him to take their side. Maybe they figured he would respect the chain of command and would reprimand J for acting out. They didn't know Steve, not like I knew him, even then, not like you know him from reading this. Steve, without missing a beat, asked Marks whether or not he listened when Agent Carter spoke. Marks said yes of course. Steve asked, when she says that she is acting on my orders, do you do as she says? Marks said yes of course. And really, that was that. Steve Rogers, little shit that he is, declared that if J was speaking on his behalf then he trusted J to make decisions the way he would. We would not join the company unless Peggy was apologized to, and we would not follow the orders of any strategic planning unless Peggy oversaw and approved of it, and we would, under no circumstances, work with Sobel ever again.

So, it was written and so it became law.

We never worked with Sobel again and when we saw Easy Company, it was under the command of Dick Winters. We never had any trouble regarding Peggy again, and she oversaw everything we did and had a say in every move the Generals would make. We never laughed so hard, either, than when we got back to our tents and Steve and J stopped being mad at each other and Peggy nearly cried she was so angry at both of them for embarrassing her like that. It was the start of something very special and very important, too. The other commanders were too official and their methods didn't suit our brand of secrecy. Peggy wired us with code names and cryptic messages that we had to decipher. We followed up with nonsense that simply meant: we are alive, mission went well. We wrote to her sometimes because we were bored and lonely and sometimes because we wanted to feel like we were still connected to home. That winter wasn't as cold as others but we wrote to her about blankets and warm fires and she sent us safe houses wrapped in burning embers and dry socks.

Gabe wrote to her the most, sometimes because it was required and sometimes because he wanted to see how long she would wait before sending a reply. He called her on the EE-8, too, even though he didn't need to, and they would speak in code about how beautiful the sunset was where they were standing or how much they missed looking across the room at one another. It was here that the codenames J gave us were so important. Peggy used them but I'm not sure anyone else would have. She used them and it confused the fuck out of the Germans because we often wrote or said things that would only make sense if you knew who was who. Messages like, 'The day is a beauty, saw flower blossoms at the bottom of the field' would mean that Jones, Morita and Dernier had successfully completes a mission. 'A few buttons on my coat popped off while I was feeding the

baby' might mean Steve and I got into a tough spot and needed help. It was difficult to master in the beginning but once you got the hang of it, our brand of poetry was something for the ages.

The telegrams weren't all prose, though; sometimes we wrote silly things just for the hell of it. Bear was fond of asking Peggy for smokes even though she was in another country—somehow, they always managed to show up. Steve used to ponder about what planets were in alignment in the sky. We bugged Peg about the thoughts we had before we went to bed, mostly to clog the airwaves and confuse the enemy but also because if there was a nagging thought we couldn't get rid of, we figured she should suffer with us.

Then there were certain privileges and certain things we didn't realize. Because we were an elite unit—Carter's words, not mine—we were given a lot more than other soldiers were. What that meant was that we could ask for something and it would come out way. Now, I wasn't complaining, none of us were. We asked for more bullets, we got them. We asked for more food, we got it. We asked for a hot bath and a drink or two and it may have taken a week to find us a secure location but we sure as shit got it. Stark shipped us experimental weapons that were stronger and more effective; Carter got us brand new uniforms. Truth is, we were tired and we were scared and we were in the middle of a war we saw no end to, but we had more than many. It never really changed, it was always like that, but something happened along the line that changed *us*. In Manosque, before we split from the 101<sup>st</sup>, after we stormed the abandoned building and found two dozen soldiers sitting pretty in it, we noticed that some of our tired and weary friends—men we had been imprisoned with—had caught trench foot or come down with a cold or were just freezing with not enough layers on.

I felt ashamed. You always do when you see things like that. I felt wrong. I felt downright stupid. Here we were with brand new boots, two pairs each, and our men were suffering. You'll notice a theme here: Bear started it. (Or maybe I did but he's not here to correct me and I still fear Carter's wrath over our abuse of the system will find me and wring my neck.) He took his boots off and gave them to O'Donnell. I gave mine to Sanders. Bradley had Steve's, Holden had Morita's, French, White, Anderson. Fuck, I lost track. We had two vehicles at the time on account of the distance we were going through France and the supplies we had been given by Stark. You can imagine Carter's face when she read the telegram Bear sent her; she had left before us and had left us in good bands. I still remember every single word:

“Wolves attacked us during the night. All shoes have been stolen. Jackets gone. Blankets torn to shreds. Send more. Feet cold.”

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## SEVEN

Here is a list of items we collected along the way that somehow got turned into weapons (excluding Steve, of course, as he was the ultimate weapon and also an item that we somehow collected):

- A pencil
- A pair of shoes
- A baseball bat—THE baseball bat
- A vase
- An empty fish tank
- The handle of a broom
- A sword

Ah, the sword. Let me paint the scene—but first, an explanation: In the years following Steve's disappearance, people often compared him to other notable historical figures. One could argue that he wasn't like any of them, he merely was himself, but one would have to argue quite a lot to convince others, so one doesn't argue. He has been compared to Jesus, yes, actually. Alexander the Great, Hernán Cortés, Julius Ceasar, and perhaps most notably, following rumors and then confirmation of the sword incident, King Arthur. Many people clung to this idea. Steve as Arthur Pendragon, fighting to save Camelot from evil deadly foes and unite the realms to build a peaceful Avalon;

lost in battle, destined to emerge one day from the ashes and rule again. A delightful fantasy, but not the correct legend.

Steve was rather a lot more like Achilles, if you ask me. For those of you who don't know the story, Achilles was the son of a sea nymph and the King of Phthia. Much like Rogers, Achilles was prophesized to be a great warrior and led several armies in the Trojan War. He died before the end of the war yet was the most recognizable figure to come out of it. For those of you who don't know, our pal Bear carried a copy of the Iliad, which tells the tale of Achilles during the last year of the war.

In my mind, I can't see past the similarities between our friend Steve Rogers and Achilles. Steve's pride—hubris, the Greeks called it—could not be outmatched. People like to say that Steve didn't like fighting but did so because he was good at it; if you knew him, you knew better. Steve was good at fighting because he loved it; always had, always would. Steve knew he could not be outmatched, not by a single soldier or ten or a hundred. He would get hurt and he would get back up, used to joke that if you got killed, you should just walk it off. Steve didn't like bullies, so he cut them all down with one weapon or another and they stayed down, and Steve, well—he always got back up.

So, he found a sword, hanging on the wall in the home of a Nazi commander. I should tell you that it was August and the sun was high in the sky and we were on our way to Aidhausen to meet Peggy and we were in dangerous territory. We needed to save our bullets so we were using knives and then Steve thought, what better way to save bullets than with a sword? The trouble was that, unlike Achilles, Steve was not as natural a fighter with every weapon his hands touched. We had to give him extra lessons about guns, after all. Steve favored the shield. It was J who picked up the sword and wielded it effortlessly when we were ambushed by Krauts. Apparently both sides were short on

ammo, so we didn't have to worry too much about them shooting us, but we did have to worry about them stabbing us or punching us too hard, that is, until Bear picked up the sword.

It happened like a dream, like a mess of soldiers and a clashing of metal. In slow motion, I shall paint the scene as it happened. History repeated itself and took us back to the high walls of Troy: we the Myrmidons, fight with our backs against one another. We fight with fists and the butts of guns, a shield, a sword. It is different this time; there is no Agamemnon to quarrel with—Achilles fights. He fights and fights and falls, not from a great height, but a fair way down in a ditch someone has cleverly concealed. He falls out of reach and we must fight on. This is the same: the mighty Patroclus takes up his armor. The sword and shield had tumbled out of Achilles' arms, clumsy in a way he usually wasn't, clattering at his partner's feet. Patroclus holds the shield close to his heart and advances. We have no bullets among us, only our bare arms and their dim wits, circling each other like vultures on a battlefield ripe with bodies to pick. We urge them closer, back ourselves against the walls of Troy and spit venomous insults at their feet, daring them to challenge our position. Patroclus cuts them down; one, two, three, and so on until his blade is a blur, his body protected by Achilles' armor. He is a marvel, he is a fright, he is untouchable. It is different this time: there is no God Apollo, favoring Paris. Patroclus fights on. Achilles climbs out, he calls to his second. The day is won, Greece is victorious. From there, the legend gets muddled. The shield! It is all people remember. Never mind the person holding it had brown hair, never mind he was smaller, stockier, had no star on his chest. The sword and the shield! So, Steve became Arthur and Bear was destined to fall into the dreaded role of the ever-forgotten Merlin.

But I remember; I remember Patroclus, I remember Achilles, I remember a fallen Troy. The clouds were grey and thick with rain and the Myrmidons lived another day.

Now here's the first thing you need to understand: times were different then, times were trying, times were downright fucking terrifying. You never knew who was on your side or who was against you so naturally you assumed everyone was against you. If you met a German soldier, you killed him. That was how things were. We didn't have time to debate and sometimes Steve didn't like that. Sometimes he'd want to find a better way, especially in the beginning. When Steve's better way didn't work, when we came up against soldiers who didn't want to lay down their arms, J would step up or speak in his ear and convince him—we didn't have much choice. I've said it before and I'll say it again: Steve killed people. He took particular delight in killing those who were remorseless about it. Don't get me wrong, if a man had reservations about what he was doing but he did the thing anyway, he would end up dead and I think that was perfectly fine, but Steve sometimes didn't agree with that. He often thought that prisoners should be taken to pay for their crimes, but he learned, as we all did, that our unit wasn't fighting the war to take prisoners; our unit was fighting to kill.

When we were playing baseball in that field a year earlier and drinking wine with our brothers in arms, even then when things were at their brightest, nothing really felt like home. In those days, you got to thinking that nothing really would ever again, no matter how much we tried. We were so far from civilization sometimes, we felt wild, and it was hard to hold on to your humanity out there in the woods. So, it was August and like I said, it was hot. We caught up to Carter sometime around then and she gave us new boots and asked us why the hell it had

taken us so long to get to Aidhausen and where all our ammo went anyway. She was in a foul mood with everyone except Jones and didn't care much for an answer, just wanted to bust our balls and give us grief, and we were all too tired to give her any back so we just took the new supply and lazily asked what else was in store for us. Ironically, our orders defied what I previously told you. Carter told us we were on a straight shot to Cursdorf to capture a prisoner. She and Phillips had commandeered a couple jeeps and some official papers that would at least make us look like Hydra scientists if we were stopped. Course—and I've said this before—things had a way of not working the way they should have, especially on a mission of this nature.

Our purpose was to locate and question a man named Johann Fennhoff, a war criminal who Peggy captured in New York years after the war. At that time, our intel only revealed that he was a person of interest to the Nazis and that his research could help us defeat them. He was being escorted to a nearby facility to meet Schmidt and Zola. So, it was imperative that we get to Cursdorf, find the psychiatrist, and save the world. It was also imperative, or so it seemed, that Peggy return some of our belongings that she had been forced to store while we were on foot. We didn't have many belongings that we couldn't carry with us, but when we acquired something we liked, we made sure she took care of it. Now that we had two vehicles, we were more equipped to carry our things with us; tactically, this worked in our favor as well because we didn't run out of ammo nearly as quickly as before and for that, Carter could stop complaining. We traded things like the sword with trunks filled with clean clothes and soap, and cashed in dysfunctional Hydra weapons for Stark to tinker with for some canned food and matches. Morita was able to stock up on medical supplies, I managed to con someone into giving me cigars, and for some fucking reason,

Bear smuggled the baseball bat into the back of the jeep and pretended he didn't know how it got there when we saw it later.

On our way to Cursdorf, we ran into a small group of soldiers who had evidently heard about us. Fennhoff wasn't with them, but considering their location, we assumed they were his guard and the target was hidden somewhere nearby. I'll spoil the end for you: we never found him. He eluded us for years until Peggy caught his trail again. By that point, the war had been won, but Hydra was still clawing its way out of the mud, trying to get started again. Dernier and Falsworth interrogated those men the proper way, meaning that they asked questions and didn't get answers until we tried alternative methods. I'll be honest, we tortured men if we had to but this wasn't one of those situations; we were able to get enough information out of the soldiers to get us to a certain point. Getting beyond that point was where it got complicated. Steve didn't think killing them was necessary; we didn't think they had any worth if they weren't talking. It was a struggle and I know that. Steve always wanted to find a better way but there wasn't one and he knew that, deep down, or even on the surface of it all, he knew that. So, we shot three of them in the head and held a gun to the fourth and waited.

Here's the second thing you need to understand: Steve Rogers didn't like bullies, not a one of them. I remember sitting with a cigar in my mouth listening to him ask this soldier *politely* for the location of the target and not only did that the poor soul refuse, as he would, he started slinging insults at us like he had a sign over his head that said 'shoot me'. He had heard of us, alright, about Bonndorf and the castle and Paris. He spat at us and cursed our names and said he'd never talk; he'd rather die. I remember Steve calling out to J, saying, "Got us a German here who wants to die for his country. Oblige him."

And finally, here's the last thing you need to understand: Nazis are not people. Nazis kill people. Nazis destroy lives and rip apart families. They believe in a world that should not exist and they should be eradicated from the Earth. We did our best but I know we missed a few. If you ever come up against a Nazi, you have my permission to act in whatever way you think I would act in the face of genuine evil. I'm not condoning murder, but when you come up against Nazis, you have to understand that they are at war and in war, the rules are different. Sometimes you gotta kill a man, sometimes you gotta put a bullet in his brain to stop the spread of that disease. Killing Nazis is easy, killing an idea, well, that's a little more difficult. The truth is, men are flawed. First, we had nothing, then we picked berries that fell to the ground until we realized we could take them from the tree itself, then we hunted animals. We did that until we owned it, then we owned huts, then homes, then *things*. We got so greedy that we had to own each other. This is where it began, with greed, with man. Greedy men never know when to stop so they own and own and own things until they own the whole world and we gotta go to war to stop them. I'll tell you something right now: women would have done much better.

I'll tell you another thing: J sure did oblige that man. Maybe he had intended it all along or maybe it *was* nostalgia that made him keep that bat, but whatever the reason, it was the first thing he picked up when Steve turned to him. He bashed that poor fuck's head in till the ground was stained red and the wood splintered. I ain't never seen anything like that before; I ain't never seen that kind of fury, that kind of determination in a man's eyes. Maybe he had just reached the end of a long and arduous week and he needed a release. I reckon he was just sick of shooting them from a distance and now we had one of them up close and practically begging for death. J never held back;

even with a rifle, he'd shoot until he was out of bullets. He hated the Nazis more than all of us combined, and he hated Hydra even more. He didn't stop until he had hit the ground and broken the bat in half and none of us felt very sorry about it. Course, we heard stories after that, whispers of fear from other soldiers we encountered. We called him by his name until that point, until we heard about the fine reputation he had received. Germans lived in fear of him: The Commando who smiled when he killed you, the man who could singlehandedly wipe out an army, the Devil himself, the American, the Bear Jew.

Someone asked me once how we slept at night doing the things we did, seeing what we saw. At one point, when I went back to Boston, I couldn't sleep at all. I realized later that the nightmares I was having weren't because of what we did, but rather because of what I missed. At night, we slept in three pairs with one watch. Usually, the snorers Jones and Falsworth were together, then myself and Dernier, Rogers and J. Morita always had first watch and then we each took the place of the man who would relieve him. This made for an amusing game of musical tents, or musical foxholes depending on where we were. Seven watches in a lucky night that lasted an hour each. On an unlucky night, it lasted half an hour and we were all sore about it in the morning, but usually happy that we had survived the night. Morita would move to Monty's bed, Monty to mine, I'd move to Jacques, Bottom would go over to Steve's and Steve would end up where J had been. You shared space with everyone at a point and since all my friends are long and gone ('cept you, Jones) I can tell you easily: Jacques, by far, had the best manners. He slept still like a practicing corpse, never snored, never swayed, and he ran warmer than most. Handy in winter, hell in summer, but still better than a lawn mower in your ear or Captain Snuggles.

That was how we all slept at night, curled around each other, swapping spots, telling stories, sharing cigarettes and breathing in the same cold air that haunted us. But we slept. I keep saying it, I'll keep meaning it—we did what we had to do. We became legends because of it and legends never die. Among the Allies, they loved and hated us and even though they resented what we were allowed to do and how we were allowed to carry on, they recognized that we were necessary during the war. We fought alongside them, helped them, saved them. We played baseball with them and ate in mess halls with them when we could and sat in mud and blood and snow with them. Some of them thought Steve was a god and we were his disciples, others knew that if we were called on, the Germans wouldn't stand a chance. The Germans knew of us only by name and if they ever caught a glimpse of us, they knew that was the end for them. Nazis only met us in combat and they always came off worse for it. War makes monsters of us all and heroes of the dead and that's why Steve and J are the heroes that they are today and the boys and I are the ghost stories that will haunt some people for the rest of their lives. I never believed in ghost stories when I was growing up. Mama didn't let me. The stories I heard never made much sense; people with unfinished business sticking around to haunt old houses. I tell you, I believe in ghost stories now. Steve haunts me, Bear too, Dernier and Falsworth. Lately I've been dreaming about Jim, hearing his laugh when nobody's home. That day in Scotland at the stones, I heard a ghost then. I let them in, I let them stay. They offer me a comfort the living simply cannot. They bring me home to that battlefield where we rested our heads and filled our hearts with each other. I believe in ghosts now, but I don't see them as the comical pests in white sheets, banging chains in the dead of night. I see them as my friends, my brothers, the image of them soft and delicate, happy.

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I wonder who I will haunt when I leave this place. It won't be unfinished business that keeps me here and it won't be Mary because she will have the good, common, Scottish sense to tell my soul to leave her be. There's only Gabe and I left now and if he goes before me, I'll end up in Carter's tea room, catching the corner of her eye when she pours herself a cup in the afternoon and she will berate me until I move on. That's the way I see my brothers these days, sitting in the sofa smoking a cigarette or crossing the street to get to me. At night, I hear the floorboards creak and Steve shushing Falsworth lest they make too much noise. I can feel J's arms around me when I'm feeling low, the way he used to hold me sideways and bury his head against my shoulder, used to nudge me like a cat. I see Dernier on my bookshelf; my eye always catches the Brontë sisters. Jim's laugh mingles with the laughter of my children and echoes in my mind all day. I hope I pass before Jones does, so he's not alone, even though I know that's silly, Peggy being there and all, but I think you know what I mean. I hope one day he's sitting in his study and sees me from the window walking out to the garden. I always did love that garden. Maybe he'll smile, maybe he'll laugh. And there, but for the grace of God, goes Timothy Dugan.

## E I G H T

Steve used to carry a notebook with him, this little black leather sketchbook that he had with him since he shipped out. It was full of pictures he had drawn along the way, some from home, some from camp, some from the road toward Hydra facilities and safe havens. He had sketches of Manila John on a war bonds tour, of Peggy in a red dress, of Erskine having a long drink. He had drawings of all of us in there, in various states of ridiculousness. He once drew Monty while he was shaving, and Jones while he was sleeping, drew me bare-assed running into a lake for a bath—I have that one framed in my study, I liked it so much. That's the notebook people have seen in museums, with some pages taken out. We weren't thinking about how people in the future might interpret certain things when we tore them out, the ones with J, we were mostly just thinking that our friend didn't want people knowing about him and he wanted to protect his family; he wouldn't have liked it much if those drawings got out. People would have gone looking for him, figuring out who he was, and he took strides to make sure that never happened. Years later, smart ass academic types would all sit around and wonder why there were no pictures of J and what that meant in the context of the group and his relationship with Steve, whether they were actually a team or not, and we would all laugh at how stupid it was, knowing full well that we were the

ones who tore that book to shreds protecting our friend's identity. J hated being seen, always had apparently. Steve said there weren't that many pictures of them together as children either, or young men. They took the occasional snap but it was always a hassle getting Bear to cooperate. His Mama used to tell us about how he'd stand in the back of every family photo and would try to look away when he was told to smile. His Daddy used to have to wrestle him up to the front. Even when he was a baby, he'd cry something fierce whenever someone stuck a camera in his face.

We all shied away from the cameras when they came around, and they came around a lot. Soldiers wanted pictures with Steve, press wanted to use his image to recruit, and there were all those images and videos showing our victories, so people back home knew we were winning the war, even as our men were being slaughtered and their lives were being torn apart. There were always cameras around, and J was the first one to find something else to do so he could stay out of the shot. Steve made him take a few pictures, I'm sure, but they never got too far and anything that was developed was found and taken by Peggy. She had to make sure our identities remained a great big secret until we were absolutely safe and even then, when the war was won and over, the boys and I were still in Europe sorting things out and J didn't want nobody knowing who he was and Peggy had some trouble filing away great reels of film with him flipping the bird at a photographer, but she did it in the end and he stayed in the shadows where he wanted to be. There were times when I wished everyone knew who he was, so they could know what an impact he had on the world, and there are fleeting moments now where I wish for more of the same, but then I gotta respect what he wanted and trust that he knew himself best; it's better this way anyway, and I say that selfishly.

I get to keep the best parts of him to myself and the boys and I get to have a secret that the world may never know. There are only a handful of people who know his name, and the same handful know what he looked like laughing, and I consider myself lucky to be in that group. But, like I said, I had my moments. Sometimes when I hear people talk about politics or society, and get into those conversations that really boil people's blood, I want to interject and tell them—"This conversation wouldn't be happening if it weren't for J." Some people wouldn't even be alive if it weren't for him, and I don't mean the people he saved in the war, I mean the people his actions saved years later. I mean the soldiers who got the care they needed after being prisoners in war, the queer kids who made 'Bear fought for me' t-shirts at that first pride, the US Army officials who were forced to change every single rule they needed to so they could accommodate women and people of color in high-ranking command positions. Our generation fucked up royally, but our children voted in JFK and despite how that ended and what's been going on since, they did better than we ever did and our grandkids are doing great now, too. I've told you about my family, but look in at yours for a bit. I bet you see things that make you proud as well. I have the great pleasure of seeing more enlightened youth these days, children and young adults who will freely talk about the state of the world and how they can change it. I see a look in their eyes that I often saw in my brothers, and especially in Bear. I ask my granddaughter about her friends who are gay and how they are coping with the crisis that is still being ignored by our government and, I swear to God, it makes me proud to hear her curse Raegan in every manner she can muster when she tells me about another funeral she has to go to. I've started to attend them with her and, maybe I've been to too many graves in my lifetime, but it starts to feel like home.

A friend of hers passed away not long back and we buried him proper with the help of Ruth Coker Burks who tipped us off about where to go and who to trust, and as we stood in the rain and Elise cried into my shoulder, I was reminded of Germany in late September. Mud and dirt were better than snow and frozen ground but it still wasn't good. We damn near felt like our friends in Guadalcanal, the way the rain would flood our foxholes if we didn't dig them right, and creep into our skin, our bones. Fifty of our men were trapped in an awkward situation. They were positioned in a valley just beyond the border of a small village with a heavy SS presence. They had been attempting a quiet pass into the next town but over a hundred men rolled up in tanks and trucks blocking their only exit. If they moved, their location would be found and the SS would pick them all off faster than you can say auf wiedersehen. Naturally, that made the job available to us; Steve could navigate the field easier than most and we could infiltrate rather than attack the Germans within the town as well as the men on the perimeter. We were fresh on our feet and eager to please.

Peggy came up with a fairly good plan considering the time restraint put on us to get the men safely out before they were discovered. It didn't involve me shaving my mustache or pretending to be a Nazi so I jumped at the chance to get in the action. Half of us joined the men from the spot they had entered, which wasn't patrolled nearly as often as the other points but still wasn't safe for that many men to squeeze through, and the other half went into town still driving Hydra vehicles. I was part of the lucky foursome who dug four extra foxholes and rigged them all with explosives and trip wires. While Steve, Falsworth and Jones knocked off a few soldiers in town, we waited for their signal of an explosion to draw the attention of the remaining men, snuck half of the allied soldiers into a barn and set off some fireworks.

I want to say that it worked like a charm, and it did—it was a clever bit of work on Dernier's part to perfectly time everything—but of course we were caught up in the chaos of it all and battled a bit to get all our men to safety. It wasn't a completely successful mission and we lost a couple friends, injured a fair few as well, but that was as close to perfect as you could get in those days. If someone didn't get hurt, you'd start to suspect that it was part of a bigger trap and paranoid soldiers isn't something you want lingering about on a battlefield.

I remember Steve drawing some of those men, huddled together afterwards, drinking hot coffee and smoking all our cigarettes; he filled up so many pages of his notebook that day, and smudged the pages with dirt and blood. We all had things like that back then—things to keep us preoccupied, sane. I used to write to Mary, apologies for my behavior. Falsworth used to come up with card tricks or new ways to cheat at poker. Jones would take pictures, Dernier carved the date into trees we'd pass on the road, Morita knitted us hats and gloves, darned our socks. J read. He used to carry a book around wherever we went, underlining passages he enjoyed, making notes in the margins. I reckon there are a few dozen books around Europe with his chicken scratch all over them. He'd pick up a book wherever we went and leave the marked up one in pubs and hotels, with other soldiers, or tucked into the shelf in a library if we ever came across one. The one book he never got rid of was the *Iliad*—it was his favorite. He almost died with it; had it in his pocket but it was too bulky to take onto the train. We all took turns with that book after the war. I remember it sitting on my bedside table at night like a gentle reminder of what love looks like. We all took turns with the painting, too, the one he found in the mud that September while we dug holes and set off explosives and laughed at each other's smudged noses and bruised ribs.

It was not the original painting, as we later found out but stupidly should have realized, but rather an impressive forgery. It was fitting, perhaps, because Steve and J were not the original Achilles and Patroclus, but were a dedicated, living imitation of the pair. We didn't know what it was when we started digging and unearthed a canvas that had been poorly wrapped. The back of the canvas was covered in mud and some of the paint was caked in it so that we couldn't see what we had found until we had returned to base with it having been shoved into Bear's bag beside his Torah and cans of food that we had brought to share if Steve took a long time to secure the town. The canvas was small, about the size of a picture book you'd read to your kids, and when we examined it, no one knew what it was—except, of course, for J. He loved the *Iliad*, loved it so much he knew everything about it, including art that had been inspired by it. We cleaned it off enough so we wouldn't damage the paint, and we carried it with us for the next little while until we had to lighten our load when we started climbing mountains.

The point is, though, and I'm trying to make a point here, is that we always found something worth finding. I guess that was the great big metaphor when we found that painting, and we had to be in the middle of a pile of dirt to figure it out. We were in the middle of a war but we found so many beautiful moments that I can never seem to forget. I've held onto them all and I'm sharing them with you because even though I look around and see such amazing things in the world, there is still so much hate and so much hurt; a reminder that things are still good is often needed. I don't have that painting in my house anymore—actually, I think it's hanging in Howard's drawing room at the moment, beside a large picture of his four-year-old wonder kid. I don't have the painting but I have the memory. I have a lot of

memories like that one. We're standing in the middle of a field while a plane crashes into the trees and the way the moonlight illuminates Morita's face makes me smile; Peggy is spread out on a beach under the shade of a giant umbrella and Steve is jokingly fanning her with a towel; J puts his arms around me and starts to speak Yiddish in my ear while I'm bleeding from the side and breathing heavy, thinking about Mary's beautiful face. There is always something worth seeing, something worth finding, even when you are in the darkest place. You've been reading with me so far and I'm sure times have seemed bleak at points, and I've sounded like a sad old man reliving his glory days because they're so far behind him. Maybe that's what I'm doing, and that's okay, but I just want you to know, I just want you to look, really look, and try to find some beauty in all of this.

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Norman Rockwell painted a picture of Steve which is now one of the most famous works of art in Modern American history as well as one of the most recognizable images of Captain America. Interestingly enough, none of us other schmucks are depicted in it. That was a choice Peggy made and it served us all well to remain anonymous but it also speaks to how the world viewed us. Steve was a one-man army. Steve Rogers Day is a national holiday. He is a household name and the American Hero, even more famous than George Washington himself. Although he never got any paintings of his face hung in museums, there is a statue of J's preferred rifle sitting pretty in Battery Park and a singular plaque in the National Mall in Washington that honors his service and several military bases named after him. There's the Bear Act, the Official #7 Armed Forces Guideline and Rulebook, he was named Time Magazine's person of the year in 1946 and given the Medal of Honor in '44 along with five of his Jewish kinsman. He was posthumously named an official ambassador to the World Jewish Congress as well as the inspiration for the group known as the Bear Jews who protested, marched, and rioted with the Black Panther Party. In 1962, Peggy gave a talk at Cambridge about J's impact on the world, and as far as I know, about a dozen universities have entire courses dedicated to him.

It isn't what he would have wanted, as we all know, but I think even he would find it interesting how an entire generation of people, their children, their grandchildren, and the society they all live in can be impacted so greatly by a person whose name they don't even know.

Someone asked me not long ago if I was ever jealous that he and Stevie got all the recognition for all the work we did. Honestly, I never even considered being jealous; didn't realize that was an emotion you could feel for your friends. It was natural that they got all the headlines written about them, all the statues and plaques and honors. They died. They died and we were still fighting from the shadows. If anyone knew who we were, that would be it for us, game over. The Krauts would find our families and we'd be on our knees. They died and we could pretend that the Commandos died with them and carry on fighting another war in secret. I don't mean to boast or to demean what we did during the war, but the lads and I got more done after Steve's plane went down and none of us cared if people knew. We were just doing our job. There's something beautiful in that too, if you look close enough. We disappeared into the shadows of war and they were illuminated by the light, just like the moon the night the plane crashed when Steve and J were tossing the shield around and being stupid. There is something beautiful about the fact that they are remembered the way they are and we are remembered the way we are and it's only now that people are looking up and seeing us, like the way you're reading this book and understanding that there were people out there in the mud sacrificing the good years of their lives bringing canned food to soldiers who had been holed up in a hole for three days and were near to starving but still had a sense of humor asking if we had tuna instead of spam.

There's something beautiful about finding a painting buried in the mud and wondering how it even got there and how we all got so wrapped up in it because it was such a mystery. There's something beautiful about the way a war works, half embedded in rules and respect and half chaos and frenzy, gunfire and gore and glory rolled into one messy package. And God, there's something so fucking beautiful about writing about your brothers at three in the morning because that's where I am right now and none of this will make a lick of sense in the morning when I wake but I think I'll keep it anyway because these are the best parts of me, the raw, open, honest parts of me that don't know when to stop pouring out stories and don't know where they all come from anyway. There's beauty in you reading this, reading it and imagining us laughing, Steve holding onto his shoulder where it started to bleed in the fight and J trying to show him this painting while Morita stitched up his neck and just grinning at the strangeness of it all. Maybe you can see it in your mind and J looks like some big hero you've always looked up to, or maybe he looks like a painting, skin white and hair dark like the forest beyond that valley, surrounded by bright blood red and embraced by his favorite friend.

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## N I N E

I should tell you: this won't be happy, this chapter. It doesn't start well, it doesn't end well, and I suppose you should be used to that—you're reading a book about a war and friends who have passed on, but I've been writing about the good stuff and now we're getting to the end and I can't hide the truth from you forever. However, I'd like you to keep in mind the advice I gave in the last chapter; look real hard, keep your eyes peeled, and find something beautiful in all this. It's the only thing that will keep you going.

See, the winter crept up on us. One day it was raining and September was a disgusting mess and the next we found ourselves battling through the snow. The months flew by and before we knew it, we were freezing and starving at the same time. I wish I could elaborate on those times a bit more but those missions are still considered classified and I reckon Peggy will tear me a new one if I talk about then. I can tell you about Bastogne and Stalingrad, though. Your history books will tell you about the Battle of Stalingrad that started in 1942 and ended in 1943. They will also tell you about a subsequent battle that lasted three months at the end of 1945, but won't go into detail about why the battle was fought. They won't tell you anything real or true about Bastogne, maybe because they

considered it a defeat, maybe because they don't know what to say about how entirely fucked up it was.

I'm getting ahead of myself, but I still scratch my head at times when I think about the time we spent in those woods. It was nearly Halloween when this story starts, but we didn't dress up like we would when we were children, in those terrible masks and costumes. Instead, we split up for a bit and it sure as hell took its toll. We had gotten used to each other, to the comfort of that steady snoring at night and the bickering and singing and the ease of which we worked together. I was with Junior and Pinky for a whole month helping them secure a base in German occupied Poland and as well as that worked for us, neither one of them could anticipate when I needed a cigar after a long day, or when my knee was acting up and what to do about it; they didn't know or understand the way Jones would count bullets for me and neither one of them danced quite like J did on those lonely nights when we were drunk and stupid.

That was what we did when we were younger: if your parents went to visit someone, you went with them. If they had kids, then you were lucky and if they didn't, then hopefully they had a record player. I'd volunteer to crank the damn thing so we could hear one song and then I'd crank it again. During the war, records played more than just one song and they didn't require you to do much work either. If we were somewhere safe—a hotel or inn or even a secure base with a machine like that—we'd put some music on and we'd all dance. In October, the dream team were back in Paris with Peg and Howard. We got a wire from Peg telling us that they were listening to I Love My Baby from backstage at a nightclub so we found that record as quickly as we could in the old town we were occupying and we listened to it and imagined our friends were dancing at the same time we were. It brought us comfort where there was so little to be found.

Jones and Morita met them in Paris shortly after and then they all came back to Werbomont before the snow hit. As well as important intel, Peggy had letters from home and the consensus was that everyone was getting sick. Monty's brother was feeling low and Mary was enjoying a cold in Scotland and J's Mama was in the hospital and we all needed thicker socks. Everyone was suffering something fierce. The soundtrack to our nights became all the songs that Falsworth got stuck in our heads, sung to the happy tune of our quiet humming. We were in Werbomont for all but a day when we got the call to arms to go to Bastogne. It was half a day's march to the 101<sup>st</sup> who were poorly hidden in the forest and we wove our way through the dense trees and freshly fallen snow to their position to help them win the Battle of the Bulge, as they would later call it. The enemy had them pinned down and the background music was distant cannons and taunting laughter that we seemed to hear even if there was no one near us. We were asked to tell stories of our triumphs and we listened to our brothers tell their tales of woe and awe and the occasional glorious moment. We compared photographs and read our letters and thought, if this is how we die, perhaps it won't be that bad.

It didn't get that dire that fast, I promise you that. It started out okay enough. Winters and Rogers were the only two people in that whole forest who wouldn't dare let themselves get scruffy. They'd melt some snow and get a fresh shave each morning and all of us—I mean *all* of us—would roll our eyes into the backs of our heads because they were so much like each other and so different at the same time, but they were both annoyingly presentable and that just didn't abide by us very well, we who were growing out beards and letting our hair get wild and caring less and less if we looked as though we hadn't slept in days, because we really hadn't.

Sleep was for the weak and we were getting weaker every day but we didn't realize it. The only person who it didn't affect was Steve, and we secretly hated him for it but he was effective and that was what mattered. It was cold and supplies were shorter than ever. He sacrificed his own meals so we could eat, and we sacrificed our own blankets and clothes and boots so the 101<sup>st</sup> could get a leg up. Peggy, and I hate to say this, but Peggy was more or less shunted aside during the first few days we were there. She eventually decided to get out while she could and did better work intercepting and decoding a message between Hydra personnel, which proved to be the worst thing that ever happened to us. But I'll get to that later.

First, we were stuck. We couldn't exactly just charge into enemy territory and try to outgun them. We couldn't stay where we were for much longer (or so we thought), and we couldn't continue sustaining such heavy losses. It wasn't even the attacks that were killing us; the men were freezing, starving, losing hope. That was the worst part. They didn't think we were making it out of there. They were eager and excited to get there in the first place, and when we showed up, they were elated thinking that the war would be won right there and then with the mere arrival and appearance of Captain America, but it didn't work like that. Strategically, we were at a huge disadvantage. We were almost completely surrounded with minimal perimeter and almost no way in or out that wasn't heavily guarded and patrolled. We stayed where we were for the most part, and hummed ourselves to sleep and held each other in our foxholes, keeping warm and safe and trying to pretend we weren't in the middle of hell.

That's what it was, and don't let anyone try to downplay it. It was freezing hell, sitting there wondering how we were going to get back home and what else we would have to sacrifice to do so. We didn't let ourselves say it out loud but I think we all

agreed that things were looking rather hopeless and unless someone with more authority than us came up with a good plan, there was about to be a mutiny. I mean, if I'm being honest, I'm surprised they didn't see it coming. We had been battling for days, and getting nowhere. We were losing men so quickly we didn't know what to do. I saw so many shell-shocked soldiers quiet and scared in their holes and saw even more being taken back to town to be treated in the makeshift hospital; most of them didn't make it through the trip and those that did weren't coming back. If they did, they were doing so against the advice of every doctor in the place, and they were doing so because they didn't want their brothers suffering alone while they were sitting on their asses.

(I should tell you that neither location was very safe. We were being bombed in the forest and they were being bombed in the town, despite being a so-called secure location. When I took a trip out there because Morita refused to accept that coughing up blood wasn't good for business, we found the hospital blown to bits and the streets torn up and the remaining soldiers scrambling for another building that wasn't falling apart to shelter the wounded. I patched Jim up myself and we didn't mention that the only safe place for miles was also now a war zone and instead we just carried on shooting into the darkness and praying for the snow to let up.)

The snow didn't let up and the temperature dropped and we begged Steve to let us blow something up, but he refused. Between Steve and Dick, we couldn't do anything fun, so we were left with no choice but to do something stupid; the opportunity presented itself when the commander of the Nazi scum, Lüttwitz, demanded our surrender.

While our superiors were debating how to properly respond, J snuck into one of their tents and wrote his own reply, while I stifled my laughter and tried not to think about how much trouble we were going to be in. His response:

To the German Commander.

NUTS!

The American Commander.

I can't say I expected the reaction we received, because I certainly did not. Dick Winters laughed harder than J and I combined and our actual General, Anthony McAuliffe, said he couldn't have come up with something better. Course, it didn't help us regarding the attacks that were to come, but it did lighten the mood considerably. At that point, I'm not even sure how many of our men we had lost in one way or another. Roe had been going crazy looking for plasma and scissors, thread, anything he could use to stitch the men up. Morita had been going crazy himself, keeping everyone warm while he was contracting pneumonia and coughing his lungs out. The 362<sup>nd</sup> medical unit had all been captured. Toye lost his boots, Fallis got frostbite in his fingers, Guarnerie had an infection that needed penicillin. They sent a patrol out and Julian got shot in the neck—we watched Heffron come back from it like his whole world had been torn apart, and maybe it had. We had lost 21 lives in the aid station and hundreds more in the forest and we were still surrounded. Steve, effective as he was, couldn't do anything without making more sacrifices, and at that point, he wasn't willing to do it. Our message to the Germans rang loud and clear: we weren't going to surrender. They could hit us with everything they had and we still wouldn't surrender. We would die before we ever put our guns down and we would die proud.

I remember hurting so bad that I wanted it to end. I thought about Mary and how I would never see her again except in the blackness of death while I drifted away. I remember that fleeting moment where I welcomed it, and then I shook myself and said no to Death, said, this is not how I go, not yet. I think we all had moments like that, where we woke up and wondered if it wouldn't be better to be someplace else where hurt couldn't get to us, but then we thought about our brothers and what we would be leaving them with. We thought of our families at home and how they were getting on and it snapped us right out of whatever mood we were in. At the end of the battle, the number stood at 341 killed, 1,691 wounded, and 516 missing. We were rerouted before it officially ended, on bigger and supposedly more important business, but we suffered alongside those men and scraped by with flesh wounds and infections that we could treat once we were back in a situation room strategizing how to take down Hydra. There were other matters before I get to the end of the line, I'm working my way up to it, I'm taking my time.

We barely noticed that Christmas had passed, or I should say that the lads hadn't noticed. I kept track of the dates because I had something important to give to J that I had been holding onto, but with everything going on, I told myself I would save it for a better and later date. We got letters from home again and his sister had written to let him know his Ma was healthy again and not to worry. Mary was still not well but she was still writing to me so I was in a great mood by the end of the year. We were lucky enough to be away from the battle then, and although Carter was in the worst mood of her life after being snubbed by McAuliffe, she still allowed us to drink well into the night and sleep in on a week day and enjoy a good dance and a laugh together in the hotel bar. We danced all night, we did, and I felt

more alive than I ever had, wondering just how I could have been so stupid to wish for death like that, but we all have our moments. There were moments during the war, and I've probably said this once or twice, where we were just normal people. We weren't soldiers, weren't saving the world, weren't on a secret, never-ending mission to destroy a radical Nazi organization that wanted to kill everything we loved. We were just people, drunk on too many beers and stepping on each other's toes and singing to whatever song was on because we could. Singing Gory, Gory and making up new lyrics. We were just friends having a good time, a family enjoying New Year's, kissing each other because our better halves weren't present or hadn't been found yet and because we loved each other so achingly that a sloppy kiss that tasted of beer was necessary. We had one night of drinking and one morning of sleeping in and then we met with Phillips and talked about a train.

Two months later, Monty, Gabe and I bravely and stupidly volunteered to bring supplies to the men in Stalingrad and we ended up trapped in the snow with them being bombed every single day and eating spam until we got used to the taste. Steve came in and rescued us like the history books dictate but before that, we had to suffer a bit. I've read those sorry excuses for education, the books that my children and grandchildren hated having to study; they only ever go on about how Steve saved the lives of 1,000 men and the Soviets kept their territory. Well, it looked very different from the ground, I'll tell you that. In '44, Hydra scientists had tinkered with some new weapons and decided that their earlier embarrassment in Russia needed to be fixed. They attacked the city again, this time with heavier artillery and more supplies to last the winter, and the Allies responded by sending a whole fucking battalion to their aid.

Course, that decision backfired when the whole fucking battalion got caught in the storm of the century and couldn't feed themselves or dig their way out of the snow or even try and fight back. Hydra was winning and Steve was so focused on finding Schmidt that his priorities weren't where they should have been. We understood, of course, but a thousand men were dying and there was no way to get to them—to us, I should say. I wondered proudly if we were the reason he finally got up and came to Russia. I wondered if the thought of losing us snapped him out of it, or maybe he just realized he needed to do *something* rather than idling around and haunting the faded footprints of Schmidt. Later Howard would tell me that Peggy threatened to save us herself, and maybe that was the final nudge he needed, but I'll never know for sure. Whatever the reason, the history books got that one detail right. Steve came in and saved us, all by himself. I don't know how he did it, I never bothered to ask. I was counting the days again and feeling *déjà vu*, thinking I had been dreaming and I was still in that forest in Bastogne. If only. No, I was in hell again, freezing my toes off this time and rationing with Jones who was counting the days since he had last seen Peggy and regretting his decision to be heroic and brave.

Monty, Jones and I felt more cut off than we ever had, from the world, from our unit, from life itself. I know I can speak for them when I say this because we spent a lot of time during those cold, hard months talking about the loneliness that had crept up inside us. I don't think writing about it will help anyone truly understand what we were going through then, but I need to put the words down, just for myself. There is a kind of catharsis that I have come to know since I started writing this book. I put the words and the sentences and the paragraphs onto the paper and I feel the pain leaving me, the weight being lifted.

Sometimes I miss the feeling of the memories trapped inside my body, inside my mind, tugging and tearing at me, and other times I recognize that they need to be set free. We didn't know many people in Stalingrad, though by the end we had made a fair few friends. There were some soldiers who we became more familiar with than others; those were the ones we would trade letters and stories with, and sit by the fire and correct all the misconceptions they had about us or all the rumors they had heard. We stuck to ourselves for the first little while and tried to remain separate from the men. We expected to be out of there soon. I should tell you, we were wrong. I should also tell you, the three of us were there for over two months but the rest of the soldiers suffered that cold for three and a half months, from November to the end of February. Stalingrad was an icebox and they didn't have one bit of comfort while they were fighting every day. We were supposed to be a resupply and that was all but the snow that hit us sure hit us hard and there was nothing we could do about it.

I should also tell you why we went. It wasn't all heroics, wasn't all trying to help our fellow man. We were running away, in a sense. Dernier and Morita went to Paris to follow a lead from one of ZouZou's people. Howard tinkered away like he did and drank too much coffee and didn't get enough sleep because he needed to stay busy or he'd go crazy. Peggy piled papers in front of her and read through every single interaction she could to try and find something that would help us take Schmidt down. And Steve, well Steve just buried himself away and went on mission after mission tearing Hydra factories and workshops and safe houses apart hoping to find something. I couldn't stay and watch him fall apart, I couldn't help Howard or Peggy, and I couldn't do nothing either. Jones and Falsworth felt the same way, so we packed our bags and tried to do some good, and we got suck.

I wish I could say that we felt good, bringing those men food and blankets and new, warm clothes. I wish I could say we saved a life or two, but the truth is, it didn't matter what we brought or how comfortable we made them, they didn't want to be there—they wanted to be home and safe and with their families. I suppose we all felt, in a way, that a part of our family was gone, so we didn't sympathize with the men who wanted to go home. We still needed to fight, we still needed to stick it out until the war was well and truly over, or we would feel just as useless as we had sitting around waiting for Steve to kill himself. That's what he was doing, and all of us recognized it and none of us could stop him. He was blowing up buildings and charging after Krauts and getting himself into all kinds of messes hoping he'd kick it because then he wouldn't have to feel the pain that was welling up inside him and crushing his hope, his heart, his soul. He was trying to die and none of us could blame him.

I lied to you. I said I was going to tell you what happened and then I danced around it and went forwards to Stalingrad and put it off, but I can't put it off any longer. It's tearing me apart to hold it in and as much as the memory connects me to the past, to what happened, I have to let it go. I have to say it out loud, put it down on paper and tell the world what happened because if I don't, it'll eat me alive. The past is just something that's over. Memories are important and we all look back, God knows I've been looking back my whole life trying to find a way to return to that place. I no longer mourn what happened though I feel deep sorrow and regret that it had to happen at all. I have infinite tenderness for the moments we shared. I remember and I love and I have learned. You can never go back, no matter how much you miss it. And you should never wonder what could have been, too. What happened, happened.

We left Bastogne and Peggy told us that she had cracked the encryption codes Hydra had been using. She had been listening to their radio communications while we were fighting in the forest. For the most part, the information she gathered told her the location of new Hydra facilities, where they would be at a certain time, and whether or not they were planning an attack. She was able to pass this information on and Phillips assembled teams to head their soldiers off; it was largely successful and Hydra didn't realize that we were listening in. The biggest win was a conversation between Zola and Schmidt. This was the break we had been waiting for, dreaming for. This would lead us to Schmidt and would help us take him down for good; we would eliminate Hydra and the Allies would have the advantage they needed to win the war once and for all. Peggy now knew where Zola would be traveling so she pulled us back from Bastogne and we joined her just outside the Austrian Alps.

The information was good: Arnim Zola would be traveling aboard a Schnellzug along the Danube River on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Several communications confirmed it, a scout team had gone ahead and watched Zola board the train, and we were tasked with retrieving him while the train was in motion, before he reached his destination. The thought was, it would be an easier extraction if we didn't have to fight off a hundred Hydra soldiers once the train reached Jägerhaussiedlung. It was a good plan, it was a carefully executed plan, it was a highly thought of plan. It went horribly wrong.

The night before, we had some good wine and ate a hearty stew that Monty had made. Steve shaved the remnants of the beard that had been growing in Bastogne and Jones and I walked the train tracks to secure the zip line Howard had reinforced for us. J complained about his hair getting too long so Steve cut it nice and short for him, with a little coif in the front

so he could run his fingers through it the way he did when he was nervous or bored or scared or he wanted something to do with his hands. That morning, we set up and waited for the train to pass. The calculations had all been done and all we had to do was zip down there and secure the payload. It was up to Jones to get up front where the conductor would be—he'd follow Howard's instructions to stop the train and the conductor would no doubt announce a problem with the engine. Steve and J would locate Zola and the three of them would escape before any soldiers aboard the train discovered them. The way Howard had explained what needed to be done, the train would be idle for ten minutes and would start up again. The conductor would continue the journey and no one would even be aware that Zola was gone. Of course—God, if this isn't the catchphrase for this book—things don't always go as planned.

I was up on that mountain keeping time. Dernier and Falsworth had taken Steve's bike up ahead in case they ran into any trouble. I was up on that mountain unable to do anything but wait. Our perfect plan, our excellent timing and precise execution and all those weeks of listening to Zola talk about how he was transporting ammunition and no one, not one person thought about what that actually meant. I don't know what happened inside that train, inside the compartment that got blown apart when an exo-suit attacked Steve and Bear. I don't know what they faced or what went wrong, what aspect of our plan didn't account for this kind of attack. He knew we were coming, Zola did. He planned for our plan and he was ten steps ahead. I don't know how long Steve hung onto the outside of the train before Jones stopped it on the tracks or how he was physically able to do it. I was up on that mountain unable to do anything, just watching as the train sped away and one of my friends fell into the Danube River never to be seen again.

I took the jeep down the long way to meet with the guys and found them at our rendezvous getting Zola into shackles. Gabe and Monty weren't talking, Dernier was holding a gun to Zola so he wouldn't run, and Steve, well Steve was a wreck. Bear fell right in front of him. He *died* right in front of him. We couldn't look for him right then, it wasn't safe. We got Zola back to base and then we headed right out. Steve was catatonic. I've never seen anyone like that before, not before the war, not during the war, not after. I've never seen someone so full of life, so happy and exuberant and downright joyful just change; he was hollow, empty, like he had died, himself. He cried for hours, while we drove back to base, while we gave our report and said the words out loud—J was missing in action. Later we would accept that he didn't survive the fall, and we would look for days for a body to bury and find nothing but snow and ice. Steve cried and cried. He stopped and then he started again. Forget what people say about Captain America embodying the macho, masculine, ideal man; he cried and wept and sobbed and cursed the stars and vowed to burn Hydra down to the ground. He drank until there was nothing left to drink and it couldn't numb his pain, nothing could. We lost J and all of us felt it, deep in our bones, in our hearts, in the depths of our souls, but Steve felt it in a way we couldn't ever know. We lost our brother and we would never be able to fill the gap that he left, even if we had wanted to, and we certainly didn't. J was not a substitute for anything and there was, is, will never be a substitute for J, if you'll forgive me saying so, anywhere.

So, we ran away. We went to Paris and Stalingrad and buried ourselves in work and suicide missions and we tried to find something to do with our hands. Nothing really helped. Nothing will ever help. What happened, happened.

It's been 41 years and some days I wake up and wonder if this has all been a dream. It takes me a moment to realize that I'm home and safe in the arms of my wife and that the battlefield is a distant memory. Some days I wake up and I am sad that I can't look to my left and see J reading a book, putting little notes in the margins, head on Steve's shoulder and his legs stretched out over Gabe's. I think he was my very best friend in the world. I had only known him for a short while if you really think about it, but I felt that, so deeply, right inside my heart. I loved him. In those moments when we were together, and many moments to come after we had parted, I loved him.

I have memories that I can't explain, memories that I get confused about sometimes. I'm not sure if he was the one with me when I got shot in '44 or if he was the one who I danced with on New Year's or if he was even alive when I declared to the boys that I was gonna ask Mary to be my wife when we got home. I can't remember where he was sitting when we had dinner in Paris, the night Peggy kissed Gabe for the first time, and I don't recall how long he kept the sword after that legendary battle.

I never told no one, but I'm telling you. During that fight, when Troy had fallen, J had taken a knife to the side and I had seen the blood and the gash and had bandaged him up with my bare hands. The next day, there was no wound. When we took off the bandage to clean it, there was only his skin and the freckle formation that Steve said looked like Ursa Minor and Cepheus. I don't know if it was God or the Devil or if Bear really was an angel, but what was there the night before had healed like a miracle. We weren't in any position to question a miracle in the middle of a war so I changed the bandage and we kept our mouths shut and he lived a little longer, until he boarded that train. I haven't thought about that in so many years—I wonder if it, too, was one of my dreams, one of my muddled memories.

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I imagine that wherever he is, it is just like that. Wounds heal easily and his skin is like the stars, reflecting eons of time and space and mystery. I imagine that his hair is freshly cut and he's in his blue overcoat and he's somewhere with a view. He always liked to look out the window and stare out at the city; he'd talk about what the people were doing with their day and how trivial and silly it seemed in the grand scheme of things. He haunts me the way all my brothers do—laughter in the night, a glimpse of his smile in the corner of my eye. I went to a new city last year and I swear I heard his voice calling out to me. I look for him wherever I go and I know I won't find him but I look anyway. I wonder if we had done something different if he would have lived. If I had gone instead of Jones, if we had left one second before or one second after, if we had skipped the wine and got more sleep or if he had left his curls the way they were. I thought I saw him when I was drunk on Christmas Day some time ago and I was closing my eyes and slurring my words, speaking to his brother convinced it was him.

I spoke in rhyme, the way he used to do when we were lonely and cold, the way he did once, telling me old Jewish lore in a frozen foxhole. My old friend: I can remember when you cut your hair; I never saw you again. Now the cities we live in could be different stars, and I search for you in every passing car.

## T E N

God, I'm so scared to continue writing. I feel the need to protect you from what's about to come, even though you already know the story and you have already felt the pain of a nation whether you were around when it happened or you read about it later and learned about it in school and celebrated in March by setting off fireworks and saluting the stars. I'm scared because I've had to live with it all my life but you haven't—you don't know the story like I do, the slow decay, the destruction that took hold of us all. You don't know how we each fell apart in our own way and then pieced each other together, bit by bit, day by day, holding on in the only way we knew how. You don't know the tragedy of it all, that we knew it would happen eventually. We were just biding our time, holding onto the parts of our lives that connected us for as long as we could. The days following the train incident were the worst ever.

The fact that we had to give our report, inform people—Carter, Stark, Phillips—that Bear was missing, was tough enough when we were still hysterical and telling them we would go out into those mountains again and find him. The fact that days later we had to call up his mother and tell her that there was no body to bury, well, I have known hell in so many ways now. Before I made that call, we went through the official motions. This was necessary but it didn't make us less resentful.

We needed to mourn our friend, not fill out paperwork and tell our stories to people who didn't care about the pain behind it. I wish I could tell you that we were polite about it, that we cooperated and said the right things and didn't tell commanding officers to go fuck themselves, but I have tried not to lie to you and I won't start now. We lasted a day of answering questions while Steve was numb all over and would only tell Peggy what had happened, through blurry eyes, with a hoarse voice and trembling words. After that, we marched back out to where we had boarded the train and walked along the river. It was half frozen over and the ground was soft with snow that had fallen the night before. We walked in a straight line and tried to conceal our footprints where we could. Howard searched from above and Peggy led our party, looking back at us to reassure and give us hope, an optimistic smile upon her face. Knowing Peggy, she had already accepted what we could not, but she humored us and went along with our wild goose chase, she knew that we would need as much evidence as we could get before we gave up. We camped out that night and slept in silence, taking turns on watch and staring at the black of our tents, and in the morning, we set out again. It was, as you know, a lost cause. We never found a body. Whether the river swallowed him up and refroze, or he landed where it was still flowing and it carried him further away, we will never know. Monty wondered if he hadn't been buried in the snow, or lost among the rocks, but whatever did happen, we never found out. We searched for days for a sign, a shadow, a dream, but came up empty.

I don't know what was worse: that we couldn't bury him or that no one had officially known who he was. His real name was hidden, just like ours had been, his image was stored away where no one could see him. He was a ghost story, a legend like Patroclus, but at least history knew of *him*—it was as though

Bear had never existed in the first place, like he was a part of our imagination, dreamed up to make the nights easier and the days brighter. That's where he is now, in that place between sleep and awake, that place where you still remember dreaming, that's where he'll be waiting. In Neverland with the faeries and Peter Pan and the Lost Boys.

While we were freezing our nuts off waiting for a rescue that didn't seem like it would come, boys would ask us about Bear and we'd reply, "He ain't with us anymore." It was an open-ended statement, could have meant a lot of things, and it certainly would have made us feel better if it had meant he shipped home early or was recovering in a hospital somewhere, warm and happy, or he got a job behind a desk, a promotion—anything. Everyone knew by the way we said it though, and they didn't ask too many questions about it and instead stuck to the inquiries about our missions. They must have seen the empty look behind our eyes and thought better of prying. I sometimes wish they would have asked so I could have told them: he saved my life, in more ways than I'll ever be able to tell, and you know, after all this time, he's still saving my life.

That winter was bleak. That may be the only way I can properly describe it. Bleak. Miserable. A torture to stay alive when our friend had died and we had no sure way of avenging him or finding him. Two months we waited, hiding in Stalingrad like cowards unable to face what had happened to us, what had been taken from us. Two months we kept quiet about our broken hearts and the mad desire in us to kill or be killed in order to feel like we were accomplishing something. Cowards, all of us. We all hid away in our pain and forgot to live and Bear would have been disappointed with all of us if he was there to see it. Two months we didn't talk about him to each other or anyone else.

The wound was too fresh and the hurt had cut us so deep that we couldn't feel where he had been any longer. I was writing one of my letters to Mary when I decided maybe I should write a letter to Bear, tell him how much I missed him. He'd never read it and I never showed anyone, never said the words out loud or admitted to myself that I was grieving and this was a way to say goodbye. I started it, wrote some words, and never finished it. I wasn't ready to let him go.

I don't think I can talk about that any longer, so I've got to go forward and beyond his time, to a place both familiar and foreign to me. This is the place in the road I didn't want to reach, the place I hoped I could protect you from.

In Stalingrad, I saw a Steve Rogers I barely recognized. He truly was a different person after Bear fell; half of himself and no longer whole. There was something not quite right about the way he conducted himself around that time. I last saw him in Höflein for the debrief and for a meeting of minds where we discussed where we would proceed. We had searched for longer than was safe and came up empty handed so we were forced to admit defeat, something we weren't keen on doing. He called Bear's Mama and couldn't finish the call; I spoke to his sister and listened to his mother sobbing in the background. We didn't have any other missions before Monty, Gabe and I shipped out to Russia. He hadn't reached his breaking point just then, but we were starting to see it. See, Steve didn't like bullies but he never wanted to kill anyone. He liked fighting, sure, but that wasn't why he joined the army. You'd meet boys who lived for the killing, who wanted to get up close so they could see the light leave the enemy's eyes. Those men scared me sometimes. You did what you had to do and you took pleasure knowing that you

stopped some Nazi soldier from killing an innocent person, and from spreading the hate that the Nazis were so good at infecting the world with, but you never took pleasure in the act of killing, and if you did then it haunted you afterwards; you felt dirty and wrong if you had thoughts like that. Well, I'll tell you—the Steve that showed up in Stalingrad, the one I saw a glimpse of when we parted ways, he liked killing. That man was lost in a wilderness so vast you couldn't see the end but you knew—I knew—the only way out of it for him *was* the end. J wasn't coming back; Steve wasn't either.

He wasn't worried about his soul anymore. He didn't care if St. Thomas turned him away at the gates and cast him down to the flames. He wanted to destroy anyone and anything that had a hand in taking Bear away. And he did it. You know the story: Zola was ready to talk after months of prison. Steve saved a thousand men who were freezing to death and Peggy called us all back into the fold. The group was back together and Schmidt was finally within our grasp. We had a mission, *the* mission, the mission to end all missions. If we succeeded, Hydra would be without a leader and we could pick off the remaining soldiers easily. We could give the Allies the advantage they needed; we could win. I have said this before, but I feel the need to reiterate. It was more important than ever that we succeed. We had failed on the train and suffered greatly because of it. This was our last chance. If we failed again, it would crush us.

I should tell you—it crushed us anyway. Success meant a failure of a different kind. Save the world, lose another friend. You all know what happened but you have no idea how much it hurt. We had prepared for it. You should know that too. We had prepared for Steve to die. That was the only way this could end and the only way he would let it end. He didn't see another way.

We didn't either. Bear was gone and Steve was on a path that took him places we feared. We could barely recognize him behind the pain, the numb that had taken him over and twisted him into something unnatural and frightening and frightened. When we spoke about it later, the boys and I all agreed that the Steve we saw in those last few days was a Steve we had never known but who must have resided in him somewhere. The serum enhanced everything about him. His good qualities became great, his strength realized. It enhanced his vision, his hearing, his health in general. It also enhanced his heart. I imagine that Steve had always felt things strongly, hence why he got into so many fights as a kid. I imagine that he felt things even more intensely after Erskine and Howard experimented on him. The Steve we knew was gone before he ever died but we didn't mourn him like we mourned J. He walked toward death with his head held high; he chose to save millions of lives by sacrificing his own and his choice was clear and thought out, there was no going back from it. He was scared, this much I know. His voice was shaking over the radio and he couldn't find the words to speak to us, but he made a choice and I respect him for it as much as I hate him for it.

There's no a day that goes by where I don't miss my friend and want him back, but it's easy to miss Steve, it doesn't hurt quite the same as missing J. Steve is with me wherever I go. I can walk to the grocery store and see his image in the shop window, I can flip through channels on TV and see an ad that refers to him, I can hear his name on the radio and see his picture in books and watch that terrible film they made about him with Robert Redford and Natalie Wood. I can miss him with the whole world, and I feel good about that, but I'm not sure the world understands just what they're really missing.

They miss the icon, the guy punching Hitler on a stage, the comic persona who said golly instead of fuck and who always respected the chain of command, which Steve certainly did not. They miss the guy who saved the world—I miss the idiot who saved my cigar from falling into a puddle once. Steve was a force of nature and a complete fucking moron. He was funny and charming and he didn't realize just how much we learned from him. All the while, we were teaching him how to fight and how to shoot and how to drive without killing us all in a horrible crash and he was teaching us how to be good people. He was teaching us to look at life from a different perspective. Maybe I haven't talked enough about this because it's all pouring out of me like a flood. Steve was a wonder, and I don't say that because of what you've read in some book. He didn't take no for an answer, but he always accepted criticism and he always listened to suggestions and he always compromised where he could. If he ever said no, he really meant, convince me. He was lazy and silly and if there wasn't a war going on, I'm sure he would have loved to be at home, stretched out on a beat-up couch with a sketchbook and some sharp pencils, sketching the gorgeous sight in front of him. He was an artist, a true artist. Steve didn't just draw, he captured something with each sketch that caught your attention no matter what. He managed to draw what no one ever looked at, the details we all missed. Steve saw the best in everyone and he made sure, he made damn sure that everyone else could see it too. He stood up for people who couldn't stand up for themselves, he protected them and made sure they knew and understood their worth. He was—he was an amazing person. The world is better because Steve Rogers lived in it and it would have been that way even if he wasn't Captain America but I think it helped, I think it changed things in such a significant way that we can never go back to the way it was.

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I don't think we can ever, as a society, make a decision that will affect others and not think: what would Steve Rogers do? It is so deeply engrained in our way of life now that even though I miss my friend, he will never truly leave me. I wrote a letter to Steve as well, after he died. It was short, just like my letter to J, but much more straight forward, and much less heart breaking. You should know, also, that whatever Steve Rogers would do: you should do the opposite.

## E L E V E N

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2945, Steve Rogers crashed a plane in order to save millions of lives. He defeated Schmidt and started the domino effect that would end Hydra. He joined his mother, his father, and his best friend in whatever plane of existence they resided in, where they had been waiting to greet him with open arms. Again, we searched for a body and couldn't find one; again, we buried an empty coffin. In a little cemetery where J's Mama was born, there are two gravestones for two lost friends. In Brooklyn, where they grew up, there is a statue of Captain America and a plaque that reflects the words spoken at his national funeral. Though the statue wasn't erected until the 60's, the words were spoken to a nation—not one of us can forget what Peggy said that day. What was said to us in private, however, was much different than what you've heard every year on the holiday. It involved a lot more cursing and a story about Steve, stark naked and barely holding his bits so an entire group of Majors couldn't see too much of him. It involved a lot of crying and drinking and calling him out on every stupid thing he ever did—those events could fill a plaque or two of their own, or maybe a dozen. Steve Rogers day didn't become a holiday until years later but we celebrated every year anyway, in our own way, toasting to our good health and his and J's sacrifice and reminiscing about the days when we were all together.

The point of Steve Rogers day, the real point since it started in a pub in London, was about celebrating the man behind the shield, the *real* Captain America that we followed into battle; that Bear followed to his death. If you look at it from my perspective, and from the perspective of anyone who fought with Steve, you can see it this way: he was a man who was once deaf, half blind with asthma, who was in and out of hospitals most his life and told he would never be fit enough to live through winter, let alone into his late twenties; the Irish son of a single mother who immigrated to America with nothing in her pockets but some rusted gold and spare change; an advocate who worked closely with women, people of color, men and women who identified as gay, lesbian and transgendered. Steve was one of a kind. He was the beginning of the end of an age I'm glad I can put behind me. He was a door that opened to a brighter world, a more understanding and accepting world. That is his biggest contribution and the one that emboldens me to continue his great work. Steve Rogers, Captain America, the man who saved America was, to put it simply, average. Until science took hold of him, there was nothing special about him, and at the same time, there was everything.

None of us are special, that is what I've learned from war. Death takes us all the same way in the end. Whether we die from a bullet or falling from a train or crashing a plane into the Arctic, Death takes us all in her arms and no one knows where we go from there. We spend all our time on Earth avoiding Death, hiding from her, finding ways to prolong our life so we don't have to say goodbye, and then—just like that—she takes us away like we were never here at all. Quick and as easy as falling asleep. We enter a dream and never wake up and I suppose, there is comfort in that, knowing that it will be peaceful.

I don't know where we go when we die but I have imagined it many times. The first time I thought about it was when J's Mama said Sarah would have to watch over them, make sure they weren't causing too much trouble, and I thought of an overgrown backyard like the one Mary and I came home to after being in London for too long. I imagined they were children again, running around throwing a ball back and forth, and Sarah would call after them because supper was ready. I imagined all our friends were there in that yard, playing different games and enjoying different things, but all young and pure, untouched by war, joyous and eager to play. I saw Steve and J, Toye and Jones, Martin, Evans, More, Basilone, Rodriguez. I saw the nameless men I never had the chance to meet, and the women, the children whose lives were torn apart by the Nazis. They were all laughing, playing, waiting to be called in for to have dinner with their families. It was nice, though I don't think heaven is like that anymore, I have a different idea of what it would be. That first image of it, though, it sure put a smile on my face.

When Falsworth passed, I thought heaven might look a little bit like his house, the way we decorated it when he got married. I thought it would be a dinner party with all your friends and family and wine that never stopped being poured. You'd stay awake talking and never want to sleep because the party would have no reason to end. You'd laugh and dance and sing and kiss the person you'd love and then you'd sneak off with them and have your own party, but it would never end. I wanted him to have something special, you see. Monty died in his sleep but it was still a shock for us all. He wasn't in poor health, but he had been complaining a lot in the days before it happened, holding his heart and then insisting it was nothing. We should have insisted he see someone but he was stubborn just like the rest of us. It wasn't bad, the way he went, but I wish he hadn't all

the same. I wish he had stayed. I wish the party could have gone on a little longer so we could celebrate. That's what I thought when I said goodbye to him; maybe the party will go on where he's going, and he never has to go to sleep.

It was Jacques next and cancer that stole him away from us. We had some warning, of course, but within weeks, he was gone and we were another friend down, another empty seat at our table. I imagined in heaven there would be no suffering, no matter what had happened before that, no matter what you had done while you were alive. I used to be a religious man and somewhere along the way, my faith got mixed up with my facts. The battlefield became my church and sitting on a pew listening to someone who hadn't experienced the world the way I had seemed like a mighty tall order, so I stopped going. I still attend, when Mary drags me along, but I don't pay as much attention as I think I should. When Dernier passed away, I had been expecting it, and yet, I was still swept off my feet by it. He was in the hospital one day and I was bringing him coffee and telling him about this fellow I met with Howard, and then I was walking into an empty room and wondering where the time had gone. In his heaven, he would never have to feel pain and he would never know the torture of being in a world where his friends were slowly but surely disappearing from view. He would be surrounded by all of them, reminiscing about our days in the field and telling wild stories he thought we had all forgotten. He would be happy—I think that's the theme here; they would all be the happiest they had ever been,

I've reached the point where Jim has left us too, and like I told you at the beginning, I held his hand when he took his last breaths. He told me he would say hello for me and I felt a great rush of jealousy, something I didn't know was possible to feel when it came to your friends, but I felt it all the same. When I

think about heaven in the context of where Jim has gone, I imagine he has passed through a great archway, pushed a heavy oak door open and on the other side, our brothers were waiting for him, clapping their hands and cheering as though he's found the middle of a maze and won a prize. I imagine they greet him with open arms and warm smiles and ask him to fill them in on what they've missed, and he starts talking a mile a minute, not wanting to forget a single detail. Maybe they just walk a little, maybe they reach a destination, but when I think about it, when I imagine how the scene would play out, they are on a bridge from our world to the next, walking slowly and laughing about memories, and when they reach the end, they will cross over and think of it no longer.

It's just Gabe and I now and the days are passing slowly, as I hope they continue to. I don't want to prolong life, nor do I want to avoid Death, but I cannot imagine what heaven would look like for me, or for Jones. I can only imagine it when it has already come to pass, when we have already left this life, until then I feel wrong closing my eyes and wondering about where we will be when we've died. Heaven to me is a concept that I still don't understand. When I was a child, it was always in the context of hell. If you do good, you go to heaven and if you do bad, you go to hell, but that certainly doesn't apply anymore. Good and bad are such debatable terms, concepts themselves. You do bad to prevent further wrongdoings and you do good to make up for all the bad you've done. You do good because it feels right but your actions cause a chain reaction that results in further problems. It never ends. Good and bad don't exist, there is no right or wrong, there is only what you do and why you do it and what happens from there. I killed people to save the world and I would do it again. Does that gain me entry into heaven?

If I had to guess, I would say no, but I imagine my friends in heaven and they are all in the same boat as me. We all did the same terrible things and the same wonderful things as well. Maybe I do still think of heaven as a reward, but I no longer think of hell as a punishment. I have endured punishment, I have been tortured, I have been haunted and plagued by things I cannot rid myself of; hell cannot compare to the life of pain I have already experienced and would gladly experience again. Perhaps that was not real pain, perhaps it was not real hell, but I challenge Death, I challenge anyone to find something that hurts me more than losing my brothers. It cannot be done, and so all I have is this concept of heaven that I can't even imagine for myself. All I have is the hope that one day I will die and cross a bridge or attend a party or play in a yard that resembles J's Mama's house and wait for dinner to be served, and truly, I cannot think of anything better. J.M. Barrie was right: to die would be an awfully big adventure.

Maybe I say all of this to make myself feel better, and that wouldn't be the worst thing I've done, but the truth is, I say all of this because I have to believe in a happy ending. Mary tells me faerie tales sometimes at night when I am bothering her because she knows it makes me frightened to go into the woods alone and she enjoys exposing my weaknesses when I am being bothersome. She tells me of the Ashrays and the Gruagach, the Heather Pixies and Buachailleen, the Sea Gardeners and Ghillie Dhu. She warns me about Kelpies and advises against wandering too close to certain areas lest the Nuckelavees take a liking to me. I brush it off but every now and then when I am in the field or having a walk, my mind plays tricks on me and I think there is some family of fair folk watching my every move, waiting for me to offend them so they can strike and take me to their lair.

Although I know it is silly, the Scots are most particular about how they treat those folks. We greet the magpies and walk the long way around that particular hill with the stone in the middle and when we go to Inverness for the weekend, we don't go too close to Craigh na Dun anymore because we carried bad luck with us for a year after the first time. Mary apologizes to the hawthorn bushes when she prunes them and I walk backwards into the house if I hear strange noises at night and whisper goodnight to all who dwell near us and thank us for allowing us safe passage. I have thought about Death so many times over the years, and how it is so closely woven with my wife's culture and my own experiences. We make all these offerings to fair folk in the hopes that they will continue to leave us be in the same manner that we make offerings to Death in the hopes we can stay on her good side.

The truth is, though, she only has one side. You can flatter her as much as you'd like, if it's your time, it's your time. I've often thought this was fair as I was growing up, and I thought when my time came, I would be ready for it, but lately I'm not sure. I want to greet Death as a friend, walk hand in hand with her and enter the afterlife with pride, but I also feel an unexplainable anger toward her. She took my friends from me and that I cannot forgive. Regardless of what utopias I imagine for each of them, I still cannot recover from the hurt that was caused when they were ripped from my life, some quickly and others painfully slow, forcing me to watch them wither away. Heaven may exist and they may be there, but Hell exists too and it is the torture of watching the place where your loved ones once were and understanding that they will never be there again.

So, I look to the past and to the future simultaneously. They are one and the same these days.

I live in the battlefield and in this house on a hill too close to the faeries and I carry the dead with me wherever I go. I hope for their sakes that they have found heaven in some form but I dread the day that I have to face my own version of the afterlife. Perhaps it won't live up to what I have envisioned; perhaps I will be further disappointed with what Death brings to me. All that I know now is that I walk a very thin line between here and there and no matter how much I write, and how much lighter I feel without the burden of memories on my back, I still feel the pain deep in my bones, like an old battle wound that hasn't healed, a phantom limb that aches though it's long gone, the odd feeling I get every now and then like someone is watching me from afar. I don't know what any of it means.

I know that I set out to tell you about our adventures; I wanted to share the story with you. The truth is, it was going to come out one way or another and I wanted you to hear it from me first, to hear the whole truth about what we did, what we saw, how we lived in those few years where we were whole and together and falling apart at the same time. When I started writing this, that was all I wanted to do, and now that I'm reaching the end, I feel that there is a greater purpose here, something we can aspire to do together. I feel like we can look forward to things now with a greater understanding of where we come from—because if you really think about it, a lot of what you enjoy in life comes from the things we did during the war. A lot of what society looks like, the way businesses are run, the way the government makes decisions, the way families are created and held together, and the way people think about each other comes from, well, us. After the war, the world was a completely different place. I'm not going to be so bold as to say that we brought about world peace. Vietnam still happened, didn't it? The Cold War tore through us all. There are people at war in

countries I've never been to and people at war right here in America. I will never credit us with solving everything, we barely scratched the surface, but we certainly had an impact. I should say that Steve did, because after all, he was the one everyone knew about. You might even be learning our names just as you read this, and that's perfectly fine by me. There is a reason for that, as I've explained, but the time has come to put that behind us as well. It's all out in the open now, who we are, what we did, why we did it. The world will know about Hydra and Schmidt and Zola. You will know about the Commandos, about J, about the enormous contribution Peggy had that has been downplayed by a lot of people. Maybe this book will put an end to some of the speculation, maybe it will cause some more, who knows. I just wanted—I wanted you to know that there was always something else to the story. It wasn't just the Nazis and the Allies. It wasn't just the good and the bad. It was us, the grey area, the in between parts, the shadows that no one ever knew existed. Steve shaped the century, but he didn't do it alone and it's important that you know that.

I told my daughter once, when she was feeling low and her Mama couldn't find the words to console her: nothing is exactly what it seems all of the time; there are layers upon layers upon layers that make up the world we live in and the life we know. What is true today may not be true tomorrow, not because the truth changes, but because you discover things along the way that add to the story or change your perspective or open your eyes to something you never would have seen before you made another discovery.

You live in a world where the president turns a blind eye to the thousands of men dying in his backyard and yet, I can tell you certainly that he will regret it until the end because you also

live in a world where people remember the man who sacrificed his life so that others could live and that man wouldn't have stood for such injustice. People are weak, they have their faults and shortcomings, and those that are weakest are often the most powerful, but the *people*, the people you see every day, living ordinary lives, suffering and succeeding side by side, loving and hating and choosing this life, the person you are, reading this book—you are strong. You are the result of years and years and decades of love, an outpour from people just like you who took Steve's sacrifice as a rallying point to be better. I have seen weak men become strong, emboldened by the influence of Captain America, I have seen families grow stronger together as they accept their differences and love each other anyway, I have seen people be given a chance when the game was rigged against them from the start because someone, somewhere, remembered Peggy Carter telling the world that Steve just wanted to help end the war and that he did so by accepting help from anyone who was willing to do good.

Things are not perfect, not even a little bit, but they are better and they will continue to get better if we continue to follow his example and fight for people who cannot fight for themselves. We had a saying, the boys and I, and we would tell it to ourselves on particularly difficult missions. We would remind ourselves that this was why we were out there in the mud and the dirt and the snow and the blood and the endless battle. We protect those who cannot protect themselves. It sounded nicer when Dernier said it in French—*nous protégeons ceux qui ne peuvent pas se protéger eux-mêmes*—but it was all the same to us. That was what Steve stood for. That was what Steve died for. That is his legacy and that is what we, as a society should move toward, actively, always, every single day.

I lied to you again: heaven is here, it is in all of us.

## T W E L V E

Things went by in a strange sort of way after we said goodbye to our friends. The war didn't end immediately and we didn't stop fighting. The Nazis sustained a heavy loss with Schmidt gone but it was still our job to find and destroy the rest of Hydra and to take as many Nazis into custody as we could. The Geneva Conventions made it so that we couldn't kill our prisoners but I know a fair few soldiers who looked the other way and said it was self-defense. Me, I just didn't wait for them to surrender, and that's the truth—never offered them the option. Just like Steve and J before him, if they wanted to live for their cause, they should have been ready to die for it too. They shouldn't have expected mercy; with Steve gone, there wasn't one man in our merry band of assholes who had sympathy for the Krauts. As we had always done, we took no prisoners and paid no mind to rules that governed other men. The government pardoned our actions and dismissed us, saying grief turned us this way. Grief or anger or just an empty place in our hearts that needed to be filled. We filled it alright. That was how we carried out the remainder of the war, in haughty silence, killing the organization that took our happiness away. We spun out of control and didn't recognize ourselves or each other and we only reeled ourselves in when we were in the company of others and had to play nice, and had to pretend we were okay.

We were far from it. When Hitler killed himself, we gave all our points to soldiers who didn't have enough so they could get home to their families. We signed on to stay and fight and do more stupidly brave missions for Peggy because we didn't know how we would face the real world after what we had experienced. The President himself insisted that we move on with our lives; he told us we were free. We knew better than that. We were still chained to the trenches, tethered to the trees and the foxholes and the smell of violence in the air. We couldn't go home, not really. Not yet.

It was May when Peg told us about something the 5<sup>th</sup> found in a field. An anomaly, she called it. We were still wrapping things up and putting them in a box, biding our time before we had to rejoin the world and we hadn't made the decision to stay just yet, so of course we jumped at the opportunity for some mystery. It was only me and Jim but it still made a difference and we finished off some more Hydra goons and managed not to get ourselves blown up. That was, for the time being, our last mission. The next day was coined VE Day and Jim and I joined the lads in a dusty old pub to drink and salute our fallen comrades. Our fates were still hanging in the balance, but several things were clear: I needed to go to Scotland, Gabe needed to get married, and we needed to get home, to have a proper funeral for Steve and Bear after Jacques, Monty and Jim saw their families. These things were our only priorities and, as we had the approval and encouragement of the President of the United States, we were able to do so unchallenged.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945, I took a train to Lallybroch and for the second time since I had met her, Mary slapped me in the face, eyes full of tears, pulling me close and calling me an idiot for taking so long. Back in London, Peggy was looking for a dress.

The lads all went home and enjoyed a warm meal from their mothers and we called over the next couple months to hear a familiar voice on the other end.

You gotta understand what it was like going back home. I have to apologize, we're almost at the end and I haven't told you a lot about myself, about my life before the war, and that's because I joined the war to escape the life I lived. In some ways, I regret that, and in others, it was the most freeing thing I could have done while I was young. I told you that my Pa was shell-shocked, that his memory was going and he wasn't himself. It stripped away everything good about him and all he could be was the memory of what he had seen. See, my Pa didn't have brothers like I did. He had friends, sure, and he knew soldiers who had his back and he had theirs, but he didn't have brothers. He never knew what it was like to be with only one person for two or three days while you were separated and racing to a rendezvous, hoping you all made it out alive. He didn't know what it was like hearing someone snore and being able to identify with certainty who it was. He had no idea what it was like to love someone the way I had loved my brothers; the men I would give my life for, not only because we were fighting a war together but because they were my family, my home, my reason for going on. In the end, the loneliness was too much for my Pa, and he took his life on a beautiful summer's day while I was picking Ma up from work. She was quieter after he left us, but every now and then she would smile as though she had just seen him in the doorway, passing by to go out to the yard, the way I see my brothers now when they come to visit me.

I spent a whole month with Mary, wrapped up in her arms, apologizing for a whole set of things now, and then I took a plane back to Boston to see my mother and sit quietly with her while she fussed about my beard and the state of my fingernails

and told me with her smile how proud she was. I look just like my father, exactly like him, and I imagine it was hard for my Ma to see me and not think of him. It was hard for me too, to go home and try to be the person who left, the person who wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and save the world. She watched me very carefully when I was there, maybe thinking I'd follow a little too closely, maybe misinterpreting my grief for something else and worrying that her son might go out the same way her husband did. But I had my brothers, and we promised to get together again and give our friends a proper goodbye. So, even if I had those thoughts in my head, which I swear to you I didn't, I had promises to keep, and I intended on keeping them.

It was the same for everyone, from what I gathered. Family felt foreign, like that aunt you see once a year who asks you when you're getting married and can't remember how old you are or what you do for a living. Conversation seems strained, like everyone was trying to avoid asking what the war was like and you were bursting to talk about it. If you came back, you came back a hero, but no one asked what you did to deserve that title. No one asked how many Nazis I killed, no one asked how many friends I lost. I still couldn't let on that I worked with or even knew Steve—this was crucial and it was made abundantly clear that we were not to discuss our status as Commandos. The best years of my life were over and I couldn't talk about them, and to make matters worse, no one was brave enough to ask. So, I got on the phone and I called my friends and I sighed, happy and relieved to hear home again.

On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, World War II officially ended with the surrender of Japan and two days later, a memorial was held in Washington, DC for America's fallen hero, Steve Rogers. To this day, it is spoken of as though something of a myth.

After all, Steve Rogers was a legend.

As I've told you, Peggy spoke at his funeral, and gave perhaps the most memorable eulogy in American history. It started with a smile and ended with the whole world in tears, myself included. It was six months to the day that he died, or disappeared as the media kept insisting, refusing to believe what we had all finally admitted to ourselves. I think people half expected he would pop up and say surprise and they could go on worshipping him without knowing anything real about him, but instead they got a lot of beautiful words and a statue of a martyr put up where he was raised and I got to drink with my brothers again and call him an asshole for getting stabbed as many times as he did.

We took a trip with J's family so we could bury the boys properly and I spent some time at their house in Brooklyn wondering just how he put up with all those siblings. It may not have seemed like a lot to him, but an only child can only take so much. I didn't want to leave and I certainly didn't want to stay but I didn't quite know where to go from there. Peggy was going back to New York, relatively undercover and working with Stark (the timeline of their adventures together escapes me because the next time I saw her, it was '46 and a little girl stabbed me and we were a little too busy to play catch up), Gabe was spending time with Edwin Jarvis trying to keep him from having a heart attack, Jim was going home to get some uninterrupted sleep, and Falsworth and Dernier were back in Europe.

Over the next year, we did odd jobs and special missions that required our brand of secrecy and expertise. We were officially ghosts and operated with the same level of freedom as we always had. We had orders and mission parameters but we did things our way and we got things done effectively, efficiently;

we were always the right men for the job. We worked with Howard and Peggy so much it was like being in the war again, with two notable absences. We never talked much about them, instead we talked around them, like things they had done had happened to someone else, and things they had said were overheard from someone unimportant. It was too painful sometimes, and too fresh as well. The wounds hadn't healed yet and if we said it out loud, they would open up again and we'd bleed out, unable to contain the hurt. And then, slowly but surely, the missions stopped coming.

It was several months before we met up again, the five of us, but in that time a lot had changed. For starters, Mary and I had moved to Paris on a whim, eager and excited to be part of a post-war world where we could help rebuild instead of destroy, and to do so in a city so rich with hope. We had a little apartment with stairs to keep us fit and we read books by the fire and drank too much coffee and wine and slept in almost every day. I had nothing to do, so I learned how to make proper French croissants and Mary learned how to help me back to sleep when the nightmares woke me up. Monty had met Andre and though their relationship was very new, we recognized in it the same feverish excitement that our wartime romances had possessed. It had a lasting quality to it that none of us could deny. It lasted thirty-three whole years. Morita had bought a ranch in Terra Bella and had that permanently ruddy look about him, like he lived in the fields and could never get the dirt out from under his nails and liked it like that. Later, he would meet Suzanne while giving a talk at the local VA—her brother was a vet and she would go along to meetings with him for support—and Jim would forget what words were when he was around her. Years and years later, he would introduce her sister, Christine, to Jacques and for some reason, she would take a liking to him.

Without the war, without the call to duty, our lives were becoming the sort of normal that people expected from us. I started writing children's books after we visited that village in Southleigh again and I encountered more children that climbed all over me and tugged at my hair. Jim had his ranch and the VA, Dernier opened a flower shop where he sold illegal fireworks at night, Monty sold bikes and enjoyed the countryside far too much. Peggy and Howard were more official than we were, and continued working on things I won't even begin to understand. Peggy became highly political as the years went on; we were all so proud and happy that out of all of us, she was the one whose voice was finally being heard. I forgot to mention—when she and Gabe got married, Steve was her best man and J was his and the empty spaces we left for them at the alter were filled with our memories, the good, the bad, and the absolutely absurd. When I finally married Mary, she insisted on having Steve's drawings of me plastered all over the restaurant; her vows reiterated that love is a bridge.

Mary and I lived all over the place when we were young. We stayed in Maastricht and Lemberg and went back to both Bellegarde-sur-Valserine and Manosque for a time, but we always preferred Paris and our weekend trips to Versailles. Mary never warmed to London that much but we spent months at a time living with Peggy and Gabe once they had come back to Europe and she enjoyed their company so much that the crowded city never bothered her. We were living the life of nomads for a time until Mary settled down at St. Michaels. My writing allowed us a comfortable life with Mary's parents and miles and miles of green pastures. When James was born, the boys, Peggy, and Howard all came out and stayed with us for a whole month, and it made Mary's mother laugh until she hurt herself, remembering how she, too, had been raised by a village.

That was how it was for all of us, for all our children. We would travel wherever we needed to let the new mothers and fathers rest as long as they wanted. It never got overwhelming when you had your friends with you, giving baths and bottles and rocking your kids to sleep so you could get some shut eye. It felt like a big community that grew with every child that was born. The older ones, James and Barney and Stephanie in particular, would rally the younger children and had a terrible, wonderful influence on them. The seven of us had thirteen kids over the years, all of whom listened to our stupid stories about the war and always seemed to request the stories in which Steve was being particularly stupid or J was being particularly brave. We passed on a lifetime of knowledge and wisdom in the form of those stories; valuable lessons were learned by listening to the tales of our adventures and taking note where we went wrong and how stupid we had been. The girls always managed to get the point of those tales, and the boys would insist on recreating our adventures, acting them out in a play or throwing a frisbee around and pretending to be Steve bringing the Nazi plane down from the sky. We were a community of traveling misfits who had come from all parts of the world and ended up in each other's hearts one way or another. Our children grew up together the same way we did. They were brothers and sisters and husbands and wives eventually and when they had children of their own, our traditions remained. Every year, we would travel to one of our homes with our growing families and we would spend weeks together, learning and loving and reliving the past while looking to the future. Our children told our stories and we listened to their take on it and the way they glorified us and villainized us, rightfully so. We weren't perfect—we always stressed that—but we were necessary. In the end, we were normal people just looking to make the world a better place. I think we did it, too.

I think we had lives that were worth living; for Gabe and I, lives that *are* worth living. I think we should be proud of what we did and the impact that we made, even if you didn't know it all this time, even if you had no idea that we existed. I am proud and I know my brothers would be too if they were here with me; proud to have been part of something so strange and beautiful, so wonderfully life altering that we can never truly say goodbye to it. We passed on our knowledge and our experience to our children. We told them stories at night and instilled the lessons we learned into their lives so that they could be good people. We loved them and loved each other and lived as a whole, oddly misshapen and intricately woven unit. We grew around each other like vines. When one person fell, others would catch them. We were never alone again, and we ensured that our children were never alone to begin with. The bonds that we forged, the love that we felt on the battlefield—that's what kept us going in those years after the war when things were so uncertain and nightmares were so frequent, but we built on that and we made sure the foundation was strong and we blossomed the way we always knew, even if it was just a feeling, the way we always knew we could. Together. Always together.

This story has been a strange one. At points, it doesn't make sense and then at others, it is as clear to me as a summer's day. We lived, we fought, we found love and lost it too. We became whole persons and then shattered into a million pieces at the weight of what we had done. In the years following the war, we tried to pieces ourselves together. We did so tirelessly, unyieldingly, but clumsily all the same. We couldn't find all the pieces so here we are, with chips on our shoulders and holes in our hearts and smiles that don't last as long as they used to, but we're here. We're right here.

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I wrote this story to tell the world about our adventures, to relieve myself of a lifetime worth of memories that weighed heavy on my heart, and to finally let it all out, the things I had kept hidden inside me for so long. So much has changed, even from the moment I typed the first word, J's name, his real name, and then crumpled the paper up and started again. So much has changed but one truth remains, one constant, one thought that refuses to let go and I refuse to let it leave me: I love my brothers.

## A G O O D B Y E

The hour grows late as I draw to a close. We've become friends, you and I. I have bared my soul, my most sacred of memories, my intimate dreams. I wonder: will I ever know as much about you as you know about me? You know what I love most in the world, my fears, my desires, my regrets. You know where I was truly born and how I lived and what I want when I die. Tell me, have you changed? Have you been transformed? As I have sat at this typewriter and recalled these events and feelings, I have realized how different I feel. Peggy asked if the feeling I was looking for was emptiness but no, I feel lighter, as though a great burden has been lifted from my shoulders. Maybe you feel as though your heart has grown heavier. If you see me, if you ever cross my path, will you let me know? And while we're talking, tell me a secret about yourself. One that no one else knows. Bare your soul to me in return—it's only fair.

Now, I'm almost at the door and it is almost closed, but I have one last secret to share. It started with him so it's only right that it should end with him as well.

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There are two things I keep with me at all times, wherever I go, whatever I'm doing. They're in my pocket, keeping me company. They're always on me, save for a shower or a sleep, and even then, they're not so far. At night, they haunt the bedside table Mary inherited from her sister, the one with the stuck drawer. Two objects: a pack of cigarettes, old, stale, but never opened; a switchblade with a name engraved on it. You can guess the name, I'll never tell. That's the secret. That's why they're important. That's why I'll never let them go. In December of 1944, we had one weekend of peace before Christmas. Carter sprung for accommodations and the lads and I had a pint too many. I met a man who etched in metal and bought the blade off him, picked up a pack and tucked them away. The rule was: no presents for Christmas. We didn't have anything to give and nothing to want 'cept home or a good bed. But that was the year J's ma got sick and he was worrying his head about her every night, so I made an exception.

Course, Christmas was hell and his sister wrote back saying how everything was alright so I held on to my gifts, said I'd save them for his birthday. It was nearly three months away and I was likely to smoke the damn things and lose the blade before it came to pass, but I told myself otherwise. In January—well, you know what happened in January. In January, I lost my best friend. He boarded that train and I never saw him again. We searched for days for something to bury but the mountains took everything and left an empty hole in my heart. I had those gifts in my pocket when he fell and I have them in my pocket as I write this. I told Mary, and she smiled in her way and gave me a good kiss. I told her, when I die, I want to be buried with them, so when I see my friend again, I can say happy birthday.

I never got to say goodbye; this is how I'll say hello.



A photo snapped of the boys and I when we returned from captivity, liberated by Captain America himself. This was before we became Commandos, before we became brothers; J and Jones are hidden in the background somewhere.

One of the earliest photos of Steve while he was at training camp, before undergoing Stark's experiment.



The night Steve asked us to join him, some asshole named Bear caught us off guard and took this picture.



Later we would exact our revenge by excluding him from this shot. Steve and Falsworth were off playing poker at the time.



Gabriel Jones.



Jim Morita.



The tank we called a home, and some of the soldiers we called our friends parked up on top of it.

This is one of the rare photos of Steve that circulated all around the world. He looks like he is planning an attack on the Krauts, coming up with some great strategy, and that's what the history books will report. In reality, he got us lost and Bear was about to throttle him to death.



John Martin and Dick Winters.



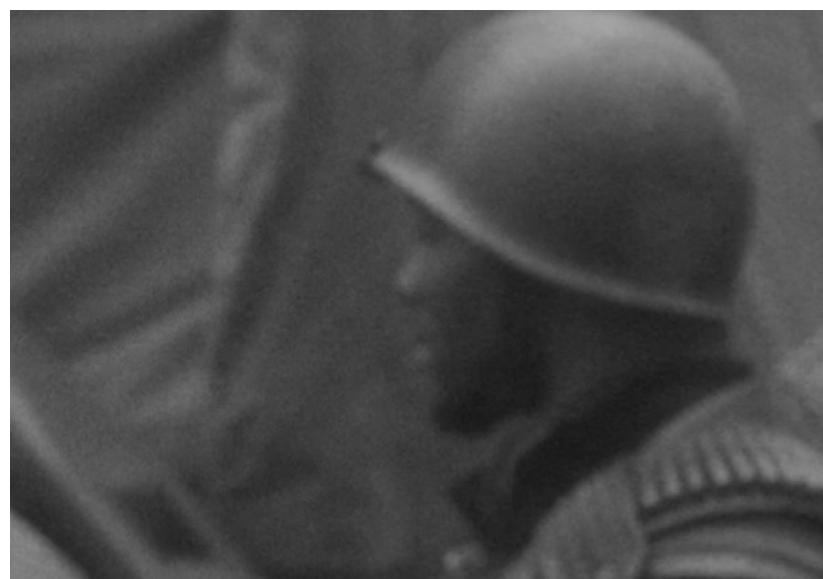
The streets of Maastricht.



James Montgomery Falsworth.



Chester Phillips.



We gave J the camera once and then decided, never again.



During mission briefings, someone would be responsible for documenting who was present, usually through photos. Not sure who was documenting this time, but they sure caught a look from Peggy aimed at her unsuspecting husband to be.



This photo is the result of being thrown against the wall while your camera is still attached to your pack. The flash went off and this gorgeous, terrifying photo was formed.

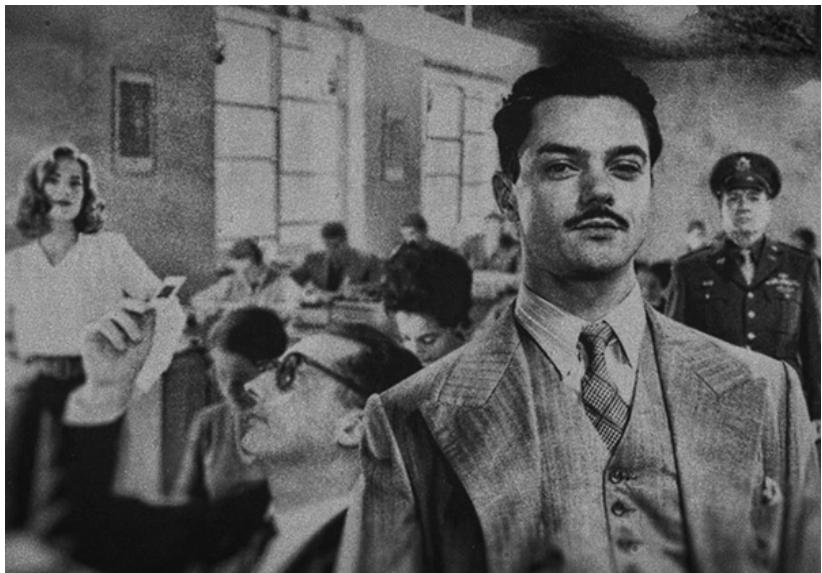




One of the last pictures I took during the war.

Forgive me, I have not shown you many pictures from after the war, from our lives living as normal people. Although I have bared my soul to you, those seem much more private than these snapshots from the battlefield. Those seem like something I should safeguard a little longer, just until I am ready to let them go as well. Here are a few, however, that you may enjoy. The first is a photo of Lallybroch, my home. The second is a photo taken during a mission with Peggy, the one where I got stabbed. She rather likes this picture, don't let her tell you otherwise.





Like I've told you, Peg and Howard went on to do great things, I visited with him many times, lounged by the pool and drank martinis, but if I'm being honest, and I can be, and he won't fault me for it—it was never the same as that time with my brothers.



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This photo was torn by accident. It got caught on a file Peggy was ripping out of a cabinet, trying to save the information. She didn't even realize it was in there at the time, but when she discovered it, well—she tells me she was heartbroken. Of all the images of J, this one was one of my favorites, taken in France on a rare day off. It was a warm spring day and we had gone out for lunch. He was full and happy and we walked down this winding road looking for a theatre; he wanted to watch a film but we were so caught up in everything, we didn't even know if they were showing films anymore. He was laughing, tired and restless, and when he sat down, he looked up at me and said, "Tim, this has been the best day of my life." Steve took his picture and we watched *La Vie de Plaisir* and we were happy.

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I won't say Goodbye and I won't say The End—it is certainly neither. I will see you around, my friend. Thank you for reading.