Reminiscences...

by ym4yum1

Summary

Steve Rogers was 18 years old when his mother died. Bucky is 4 years younger. What happened?
This is the story of Steve & the women who loved him before/after the serum, his journey to find love and the right partner.
OC Joanna Splendore, Sarah Rogers, Bucky Barnes, Peggy Carter, cameos Coulson & Natasha!
Captain America: The First Avenger & The Avengers.
Steve's background movie-verse canon-compliant comics crossover.

Disclaimers: All rights to Marvel. Characters, lines & context from Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), TV series, Cartoons & Comics.
Present day, New York

Steve Rogers woke up. The dim light coming through the window indicated it was late afternoon. He blinked slowly a few times and frowned slightly while taking stock of his surroundings. The lounge room at the Avengers Tower's common area remained peaceful. He stretched, pleased, and picked up the book that had fallen by his side on the couch. The break for a tranquil reading had turned into a well-earned rest. The small drops of sweat dripping down his forehead were the only sign that he had been dreaming. No nightmares, just memories. Not that it mattered.

As long as he remembered, Steve always woke up the same way, evenly. Sometimes faster, when in battle or on a mission. But every single time, even after being frozen in suspended-animation for sixty-six years - a non-conscious coma state - he woke up without any sudden movements.

When you have a force so formidable, you cannot afford to lose control. Not even while waking.

It had always been this way. Growing up as a sick boy, with all the times he had been admitted to the hospital, he had learned the importance of remaining silent and steady. Even when in hunger or in pain, he needed to be quiet to not disturb the other patients and not disrupt his mother's work. This willpower and self-control had grown within him, and had been fundamental when he became the super soldier. No surprise that one of Captain America's strongest features is the indomitable will.

That's why, after the serum - that changed him from a frail young man to the very peak of human potential and conditioning - he never thought of himself as skinny Steve, as the little guy. Once he was transformed, he chased the spy who killed Dr. Erskine and saved that boy by the pier - instinctive acts that he didn't need to think to accomplish. The simple truth was that he always had the heart of a true hero and finally got the body to keep up with it. His new physique came with the understanding that he needed to be permanently self-conscious to never, ever, harm anyone inadvertently.

'Because a strong man who has known power all his life may lose respect for that power, but a weak man knows the value of strength.'

But Steve didn't forget who he was before, of course not. And sometimes, the little guy came back with full force in his memories.

After months of rehabilitation, Agent Phil Coulson was finally cleared for work, but it meant a desk job and paperwork at SHIELD's New York Headquarters. For years he had been the unofficial go-to-guy for everything about Captain America, so he wasn't surprised when he received the package. Security X-ray indicated that inside the larger box there were only two metal objects, small and
harmless. He checked the sender, Ralph Splendore, born in 1940, Italy, immigrated to the United States in 1945. Passing through all safety procedures, he brought it to the Avengers Tower.

"Hi, Cap," Phil likes to call him 'Cap,' even though he has long considered him a friend. "This is for you. It's from the family beneficiary of your will, after the crash, right?"

"What?" Steve got up from the couch, took the package and read the sender's name. "Oh. Yes. Thanks, Phil."

The Agent kept looking at his childhood hero waiting for any new detail about his past life, "Uh… I'm sorry if it's too personal, but are they your relatives?" Phil knows Captain's story better than anyone, and his parents were Irish, not Italian.

Steve said they were old neighbors - friends of his mother - who kept his things when he went to war. He excused himself and left, holding the package close to his heart.

Back to his floor in the tower, Steve went to his studio. His safe place, where he could be surrounded by classical furniture of wood and leather, all his books, and his drawing and painting tools. He put the package on his desk and sat down, relaxing his body in the comfort of his chair. He closed his eyes for a moment and hoped. Prayed. Carefully, he unpacked it and sighed deeply when he recognized the antique chest that seemed to be locked for years.

He opened it and felt his hands trembling slightly, although to an outside observer they were steady as ever. Among books and other packages there was what his heart yearned for. Tears finally flowed when he opened his old wooden box to find his mother's ring and his father's Infantry Insignia.

Steve was overwhelmed by a mix of emotions… sadness… happiness… gratitude. He cried silently and allowed these feelings take over him in a release that he didn't know he needed. At that moment he felt safe and sheltered in a way that he hadn't felt in a long time. Mom. He missed her. And he was carried away by the memories of his loving mother.

The night had already come when drier eyes landed back to the books and old photos still inside the old chest. Everything so carefully kept. He recognized the ribbons tied around them and fondly remembered the long curly black hair that these same ribbons once wrapped around. And he noticed a pile of postcards and a bigger one... of his drawings. She saved everything for him. He smiled and picked up the paper on top of it. The first drawing he made of her.

Joanna Splendore.

She always took so good care of everything. Of him. He learned she died a long time ago, and yet she had still found a way to take care of him, to give his things back. After all this time she still knew exactly what he needed.

He closed his eyes and there she was. Beautiful. Those trusting dark blue eyes and the smile that always warmed his heart.

My petite Italian chef.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I hope you had a good time!
English is not my first language. Thanks to Winterbeauti for the inspiration and the incentive, and Polexia Aphrodite for the invaluable historical-research help and so much more! I'd be lost without their help!

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it! I hope you enjoy the journey!

xxoo Mari
1927, Brooklyn

Steven Grant Rogers woke up. It was a cold morning. He blinked quickly, scared, but he kept still. The infirmary bed at his right side was now empty – the crying boy was gone. Before he could think about it, his mom arrived. She hugged and kissed him, and he smiled, relieved – the fate of the other boy was long forgotten. Steve had no idea how many times he had been hospitalized before, but none of that mattered. He wasn't sick anymore, and his mom would take him home that day. He was happy.

At 9 years old, he was a sweet little boy, who charmed everyone with his good manners and intelligence. His frail body never allowed him to play like the other children, so he spent a lot of his time drawing and reading about everything. Through books, his mind would travel around the world. He grew up shy and reserved, but well educated. From a young age, his mother taught him the value of knowledge.

Steve's parents were Irish-Catholic immigrants. His father, Joseph Harvey Rogers, fought in the Great War and died before he was born. His mother, Sarah Alicia Rogers, worked as a nurse at the Brooklyn Home for Consumptives. Life wasn't fair for a widow, but she had a job and an education, and Steve, who was her pride and joy.

Sarah was a good woman, and always stood up against discrimination and injustice. That's why she was so compassionate towards that Italian girl.

Like many others, Joanna Splendore came from Italy to the United States to hopefully gain a better life. Her father brought her to an arranged marriage – to unite two families – and together build a future for them all. But life doesn't always follow plans. Some time ago, her father died carrying away the dream to bring their overseas family together. Now, at only fifteen years old, Joanna was at Sarah's hospital with a dying husband. They didn't speak English very well, but Sarah saw that the young woman was sick too, and took care of them both. Unfortunately, in a few months, her husband died. Joanna had another kind of illness – she was cured, but, sadly, became infertile.

As an immigrant and a widow, Sarah knew that the girl's life would be unbearable. Steve's mother was as noble as she raised her son to be. So she helped her in every way she could. She got her a job as laundress in the hospital and protected her against unwanted attention from male coworkers. Joanna trusted Sarah, and learned to hide in the shadows – she was small, barely five feet tall, so
hiding was easy.

Young but dedicated, Joanna was a hard worker, and an excellent cook, as Italians can be. Soon her meals were appreciated everywhere and the extra money she got from selling them helped her to settle into a modest life. Smart, but too ashamed to speak English, she understood everything perfectly. Through the years, with Sarah's incentive, Joanna learned to read and write in the foreign language, and started to work at the hospital kitchen. Joanna was eternally grateful for everything Sarah has done for her.

But people weren't as friendly as Sarah towards the young, pretty brunette. Joanna missed her own family, still living in Italy, and hoped for a chance of reunion, someday. Her mother stayed with her younger siblings and her older brother, who was fighting against Fascism. Looking at Sarah, always so loving with her young son, Joanna remembered her own mother. Often, she would make a special meal for her always-exhausted friend. That small gesture of kindness brought comfort and sweet memories for Sarah and Steve, as they enjoyed together the flavors of Sicily.

1932

'You start running, they'll never let you stop. You stand up, you push back.'

Steve's years at George Washington High School weren't among his fond memories. He was the teachers' favorite for being clever and educated, and also too fragile to get himself in trouble. He was the skinniest boy, but always the bravest.

Sarah was a resilient woman and raised Steve with solid moral standards, a strong sense of duty and honor. The Rogers would always do the right thing and never give up.

Tragically, after working many years caring for the sick, Sarah became ill. Towards Steve's senior year, her health decreased quickly. They struggled to survive and basically lived in the hospital. Steve's only comfort was having a daily hot meal at the hospital kitchen, while keeping a silent vigil by his mother's bedside. It had the same flavor of those his mother frequently brought home, but Steve never knew the cook who made them. However, he couldn't be more grateful for all the care they were receiving from his mother's friends and coworkers.

Without Sarah's presence, Joanna was even more invisible. But from a distance, she remained, feeding the Rogers and praying for their health.

'Listen close, Steven... You always stand up.'

Steve wanted to be with his mother all the time, but she wouldn't let him quit school. Ever. Leaving his mother's bedside was the hardest thing he have ever done in his entire life. In her last days, Sarah was finally isolated, and Steve couldn't say goodbye.

1936, October 15th

Sarah Rogers died on a rainy Thursday. Steve was eighteen years old, and alone.

Things went downhill from there. Steve could not bear it. Thanksgiving shattered his heart. He couldn't remain with his neighbors and family friends, not that he had many. But he couldn't be with their families. He was hurt, sick, and hungry, and desperately missed his mother. He couldn't give up, but he never felt so miserable in his life.

Christmas was coming in a couple of days. The winter continued in full force. Everybody left work early, fearing a heavy snowstorm that was approaching. People were rushing through the somber
streets, without paying any attention to each other.

Then Steve saw Joanna for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

End Note 2: Thanks for reading!

Joanna was slightly inspired in the character Giulianna Splendore from the Brazilian Telenovela Terra Nostra.

Ref: Movie verse, Steve's time line from SHIELD's files (Blu-Ray/DVD extras)
1918, May 8 - death: Joseph Rogers
1918, July 4 - birth: Steve Rogers
1932-1936 – Steve went to George Washington High School, Brooklyn, NY
1936, October 15 - death: Sarah Rogers - Steve was 18 years old - no orphanage

Ref: Marvel Databases - Steve's full name - Marvel Universe, Steve's parents full names - Avengers Ultimates Universe (Earth-1610), Sarah Rogers' quotes (Earth-616)
"Did you have something against running away?"

Whenever Steve wasn't too sick, he would stand against bullies – he'd go home with some bruises, and his mom would take care of him.

That time was different – across the street, two boys were after a girl's groceries. The place was deserted and the few passers-by didn't stop for anything. Joanna knew that nobody would help her. She was so small that the young muggers easily knocked her on the slippery sidewalk. The freezing wind cut through Steve's threadbare coat, and his body already felt weak, but he didn't hesitate and stepped in, "Stop!" Startled by his shout, the boys ran away.

Ever the gentleman, he reached down to help her to get up. "Are you ok, ma'am?" He asked, extending his hand towards her. She instantly recognized Sarah's son, but before she could've answer him, one of the boys threw a rock at his head and vanished.

The cut was deep and started to bleed, but Steve had no one to come back to. And he was too young and too proud to ask for help. After the adrenaline rush, he felt his body crashing. Between the pain and the weariness, he didn't remember much.

The girl, "Joanna", was a young woman. "Grazie! Sei il mio eroe." Her voice was soft and welcoming. Among several Italian words and a few in English in her heavy accent, she told him she worked at the hospital and knew his mother, "Donna Sarah helped me."

She gave him condolences, and guided him to her home – just a few houses from there. She took care of his wounds, and gave him a bowl of hot soup. Fed and bandaged, he collapsed from sheer exhaustion. She didn't let him leave and put him in her spare room. That day she saved his life. Steve wouldn't have survived much longer by himself.

The snowstorm that hit Brooklyn that night left them trapped inside her home for a couple of days.

Steve had the same deep blue eyes and noble heart as his mother. Joanna knew him since he was a kid. He looked as lost and alone as she was at 15, when she met Sarah. He was pale and very thin, and his clothes were poorly cared for. And yet, even not knowing her, he had stopped to protect her from the mugging. Joanna knew that she had to look after him. The now 24-year-old woman owed her life to his mother - her friend Sarah.

So she did what she knew best, cooked and sang. Steve didn't understand anything, but the sound of her voice slowly helped to ease the pain of his heart, and her meals started to heal his weak body. Joanna's place was warm and colorful like her, and smelled delicious like her food. It felt like… home.

It was at that moment that a sudden realization hit him. "You are the friend my mom talked about!"
He looked at her and his heart was filled with recognition and gratitude, "You cooked for us. Thank you."

Fighting to hold back her own tears, she told him how wonderful his mother was for her. Steve was proud of his mom, but felt his heart hurt even more. She'd helped countless people during her whole life, always doing more than her job as a nurse, but called Joanna a friend. Even mourning, he couldn't stop worrying about the small woman's fate. Joanna worshipped his mother, and had no one else. She met his gaze, and her teary eyes mirrored his pain.

They weren't strangers anymore and, unsurprisingly, both hearts had the same plea. *I miss her.*

Joanna didn't wait for him to say anything – she knew he couldn't. "Please, stay." She was so heartbroken and vulnerable that Steve couldn't refuse it, and agreed to rent her spare room.

When the weather finally improved, it was Christmas Eve. He didn't possess much, and moved in that same day. She cooked a modest but nourishing meal, and they prayed and ate in silence. That night, in the privacy of his new room, Steve cried silently, praying for his mother, and thankful to not be alone. Unbeknownst to him, Joanna was doing the same.

As the temperatures plummeted, they spent the holidays at home in a peaceful routine. They didn't talk too much to each other. She was too shy to speak English, but was always talking and humming something in Italian. Steve was still wounded and sorrowful, and he didn't have anything to say. Joanna comforted him as they both mourned the loss of his mother. She kept him warm and nurtured, and took care of his health. He felt safer than he had felt in a long time.

The New Year was coming and all Steve wanted was to forget this past year, to erase it, and to have his mom back. Finding Joanna was the only good thing that had happened to him. But even with all this grief in his heart, Steve knew he had to keep moving forward.

*I'll always stand up, mom.* But it has never been so hard.

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1937

Steve worked in a factory, a few blocks from the hospital, so it was natural for him to find Joanna on their way back home. He began to wait for her every day, and they would walk together in silence. But he'd never get too close to his mother's former workplace.

Joanna wasn't used to chivalry, and was a little timid around Steve. She was surprised by every courteous action he made, as if she wasn't worthy of his attention. But like his mother, he couldn't ever accept something like that, "We are all equal in the eyes of God, ma'am." He was decent and genuine. Joanna never felt so respected and didn't hide anymore.

He bought them groceries. She didn't want to accept it, but there was no arguing with him. He said that she cooked and took care of everything, so it was only fair if she let him help the way he could. "It's the right thing to do." He'd always have a straightforward answer, and that earnest command voice that she just wanted to follow. He never made her feel cheap.

'Whatever happens tomorrow, you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.'

But Steve was still in pain. He kept the most precious things he had inside a small wooden box - at his bedside table - but he never opened it. And he stayed away from his neighbors, like he did with the hospital. He was friendly and polite with Joanna, and yet, quiet and melancholic. He couldn't
give up, but there were days when it was hard to find a reason to keep going. He worried about her,
always so kind and caring with him, and tried his best to hide his depressed feelings.

Joanna watched him with admiration and concern, because he remained balanced, in spite of his soul
being so anguished. But he didn't fool her. She knew she needed to do something to ease his pain, to
help him. So she kept his mind busy telling stories about how she had learned to cook with her
French grandmother, and that she always used her tips in the preparation of typical Sicilian food.
Steve was really entertained just by watching her. She smiled and moved gracefully, she sang in
Italian and spoke a little French. It was as if one of his story books became alive. And she was
always cooking something good for him.

In spite of being six years older, Joanna was full of life, so she looked younger. The grief and burden
of so many sick years gave Steve an older stern expression. But day after day, his heart sought
comfort in those moments they spent together. Joanna's joyfulness was a welcome relief, and he was
beginning to heal.

She made him a dessert, and waited for him to taste it. She looked so young and open, just expecting
his approval. Steve savored it and his expression was of pure delight. Everything was delicious.

"You're a chef," he smiled softly, "A petite chef!"

Joanna flushed, but her eyes were shining. She was happy because he'd smiled for the first time after
his mother's death. And she told him that her grandma used to call her this way.

It was only then that she realized he was complimenting her. And he was looking at her in a way she
didn't understand and couldn't expect.

Was he really admiring me?

He started drawing, slowly, and soon was sketching everything - mostly what she cooked. He was
really talented, and Joanna was amazed, "It's beautiful." She'd blush and smile shyly, but kept
cooking different recipes.

July, 4th

For Steve's 19th birthday, Joanna got him a wooden desk, used but well-preserved. "For your
drawings!" her grin was contagious.

Steve blushed thrilled. "Thank you. You didn't need…" But when he saw the cake, he broke down
on the couch next to him and started to cry in silence. It was a 'bleu-blanc-rouge' cake - the national
colors of both France and America - the same one she once made for his mother to give to him.

Joanna realized her mistake too late and was heartbroken. She knelt in front of him and grabbed his
hand, apologizing profusely.

"Please, pardon!" How could I be so stupid? "I didn't want to hurt you," she felt miserable. "I'm so
sorry."

Steve looked at her - his wet eyes were a mix of sorrow and concern. He took her hands, kissed them
softly and raised her off the floor. His voice was almost a whisper, and it was trembling with
emotion.

"Thank you for not forgetting her."
Joanna let out a breath that she even didn't know she was holding, and tears streamed down her face. She sat down next to him and they held hands in silence. Steve thanked God for his mother, and continued to weep remembering the blissful moments he had with her all their life. Joanna never left his side, and prayed quietly for him to find peace. They stayed there together until tears dried. Later, he ate all the cake, and they were both relieved.

After that, Steve was lighter - drawing and smiling a lot more. He would always miss his mother, but he was getting better. With Joanna's daily care and safe shelter, his body was gradually fighting his long-time illnesses. He weighed 110 pounds now - more than he had ever weighed at 5’7” tall – and was feeling recovered.

'I know this neighborhood. I got beat up in that alley. And that parking lot. And behind that diner.'

Being healthier meant he would fight against bullies, again. Joanna got worried and upset when he came back beaten up and bruised. She was muttering nonstop, as if scolding him, while she cleaned his wounds - fully immersed in her Italian mood.

It was endearing and Steve couldn't help but be amused. Her touch was soft and tender, and Steve remembered when they met. So did she - she smiled and kissed him in the cheek, "il mio eroe." She was always affectionate and spontaneous, so she had never made him uncomfortable. But Steve couldn't believe it and checked the dictionary. Hero? He realized that she didn't think he was a fool for getting into a fight.

Was she actually proud of me?

Chapter End Notes

End Note 3: Thanks for reading!

Steve's past wasn't easy. He went through hell. Wake up in the future pale in comparison. If Steve was going to be depressed, it would be this time. But he remained a good man despite of all this.

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, leave a comment!
xxoo Mari

Ref: DVD/Blu-Ray extras Army enlistment physical exam form - Steve's height: 5’7” and weight: 110 pounds. At Captain America: The First Avenger movie, Colonel Phillips refers to him as 90 pounds, but it sounded like a deprecating joke. I used the data in the form.
Reminiscences... of hope

They were only friends.

It was a time when people didn't have long conversations about feelings. There were some things that a man wouldn't talk to a woman about and vice-versa, and others that no one would ever talk about at all. Everything was concealed and subtle.

But both Steve and Joanna were excellent observers. Their connection went beyond what either of them expected.

Steve didn't know what it was like to be in love.

He loved his mother but he grew up without a father. Between his home and the hospital, he didn't have a traditional family. Constantly sick and always small, he never had friends of his own age. Boys mocked him because he was skinny, and the girls didn't even notice him.

Steve never met someone like Joanna.

Finding her was the best thing in his life in years, and he was lucky for having her as a friend. He couldn't wait to come home to see her smile. The sound of her voice always made his heart flutter, whether singing or speaking in other languages. He treasured everything she cooked, and was thrilled that she did it all for him. Her meals healed his body, and made him feel... stronger. That was a word that he had never associated with his skinny self before. She was cheerful and positive, and loved life. He wanted to be around her all the time and understand everything about her, so he even got a book to learn Italian.

It always amused him how she could be so natural – with her hugs, kisses and caring touches – and absolutely shy whenever he gave her a compliment. He loved to make her blush - like when he said, "Splendor means brilliant, gorgeous," or every time he'd sketched her.

Joanna Splendore was a woman that Steve Rogers couldn't help but fall for.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but she was totally modest and didn't realize that. Outside, she disappeared into layers of work clothes, but at home she blossomed. She was so petite that he felt the urge to protect her. She was absolutely perfect... for him. Her long black curly hair, always tied with a colorful ribbon, was like a frame for her delicate face. She had stunning dark blue eyes and pinkish lips that made him aroused only by thinking of them.

He loved to capture her in his drawings – he loved to watch her. She had invaded his most secret dreams - he couldn't stop thinking about her.

For her birthday, he made her a notebook with his drawings, "To make your own cookbook," he told her when he gave it to her. Each recipe's illustration was in one page, and it had a place to write it down. He never saw her happy like that – she was glowing and she was gorgeous.

She smiled shyly, but hugged him and kissed his cheeks. She held the book tight, and her eyes were filled with tears of joy. "Grazie!" Steve realized that he longed to make her happy – he'd never felt like this before.

She made him feel proud about himself. She had called him 'my hero'. Hers. He was the little guy
who always got beaten up - he was no hero.

And then she said, "You fight for the weak." She read him like a book and always knew what he needed, whether it was a word, a hug or a delicious brioscia - every time, she would make him feel better.

Steve didn't imagine that he could feel that way. All his life he had wanted to be a man. And now he just wanted to be the man… in her life.

Joanna didn't know what it was like to be in love either.

She was just a kid when she got married, and her older husband treated her like a woman - only to serve him. They both came from another country, another culture with different traditions, and she was raised to be someone's something - daughter, wife and mother. But without being able to bear children, she didn't have a purpose in life. After his death, Sarah protected her from becoming an easy target and taught her to hide herself in her work.

Joanna never met someone like Steve.

He brought her back to life - he gave her a reason to smile. She was privileged to be his friend, and happy to have him to take care of. It was more than she could have dreamed of. She couldn't wait to come home to see his shining blue eyes. She absolutely loved to cook for him, and to see how he cherished everything she made. He blushed every time she kissed him on the cheek, but he'd eat everything on his plate waiting for her sweet reward.

Steve Rogers was a man that Joanna Splendore couldn't help but fall for.

He was her knight-in-shining-armor – he saved her, and he had walked her home every day after the attack. He said that a lady must be treated with the ultimate respect and courtesy – she was a simple cook, not a lady. But he was always a gentleman – opening the door for her and carrying her bags. It was her job to attend to him, but he was the one always helping her. He never demanded anything - he thanked her for everything. He was noble and undeniably honest with her. He had solid morals and principles without a hint of prejudice. He always stood for what was right and never faltered, even under the worst adversity.

This past year, that fragile boy grew up in Joanna's eyes as the strongest man she'd ever met. Joanna had met big men. None of them worth a tenth of Steve.

He was an artist. His drawings seemed alive, and the way he could capture the soul of everything was fascinating. He made a drawing of her and her heart melted - it was beautiful. She flushed instantly. He teased her, "You don't like it? I can make another one."

She just couldn't say anything, and ran to her room, with the paper close to her heart. She put it in her chest box, where she kept her most precious things.

When she came back, Steve greeted her with a wide smile, "How about this one?" He winked and gave her another drawing with her looking even more stunning. They'd continue this dance for hours. She felt completely embarrassed, but loved every single moment.

And he made her the cookbook, and called her "my petite chef". His. This was the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for her. But he didn't stop there. He made lots of sketches of each recipe for her to choose - which one she wanted and what elements were important to be in the drawing. That was the most amazing thing he had done for her.
First she couldn't make herself to answer – she found everything he did perfect – and she was grateful that he did for her. But Steve never stopped admiring her and wanted to please her. Every day, with the utmost patience and genuine interest, he showed her that she was entitled to have a choice. And that all he wanted was to know and respect her choices.

"It's your cookbook, it has to be the way you like it."

It affected Joanna deeply, and changed her. She never got the attention and deference that Steve was given to her. She certainly didn't think she deserved it. But he made her feel proud of herself. She would never say or ask for anything directly, but over time she would nod and smile shyly, and show him something for him to put in the illustration.

Joanna didn't imagine that she could feel that way. He was the first one ever to truly care about her, to ask her, "What you want?" And with all her heart, she wanted to belong… to him.

The truth was that they were both young and inexperienced, and also shared the misfortune of being marginalized for a great part of their lives. This huge burden left a big mark on each of them.

Even if she could face all the prejudice against immigrant women, Joanna thought herself as broken because she couldn't ever have children, a family.

Steve fought his whole life against bullies because he was always a victim of them. He was labeled as less-than-a-man because he didn't have the standard physical attributes.

Both saw the other as perfect. But neither thought they were worthy of the other.

Together they could be free, without fear or prejudice. They lived in a perfect balance, and none of them would ever do anything that would jeopardize the one good thing they had in life. It was an equilibrium that could only be broken by an external factor.

They needed a push to realize what they could become.
Reminiscences... of learning

Chapter Notes

Warning: Implicit sex situation, and slightly mention of drug/alcohol use.

Author's Note 5: Steve is just a 19-year-old young man trying to find his place in the world. He has a lot to learn. Please, after this chapter read the end note, ok? I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve was an exceptional artist, and Joanna was his most devoted admirer. While she was shy with her own things, she was diligent in supporting him in everything. She turned his room into a little studio, with his desk and all his modest Art tools. She also encouraged him to enter at the Creative Arts annual 'Art of the Future' contest.

"Please, you have to try." She looked at him with so much pride and hope - he would do anything to please her.

He needed to select a piece to submit, and asked for Joanna's help. She gathered all the drawings he gave to her, of her food and recipes, but she didn't bring the ones he made of her.

"The best category for me to enter is women's portraits. Please?" He needed those drawings - she would do anything for him.

Mortified she brought her chest box to the kitchen table and opened it. Some photos and small boxes, and all his drawings - everything carefully wrapped with the same ribbons he loved to see in her hair. She picked the pile of drawings, and gave to him, and her cheeks were redder than her lips.

He undid the tie that held the pile of drawings and spread them all across the table. He was charmed with the splendor and the life they contained. He did not see his drawings, or his work - he saw her. Joanna grasped at the way he looked at the drawings, almost passionately, and she was terrified. He's Sarah's kid, he's just a boy. The farthest thought on this subject was forbidden to her.

The three portraits he chose were the ones he made while already completely in love with her.

And the jury felt in love with her too - he won both the gold medal and the silver one. Steve credited the victory to her beauty; Joanna, to his talent. But the best of all was the award – a scholarship to study Art. She'd been right to push him and he owed her more than ever. He rushed home with his prize and a bouquet of flowers he bought to thank her.

Joanna was thrilled – she was proud of his success, proud of him. She hugged and kissed his cheek, took the trophy with pride, and began to read the award certificate. She focused on the scholarship and how it would be great for his future, for his life.

Steve was happy with his success, but he was disappointed – she thanked him politely for the flowers, but put them on the side. Joanna was the only reward that he dreamed of – he couldn't think of anything... anyone else.
For his young heart in love, her action meant rejection.

She cooked his favorite meal and then she told him, "Your mother would be very proud."

That hit him even harder. "Thank you. I think she would," he said trying to smile.

He went to his room to put the medals in his wooden box and showed Joanna his life's treasures - the only things he had from his parents beside photos - a ring and an army insignia.

Joanna smiled and sighed relieved that he wasn't grieving anymore. She left his room, and silently, picked the bouquet and held it close. No, she didn't forget – she only wouldn't dare to think about the meaning of his gesture.

Steve wasn't mourning; he was heartbroken. *She's mom's friend, she'll never be… mine.*

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**1937, September**

Steve started at Auburndale Art School as a fine Arts student to continue his education. He loved the classes, and for the first time in his life, he was healthy enough to enjoy school.

Quickly, he became admired for his huge talent. He began to specialize in illustration, and he wanted to become a comic book writer and artist. It was a whole new world – he was surrounded by things that he had never experienced before. Art students were easygoing – there wasn't any standard, they were all different, and it didn't matter.

*Well, asking a woman to dance always seemed so terrifying.*

Steve started to make some friends, but still, something was missing. The 19-year-old boy couldn't avoid all those feelings inside him.

He went to some crazy parties, and there were always too much alcohol and drugs. Like any young person, he suffered the peer pressure, but he would have a beer or two at the most, and he would stay away from all the rest. However, the most difficult part was to deal with his intoxicated female colleagues, sometimes too friendly. He didn't want any of them. There was only one woman in his dreams, but he was no man, and he wasn't enough for her. So he kept trying to fit in with his classmates – desperately wanting to feel… normal, to be like them.

**October**

*Which means I can't get drunk.*

The anniversary of his mother's death - the memory of the worst time in his life and he was miserable again. This time he had someone to go back to, but he didn't want Joanna to see him like this. He couldn't go home and be weak in front of her anymore.

Steve wanted Joanna to see him as a man. So he went to the bar instead.

It was late at night, they all had drunk too much, and the boys dragged Steve to a walk. They wandered, swaying and humming on the streets nearly empty, until he found himself climbing some stairs toward the sound of a piano. He took some time to realize what kind of place it was, but when he did – a house of ill fame – he was already trapped inside there.

Steve didn't have a father or male friends before, but he'd reached the books to initiate him into the
mysteries of sex. But now it was for real. It was demeaning to be there but he wasn't alone. He couldn't just leave his friends, run away. That was supposed to be the next step of men education. Laxer, because of the effects of alcohol, he couldn't deny it, it was normal to be curious - and he needed to prove he was a man after all.

It was an old place, and the smell of alcohol and cigarettes were taking the whole environment. There were pairs at every corner. A man was playing ragtime on the piano. Steve sadly noted that some of the women were very young, even more than him.

He couldn't say anything, and stood there until a light brunette picked his hand and guided him to a room upstairs. She took him to sit on the bed and said smiling, "No kissing on the lips." He was so nervous that didn't feel drunk anymore. She was young and pretty, but he couldn't understand her name. The reality was quite different from the books, but she was patient and kind, and taught him a lot of things, step by step, starting with safe sex. She said that he was gifted, and he was afraid of hurting her. She showed him a few more tricks and said he was a gentleman, "Never change."

Finally, the first physical activity in which he wasn't a failure - every man's dream. His friends were all bragging about their own successes but, secretly, Steve wasn't happy. He had his first sexual experience, and it meant nothing. He did what they expected him to do, and yet he wasn't feeling part of anything.

How can you celebrate something you did for the wrong reason?

Chapter End Notes

End Note 5: Thanks for reading!

I know this is a tough subject, but the message is simple – even very good people sometimes face unexpected situations in which they have no experience to deal with, and they can do things for the wrong reason, and/or make mistakes. And, unfortunately, some things need to be learned by experience. That does not make them bad people, just human.

And we can't ever forget the historical context he is within - what mean to be a man back then. I don't want, in any way, to damage Steve's image. I hope you can still see him the same way, and love him even more. Because in spite of growing up in the past, where prejudice and sexism reigned, he remained a good man.

I had to split this chapter, so there will be twelve in all.

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it!

xxoo Mari

Ref: Gold medal in the Creative Arts annual "Art of the Future" contest (Earth-616)_(Unabridged)
Ref: Comic book writer and artist - wikipedia Captain_America
Ref: Movie verse, Steve's time line from SHIELD's files (Blu-Ray/DVD extras) - 1937-1938 - Auburndale Art School, Brooklyn, NY
"Our mistakes do not define us; it's what we do afterwards that does."

The beauty of Steve and Joanna's relationship was that they were really soul mates. In times where prejudice and sexism reigned, he didn't accept these social impositions - he fought for the defenseless and he respected women's right. In spite of her forced marriage, and her submissive formation, Joanna guarded herself and didn't submit to another diminishing situation.

But even being different people at their time, they were still subjected to some traditions.

She had a simple and modest life, but financially, Joanna was an independent 25-year-old woman, while Steve was just a student whose future was yet to be determined.

Steve didn't do anything wrong. It was how it was supposed to happen that time, how every man did it. Yet he was too humiliated to face Joanna. And even to think about her and what he did, at the same time, was improper. She deserved only his ultimate respect. So, he avoided her for a couple of days. But every time he came home, no matter how late, there was a hot meal ready for him in the oven. Her familiar gesture of care only deepened his guilt.

It was a Saturday afternoon when they finally met. He wouldn't say anything – there were things that a gentleman couldn't ever tell. But she never needed to ask. She just knew it.

He wasn't a boy anymore and Joanna was... jealous. That realization scared her to death. She didn't have any right to feel that way. She was nobody in his life. In her most secret dreams, all she wanted was to be the one to give him everything he needed, to be worthy of his love. She wasn't mad because of what he did. She was devastated because she'd never have that place in his life. Because she was broken... she couldn't give him a family and he wouldn't ever want her.

Steve knew he was a failure and he had disappointed the most important person in his life. But he was shocked to see her fade in front of him, as if life has abandoned her. She did everything mechanically - cooked his dinner and cleaned it all - but she didn't kiss him in the cheek, like she always did. She went to her room, collapsed into her bed and then she burst into tears.

Her crying was a lament, helpless and hopeless.

Steve couldn't have foreseen this, and he definitely didn't know what to do. She was the caring one who always comforted him. But he had never seen Joanna cry that way, like if she were in pain. He could read her; he just couldn't understand her feelings. Why is she hurting like this? But he couldn't bear to be the cause of so much agony for her - he needed to do something. He stopped at her room door, and he was hesitant - he had never been there. The light was off, but the room was cozy and modest, like the whole house. The moonlight hung over her bed where she seemed completely lost, curled up sobbing.

At that moment, Steve knew he would do anything to ease the pain of her heart, nothing else mattered. Without thinking, he entered the room and sat beside her. He took her in his arms and...
hugged her with the same affection and care with which she always had comforted him. Touching her wasn’t a strange feeling – holding her almost felt natural. "I'm sorry, please, don't cry," he pulled her close while shushing her, and she melted in his arms. He held her tight, curling his fingers in her silky curls and whispering incessantly that he was sorry, "Forgive me." His voice was caring and soothing and nestled into his chest she began to calm down, "Tell me what you want."

He lifted her chin tenderly, and was completely entranced by her vulnerability and beauty. Her eyes were showing only one emotion – surrender. I want you.

Steve kissed Joanna. Sorrow became tenderness, and erupted with passion.

He had never kissed anyone before, and she had never been kissed like this - but she placed her arms around his neck returning the kiss with all her heart. All the pieces fell into place. Being held by Steve was something she had never dared to dream. And feeling Joanna in his arms was everything he had never admitted he desired. It was the most intimate and personal experience they had lived in their entire lives.

Joanna had been married - for less than a year - but she never felt anything. She truly knew nothing about relationships, and she couldn't say or ask for anything, ever – it wasn't appropriated. But for the first time in her life, she was in love. So she just wanted to belong to him.

Steve cherished her. She was the woman of his dreams - untouchable. Never once has it occurred to him the fact that she was a widow. In his single experience, he had learned a few things that would give him pleasure. But he couldn't even think of her like this and he wouldn't ever use her to please himself.

But she had no walls and that terrified him. His mind had lots of thoughts about what he should do to respect and honor her. His heart was overwhelmed by love and the need of making her happy. His body desired her passionately. And they kept kissing each other, deeper and deeper, while he was trying to maintain control and trying to know what she wanted. His head was in a whirl, but he looked at her and everything made sense.

Once again her eyes were telling him everything he needed; the one answer that mattered - I'm yours.

He gasped, searching for air, "I… I know I'm no man… I know I'm not worthy of you…" blue eyes locked in blue eyes, "But would you ever consider the possibility…" and he started to kneel next to her bed, "of one day… maybe… marry…" and she pulled him back to her arms and, for the first time in her life, she did something she dreamed to do - Joanna kissed Steve.

That night, they made love, and that was a first time for them both. It meant everything – and it was perfect. Steve felt whole and Joanna felt worthy.

'And the past few years, it just didn't seem to matter that much.'

Steve had the expected epiphany that he read in so many books - but being with Joanna was more than any book could describe. All the love he felt for her before only increased infinitely. Now he was a real man, her man, and he didn't want anyone else.

Joanna had given her heart to Steve a long time ago. But now he made her feel alive in a way she didn't know that was possible. She knew she belonged to him, body and soul, forever. She couldn't dream of more.

She slept safe in his arms with her head on his chest, and lulled by his heartbeat. The two hearts were beating in unison.
In the morning, the bright sun light woke Steve. He looked at Joanna asleep in his arms, and held her softly to make sure it was not a dream. She blinked slowly, smiling. He caressed her face, and kissed her forehead whispering, "Morning bella." She leaned to his kiss but when she really woke up she turned around and covered herself with the sheets. Steve grinned and tried to uncover her face, but realized she was redder than he ever saw her. He kissed her head tenderly, but she nodded negatively and curled even more. He was amused, and understood her need for privacy. He kissed her again, got up and left the room to start his morning routine.

He was seated at the living room when Joanna appeared later, all dressed and ready. She had a glow that made her even more gorgeous. Steve couldn't stop looking at her, and feeling the most blessed man in the world. And he had lots of plans - he needed to finish college, to get real job, to be able to care and provide for her, and to make the proposal she deserved.

He had his wooden box in one hand and picked his mom ring, and walked to her, "I don't have the right to ask you to use it, I'm not…" she placed her hand softly in his lips and hugged him, and tears streamed down her face while he wrapped his arms around her. She said that he didn't have to do any of this, because she could never give him a family.

He took her to sit on the bed, and knelt in front of her, "I know. I don't need any children." His eyes were shining, "All I need is you. If you have me… someday."

She reached out to pull him to sit at her side, and he held her while she rested her head at his chest. They stayed there for a while until she said, looking up at him with loving, watery eyes, "I don't need anything else." She replied that he would do whatever he wanted to do, the way he wanted, at his own time. She put the ring back to his box, but he asked her to keep the box. He pulled her closer into his arms and felt happy. Nothing else needed to be said.

They were friends first. Their connection was already so strong and so true that almost nothing changed – except that they both couldn't stop smiling. They worked, Steve studied and Joanna cooked. He drew, she sang. He fought bullies and she took care of him. He still blushed when she kissed him in the cheek, as she did at every portrait he made of her. Life continued normally and respectfully as ever.

But at night, in her bedroom, the light was always off, Joanna was always beneath the sheets and they never talked. Steve would lie down beside her, took her in his arms and kiss her senseless. And they would love each other. He would read her signs and found what she liked, mapping her body, slowly, gently, loving her with all his heart. And once more, all he wanted was to please her and showed her that she had a choice here too – in their bed. Joanna couldn't be more embarrassed and happier in her whole life.
Life never felt so good.

Steve found his life's path in Art School. His talent was appreciated even more; he started to work as a freelance illustrator. He had a future ahead of him and the love of his life by his side. He had never imagined he'd be happy this way, and become even more protective of Joanna. It was charming and amusing at the same time. He still couldn't be the provider he wished to be, but he helped her in all ways.

Joanna was an excellent cook. In those times of shortage of food, when people worked hard struggling to keep their jobs, her homemade food was a blessing. With few ingredients she managed to make nutritious and inexpensive tasty meals. Combining her French and Sicilian legacy she was also able to make the most exquisite dishes to a more refined clientele. But she was too introverted to sell anything, so Steve took charge of the deals. Not only was she paid more properly, but the number of debtors became zero. Of course, he wouldn't ever touch a penny.

"These are your savings."

Meanwhile, Joanna's work at the hospital was becoming increasingly difficult with poor working conditions. It was a cold autumn night, but Steve was waiting to walk her home. She arrived really upset and told him about a discussion with her supervisor, who wanted to increase her already long hours. He clenched his jaw and she knew that he was furious. He wanted to shield her from all harm, but above all, he'd always respect her choices. He would never demand or force her to do anything, even if he thought it was for her own good. He carried her bag and they walked home in complete silence.

After dinner, Steve took Joanna's hands, and kissed them softly. His touch was always gentle, but powerful for its meaning - she belonged to him and melted instantly as she always did. He knew it, and gave her one of his breathtaking smiles, releasing her hands as if to free her from any influence. When he spoke he was extra careful to assure her that he'd be at her side anyway, but he said that her will was the only one that mattered on the subject.

"What do you most enjoy doing?"

Joanna would do anything for Steve, and here he was again, asking about what she wanted. He questioned if she won't be happier if she stopped to work at the hospital and just cook. Taking into account all the risks, benefits, she'd be less tired and make more money, "You can have your own restaurant someday." As always, he was completely sincere and accurate on his assessment. The faith he had on her was inspiring – it had already changed her. Now he was making her dream of being more than the simple passive woman she was raised to be.

Steve understood Joanna's fears and how difficult it was for her to try something new like this. At that moment, she was fragile and insecure, but was relying on him to face this new challenge. He reached out for her, and she grabbed his hand. Together. As scary as it was, he gave her the support and trust she needed - she quit the hospital. Steve couldn't be more proud of her.

Joanna knew that Steve was one of a kind, and couldn't feel more blessed for having him in her life. Her young hero was the most inspiring person she'd ever saw. Talking with clients or handling
suppliers, it was a joy to see how he would bring the best out everyone around. He had an ease way in dealing with people, leading them in a natural way, by example, not by force.

Steve was the most faithful friend and passionate lover, and yet, he never ceased to amaze Joanna.

The holidays were the happiest both spent in years. Being home never felt so good. It was never enough to be together. They honored the past, praying for their missing ones. Joanna's care and love attenuated the effects of the winter, always ruthless to Steve's health.

She also received a few orders to make festive desserts. Although men weren't expected to help in the kitchen, everything about Joanna fascinated Steve, so he actually learned a few things just to be close to her. She put him to knead the dough, but when she came closer to check if it was already elastic enough, he teased her, by simply caressing her hair, running his fingers through her silky black curls. Because, in truth, even knowing how shy she was, it was just too hard for him to stay away from her. The gentle brush on her skin was enough to send shivers up her spine and the next thing she knew, she was surrendered in his arms.

Redder than the tomatoes on the table, she made another rule; he could help her, but always keeping a safe distance. Steve smiled broadly and she knew he wouldn't. He still loved to make her blush. Somehow it will make Joanna even happier.

They dreamed with the future, together in complete joy.

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1938, February 14th

To celebrate their first Valentine's Day ever, Steve took Joanna to that Monday matinee showing of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* - the first full-length classical animation feature film. She was delighted, and he felt proud of himself for making her so happy. He embraced her and held her hand during the whole movie; she felt the most loved woman in the world.

Back home, Joanna made them a special dinner with Steve's favorite dessert. She loved to cook, but cook for him was what she enjoyed doing most, absolutely. He ate everything, as usual, and waited for her to come and kiss his cheek. Then he took from under the table his last gift, and she was taken aback by a bouquet of red roses with a card that he had made especially for her.

"Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow."

She was too happy to be embarrassed and broke one of her own unspoken rules – she kissed him avidly in the middle of the living room, while he held her in his arms. His soft touch was all that takes to make her his, and he carried her to their bed. Because of the full moon the bedroom wasn't in complete darkness, and Steve could see the sparkles in Joanna's eyes.

"I only need you," he kissed her like the first time and she fell in love again. His hands knew every inch of her flawless body, every way to make her come alive under his touch. He loved to know her wishes so clearly. Steve felt fulfilled, a real man, with the most wonderful woman in the world in his arms. Every night with Joanna was unforgettable.

They were living a perfect fairy tale. But in real life, what happens after happily-ever-after?

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1938, June

Steve finished his Freshman year with the higher grades. But his time of full happiness ended when he received a letter from Art School. Due to the country's deep recession his scholarship wasn't
renewed. Since he couldn't afford the college tuition fees and he'd have to stop studying.

This had a tough impact on him. It was a step back in their dreams. His young soul was devastated. Steve sat there on the couch with the letter in his hands, motionless. But his expression was one of deep regret.

Joanna hurried to sit by his side and he gave her the letter. Immediately she said they could use her savings to pay for his education, but Steve didn't accept it. She got up very upset and started pacing from one side to the other, muttering, in her Italian mood. He gently took her hand and she stopped. It was impossible for her to be mad at him when all he needed to do was to touch her. He asked her to sit again. His voice was trembling but his eyes were completely dry, making Joanna alarmed.

"Please... don't ask me that."

And he continued saying he couldn't deny her anything. But there were things a man could never accept. *I need to be the man here.* He knew that he wasn't worthy of her yet, but he needed to win on his own merits. He needed to do the right thing.

"I don't deserve you."

She never saw him so defeated. She tried to swallow a lump in her throat, blinking back tears. Heartbrokenly, she understood that there was nothing she could do to convince him otherwise. She had to respect his choices as he always respected hers. Even a choice based on pure male pride, but it was a fundamental part of who he was. They were both raised to respect gender roles, but her love for Steve was so huge that, for once, she found these traditions really ridiculous. But she could never fight him – she wouldn't make him feel less-than-a-man, like he felt his whole life.

She put her hand near to his heart, struggling to speak between her incessant tears, and said, "Don't you ever say that you are not worthy of me."

That moment, he needed her, so she forgot all about her shame. She pulled him to her arms and kissed him. He returned the kiss but kept still. She continued kissing and hugging him, talking about all amazing things he did for her, how he inspired her and how she'd be lost without him. "Il mio eroe." That she had hope that things were going to be better, and he'd find a great job, "You can fight anything." Until he was holding her, and smiling through her kisses. Once again, she made him feel better. Of course her kisses helped him a lot too.

But in the days that followed, Steve maintained the absolute control, without blaming anyone or venting his understandable anger and frustration. He was holding everything inside and Joanna was worried.

1938, July

Steve's 20th birthday was coming, and Joanna didn't know what she could do to cheer him up - if there was anything that could make him to feel a little better.

They were laying in their bed in total darkness, wrapped in each other arms, when he broke the usual silence, "Can you make me mom's cake again?" He was almost sleepy, but she noticed the slight tremor in his voice, and simply nodded her head in agreement. She remembered how emotional he got last year.

On the 4th, she made the 'bleu-blanc-rouge' cake, and he wept silently like last time. That was the only way he would allow himself to cry - for his mother. She took him to bed, and he let her nest him
until he fell asleep, completely wasted. When he woke up he was in a good mood, smiling, and ate the whole cake.

Joanna learned - she'd make the cake every time Steve needed, and he'd never had to ask her again.

Unfortunately, things were far from getting better. Steve kept working as a freelancer illustrator, but only got a small job at a Newspaper.

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1939, September 1st

The World War II started in Europe and Joanna was worried for her family's safety.

Steve was still without perspective of change in his future. What frustrated him most was the fact of having to hide his relationship with Joanna. He wouldn't ever taint her reputation and since they lived together, not even their romantic involvement could be visible - to the outside world they were just family friends, business partners.

He worked hard and achieved agreements for her to provide fine desserts for a few exquisite restaurants, so that even with any crisis, Joanna, at 27, continued working and earning.

But still, Steve needed more.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

It's the middle of the story, and things are going to be difficult. It'll take me more time to publish because I need more time between the chapters. When I wrote the story it was like writing a script. Now that I'm actually publishing the chapters it's like shooting the scenes... I'd never imagine that I would write such an emotional story... Anyway, it's harder than I anticipated…

The mistakes are all mine. Many thanks to Winterbeauti who is always inspiring me!

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it!

xxoo Mari

Ref: Movie verse, Steve's time line from SHIELD files - 1939-1943 - Steve worked as Newspaper boy
That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight. I'm following him.'

Growing up, James Buchanan Barnes always worshiped Steve.

Their families were neighbors, and when his mother Winifred died giving birth to his sister Rebecca, Sarah helped in any way she could. His father George was a soldier at Camp Lehigh, Virginia, always away from home, so Bucky would spend a lot of days with the Rogers, while his aunt Ida took care of the baby girl.

Four years is a big age difference between children, but Steve was a lonely boy and frequently in bed rest, so it wasn't bad to have company. Bucky never missed an opportunity to sneak in to hear the stories that Steve liked to read aloud. Steve wouldn't shoo him away like other older boys, so Bucky kept quiet and watched while Steve drew the characters and scenes from the books – the younger boy thought it was the most amazing thing in the world. Steve had compassion for him because he couldn't imagine anything worse than not having a mother. Bucky felt sorry for the always-sick boy, but envied him for having such a caring mom.

Their true friendship started when Bucky was eight years old. In spite of the age difference, he was almost as tall as Steve at twelve. He was coming from elementary school when saw three boys beating Steve into an alley. They wanted money but Steve refused to give them anything. Bucky couldn't believe that Steve was facing them alone, without backing down, so he stepped in to help his friend. They stuck up and fought together, and after a while the bullies ran away.

"I was afraid to stand up to those bums until I saw you do it." Bucky was amazed. "You're the best, you know that?"

Steve never had help before, "Thanks… I guess."

That day Steve became Bucky's hero - he had never seen anyone so courageous. They were bruised but proud of themselves, and since then, they would always stand against bullies together.

Bucky was only fourteen years old when Sarah Rogers died. Steve was struggling to be a man, and couldn't let anyone, especially his only friend, to see how miserable he really was. He pulled away from everyone, took refuge with Joanna, and forgot the world in his love for her.

Steve and Bucky lost contact for almost four years, and during this time, Bucky went from an average teenager to a taller and stronger young man at eighteen. Steve was surprised when they met, "I thought you were smaller." He hadn't realized how much he missed Bucky. Their bond was like the ones between siblings - the longest relationship they both had. They were both adults now and became inseparable.

Steve was definitely happier - laughing more and always remembering something fun about their childhood. But Bucky broke the perfect balance that was his life with Joanna - he brought the world inside their home. Steve wouldn't ever talk about his private life, and even less risk to tarnish Joanna's image.

The underlying reason, Bucky had become everything that Steve wasn't - strong, handsome, and
gallant – he hit on every woman and they all fell for him. They were friends, but, unfortunately, not free from a slight rivalry. Steve couldn't allow him anywhere near Joanna, so he kept Bucky away from their home.

Watching from a distance and completely innocent, Joanna liked Bucky instantly. But it was for a different reason than what Steve secretly feared, "He loves you like a brother." Bucky brought some joy to Steve's life - he had a chance to do normal things young men would do, and Joanna was grateful for that.

'Remember when I made you ride the Cyclone at Coney Island?'
'Yeah, and I threw up?'

Boys will always be boys, so there were some troubles. They went to Coney Island with Bucky's friends, and Steve came home very upset. Joanna could hear them outside; Bucky was talking, apologizing, but Steve was impassive, so Bucky left.

Steve was feeling humiliated because the other guys made fun of him. Different from Steve's easygoing old pals in Art School, Bucky's friends were typical young men, with a strong streak of immaturity, an eagerness to live up to social standards of masculinity. Steve would never fit in.

He entered the house in silence, apologized and went to the bathroom to wash his face. When he came back, he kissed Joanna on the cheek before sitting on the table already set for dinner, "I'm sorry, I'm not too hungry." He knew that Joanna always worried when he didn't eat properly, so he told her about the snacks they ate at the park.

"Bad food made you sick," she said putting a bowl in front of him – it was a minestrone with an irresistible aroma, and so tasty that he ate everything without even realizing, which made him feel a lot better.

When they went to bed, she picked up her chest box and started to show him her family photos. She told stories about her childhood and how her huge brother once took her to a fair in Sicily, where both end up sick too. Steve ended up remembering some embarrassing things about Bucky and they both laughed.

With Joanna by his side he wasn't feeling so ashamed anymore. He loved that about her - even when he didn't know he needed her, she was there for him. Always in her subtle way, making him felt good about himself - she always gave him exactly what he needed. He hugged her tight and said shyly, "I don't deserve you." She was about to protest but he kissed her, and they got lost in each other's arms. Their bed was the place where Steve felt like a real man - they fit perfectly together and he knew all the ways to love and please her.

'You still don't know a bloody thing about women.'

She was the best thing in his life, but he couldn't help but feel that he wasn't good enough for her. He wasn't strong like Bucky, and because of that he couldn't get a decent job to afford him to marry her. The awful truth, he didn't know why she would be with a guy like him.

'Sometimes I think you like getting punched.'

And to make it worse, Bucky continued to grow increasingly stronger and took the role of Steve's protector - he was huge at 5'11" next to Steve's only 5'7". After they started to hang out together Steve would come home less bruised and Joanna couldn't be happier. The greater the feeling of inferiority that he was experiencing the more powerful was the urge to prove himself, so Steve got into more fights.
It was something that neither Joanna nor Bucky could understand because they both loved and worshiped Steve for all his greatness beyond any physical limitations.

1941, May 25

*The game. It's from May 1941. I know, 'cause I was there.*

Bucky would do anything for Steve and kept trying to cheer him up. He got tickets for them to see the Dodgers’ game at Ebbets Field. The Dodgers won 8 to 4, and for the first time in a long time, Steve came home exultant.

That night when he made love to Joanna it was about them as a whole and they were both consumed by the heat of passion. She missed him like this, and couldn't hold back her tears. Steve hugged her even harder, "What's wrong bella?"

She told him she wanted to make him happy. He caressed her face and kissed her softly, "I'm sorry I've been Grumpy." She smiled at the Snow White movie reference - he knew it would always work to cheer her up - and kissed her once more. "You are my happiness," he whispered, running his fingers through her hair.

Joanna knew he was completely sincere, but also how much he had been suffering in silence these last years by not getting what he had planned - college, career, marriage. But she didn't know what else to do, because although he continued working to improve her food business, to keep everything perfect for her, he still didn't accept her money. Instead, everything he earned he would bring home to her - no one was more noble and honest than him.

'You were meant for more than this, you know.'

She was a simple woman, but she wasn't ingenuous - deep inside she was afraid that his life might be better if he wasn't with her. Steve was special and deserved more in life – he was too good for her, and she feared that one day the world would find it, and she'd lose him forever. As hard as it was to believe, she always knew that he could leave one day and never come back.

Bucky's unconditional admiration for Steve only heightened Joanna's fear.

After years of friendship, Bucky ended up knowing Joanna only as Steve's landlady and the cook. The 29-year-old woman was ten years older than Bucky, but always a beauty. She would remain invisible to any other men - she would only shine to Steve.

Bucky couldn't help but tease. "She's not bad for an old dame," he said much to Steve's chagrin. He never understood why Steve would care about a woman like her.

Steve categorically didn't like it and warned his friend, "Can you show some respect?" Secretly he was pissed that Bucky had never imagined that Steve could be attractive to any woman.

Joanna was delighted and yet embarrassed by Steve's protection. She didn't understand why Steve would be mad at Bucky - she didn't even see Bucky as a man, so she couldn't be upset by Bucky's comments. She told him to not pay attention, that Bucky was only a kid, and to tell him she was a friend of his mother.

Steve was too upset to dwell on these discussions and he would always respect Joanna's wishes. He trusted Joanna and everything they had together. But in the last three years, he had found no chance of pursuing the future he had once planned for himself. Whenever she mentioned his mother, it only reminded him of the time that had passed and the things he hadn't accomplished. The 23-year-old
was disheartened. *It's all still about a debt to my mother?*

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**1941, December 7**

*There are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them.*

 Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Bucky joined the Army and Steve couldn't think of anything else. He tried to enlist too but was rejected because of his frailty and history of illnesses. It was the start of a series of rejections.

 Fate struck again and the war hit Joanna's family, and fear for their safety consumed her. Steve found her sobbing with a letter from her mother - her brother and his wife had died while fighting against Fascism with the Italian resistance, leaving his son Raffaello, Joanna's nephew, an orphan. She cried the whole night in Steve's arms, and she continued to cry for days - for the loss of her brother, for her orphan nephew, for the babies she would never give to Steve.

 Steve couldn't see her shattered like this. She needed her family - he needed to do something for her.

 *This isn't a back alley, Steve. It's war.*

 Bucky didn't want Steve to go to war and Joanna couldn't agree more. He knew Steve needed a distraction and made up his mind to find Steve a girl, just to get his mind off of all the terrible things that had happened to him in the last few years. "You'll forget the war," he told Steve, "I promise you." Of course Steve didn't want any girl, so he kept refusing his friend's *help* - he had more than he could wish for with Joanna but Bucky didn't know about their relationship.

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**1943, June**

*The moment you think you know what's going on in a woman's head is the moment your goose is well and truly cooked.*

"You have to go with me. This girl, Connie, won't go out without her cousin."

 Joanna heard Bucky talking Steve into a double date - she trusted Steve above all, so she told him to go. "He's your best friend, and he just wants your company." That she had complete faith in him, and he didn't need to do anything inappropriate. Steve didn't know what to say - she was right, she always was. Joanna was the person he most cared about and she was telling him to go to support his friend. *But why she was sending him away?*

 He never asked - she never said. Suddenly the lack of words wasn't all good after all.

 Steve was feeling defeated and had to do something. He tried to enlist again, was rejected, and ended up being beaten up in an alley. Bucky saved him and told he was going to war.

 "The 107th. Sergeant James Barnes, shipping out for England first thing tomorrow."

 "I should be going."

 "Come on, man. My last night! I got to get you cleaned up."

 "Why? Where are we going?"

 "The future."
Bucky had set up the double date and Steve couldn't say no to him on his last night in town. Steve felt more insignificant than ever - he was a failure - to the Army, to those girls, to his best friend. Steve wasn't good enough for Joanna, and all he wanted was her.

'Well, I'd settle for just one.'

Joanna knew everything about Steve, so she knew he was feeling inferior. But she could never imagine that he was feeling insufficient for her.

Before they had time to figure it all, the day Joanna most feared finally came.

Chapter End Notes

End Note 8: Thanks for reading!

This chapter took me more time because, despite real life tasks, there are many Steve and Bucky's story lines to follow in the comics and I wanted to get the better background to fit the movie. So I tried to find the best way for them to became real close, and the reason why they would like each other - to create a brotherly relationship, right?

The next chapter is the hardest. I still cry every time I edit it, so I ask you to have patience with me. :( 

The mistakes are all mine. Many thanks to my friends Polexia Aphrodite and Winterbeauti that always help me.

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it!

xxoo Mari

Ref: Bucky's background history (Earth-616) - George M. Barnes (father), Winifred C. Barnes (mother), Rebecca P. Barnes, Ida (aunt)

Ref: Movie verse, Steve's time line from SHIELD files, and movie's references.
1922, (?) 10 - birth: James Buchanan Barnes
1939-1943 - Steve worked as Newspaper boy
1941, May - Dodgers game

Ref: Steve and Bucky's fight against bullies from Captain America: First Vengeance #1
1943, June 14, EXPO

Actually, Steve was relieved - the girl didn't even look at him, no surprise. He was used to those kinds of Bucky's girls and their reactions. But since Joanna he couldn't care less. He left and none of them noticed.

He found herself in front of an Army enlistment center - again. The drive inside him was stronger than anything else. He needed to do it, to serve his country like every other man - like his father did. He needed to keep trying. *I will always stand, mom.*

Bucky found him and pulled him out of his thoughts. His friend was going to war - his best friend, his brother. *Please be safe.* Steve was proud of him; Bucky didn't have an easy time growing up, but he turned into a fine man. Steve understood Bucky's concerns – they always looked for each other, like family.

*There are already so many big men fighting this war. Maybe what we need now is a little guy, huh?*

Steve tried to enlist and thought he was going to jail for lying on the enlistment form. Instead he couldn't believe it that this German doctor was giving him a chance. Suddenly, his dream was coming true.

He came home beyond excited. He said Bucky was going to the war, and he would have an opportunity to go after him. He showed Joanna his approved enlistment form and she was shocked. She knew he would always be brave, so if he went to the war he wouldn't hide. She burst into tears telling him she didn't want him to be killed.

"No, no, don't cry, bella." He hugged her and sat on the couch with her on his lap, but she was sobbing. He told her he was going to the Army base Camp Lehigh in Virginia. In seven years they had never been apart from each other, so he knew it would be hard for her, "I'll miss you too, but I'll be back in a week, or ten days max, that's what they told me." He kissed her face and dried her tears. His touch was always enough to make her forget any pain or trouble, but that moment it wasn't that easy - her tears didn't seem to stop.

Steve laid her gently on the couch, "Just wait a minute, ok?" He got up and went to their room. When he returned he picked a small posy of flowers that was hidden under his coat. He knelt in front of her and said, "I'll never leave you." He kissed her hand, "I was waiting for the right moment." He held the flowers in front of her and smiled, "I wanted to be worthy of you." She looked at him stunned and he was shining and proud. "And now I'm in the Army." Between the red roses he was holding his mother's ring. "I love you. Please, marry me."

Joanna was crying even more and couldn't find words, "Si." She hugged him hard and kept weeping. He put the ring on her hand, "Now I know mom is proud of me." He had tears on his eyes too. He kissed and soothed her, until she calmed down.

She helped him pack all his war books – Steve had gathered a few good ones since he started to try to enlist. She cooked Ravioli, it was his favorite, and made a special dessert.
The night was magical. Steve was strong and bold - Joanna was hungry and passionate. They made love as if it was the last time.

In the morning, she woke up crying again and he tried to calm her, "You don't need to worry, I won't get hurt; it's just a training camp."

"It's war," she was desolated, "You won't come back".

He looked at her questioning, "Of course I'll. You're my home." He kissed her gently on the lips, "Don't you trust me?"

She nodded and kissed him, "Il mio amore," she trusted him her life. But in her heart there was that fear that she couldn't explain. Watching him leave was the hardest thing she had ever done in her entire life.

But the truth was that Steve would never come back - her Steve never did.

1943, June 15 to 21, Army base Camp Lehigh, Virginia

It wasn't a normal Boot camp, which takes at least 6 weeks. There was no reason to submit Steve's frail body to a full training when Dr. Erskine only wanted to know him a little better. Besides, the Army was in a hurry to have the super soldiers.

Even so, the one week Steve spent there was excruciating - the guys gave him hell. His body hurt everywhere and he was so tired that he didn't have time to think about anything else. Everybody was joking about him, except Agent Carter. She was beautiful and scary - he never met a woman like her. Worst of all, Colonel Phillips, the SSR commander, hated him - nothing would change that.

Steve ended up proud of himself because he won the flag challenge - no one had done it before in 17 years - he didn't have the muscles but always had the brains. And there was that scary test - the grenade. What was he thinking? He wasn't actually - that was pure instinct. He did what seemed to be the right thing to do, but the risks were so much higher. It wasn't about just proving himself, as Bucky said. Of course there was something about that too, he couldn't deny it, but it was more. The hero part that Joanna always told him - to be true to his heart, he couldn't accept it. Yet, he had a drive to do more, to do the good above all, to protect people. And now this gentle crazy doctor was telling him he could become stronger, to really have the power to do all he dreamed of - and maybe more.

Dr. Erskine told him, "The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great. Bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen," because Steve was a good man.

1943, June 22, Brooklyn Secret Installation

Steve arrived in New York and Agent Carter escorted him to Brooklyn. He was really nervous, and deep inside, afraid of not surviving through the whole thing. Dr. Erskine had explained the Project Rebirth but he didn't understand it all. Who would? Talking to Agent Carter was disconcerting and he was too embarrassed to be sure what he was babbling on about. He wasn't used to be receiving women's attention other than Joanna's. He was too close to home, but without a chance to see her first – maybe for the best. What if she asked him to not do it? He couldn't think about her right now, but he had wait for so long to marry her.

"The right partner." I wish I could call her.
They entered at the secret base - thousands of things passing through his mind, no one making sense. The last door opened and then he felt as if he was inside of a science fiction movie, maybe a horror one. Everybody was looking at him with doubt, pity, uncertainty. Lord, I ask for courage.

"Are you ready?" Dr. Erskine was talking to him but he couldn't find his voice to answer, and just nodded.

Everybody else was acting as if he wasn't really there. Agent Carter seemed to be worried. He recognized Mr. Stark from the EXPO. Lying on that stretcher, he heard the doctor talking to the audience.

"We begin with a series of microinjections into the subject's major muscle groups. The serum infusion will cause immediate cellular change. And then, to stimulate growth, the subject will be saturated with Vita-Rays."

That's when it all started. The needles pierced his body but didn't hurt as much as the serum penetrating into his muscles. He felt a little dizzy, almost numb with pain, but still manageable, so he kept still. The was capsule closed but he couldn't show weakness, "It's probably too late to go to the bathroom, right?" Yes, I'm ok. He was, until he began to feel his whole body tingle. Shocks began smoothly but growing, until he felt like being ripped apart and exploding from the inside out. He couldn't contain himself and cried out. Someone shouted, "Kill the reactor!" Steve couldn't really know who, but he was able to endure the pain, always had been, he wouldn't give up now. Failure wasn't acceptable.

"No! Don't! I can do this!"

There light inside was too bright and the sound too loud. But after a while everything stopped, even the shocks and the machine wasn't shaking anymore. His body was on fire until the heat ceased and all pain vanished. The capsule was opened and everybody was around him. He moved for the first time and it was like being inside a huge costume, only it was all him - bigger, taller like never before. He could hear many voices and feel many hands supporting him, touching him. One thing came to his mouth, "I did it."

The buzz around Steve continued until he heard shots and saw Dr. Erskine felt in front of him. He hurried, but it was too late - the doctor pointed to Steve's heart exhaling his last breath and died. Stay who you are.

Nothing before had prepared Steve for that moment. His sense of justice yelled inside him, and he felt the adrenaline rush. His body response was simple unbelievable for him to even try to explain. He ran as if he was flying, jumping on cars, facing bullets, and he could stop a submarine without feeling any pain or fatigue.

The boy wasn't harm and he caught the killer - they were calling him a hero but he still couldn't save his mentor.

They took him to the infirmary and he was subjected to lots of medical tests. It was more than Steve could've ever imagined - all of his body natural abilities were enhanced to the peak of human potential - not in his most secret wishes he could have dreamed to be that powerful. He went from 5'7" and 110 pounds to 6'2" and 220 pounds, and they told him that he was cured of all his previous illness. They kept him overnight for observation - his mind was still trying to process all that happened, and he slept truly exhausted.

1943, June 23
"I asked for an army and all I got was you. You are not enough."

Colonel Phillips' words were worse than any beating he had before in his whole life. Now that he was a super soldier, he could've never imagined that he would be rejected by the same Army that created him. The SSR commander left to Europe with Howard Stark and Agent Carter. To avoid being treated as a lab experiment, Steve accepted Senator Brandt's offer to work as a propaganda tool.

Steve was finally able to go home. He couldn't wait to see Joanna – for her to see him.

Chapter End Notes

End Note 9: Thanks for reading!

Talking to Winterbeauti I realized I missed Steve's insights during these scenes. What do you think? Also it gave me an excuse to write another chapter before the next one. Yes, I'm a baby.

Many thanks to Winterbeauti, Polexia Aphrodite, and Dark Goddess 1487 who helped me to get this chapter ready!

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it!

xxoo Mari

Ref: Dates from the movie: Rejected Army Enlistment Form, June 14, 1943. Senator's paper, June 23, 1943.
Steve entered the house calling for Joanna and she came running, but when she saw him, she stopped with her hand clutched to her heart.

"Joanna, it's me, can you believe it?" He went to meet her with a big smile in his face, "It's really me," but he was so taller that her head was on his chest. He reached out for her, but he noticed that her eyes were of pure panic. Still smiling, he bent down, "Bella."

Joanna didn't see the strong, handsome man he had become - she saw a giant-non-Steve. She waited for him ten days, praying for his safe return. Now she was looking at his eyes and hearing his voice calling her the way only he did - but this wasn't Steve. It was a nightmare, and she fainted.

Steve acted quickly, and grabbed her before she felt, carrying her close to his chest. All he wanted was to have her in his arms, but what he felt was completely different and strange. She was so small that he was afraid of hurt her, so he placed her carefully on the couch. "I missed you so much," he whispered kissing her forehead.

Since the procedure, he had superior senses and reflexes, but he didn't expect Joanna's reaction, and it baffled him. He went to get a glass of water, but bumped into the shelf and almost knocked the vase; nothing seemed to go right.

He came back slowly, and sat on the couch that creaked with his weight - Joanna woke up in a jolt. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." He offered the glass of water and she blinked slowly with the sad realization that it wasn't a bad dream.

"I'm still not used to my new size." It was a shame not to feel at ease in your own home but at least she sipped the water. "Are you feeling better? Sorry, I'm doing everything wrong."

He wanted to hug her and kiss her, but she was painfully uncomfortable. Her watery eyes were frightened and confused so Steve started to explain what happened. "Let me tell you everything, ok?" He tried to simplify the process, speaking of injections and the ray-chamber, but she was getting more terrified until she put her hands on her face and began to cry. He reached out to calm her, but she flinched. His touch was completely different - the temperature and texture of his skin, the size and strength of his hand.

He was living the nightmare then - see her crying unable to do anything. "Bella, please, don't cry. I am ok, no more asthma, no more diseases. I'm stronger, faster; they turned me into a super soldier." And he showed her the paper, "Look, it all happened yesterday."


She read the paper just looking at the picture for a few moments when she finally found words, "You got shot?!" All she could see were bullets holes, she put her hand on her mouth and froze entirely. Steve continued to talk trying to reassure her that he wasn't hurt, but she kept still, voiceless, in utterly shock.

'Dr. Erskine said that the serum wouldn't just affect my muscles, it would affect my cells. Create a
"I'll show you, ok?" He picked a knife at the kitchen and sat next to her again, this time the couch creaked louder. He moved carefully and said as calm as he could, "I'll make a little cut in my hand here, and it'll heal. You'll see. Trust me."

Joanna desperately wanted that something made sense in all this madness. His eyes were the same deep blue ones that she always trusted. His voice was the same earnest one that always told her the absolute truth. He asked, "Ready?" She simply nodded. Steve did exactly what he told her and it all happened the way he did it would - the cut in his hand healed in front of her eyes.

Then she moved - she got up and picked a napkin, sitting again and gently cleaning the blood in his hand, but when she touched his hand, she pulled back quickly. No cut, no scar. Joanna was relieved but still shocked; that was too fantastic to be true. She was a simple cook that liked romance novels. This was science fiction, far beyond her imagination.

Steve had never seen her so lost. It was too much for her. It was too much for anyone, even for him. But the last thing in the world Steve wanted was to hurt her. So he did what he knew that would always make her feel better - he said he was hungry.

'Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person.'

Joanna instantly became herself, and ran to the kitchen to make him dinner.

Steve was relieved to see her back to life again. He went to the bathroom to clean himself; he had to bend down to look in the mirror, and ended up breaking the towel holder. He had to be extra careful; he couldn't do anything automatic anymore. He needed to get used to his house with his new size. He was experiencing what he hadn't the chance before; feeling like a teenage boy who grew up too fast.

Moments later there was lots of food on the table. He grabbed the old chair to sit down, but tested its weight first in order not to crack it. He sat carefully, "We'll need some new furniture."

He ate everything she cooked - she was astonished, but proud. Steve apologized, saying that he would eat a lot more, and that made Joanna smile shyly. "I missed your smile," he said but quickly looking down when her eyes filled with tears again.

Feeding him was one of the things she loved to do, and he was there, eating as never before. The way he moved, smiled, and talked about things during the dinner showed her that he was still Steve. But she didn't recognize or understand all that had changed – giant Steve was unfamiliar, he wasn't her Steve, not anymore. Her head hurt and she started to cry again.

He couldn't help himself and touched her face. She didn't flinch this time; she wanted to lean into his hand and to surrender to his touch as she ever did. But closing her eyes the feeling of his now huge hand was unknown, unwanted – something she didn't feel for a long time, and for the first time in years, she remembered her late husband. She shuddered in a repulse more of the past memory, than from the present touch, but Steve removed his hand devastated. Then her words echoed at his mind and he understood.

"You won't come back. The Steve she knew was gone; he was a stranger for her.

"Joanna, I am back. They just fixed me."

The puzzled look she gave to him meant everything. There was nothing wrong with him before, he was always perfect for her.

That realization hurt him badly. He didn't think about her feelings; he didn't think about how his
change would affect her. He followed his dream and left her behind, now he couldn't go back. He didn't want go back - he couldn't be that little guy anymore. But little Steve was the love of Joanna's life.

"Please, forgive me," he knelt in front of her. "I never meant to hurt you." He was feeling miserable, but he couldn't cry. "I only wanted to be better." He felt dry… empty. Getting up he went to his studio and carefully laid down on his old bed that didn't fit him. Everything on the house was screaming that he didn't belonged there anymore.

His whole life was passing through his mind in a flash – he wasn't the skinny kid anymore, but at what costs?

When he went back to the living room, hours later, he found her asleep on the couch. She was so drained that she didn't wake up when he called. Like handling a child, Steve carried her to the bed, and tucked her in gently. She was so beautiful; he sat on the floor and stayed there looking at her peaceful face.

Steve still couldn't cry. The guilt was consuming him. How could I be so blind?

All his life he felt he was a failure. She was the most important person for him, and he didn't realize he was always perfect for her. He always had been.

Would he be happy with her, if he stayed small? Would he get a decent job, to provide for her? Or he would have to end up accepting her money? In any of these options, the financial gap could have destroyed him or their relationship.

Could he be happy with himself? If he had the chance, would he go back? Would he do it, if only for her? Well, he'll do anything for her, but in doing so, he would be killing a large part of himself. Because, unfortunately, although little Steve was everything for Joanna, he wasn't enough for himself.

Now it was too late, he couldn't find the answers to those questions. He fell asleep with his head resting on her bed.

In the morning, Joanna woke up and found giant Steve asleep by her bedside. She couldn't hold back tears. Closing her eyes, she was overwhelmed by all the memories of the life they shared together - 7 years - a lifetime.

When he left, she was afraid that he would die. The truth was that a part of him was dead - the part that she loved most. She missed him desperately - his touch, his arms around her - she could never forget little Steve. Joanna didn't know if she could breathe without him, and she knew she would never love anyone else.

But he wasn't dead, and she still loved him, but could she love giant Steve? Even if she could, he wasn't her Steve anymore. He was a true hero; he was in the papers, in the Army. Would she be worth of him?

"Steve?" she called softly, and slowly, carefully, she caressed his head. His hair felt the same and she was relieved. He leaned into her touch and opened his eyes smiling. She was truly concerned, "You shouldn't be on the floor, you're gonna be sore." But before he was fully awake, she got up quickly, inviting, "Breakfast?" She didn't want him to see the tears still falling from her eyes again.

At the table, eating and talking, they found a relative normality in their lives. But she was never tired of admiring him eat; that was a change that she enjoyed. He was definitely more confident, talkative,
and proud of himself.

He gave her his last drawings. "For your cookbook. You know, we have to publish it," Steve said with sincere admiration and she blushed astonished. "I'm serious. The book is beautiful and you recipes are the best. You are the best." Joanna had written each recipe with her classic calligraphy and Steve had sketched each one of them. Through all these years it had been their project together. "You're my petite Italian chef," he said fondly and she smiled ashamed.

Then he told her about the rejection from the Army and the job with the Senator. "It's not what I wanted, but it's a step, and I got promoted," he said a little embarrassed. "He's calling me Captain America."

When she saw him so disappointed, she reacted instantly. That petite woman was his rock. She still knew, even as giant Steve, what he needed to hear. She looked at him, her eyes filled with tears of pride. "You'll find a way. The world needs a hero like you," that was the truth that she always held in her heart.

Steve met her gaze with lost eyes. "I'm not a hero." *I'm still not enough.*

Even through the tears, she smiled widely, "You always have been." She looked so fragile and yet she was giving him her unconditional support, "Il mio eroe." Then she reached for him and touched his face.

He pulled her into an awkward embrace - it was like he was holding a crystal - but there was one thing on his mind, he needed to know. He gently caught her chin in his hand and he looked at her tearing eyes asking her permission. She nodded, closing her eyes; she needed to know too. He bent down and pressed his lips to hers. The heartbroken realization took hold of them both – something was missing. Someone. Joanna was everything his mind remembered and his heart needed, but their bodies didn't fit together, not anymore.

The simple truth was that she belonged to little Steve, and no one ever would take his place, not even giant handsome Steve. And he now belonged to the world. Crying silently, she took the ring off her finger, but he held her hand in despair. "Please," he begged, "It's yours." She rested her head on his chest, his arms still cradling her.

The thought of not marrying her was devastating, but he would never do anything to make her uncomfortable. She couldn't see them as a couple - there was no way back. It was a pain he had never felt before, only surpassed by losing his mother. But what mostly shattered his heart was the guilt - to know that he had hurt her this way. "Please, forgive me." He didn't know if he couldn't ever forgive himself. He was holding everything inside him - he was unworthy of her and as such he didn't have the right of tears.

Joanna knew him; she couldn't let him blaming himself, so she spoke with all her love, "It is your destiny, what you were born for." Her voice was a murmur, "I know you didn't mean to hurt me. I will always love you."

It was the last straw, he broke, and tears erupted in full force, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." It was all he could say, ashamed, lost. She sat on the couch, and he dropped on his knees, resting his head on her lap, wrapping his now strong arms around her. "I love you," he whispered through tears, "I can't live without you."

She held him, "I love you too. You will never lose me." Their tears were mingling together.
Senator Brant had opened a credit for Steve to pay for new clothes, and other personal effects. Between the rehearsals for the War Bond shows and preparation to travel, Steve spent the next couple days fixing everything around in the house. With the payment advance he received, he bought a new heater, changed the lockers, reinforced doors and windows. He was adamant to leave her as safe and comfortable as possible during his absence. No matter what, she was his home.

Before leaving, he gave her all the money he got - she didn't want it. Then he said he'd eat more; she'd have to be ready when he came back. He knew her, and Joanna couldn't argue with him about this, she never could. He gave her the Senator's office address and number, also his assistant's contact information. "Call if you need anything, they will find me. You're listed as my only family."

He took her into a last embrace, asking her to take care of herself until he got back, "I'll write you every day." Through tears, she told him to be safe. He didn't want to let go of her, he sighed deeply and kissed her forehead. He left, turning his back on the only life he knew; while inside both Steve and Joanna were hollow.

Chapter End Notes

End Note 10: Thanks for reading.

I hope you understand why it took me so long to write this chapter, and forgive my English mistakes. But it's done, I'm heartbroken with them. No more tears left. Now we need to find a way to heal. I promise the next chapter they will start it.
My dearest faithful friend Winterbeauti held my hand here; I'd be dead without her. Many thanks to Elwyn, who helped me to get this chapter ready.

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it.
xxoo Mari
1943, July

When the Allies invaded Sicily in a major WWII campaign, Joanna was terrified. It took quite some time, but finally, she received a letter from her mother telling they were hiding but safe. She couldn't help but think about Steve - he wasn't dead, he wasn't in the war, and she could only be grateful for that.

Steve kept his promise writing Joanna every single day; he worried about her being lonely, so he sent her postcards from every place he visited, just a few words and always a drawing about something he did or saw.

'I don't know if I can do this.'

His life had turned upside down, but he didn't have time to feel sorry for himself. At 25 years old, he had to redefine Steve Rogers, and he had his mind made up to find his path to the war. Of course he never imagined himself wearing a whole patriotic costume.

'For the longest time, I dreamed about coming overseas and being on the front lines, serving my country. I finally got everything I wanted and I'm wearing tights.'

In spite of feeling silly behind the mask, Captain America was an instant success - Steve had a natural earnest charisma, he was handsome, strong, and surrounded by 30 smokin' hot dancers. The show was a hit since the start.

A super-soldier didn't need bodyguard, but he was the unique successful experiment, certainly an HYDRA target. So, a member of the U.S. Army's WAAC, Elizabeth Ross, was assigned to work with him as his assistant. In spite of being highly trained, Betsy was a sweet blonde girl, whose fiancéé had died while working at Red Cross a year ago. She helped Steve improve as a performer to become confident on stage and handle his new found fame.

'Bond sales take a 10% bump in every state I visit.'

Captain America was the new American Hero to be used as a public relations/propaganda tool around the country at War Bond rallies, Saturday matinee serial and even in comic books - created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby from the successful company Timely Comics. Steve met an enthusiastic young guy named Stanley Martin Lieber, a playwright at the Army who was going to write the third issue of Captain America's comic book and wanted to see Steve in person.

It was surreal to be the center of all that attention and being treated as a celebrity. Steve hated the shallowness around him, but he took the job seriously as everything in his life - he wanted to serve his country, and was doing it the best way he could. When he stepped into the spangled outfit, he became a professional, a star. The children were the most rewarding part; Captain America was real for them and an inspiration to stand against the evil. That was something that Steve was proud of.

'The enlistment lines have been around the block since your picture hit the newsstands.'

Of course being the American Golden Boy had other side effects. Women were literally throwing themselves at him, in a way that would make Howard Stark beyond jealous. If Bucky could see me
now…

Steve was always polite, but was clearly uncomfortable when the female harassment was more aggressive. He never told anyone about Joanna, but it was obvious he was missing someone. In War times, nobody asked many questions.

It was 4th of July, and Steve was miserable missing Joanna. The cast was all gathered and being his birthday, he had no escape; they threw a party for him, extravagant and impersonal. He kept the card that Joanna had sent to him in his pocket all the time, and played his part, but in the end he just wanted to go to the hotel. One of the dancers approached him and clung to his arm offering to accompany him. He looked so exhausted that Betsy stepped in, "I'm ready, Steve," and she took his hand, "Good night, Marion." They left the disappointed woman behind.

He looked at Betsy, surprised, "Thank you."

"It's my job, Captain. And Happy Birthday." She smiled proudly.

Since then, her constant presence from breakfast to dinner, brought him comfort and kept the other girls away. She was very professional and assisted Steve in everything, but she was also sensitive enough to see him as more than just muscles. They established a rebound relationship without them being an actual couple. They kept each other company, while helping to ease their pain.

But how do you move on from a relationship you never meant to end?

Joanna was constantly in Steve's heart and mind. He sent everything to assure her that he was safe – cards, comics, posters. For all that mattered, she was his family and he just wanted to take care of her. But he couldn't see himself living the same life they shared before, and also he couldn't imagine Joanna into the madness that was his life now. Still, he was a man inside of a huge, perfect, healthy body; it was normal to miss the intimacy and the human contact. But she belonged to little Steve - he couldn't violate that. He couldn't betray little Steve thinking about Joanna, but he couldn't also betray Joanna thinking about other women. He was in a serious mess.

In spite of all that happened, Joanna's path to heal was, in a way, quite simple.

Back in Brooklyn, she still dreamed of little Steve every single night – her shy artist who fought against bullies, who shared her life and bed. He was the most incredible man in the world, the only one for her. She was mourning her lost lover and for the first time she felt like a real widow. She would love him forever - nothing would change that.

In Joanna's eyes they were two separated people.

Giant Steve had his own place in her heart, but in a completely different way – he was a symbol against the Nazis that were destroying her motherland and endangering her family. She kept herself busy following his success through papers and magazines, while waiting for his next letter. His drawings showed her how unbelievable his life was now, but mostly, how lonely and guilty he still was. She wrote him a few times, to assure him that she was OK, answer his incessant questions about her safety and well-being. She told him how proud she was every single time.

Joanna was extraordinary in her simplicity, and her love for Steve was unconditional. She was healing the pain for losing little Steve with the joy of knowing that giant Steve was alive and had a whole future ahead of him. But she knew she had one last task – to help giant Steve to move on.

1943, October
They hadn't seen each other for almost 4 months.

Steve sent her tickets to his show in New York, with a new dress and a car to pick her. Betsy attended Joanna the whole time, courteously explaining everything, telling about the success of the show tour through the whole country, in cities before, like Buffalo, Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Chicago. Joanna never felt so fulfilled in her life - everybody loved giant Steve.

Betsy was extremely respectful, "He made Captain America real; a symbol of freedom and what's worth fighting for. He's a true gentleman. My fiancée died a year ago. Working with the Captain gave me a noble purpose, you know? I feel like I'm helping my country too."

Joanna saw clearly that the young woman was smitten with him; oddly enough she didn't feel jealous and smiled proudly, "He's special."

She took Joanna to see him after the show. Steve was busy like a movie star surrounded by fans, but he stopped everything when he saw Joanna, and led her politely to his dressing room. He closed the door behind them, kneeling to hug her as gently as his anxiety allowed.

How he missed her, "Are you OK? Did you enjoy it? Betsy took good care of you? Do you need anything?" They sat together on the couch, and he wanted to know everything about her last months.

Joanna was absolutely delighted; to see him as Captain America was fantastic, "Did you really carry that motorcycle with three girls?"

She touched his costume, and he asked already blushing, "I am ridiculous, ain't I?"

"Of course not, you're superhero!"

He told her about the movies, and that Betsy would send her tickets and help with everything like today.

"Why does she think I'm your sister-in-law?"

He looked embarrassed, "Short story, she got two parts and thought it was one. Once I talked about missing a younger brother, thinking about Bucky, and other time I implied that you were married to the little guy."

The mention of little Steve made Joanna lower her eyes.

He took her hand on his, "Joanna, I'm sorry I didn't mean…"

She could see little Steve and giant Steve, side by side - that image made all sense in her head. "You really think that way? That we were married before?" She looked at him with bright eyes like he didn't see her in a long time.

"Of course I do," he hadn't asked, but his eyes were begging for an answer.

"Me too," and she leaned to kiss his cheek, for the first time after the transformation.

He looked down, "I just couldn't make it official… I still think we are…"

Joanna wished she could fix everything, and find a way to stop his pain. But she knew there was no turning back, their paths were already apart. He needed to move on and she could never follow him. "Steve, I'm so sorry that I hurt you."

He spoke as truthful as he always was, "Joanna, you did nothing. I made all the decisions myself, I
took him away from you. And I understand, I'm not him anymore, and I'm sorry I can't be."

She rested her head on his shoulder, putting her hand on his heart, "It was your destiny. Your heart was always too big," she continued proudly. "You were born a hero."

"I have no idea what I'm doing... And I miss you," he held her is a soft embrace. "But this is no life for you. Everything is superficial, fake, people only care about appearances and compete for attention all the time."

"Don't do this to yourself. I can't..." she squeezed his hand.

The guilty in his voice was almost palpable, "I'm not asking anything."

Joanna knew that he was the noblest man in the world. "I know." She straightened up and touched his face softly, "I'm asking you... to start your life without me."

Her words scared him. "I'm not leaving you," his eyes showed some outrage.

She was devastated to see his anguish. "You don't have to; I'm your sister, right?" she smiled affectionately trying to cheer him up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't say anything because it was easier than try to explain," he said ashamed, "But I can, if you want me to."

She spoke with all the love of her heart, "I'm honored." She took his hand on hers, "I need you to understand what it means. I will always love you, and I want your happiness."

Steve was completely lost and nervous, "I love you... I..."

Joanna was a 31-year-old simple woman with her own limitations, but to help Steve she would face her fears - she was still wary, but she had to gather her strength to act despite of herself. At that moment, helping him was the most important. She knew he needed to hear the words clearly, to begin to think about it, "You need to start dating."

He was shocked, and couldn't look at her, "No. I can't." She touched his face and he closed his eyes, "I don't know how."

She pulled his face kissing his cheek again, "Promise me you'll try."

He was listening to everything she was saying, and somehow the guilty was starting to fade away. She always knew how to make him feel better and he had no idea how to live without her. He nodded silently.

She told him about everything being ok in their neighborhood. He said he'd go home in a couple of days; the War Bond show was turned into a USO Tour show and he was going to Europe. It was time to say goodbye, they got up and she said smiling, "I loved it all, the show, the dress, thank you."

He smiled shyly, "I'm really happy you liked it. Betsy helped me. I couldn't buy it myself."

"She's pretty." Joanna didn't know that giant Steve could blush that way. Then she laughed, but her eyes were full of approval, telling him he had nothing to feel ashamed for.

"You have to live. You have to try." This time she hugged him and told him to bend down. Through smiles, she kissed his both cheeks, and hugged him again. He held her tenderly, but closer, pressing his lips to the top of her head.
Steve understood he had his best friend back.

That was the beauty of their love - one was always putting other's happiness first – and that was their path to healing. They were friends first; that wouldn't ever change. It still hurt, but they weren't feeling so empty anymore.

Joanna watched him walk away, confident, stopping to sign cards, and taking pictures with every fan, with a professional smile in his face. She couldn't be more proud. Betsy guided her back to the car and Joanna thanked her for the dress and everything.

Betsy smiled proudly, "Don't mention that, it's my job. You're Captain Rogers' family."

Family. That was the absolutely truth. More than everything the Rogers had become her family. "Please, take care good of him," Joanna asked Betsy before leaving.

After everything ended, Betsy was waiting to take him back to the hotel, as usual. "Ready for tonight, Captain?"

Before he could think about, he said, "Betsy, would you like to have dinner with me?"

"Of course, I have the hotel waiting for you arrival, the dinner is already ordered." It was their daily routine.

"No, I meant... as in a real date."

"Oh, Captain," her cheeks were pink hot, "You don't need to do that, I... It's my job," she couldn't deny it, he was every woman's dream, but she couldn't imagine to earn his attention this way.

"There's no way to replace what we lost," he was nothing but honest, "But if I have to try, I would like it to be with someone that is already special to me. I understand if you are not interested..."

Betsy has been his faithful companion all this time, more than an assistant, she took care of him. She was a skilled agent, but also a pretty young woman. They knew each other; it was a safe option for both of them.

"Captain," she still couldn't believe it, "I was afraid you'd never ask."

After four months of unofficial dates, and Joanna's blessing, Steve took Betsy for a night out. It was pleasant and familiar; he kissed her goodnight on the cheek - but it was a first step.

Giant Steve came back one last time. Joanna had cooked a lot; even he had trouble eating it all, but he came ready for it - he came for her. He knew it was the one thing that it would always make Joanna smile. And she did; she smiled and cried all the time, so did he. She kissed his cheek when he finished making him blush; as she always did. He made a lovely last drawing - she looked beautiful, in a chef outfit he bought to her, while he was traveling, and all that food around her.

"Here, you see? That's how my petite Italian chef looks!" He was proud of her; he always had been. Joanna blushed when he gave the compliment, as she always did. Things were starting to feel right again.

Steve had one thing to settle before leave, "Remember that place we liked in little Italy? There's an excellent house on sale there, low-priced. With your savings and my earnings, we can buy it, if you want to." He gave her the name and number of the person on the Senator's office that would contact her to take care of everything. Joanna didn't know what to say, but he was straightforward, "Say yes,
He said he'd try to write, but it would be more difficult. "You know I'm going with the show, not to the war, so you don't need to worry."

Joanna said he'd find a way to get into a fight as he always did, both knew she was right. "Please, be safe."

They had found a way for their love to continue, to resist time; they adapted it. They would live forever in each other's hearts, and they would never forget little Steve. Between hugs and kisses in the cheeks they laughed, cried, and said goodbye.

It was the last time they saw each other.

Chapter End Notes

End Note 11: Thanks for reading!

Joanna loves little Steve as I do, unconditionally, for everything he was and did. Forever. He may not have danced, but I'm sure he was loved.

In my mind, Betsy is the blonde woman who came after his show and said, "Hi!" Played by actress Laura Haddock, listed in the movie as Autograph Seeker. Her background story is from the comics where she was one of Steve's past girlfriends.

Many thanks to my friends Winterbeauti and Elwyn, who helped me to get this chapter ready.

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it.

xxoo Mari

Ref: Stanley Martin Lieber made his comic-book debut with the text filler "Captain America Foils the Traitor's Revenge" in Captain America Comics #3 (May 1941), using the pseudonym "Stan Lee". (wikipedia/Stan_Lee)

Ref: Elizabeth 'Betsy' Ross (wikipedia/Golden_Girl)
1943, early November, England

The USO plane took them securely, but being in Europe during the war changed everybody's moods. Steve was feeling like a complete fool because he was going to do shows on stage, when all he wanted was to be fighting alongside their fellow countrymen - something he was more than ready for.

He was the first successful super soldier from Project Rebirth. Even working with Senator Brant, the Army kept monitoring him very close - they put him through an intensive physical and tactical training program that taught him hand-to-hand combat, military strategy, how to handle vehicles and weapons, among others. Also a former FBI agent, part of Betsy's job was coordinate the shows and help with the Captain's training program; she also provided all kind of military books and manuals. Since his mental performance had been greatly enhanced, he was able to remember everything and mastered all disciplines. He just needed an opportunity.

The crew was settled at the hotel in London where the first show would happen.

The first cold winds of winter blew in from the north. Despite the war, London was a very beautiful place. Steve took Betsy to dinner; they had only one real date, and nothing more had happened yet – they didn't have time. When they were walking back to the hotel, holding hands, he noticed that she was trembling.

"Betsy, what's wrong?" He saw tears in her eyes and pulled her to sit in a bench in the park they were passing through.

She was a skilled agent, but she wasn't a soldier and confessed that she was terrified with the war. Her fiancée was a Red Cross doctor, and had died while attending wounded at British ship that was attacked by an Axis submarine, in 1942. That's why she had been silent throughout the trip. But above all, she was afraid to be alone and to not be loved anymore. She cried silently in his arms, until she whispered, "You never kissed me."

Steve thought about everything. Since the beginning, Betsy stood by his side and did more than her job to help him. By pretending that they were a couple, she endured all the animosity and gossip from the other women around him who wanted to take her place. She protected him from all embarrassment, vetoing people and events, which he, as Captain America, couldn't refuse by himself. Her assistance and friendship made his life a lot easier among all that madness - she was a beautiful and interesting woman who was giving him nothing but her care and attention.

He took a deep breathe, cup her face with his hand and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't want to be forward." And he smiled shyly, "May I kiss you now?"

She blinked several times in the midst of tears, then she nodded and he kissed her - softly, tenderly at first, but soon they were both panting. He missed this, and he couldn't deny that he was attracted to her. In the past, Steve had jumped from lonely teenager to a committed man in love, living with Joanna. With Betsy, he was finally having a chance to enjoy normal things, like romantic dates.
After the shows in Bristol and Manchester, they had to prepare to take a ship to the following Allied bases. Everybody was scared - there were reports about German submarines on the seas. On the last night on England, Betsy was completely frightened. Steve walked her to her room but she didn't let him go, hugging him closer. "Steve, please, stay with me tonight."

Steve held her carefully, and said concerned, "Betsy, I can't. This isn't right." In spite of their crescent desire, he had been absolutely respectful to her.

She was shaken, but put her arms around his neck pulling him close, "Nothing feels more right", and kissed him ardently. "We can die tomorrow. I need to feel alive again, and I want to be with you." There was a certainty in her eyes, an excitement, that even in the midst of fear and insecurity, he couldn't resist; and he wanted her badly.

It was a whole new experience. Steve had power and strength he hadn't before and she had a well-trained body. Their first time together was incredible. Between the shows at Allied Bases in North Africa, they spent every free second together. Each time was better. They both had missed this kind of intimacy.

They were completely pleased but, unfortunately, also feeling empty. Despite being amazing, only sex isn't enough. They had experienced more in life before – they had loved. They hoped to find solace on each other's arms but neither one was right for the other; deep down they both knew it. They needed to try and see for themselves – it was the path to heal. When the ship finally arrived in Sicily, they were just friends once more.

Steve treasured what he had with Joanna and he dreamed if he would ever find it again.

The conditions of the Allied Bases in Italy were very dangerous, so the show would be reduced. Many girls would be sent back home. Betsy wanted to stay, to do her job, but Steve convinced her to go home. He asked her to do one last task.

Steve wouldn't miss an opportunity to do the right thing. Since he knew he was going to Italy, he had this plan in his mind, to find and save Joanna's family. He had been in contact with the Allied Base in Sicily for a while. It took some time and money, but it worked. They had found her mother and nephew Raffaello - the 3-year-old boy had become an orphan when her older brother and wife had died fighting with the Italian Resistance. However, her younger brother was missing, like the other men in her family, still opposing Fascism. Alone and scared, struggling for survival, Joanna's mother found the Captain to be her savior.

Betsy would help him to send them back to Joanna, and Steve couldn't wait to write her.

1943, late November, Italy

The news about the new American Hope was everywhere, and at the Allied Base on North Italy, Margaret Carter couldn't stop thinking about Steve Rogers.

When she met him, at Camp Lehigh, she couldn't believe on Dr. Erskine's choice, but soon that skinny guy changed her mind.

Steve faced every test they put him through with determination and courage; what he lacked in the physical he made up for in heart and intelligence. He won Sergeant Duffy's flag pole challenge easily, and used Colonel Phillips' own test to prove him wrong - Steve was the only one with guts enough to jump onto a grenade, in an act of self-sacrificing bravery. In one week he showed that he had the strength of character that validated the good doctor's choice, and completely won her
admiration.

Peggy had had only one moment with him, while escorting him to the secret base. It was endearing how shy he was. There was something special about him, and she couldn't help but want to know more. She remembered his words about waiting for *The right partner.* She read his file, no listed relatives, but he was too taken care of to be alone. A woman recognizes the signs left by another woman. He was determined and focused, not showing any fear, and seemed unaware of her attention. Walking him to the lab was terrible - she felt like leading him in dead-man-walking, and she hoped that he survived.

His scream shattered her heart and she still didn't believe she had yelled, *'Shut it down! Shut it down!'*

But he persevered and then, everything changed. Peggy's heart literally stopped when the capsule opened and he emerged – the ultimate image of masculine perfection. She had never seen anyone like him; she couldn't help herself and touched his chest, and it was all real. *'You look taller.'* She was so hypnotized that it was all she could say, before the nurse, Katherine, gave her a shirt for him. That moment, that body, that chest... had been possessed her dreams since then.

The way he caught the spy was truly heroic - he saved her life and she didn't even thank him. *'I had him!'* She remembered her rash words while she was literally in those godly arms.

Later, Katherine, who was an old friend, gave her a hard time. "I've never seen you drooling over a man like that. But sure, he's a dreamboat!"

Peggy denied, "It wasn't that."

But the nurse couldn't stop teasing her always-so-collected friend. "If you could've only seen your face when you touched his chest..." Peggy's eyes widened, but she said nothing. Katherine continued, "How does it feel?"

The agent kept her stoic face. "I was just checking if he was all right."

"Cut yourself some slack, girl. We all wanted to touch him, but you got there first." The blonde winked mischievously.

Peggy smiled. *Damn, Katherine."

The procedure was a complete success and Steve's tests exceeded all expectations; he was beyond human excellence. Also a former nurse for the British Armed Forces, Peggy stood by his side supervising everything while he was examined extensively.

She was used to be tough around men, but Steve Rogers changed her world and she desperately wanted to be softer. Although she wanted to comfort him for the loss of Dr. Erskine, she needed to keep it professional and couldn't let her guard down. *'If it could work only once, he'd be proud it was you.'* It was the best she managed to say. He remained unaffected by her gaze, absolutely consumed by guilt and mourning his mentor, who, in spite of the short time together, was like a father figure for him.

But soon Colonel Phillips was disregarding Steve and left him behind. She couldn't believe how stupid Phillips would be sometimes. Deep inside, she thought that he was missing his old friend and blaming Steve somehow.

They flew to London and she wondered if she would ever see him again.
It has been almost five months, but since Steve arrived in Europe on tour, Peggy waited for the day his show would come to her base.

"Come on, guys, we're all on the same team here." The soldiers received Captain America with derision - it wasn't different from any base camp before. He went backstage to finish the last drawings for Joanna, telling about his train trip through Italy; he ended up drawing how he was feeling in reality – a joke.

Steve was lost in his melancholy, when he was surprised by Peggy; in no time she was pushing his buttons. "And these are your only two options? A lab rat or a dancing monkey?" She pointed to his drawing. "You were meant for more than this, you know."

Ashamed and frustrated, he didn't know how to find a silver lining in all this. "You know, for the longest time, I dreamed about coming overseas and being on the front lines, serving my country. I finally got everything I wanted and I'm wearing tights." His honesty was touching.

She was used to have control of any situation, but Steve wasn't like any other man - he defied definition. She waited to meet him again but, when she did, her words were tough and her hair was a mess. Being near him made her feel different and she had no idea how to deal with it.

But they didn't have time to feel sorry for themselves; the 107th was missing – Bucky.

Steve surprised Peggy when he quickly shifted from self-pity to sheer determination. Seeing him confront Colonel Phillips without fear and oddly enough without being disrespectful had been exciting; she couldn't believe it made her weak at the knees. How can this man make me feel like a woman?

The Colonel didn't take him serious and treated him with even more disdain, "I don't expect you to understand that because you're a chorus girl," and refused a rescue mission.

Looking at the map with the location of where his friend could be, Steve made a decision; nothing else mattered other than find Bucky. He wasn't following orders anymore and Peggy didn't know this powerful, unstoppable side of him.

But, suddenly, he asked, "You told me you thought I was meant for more than this. Did you mean that?"

She could see the little guy from Brooklyn again, and answered sincerely. "Every word." That was the heart who inspired her, she couldn't help but believe in him and she'd do anything to help.

Aided by Howard Stark, they flew behind the German lines into Austria, where Steve parachuted near HYDRA's base. It was a suicide mission. Peggy worried for him - as she tried not to think about what Steve had implied about her and Howard when he asked, "So, are you two... Do you... fondue?" And why.

Steve landed and started to walk to the Hydra base without feeling any kind of physical discomfort. Finally he could apply all the military training he received. He snuck into the base almost effortlessly; with a single punch, he could knock down any Hydra soldier, since he had the strength of 10 men. He found a base map on the main entrance, memorized it and headed to find the prisoners.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Asked one of the POW as Steve was opening the cells doors.

"I'm Captain America." That name came so easily Steve didn't stop to think about it, but he wasn't a simple guy anymore - he was a soldier on a mission. He needed to save those men and make them believe they could do it together. "The tree line is northwest, 80 yards past the gate. Get out fast and
give 'em hell. I'll meet you guys in the clearing with anybody else I find." He took charge naturally and everybody obeyed him.

Finding Bucky was his main objective, and Steve was almost in shock to see his best friend trapped into a gurney like a lab rat. "I thought you were dead."

Bucky was truly confused, "I thought you were smaller." He wanted to know everything about it; this brought Steve relief, because Bucky's questions were a good signal of his mental state. Who knows what kind of torture he had been submitted to, and how damaged he could had been. They needed to get out of there quickly so Steve helped Bucky - this time he was the strongest one.

On their way out, they met Johann Schmidt; it was completely surreal. Everything that Dr. Erskine had told Steve about his madness made sense when he ripped off his face mask revealing that horrible Red Skull face. 'Bad become worse.' In spite of his arrogance, the coward ran away with his top scientist Dr. Arnim Zola, leaving the two friends in the factory set for auto destruction.

Bucky crossed the bridge before it collapsed. Trapped on the opposite side, Steve said to his friend, "Just go! Get out of here!"

"No! Not without you!" Bucky yelled and that moment Steve saw the scared young boy who had been by his bedside listening his stories; Steve couldn't let him down.

The things that his new body could do never ceased to amaze Steve. He made the seemly impossible jumping through the gap separating the two friends, and, together, they left the plant on ruins. They found the POWs outside in the clearing waiting for Captain America, gathered the weapons and provisions they could found, put the wounded on the captured vehicles before starting the long journey back to Italy.

At the Allied base, after a few days with no sign of activity from aerial reconnaissance, Colonel Phillips was declaring Captain Rogers killed in action -- and lecturing Peggy.

"With respect, sir, I don't regret my actions. And I don't think Captain Rogers did, either."

"What makes you think I give a damn about your opinions? I took a chance with you, Agent Carter. And now America's Golden Boy and a lot of other good men are dead 'cause you had a crush."

Peggy kept her professional tone, despite being clearly sad. At that time, she did what she thought it was the right thing to do; she would stand by it. "It wasn't that. I had faith."

But, suddenly, the base went into an uproar, calling their attention.

To everybody's surprise, Steve entered the camp leading all the rescued soldiers. Seen all those admiration looks towards him was something he didn't anticipate. The look of pride in Bucky's face gave Steve a first sense of the dimension of his accomplishment. Peggy's eyes were devouring him and made him feel strangely happy. And, of course, Colonel Phillips' refuse to reprimand him was really a sign that everything had changed. The cheering was unbelievable.

"Hey! Let's hear it for Captain America!" Bucky lead and everybody followed.

Steve Rogers had transformed the fictional character into a true hero by saving almost 400 men - something he had never dreamed to do, but that really gave him a sense of fulfillment. He saved Bucky. Finally, he had earned the gift he received from Dr. Erskine, putting his superhuman powers to do the good they were meant to.
The news about his extraordinary rescue mission was everywhere.

Back in Brooklyn, Joanna couldn't be happier. Her mother and nephew arrived safe and sound, as Steve had promised in his last letter. She wasn't alone anymore. In her heart, she prayed for God's protection over him, as tears of joy rolled from her eyes. The world finally recognized the hero she always knew he was. "Il mio eroe."

Chapter End Notes

End Note 12: Thanks for reading!

I'm sorry it took so long. It was hard to write without Joanna. But this is Steve's story, so here we go. Only two more chapters left.

Many thanks to my friends Winterbeauti and Elwyn, who helped me to get this chapter ready. I can never thank them enough.

Feedback is the best way to improve. So, please, review it.

xxoo Mari

Ref: marvel/Steven_Rogers_(Earth-616) - Steve's training program.
Ref: marvelcinematicuniverse/Peggy_Carter - Peggy's background.
Ref: Elizabeth 'Betsy' Ross (wikipedia/Golden_Girl)
Late 1943, London.

Captain America was officially a war hero – he was honored with the medal for valor, but he didn't leave the battle zone to receive it. "I've decided I'm officially off the press circuit."

No one was happier about the super soldier's success than Colonel Phillips – he was almost friendly. "Rogers, you just embarrassed a United States Senator in front of a room full of reporters and ten members of Parliament. You deserve a medal just for that." Not that Steve had intended to upset the Senator.

But Phillips was treating the Captain with the ultimate respect and reverence – he didn't command, he asked. "We are going to set a fire under Johann Schmidt's ass. What do you say, Rogers? It's your map. You think you can wipe HYDRA off it?"

That was the ultimate goal in order to fulfill his destiny honoring Dr. Erskine's work. "Yes, sir. I'll need a team."

The always stern and sardonic Colonel was sounding nothing but supportive. "We're already putting together the best men."

The game had changed completely and the former '90-pound asthmatic’ had earned his place at the frontlines of the war – he was more than enough.

"With all due respect, sir, so am I."

His team had naturally been formed by the five valiant men who stood out among the 400 POW he freed. Each one had specific valuable skills, but, above all, a fierce team spirit and determination to save his fellow soldiers. Unusual for the time, the team selected by the Captain was a racially and ethnically integrated unit; African-American Gabe Jones, Japanese-American Jim Morita, American Timothy Dugan, British James Montgomery Falsworth, and French Jacques Dernier. All experienced soldiers, mostly older than Steve, they were inspired by the Captain's natural leadership and drive to fight for freedom. With a relationship based on trust and gratitude, they would become the special elite squad, the Howling Commandos.

Unquestionably, Steve's most precious reward was to have his best friend back, safe and sound. They were all gathered at a pub when Steve invited the team and asked Bucky to be his second in command. "How about you? You're ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?"

"Hell, no. That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight. I'm following him."

Bucky's words touched Steve's heart. The memories of their friendship and the hard times growing up filled his mind. Once he finally asked why Bucky had always followed him, his friend was nothing but thankful.

"I believe in you, Steve. You will do the right thing and take care of everyone, as you always did
with me."

"You saved me more times than I can count, Bucky."

The 21-year-old smiled looking like the young boy he was when they first met. "You saved me first, when you gave me a place at your home with your mother, when you let me be around you."

Steve tapped on Bucky's shoulder, "You're my brother."

"But you're keeping the outfit, right?"

When he first put the patriotic costume, he felt like a joke; but saving those men, he realized it inspired them. "You know what? It's kind of growing on me."

Bucky pointed to his friend's chest. "The thing that makes Captain America great... is Steve Rogers."

For the first time in his life, Steve felt really proud of himself. He was a new man, with a great team, and an important job ahead of him. Still, he was just a young man full of life, and definitely affected by Agent Carter's increasing attention towards him.

The two friends were still reminiscing when she arrived drawing everyone's attention, looking stunning in a very feminine red dress. "Captain."

Steve was surprised, and replied politely. "Agent Carter."

"Ma'am." Bucky greeted her, but she barely nodded at him.

As usual, she was straightforward, "Howard has some equipment for you to try. Tomorrow morning?"

She was addressing Stark by his first name, Steve noticed, but it didn't change his reply, "Sounds good." Only when Peggy looked around that Steve took the chance to check her up. Bucky was watching them both.

Once more, her eyes locked to Steve's, "I see your top squad is prepping for duty."

Always the ladies' man, Bucky tried to get her attention, "You don't like music?"

She lightened up, but didn't change her focus from Steve. "I do, actually. I might even, when this is all over, go dancing." Her eyes were the ones swaying, intensely gazing the Captain, who remained impassible in front of her, looking only to her eyes.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Bucky couldn't help but tease.

Nonetheless, Peggy only had eyes to Steve. She blinked, and replied openly, "The right partner."

She couldn't be more direct, but he kept the half-smile, and didn't say anything. So after a brief pause, she was back to business, "0800, Captain", and she walked away.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be there." Steve looked down trying to process all that had happened, and Peggy left the pub, as quickly as she came.

Bucky was pissed, "I'm invisible. I'm turning into you. It's like a horrible dream."

Steve padded at his friend's arm, and didn't miss the chance to joke, "Don't take it so hard. Maybe she's got a friend."
Then it hit Bucky, and he pushed, "What are you waiting for? Go after her."

"What? No. She's not..." Thinking about the possibility, Steve felt good about himself, but Peggy wasn't like any woman he had met before.

"She's got the hots for you, bud. Are you gonna make a pass or not?"

"Peggy's not like that, Bucky."

But the younger man knew women, and wouldn't give up so easily. "She came here all dolled up for you, you punk. Go grab her!"

Steve was attracted to her, he couldn't lie to himself, but he acted by impulse before, with Betsy, and it didn't work at all. Peggy's words were echoing in his mind, 'When this is all over...' The message was loud and clear. As much as he had his own human desires, she was special and he didn't want to blow his chance with her.

"This is not the time or the place, Bucky. We have a job to do."

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Sitting at the bar, next to the pub entrance, Katherine was waiting for her friend. But Peggy came visibly upset, so the nurse grabbed their coats and followed her. "Wait, why are you in such a hurry? What happened?" She asked when they were already outside the bar.

Peggy looked furious, "Nothing happened."

"He wasn't there?"

"He was..." She looked down and when she raised her head her eyes were watery, "We talked, and I left."

Katherine gave Peggy her coat, "Here, put it on." The blonde couldn't believe it how men could be so dumb sometimes, but she didn't want to upset her already crushed friend. "Maybe he's coming after you. Let's wait for a while."

Peggy was devastated. She got all that trouble to dress for Steve and he didn't even compliment her. "I shouldn't have done this, this is ridiculous."

"Of course not. He won't forget this dress, I'm telling you. You stopped the entire place when you walked in."

"But he did nothing!" Peggy looked at her friend and her heart was shattered. She was hoping that he would offer her a drink, flirt with her, offer to escort her home, and kiss her like she always dreamed. "What else can I do? I wanted to kiss him so badly that it's painful."

"Why didn't you?"

"Who do you think I am?" Peggy had never felt so humiliated before. She wasn't the kind of woman to cry over a man, let alone run after one. With her job and career, she had more goals in life than be someone's something – she was her own woman. But he showed up turning her perfect settled world upside down, making her behave like all the stupid girls she always despised so much. Damn, Steve Rogers.

He never followed her, and the two women left disappointed.
Next day, at the headquarters, Steve went to Phillips' office. "Excuse me. I'm looking for Mr. Stark."

"He's in with Colonel Phillips." The Colonel's assistant, Pvt. Lorraine, was distracted reading a newspaper, but when she realized who she was talking to, she changed completely. "Of course, you're welcome to wait." Her voice became soft, inviting, and she showed him the news headline, _The Star and Stripes – 400 Prisoners Liberated_. In a seductive way, she turned in her chair, to face him, legs crossed. "I read about what you did."

Steve wouldn't deny it, she was beautiful and it felt good to be admired. "Oh, the... Yeah. Well, that's, you know, just doing what needed to be done." Smiling, he flashed his irresistible blue eyes.

"Sounded like more than that. You saved nearly 400 men." Openly flirting, she gave him elevator-eyes.

He flirted back, checking her out too. "Really, it's not a big deal."

It was the signal she was waiting for and she wouldn't miss the chance – she stood up, and walked towards him. "Tell that to their wives."

Taken by surprise – he wasn't expecting her to be this forward inside a military facility – he took a deep breath and crossed his arms, as if to protect himself, "Uh, I don't think they were all married."

But she only stopped right in front of him, saying, "You're a hero."

Trying to get time, he looked down, closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead. "Well, that depends on the definition, really." Anyway, he didn't get up or walked away, he didn't block her actions. His awkwardness made him even more attractive, not that she needed any more incentive.

She pulled him by his tie, their eyes were locked at each other and his lips parted, as she replied, "The women of America, they owe you their thanks." He was unable to take his eyes of her pretty face. She looked around before grabbing his jacket, "And seeing as they're not here..." pulling him for a kiss.

His instincts were screaming that he should be wary, but his body didn't hesitate and he held her arms, kissing her back. The adrenalin rush and her sweet perfume were enticing. Oblivious to everything but each other, his hands slid to her waist and she was wrapping her arms around his neck.

They were ready to deepen the kiss when Peggy arrived. Outraged by the scene, she shouted, "Captain!"

The couple broke the kiss instantly, and he put his hand on his mouth to clean her lipstick – he knew exactly what he was doing. Technically, the problem was being at work, but Pvt. Lorraine looked like they took her prize, and Steve looked guilty.

"We're ready for you, if you're not otherwise occupied." Peggy left in a hurry and Steve followed her immediately.

"Agent Carter, wait."

Anger and deception were mixed with the obvious sarcasm in her voice. "Looks like finding a partner wasn't that hard after all."

He was still cleaning his mouth, putting his tie back in place, and gave her just a typical lame excuse. "Peggy, that's not what you thought it was."
"I don't think anything, Captain, not one thing. You always wanted to be a soldier, and now you are, just like all the rest."

To tell the truth, Steve didn't understand exactly why Peggy was so upset since they weren't involved or anything, and she was always with Howard. In war or life, the best defense is a good offense. "Well, what about you and Stark? How do I know you two haven't been fondue-ing?"

Their eyes locked, but she turned around, leaving him behind. "You still don't know a bloody thing about women." She thought he was different, but turns out he wasn't innocent at all and the truth was hard for her to admit. Maybe he knew a few things about women, other women. *He doesn't know anything about me.*

Peggy was furious at Steve, for sure. But the awful truth? She was furious at herself. Why didn't she kiss him yesterday at that club? What worth now all her pride and principles? That Private got the award Peggy dreamed of. She kissed him.

When Steve confronted Howard, the engineer explained, "Fondue is just cheese and bread, my friend."

"Really? I didn't think…"

"Nor should you, pal. The moment you think you know what's going on in a woman's head is the moment your goose is well and truly cooked." That was actually one of the wiser things the genius has told to the Captain. The two completely different men ended up being great friends. Steve was always brave to test Howard's boldest inventions, and smart enough to come up with great improvement ideas.

They were checking shields options when Peggy interrupted them. "You quite finished, Mr. Stark? I'm sure the Captain has some unfinished business."

Steve was trying a rounded model made of Vibranium and took the chance to ask for her opinion, "What do you think?" He held the shield in front of him, almost like a child with a Christmas gift, and smiled in the most charmingly way, testing her mood, hoping everything else was forgotten.

With a completely serene expression, she picked a gun and started to shoot at him. *I… Bang! Think… Bang! You're… Bang! A bastard! Bang!*

The shield was effective, no harm done. Peggy sighed, putting the gun back on the table, and smiled almost kindly, "Yes, I think it works", leaving Steve and Howard absolutely startled at the explosion of her reaction.

Maybe the red dress was just a insinuation, but there was no way he couldn't ignore the shots at close range. Finally it hit Steve that Bucky was probably right.

Unfortunately, it was no time for romance.

Through the year of 1944, Steve and the Howling Commandos got mission after mission, successfully disbanding HYDRA's bases everywhere. Peggy was the comforting voice passing Phillips' instructions and information through the radio, and the welcoming face when they got back sore, but victorious.

And while in the field, Steve had her picture inside his compass. It was a picture he found in an old newspaper, but it was enough to keep his heart warm and hopeful about the future ahead them. Peggy's heart had fluttered when she discovered that while watching a film about him. She
In the closing days of the war, tragedy fell upon them. Bucky died during the mission to capture Schmidt's right hand, the scientist Arnim Zola. James Barnes was only 23 years old.

'Bucky!' The image of his friend falling on that icy gorge haunted Steve's mind constantly. It was the second time in his life that he'd lost someone so close to him. Once again, he tried to drink to forget and Peggy found him at the destroyed pub with a half empty bottle.

"Dr. Erskine said that the serum wouldn't just affect my muscles, it would affect my cells. Create a protective system of regeneration and healing. Which means I can't get drunk. Did you know that?"

The scene was devastating. She had never seen him so weepy and vulnerable before.

"Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person. He thought it could be one of the side effects." She needed to comfort him, "It wasn't your fault."

"Did you read the report?"

"Yes."

Guilty was dragging him down, trapping him in a world of self-pity and grief. "Then you know that's not true."

They didn't have time to mourn either, so she tried her best, "You did everything you could." But, honestly, Peggy didn't know how to deal with her own fragilities, let alone an emotional superhero. Neither of them had the luxury of being weak. He needed to be strong, focused again and she knew exactly what buttons to push to reach the soldier, "Did you believe in your friend? Did you respect him? Then stop blaming yourself. Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice. He damn well must have thought you were worth it."

It worked like a charm and the Captain was back in the game. "I'm going after Schmidt. I'm not gonna stop until all of HYDRA is dead or captured."

She was relieved and ready to follow his lead, supporting him all the way, "You won't be alone."

The Captain would always take the responsibility in his own hands, and the hero would complete his mission, no matter what. However, in the secrecy of his heart, the guy from Brooklyn was broken. He missed Bucky, he missed his mother, and he desperately needed his family. Joanna. He needed her.

Steve wrote her one last letter, the first one without any drawings. He told her Bucky was dead and he was afraid that no one would remember their story. "Please, don't forget us." Don't forget me. He said that he was happy that her mother and nephew had arrived safe and sound, but that she had nothing to thank him. "You're my family, my home." Once again, he asked her to publish the cookbook. "You're my petite Italian chef." He ended this letter like all others, "I'll love you forever." But his final words shattered her heart. "P.S. Maybe you could make me mom's cake when I get back, right?" That was their unspoken code for his need to mourn, to be comforted, to cry.

But that chance never came.

Before HYDRA could launch the offensive that would shake the planet, Steve led the attack at its last base in the Alps, crushing them completely.
Everything was about to end, and they would finally have their chance, their date. Peggy was so proud of everything Steve had become and done that she couldn't wait anymore and pulled him for a kiss, surprising him completely. She encouraged him, "Go get him."

Steve didn't have time to think and jumped on the Valkyrie bomber to stop Schmidt. Their first real confrontation would have to be the last. Red Skull's insanity was beyond any reason and his goal was to bomb the U.S.'s major cities. After an intense battle, the villain was disintegrated, but the plane was still armed and on beeline straight for its target.

Peggy's voice greeted Steve when he radioed back to the base explaining the situation. "There's not enough time. This thing's moving too fast and it's heading for New York." There was only one right thing he could do, and he took a deep breath before saying it out loud, "I got to put her in the water."

The only signal of her panic was her slightly trembling voice. She needed to help him to find another solution, "Please, don't do this. We have time. We can work it out."

"Right now I'm in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer, a lot of people are gonna die." As usual, there was no arguing with the Captain. "Peggy… This is my choice."

She knew he was right. The pain in her heart was excruciating and tears fell from her eyes.

He was forcing the plane down and watching the ice approaching. A tourbillon of thoughts flooded his mind. The sense of inevitability about his death was too overwhelming, and he needed to think about something else. Once again, Peggy's photo in his compass was there to guide him.

"Peggy?"

Her voice was a murmur, "I'm here."

There was no turning back and as hard as it was, he didn't have anyone else to be by his side at this final moment. He trusted her to be strong enough, he prayed. "I'm gonna need a rain check on that dance."

There was a bittersweetness on the simplicity of that sentence and she almost didn't find voice to reply, "All right." They didn't have any personal conversation about feelings or plans before and the heartbreaking reality was that they would never have – their story would end before it ever started. The message was clear. He needed her one last time, to keep his mind focused to get the job done and she wouldn't let him down. "A week, next Saturday, at the Stork Club."

"You got it."

"8:00 on the dot. Don't you dare be late. Understood?"

"You know, I still don't know how to dance."

She almost smiled between tears, "I'll show you how. Just be there."

"We'll have the band play something slow. I'd hate to step on your…" And there was only the static left on the radio.

"Steve?" Sobbing, she called again, "Steve? Steve..."

No goodbye, no I'm-sorry-we-won't-have-our-chance, no I-love-you. Peggy cried as she had never before.
Steve didn't reach his 27th birthday.

1945, New York

Joanna fainted in her mother's arms, as the world was shocked by the last Captain America's news, about his ultimate sacrifice to save his country, and the world. She didn't know she could cry that much.

When she was brought to America for an arranged marriage, she didn't choose to lose her father or to be a widow – she didn't choose to be left alone while only a teenager. Sarah Rogers rescued her, changing the young woman's life. She survived and grew up to be able to make a choice of her own – to help young Steve. And she ended up saving herself.

As much as it hurt, she knew that Steve would do the right thing, what needed to be done. Giant Steve got the body, Steve always had the heart. It was no surprise that his choice was to save everybody.

'The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great.'

Joanna fell in love with Little Steve because of his noble heart. But she always knew that his heart was too big to belong only to her. He was destined to be this hero, to be Giant Steve.

Lying in her bed – their bed – wrapped in her chest box, with all of his drawings, letters, and their cookbook, she didn't feel guilty, but deeply, profoundly sad. Since he went to war, she had questioned herself if she truly loved him. Why she rejected him after he became Giant Steve? If they were still together he could be alive, couldn't he? Inside her hopelessly shattered heart, she knew she didn't send him away. Instead, she let him free to pursue his dream, to do what he always wanted to – fight the war defending his country. No, she didn't stop him. Maybe she could do it, but he would regret it for the rest of his life – it would have killed his soul. It didn't bring any consolation or relief to the excruciating pain in her heart, but she knew that the ultimate proof of love was to set the one you love free.

"Mommy?" Raffaello didn't forget his mamma and papa who died in Italy, but since he started to learn English, he decided to call Joanna this way. The 5-year-old boy was worried about her, and jumped into her arms. "I love you, my mommy."

She was instantly overwhelmed with gratitude and prayed silently for Steve and Sarah. At 33, Joanna was a widow and a mother too, who would keep working hard to take care of her family. She would never love again because she didn't need to. What she shared with Steve was enough for her lifetime, even more. He had left her everything in his will, for he needed to make sure that she was taken care of. But his most precious gift was to save Raffaello's life – Steve gave her the son she didn't imagine she would ever have.

Joanna hugged the boy who was the joy of her life, and smiled between tears, "I love you too, my baby."

Chapter End Notes

End Note 13: Thanks for reading!
I'm sorry it took so long for me to write this chapter. I tried... but I had to say goodbye to Joanna… I know it sounds silly, but I couldn't do it without crying a lot. Now it's done... I miss her already. I hope you had appreciated her story and her unconditional way to love Little Steve. Because he was beyond lovable, and even though we haven't seen it in the movies, there's no way no one had noticed it before. The next chapter is the final one, Steve back to the present.

Many thanks to my friends Winterbeauti and Elwyn. They helped me through the long journey to get this chapter ready. And my daughter (she's an English teacher now!) who proofreads and corrects my mistakes! I can never thank them enough.

To all reviews, favorites & follows, a special thank you. Remember, for a writer, feedback is gold, and your opinion always matters. I appreciate anything and everything you want to say!

Love & peace, Happy New Year!

xxoo Mari

*** Writing is a labor of love. Please, support our young writers, leave a review! ***

Ref: Movies: Blu-Ray/DVD extras

Deleted scenes: Steve, Phillips. (youtube/watch?v=2AS0w0_EqVM)
[STEVE] "I've decided I'm officially off the press circuit."
[PHILLIPS] "Rogers, you just embarrassed a United States Senator in front a room full of reporters and ten members of Parliament. You deserve a medal just for that."

Director Commentary after Bucky's death: "Steve is weepy... It changes his vulnerability, gives him humanity and emotion."

Ref: Comics: Captain America 70th Anniversary Special Vol 1 [Bucky] "That's the thing, the thing that makes Captain America great… is Steve Rogers!"
Present day, Avengers Tower, Steve's studio.

Steve stares at his old wooden box pondering over his mother's ring... Joanna's... It's not every day that he let himself feel so emotional, but the memories swaying in his mind now bring him peace. Looking back at the package, he begins to pick up the books when he finds a letter from Ralph Splendore. Steve fondly remembers the scared Raffaello in his grandma's arms. The calligraphy, although a little trembling, is almost familiar. "I must begin expressing my sincerest gratitude towards you, Captain. You saved my life, I remember." A teardrop falls as Steve reads his kind words. "Mother always told me that you saved me for her."

Ralph says that Joanna was the best mother he could've asked for, and every night they prayed for Steve alongside their family. He grew up listening to the stories about how the brave hero saved his family from the war, and sent them to America. As a boy, he liked Captain America's comics but Joanna didn't let him forget about the man behind the mask. He was proud to say that Steve's story was their family most precious secret, and he loved the moments where Joanna would open her chest box and share it with him. She kept Steve's things during all her life. After seeing the news about the Avengers, the 73-year-old man couldn't believe he would have a chance to return them to his savior. He continues saying that Joanna had a good happy life, and he was by her bedside when she died in peace.

With watery eyes, Steve looks at the beautiful picture. Ralph, his wife and kids were around Joanna for their last family photo together. Her hair was grey, but she had the same trusting eyes and was as beautiful as always.

She wasn't alone.

"I'm sending you her book. Your book. She told me you made all the illustrations, and that you were the reason she made it. I have to thank you for that too. It took some time but, when we got it published, she was very happy." He ends the letter inviting Steve to their small restaurant in Little Italy, run now by his daughter, but still making Joanna's recipes. Finally, Ralph thanks him profusely for all he had done for his family.

Silent tears fall down Steve's face, his heart swelling with pride, a sense of accomplishment, as he looks at the modest edition of their cookbook, Petite Italian Chef, solely dedicated to 'Mio eroe'. On the cover, it's the sketch he did for her, the last time they saw each other. Inside the book, there's a photo of a younger Joanna, as he remembered her, absolutely shining.

A family, a book and a restaurant, she did it all.

Looking at her smile, Steve thinks about their life together, and all the amazing things they shared. He smiles remembering that she was shy to speak English at first, so they used his drawings and her food to communicate with each other. It was the origin of this lovely cookbook.

'You have no idea how to talk to a woman, do you?'
'I think this is the longest conversation I've had with one.'
Honestly, the women in Steve's life didn't need words. They all understood the language of his heart.

As if on cue, Natasha enters the room, and he reaches for her, pulling her to sit in his lap, melting into her loving embrace. He lost some things when he jumped to the present, but he thanks God for what he gained – his second chance to live and love. Safe in her arms, he rests his head on her chest, getting soothed by her heartbeat, until his breathing is back to normal. She starts to kiss his face cleaning his tears.

Looking at the book, she compliments kindly, "She's beautiful." He simply nods and Natasha hugs him tight. Recognizing his draw style, she exclaims, "You did this! Steve, it's amazing!" Blushing shyly, he nods again, and she kisses his lips softly, "We have to try these recipes."

Steve takes her hand kissing it, "I'll take you to their restaurant." He doesn't need to say anything. Natasha doesn't need to ask. She knows him too.

'I figured I'd wait.'
'For what?'
'The right partner."

Joanna loved little Steve, she was perfect for him. They shared a life that Steve doesn't regret any moment of it. She saved a boy and helped him to become a man, loving him when he didn't love himself. Because of that, he had questioned himself if he was capable of true love at that time. But it was all the love he had, and despite of everything, it didn't end, so it was real. Steve's grateful for all the happiness she had in her life.

Even for the brief time they shared, Betsy helped him to heal and understand his new body. They had the rebound effect on each other, but they were friends too. Steve was pleased when he found out she got married later and had a family of her own.

Peggy loved the new Steve and helped him to become Captain America. She had the hardest part, all the fame – her photo inside his compass was the one captured in film – but none of the pleasure. She was the one by his side during the terrible times of the war, until the very end. Steve was happy that he had a chance to talk to her before her passing, and to know that she continued to fight, and found love with their friend and former Howling Commandos, Gabe Jones.

These amazing women helped him to become the man he's today. He won't forget his past; instead, he learned with it to build his future. Maybe there's not only one right partner. It's a huge world and there are many amazing people out there. More than anything, Steve thinks that there's the right person at the right place at the right time.

He feels blessed for having found his own path to happiness and true love.

Natasha is all of it. She was raised with nothing and had to fight her whole life. But she gave Steve the ultimate proof of love, when she faced her deepest fears opening herself completely to him – to love and to be loved. Holding hands with their wedding rings together, Steve shifts down to kiss her already rounded belly. She's his present and she's carrying their future inside her. "You're my everything. I love you, Nat." He meets her gaze with wet eyes, full of absolute devotion and she kisses him with the same passion.

"I love you too," she replies smiling against his lips.

Picking the book with Joanna's photo, he smiles shyly. "She was my right partner when I was the little guy." And he starts to tell his wife the story of his first love.
Final End Note 14: Thanks for reading!

I can't thank you enough for all the support you gave me through all these six months.

Writing Joanna was a delight. She's alive in my head, I will never forget her. Her history always was meant to be an example of altruism and true love. She was like Sarah, Steve's mother, born in a world of men, but they didn't fight as men. Their strength was to be resilient, remaining faithful to their beliefs, good despite the cruel reality around them, supporting and loving Steve during the harshness of that time.

Through Joanna's eyes, I could unveil the real man inside the hero, how he was after and before the serum.

Steve Rogers is an amazing character, and I loved to write my view of his story. I had to read all about his historical time period and the comics – research always makes me happy – to show what truly meant to be a man-from-the-past, even a skinny one. The challenges he must have faced and the life he could have lived that would create a more complex personality, beyond the usual cliches. He respected people, without distinction, so he was a gentleman with women. He didn't have to be inexperienced, even if he didn't have dated or danced before. It didn't change who he was: a good man, a true hero.

In the movie and the comics, Peggy wasn't just his love interest; she was her own woman, with her goals and beliefs. As a character, she chose to fight as a man, and she paid a price for it. She had to keep her vulnerability hidden to survive, and to remain strong at any costs. Their story ended without having started, because true love isn't just infatuation or love-at-first-sight. That's why, after jumping to the future, he couldn't be stuck in the past with her. He missed her and the chance they didn't have, but he had to move on.

Steve will never forget his past or the people who were important in his life. He's human with flaws, doubts, but what defines him, what makes him Captain America, is the strength and goodness of his heart, always moving forward, never running away or backing down. So despite the pain and sadness, he will move on with his life, and, following the Marvel Ultimate Universe (in my book too), Natasha is the one.

In the movie Ultimate Avengers 2: Rise of the Panther (2006), Steve Rogers said to Natasha Romanoff, "That's in the past. I think we should start focusing on our future", before kissing her! And, at Next Avengers: Heroes of Tomorrow (2008), they have a son, James Rogers.
Many thanks to all my friends who helped me in various occasions: Winterbeauti, Polexia Aphrodite, RobertDowneyJrLove, 50-points-for-ravenclaw, Thiveril/Elwyn, ElektraMackenzie, and to my daughter (she's an English teacher now!), who proofreads and corrects my mistakes! I can never thank them enough.

Finally, to all reviews, favorites, follows & personal messages, my most special thank you. Remember, for a writer, feedback is gold, and your opinion always matters. I appreciate anything and everything you want to say!

I hope to see you again! Love & peace, Happy New Year!
xxoo Mari

*** Writing is a labor of love. Please, support our young writers, leave a review! ***

(OBS: Reminiscences… isn't directly connected to my Chris Crush series because Joanna isn't there. But if you like to read about Steve Rogers in the present, I invite you to take a look at his love story with the Russian spy, Natasha Romanoff!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!