

Chapter XXV

Charles Emmett

April 2, 1930 – April 10, 1930

During the week that followed the election, Geannie took a break from working in her father's campaign. One morning she awoke to the familiar stirrings within her body. It couldn't possibly be time yet, her due date was still three weeks away. Remembering the false labor she had with Austin, she figured that was what was happening. The contractions didn't reside but continued with regularity and got stronger. She and her mother both determined that this was it.

Ellen came over and got Sandy and Austin and took them home with her. Marie loaded Geannie into the car and took her to the Lewis-Gale Hospital, which was only three blocks away on Third Street and Luck Avenue.

On Geannie's last visit to Dr. Reynolds before leaving, she explained that she would be going to Roanoke for an extended visit and would be having the baby there. He put together a packet of her medical records for her to give to the doctor that would be taking care of her. Not long after arriving in Roanoke, she went to see Dr. Weston Taylor, the Austin's family doctor.

The hospital placed a call to Dr. Taylor, who arrived in about forty five minutes. Geannie's contractions were becoming more frequent and intense by the time he arrived. "Well, well, Missus Brason." Dr Taylor commented. "I wasn't expecting to see you here for another three weeks. Let's take a look and see what is going on."

"I'm havin a baby!" Geannie blurted. "That's what is goin on."

"Yes indeed you are." the doctor quickly deduced.

After that contraction subsided, Geannie asked with concern in her voice, "Is everything alright? I'm not due for three more weeks."

"It's not uncommon to deliver in the thirty seventh week." the doctor assured her as he continued his examination.

Marie informed the doctor and reminded Geannie, "You know, Sandy was two weeks early."

"If you have a history of delivering early, then there should be nothing to worry about." the doctor said as he checked the baby's position. Then he added, "The baby is in the proper position. You should have a normal delivery."

Geannie began to feel the intensity build as another contraction came on.

Dr. Taylor put the cold stethoscope on Geannie's belly to listen to the baby's heartbeat, "The heart sounds normal." he commented. "I'd say your about an hour off." he determined at the end of the examination.

Then he asked, "Missus Brason, we have some nursing students here from Hollins today. Would

you mind if a few of them observed the birth?"

The contraction had died down and Geannine answered, "That's my alma mater. I reckon it will be okay."

"I'm going to leave you now." Dr. Taylor said. "Once I'm needed, the nurses will call for me. I'll see you in a little while." At that he left the room.

Geannie closed her eyes to rest until the next contraction. When that one was over, she turned to her mother and lamented, "Curly is goin to miss the whole thing. The plan was that I wouldn't be havin the baby until after he got here."

"The best laid schemes of mice and men go often askew." Marie responded.

"Geannine tried to laugh, "To a Mouse, by Robert Burns. I memorized that poem in high school. Well this time things went askew alright. Curly is goin to be surprised. Should I write to him and hope the letter catches up with him, or should I surprise him when he gets here?"

"He is the father. I figure he deserves to know as soon as possible." her wise mother counseled.

As Geannine's contractions became closer and more intense, the nurses made the final preparations for delivery. Dr. Taylor was summoned and soon returned with four nursing students. Geannie, sweating and in severe discomfort at the moment, didn't notice the four young women.

Doctor Taylor quickly surmised the situation. He positioned himself to catch the baby while Geannie did all the work. "Okay, Missus Brason," he paused for a couple of seconds, "push!" he coached.

Geannie knew the drill. She pushed with every contraction. She also cried and yelped in pain with every contraction. Marie held her daughter's hand as Geannie squeezed it tight.

"You're doing fine, Missus Brason. I see the head. Just a couple more."

The sweet sound of a baby's first cry filled the room. Charles Emmet Brason was born at 1:15 p.m. on Wednesday April 9, 1930.

Dr. Taylor placed him on Geannie's collapsed abdomen. "It's a boy!" He announced as he took care of the umbilical cord.

Geannie's tears turned to joy. A moment later a nurse took the baby and cleaned him up and wrapped it in a little blue blanket. She then placed him in Geannie's arms. "Hi there, Charles Emmett." she said softly. "That's your name, you know."

Geannie unwrapped the blanket and gazed on the tiny body. He was beautiful. He had good color and everything appeared to be intact. After a moment of bonding, the nurse returned to Geannie's bedside. "I need to take him now, Missus Brason. We need to give him a good checkup and get his vitals."

Geannie reluctantly gave him to her.

"You can have him back in a little while." the nurse assured her.

Dr. Taylor turned his attention back to Geannie. "That's a fine looking baby boy." he commented. "Everything went like clockwork. You did a great job." When he was finished he said, "You have been through a lot today. Why don't you get some rest while I look in on Charles Emmett." As he left the room, the four nursing students followed. That was the first she had noticed them.

Breathing deeply at a more relaxed rhythm, Geannie closed her eyes for just a moment. That moment turned into forty five minutes. She talked to her mother until a nurse poked her head in the door to check on things.

"Can I have my baby now?" She asked the nurse.

"I'll go see." she responded as she disappeared.

Several minutes went by as she waited anxiously to hold the child that she had longed for. After a few more minutes, she began to worry. "Do you think there is somethin wrong, Mother?"

"I'm sure everything is alright." Marie assured her. "I'm sure they are just busy."

A moment later, a nurse came into the room, without the baby.

Geannie's heart sank. "Where's my baby?" she plead. "I want my baby!" she insisted.

"Missus Brason, Your baby is experiencing some difficulties. Doctor Taylor is with him right now trying to determine the nature of the problem."

"What's the matter?" she gasped as her mother took her hand.

"Where not really sure." the nurse answered. "He doesn't seem to be getting enough oxygen. Doctor Taylor will be with you as soon as he can. He can tell you more then."

Geannie began to sob as her heart went out to her helpless son. The nurse left her and Marie alone as Geannie began to digest what she had just been told. Her mother tried to give her comfort and reassurance.

After what seemed a very long time, but was actually only a few minutes, Dr. Taylor came into the room. He pulled up a chair and sat down next to Geannie's bed.

Geannie swallowed hard.

Dr. Taylor took a deep breath, then he began very slowly to explain, "Missus Brason, your baby has a very serious problem. He is not getting enough oxygen in his blood stream. I'm sorry to say that I don't know why. His lungs seem to have the capacity so I am inclined to believe that somehow his blood stream is not being oxygenated. That is indicated by the fact that his color has a bluish hue. The reason I suspect his heart is because it is beating rapidly yet at the same time his blood pressure is low." Dr. Taylor paused to let what he was saying sink in.

"But he looked so good when he was born. There wasn't anything wrong then."

Dr. Taylor explained, "While he was in the womb, his blood was oxygenated by you. There is a

shunt valve that closes once the baby begins breathing on its own. Once that occurs the blood flow is rerouted through the baby's lungs. That's why it took a little time for the problem to manifest itself." Dr. Taylor went on to explain, "This is a very rare condition. It doesn't even have a name, but it has been reported in up to four out of every ten thousand live births."

After a moment, Geannie asked in a quivering voice, "What are his chances of survivin?" She didn't want to hear the answer to her own question.

"I'm afraid that they're not good, Missus Brason. I'm sorry to have to tell you that." Then he added. "I am doing all I can. Let me have a little longer to see if there is anything that can be done for him." He got up to leave. Before walking out the door, he turned and said, "I'll check back in a little while and keep you posted."

Geannie laid there in stunned silence as her mother simply held on tightly to her hand. Neither woman had words befitting of the moment.

It was well into late afternoon, perhaps four o'clock when Geannie's father and Emmett and Ellen Brason came to see how everything was. They only had to enter the room to discover that all was not well. Geannie was unable to speak as she was barely hanging on to her emotions. Marie told them all they knew up to that point. Three more chairs were brought into the room and they all sat and waited together.

After about an hour, Dr Taylor came back. His countenance betrayed the news came bearing. "I'm so very sorry, Geannie. I'm afraid there is nothing more I can do. Would you like to spend what time he has left with him?"

Through her tears and shaking, she couldn't answer. She simply nodded.

Dr. Taylor turned and motioned to someone just outside the room. A nurse entered the room with the a small bundle and placed Charles Emmett in Geannie's arms. He was a bluish gray color. His breath was faint and he struggled for every puff of air he could take in. Unfortunately, the oxygen rich air did him no good.

Dr. Taylor said, "I don't know how long he has. It could be any where from several minutes to a few hours." He had another chair brought in and sat down to explain everything that he had done in an attempt to save his life. "There are things about the human body that we still don't understand. Someday there may be machines that will let us look inside and see exactly what is going on."

As Geannie listened to what the doctor was saying, she loved and caressed Charles Emmett. As she did, a little color came back into his skin and his breathing became more relaxed.

"Well I'll be." Dr. Taylor exclaimed as he put his stethoscope to his chest. "I wouldn't of expected that." Then he cautioned, "He will most likely go through cycles where he appears to be improving, but each time it will most likely be less and less as he gets weaker. He's strong and is fighting for his life.

Sadly, it is a fight that he will lose.”

No one had words that would come, not even Senator Austin. Dr. Taylor stood up. As he was leaving the room he said, “I will be here at the hospital a while longer. I'll stop in before I leave.”

After he left, Geannie asked for the bag she had brought with her. She retrieved the clothes she had brought for him to wear home and lovingly dressed him in them. Next she asked for her handbag and took out her camera and had her father take a picture of her with Charles Emmett. Everyone got there picture taken with him. Then Senator Austin got an idea. He spread out the blue blanket on the floor and had Marie lay him out on it. Standing over him, he took a picture. The flash caused Charles Emmett to open his eyes. He quickly advanced the film and snapped a picture with his eyes open.

“Where are Sandy and Austin?” Geannie asked.

“Sarah has them.” Ellen answered.

“Do you think it would be too much for them to see their baby brother?” Geannie wondered.

“Will they even let them in?” Marie asked.

“I'll take care of that.” Geannie's father said needing somehow to fix things. He left the room and returned a few minutes later. “I just talked to Doctor Taylor. He said it would be alright for just a few minutes.”

Then he turned to his friend and said, “Let's go and tell the rest of our families what is going on. But first will you offer a prayer?”

“I'd be happy to.” Pastor Brason stood and offered a brief heartfelt prayer for Charles Emmett, Geannie, and Curly wherever he might be.

Before they left, Charles Emmett began to falter and true to Dr. Taylor's words, grew weaker.

Geannie passed him to her mother and then in turn to her mother-in-law. As each held him and loved him, he rallied. But not as much as before. Before long Sarah brought Sandy and Austin into the room.

Sandy, at five and half, was confused. She had so much anticipated a new baby brother or sister and now she learned that he couldn't come home with them. She did get to hold him on her lap as Aunt Sarah showed her how to hold a baby. Geannie took a picture of her three children all together. Austin really didn't understand any of what was happening. After a few minutes, Sarah took them back to her home.

Soon other family members stopped in. After all, the hospital was only three blocks from home. Then other neighbors and people from church stopped in, Bill Casper and his wife among them. He told them that Walt had called for a prayer vigil at the church at nine o'clock for Charles Emmett.

As the evening drew on, Gaennie needed some rest. Ellen waited in the hospital foyer and greeted

well wishers who came to call. Marie rocked Charles Emmett while Geannie rested. He cycled through more spells of revival only to grow weaker each time. There were times they wondered if he was still with them. Then he would take a puff of breath and then another and go through the cycle again.

Geannie didn't sleep long and resumed her vigil over her son late into the evening. About midnight, Dr. Taylor stopped in briefly before going about his rounds. He was amazed that Charles Emmett still holding on, if only barely.

Charles Emmett was so weak by then. As Geannie held him oh so close, he took one final weak breath and was gone. Geannie could feel the life leave his tiny body. He had given her a lifetime of love in twelve short hours.

Marie stepped out of the room and summoned Dr. Taylor. He came in a moment later and confirmed the unthinkable. Geannie held on and didn't want to let him take his body from her. He gave her just a moment more, then Geannie handed her son over to the good doctor. He took the body and left the room to make arrangements for the mortuary to come and take it away.

Geannie broke down and cried her broken heart out. The ache was unbearable, the loss devastating. The only thing that even came close was when she thought Curly was dead. Then she had hope to cling to. But now, all hope was removed. Her baby, that she had longed for and had tried so hard to bring into this world, had come and gone.

Geannie cried herself to sleep as exhaustion overtook her sometime around three a.m. Ellen went home with Emmett but Marie stayed at her daughter's side. She too succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep in the empty hospital bed that was in Geannie's room.

Marie was the first to awaken but she let Geannie sleep as long as possible. She even turned away the nurses on their morning rounds and wouldn't let them disturb her. Finally around nine o'clock, Geannie began to stir.

Marie was at her side when Geannie opened her eyes. "Oh, Mother. Please tell me it was all just a horrible nightmare."

"I wish it was." she answered. "I'm afraid it is all too real. How do you feel baby girl?"

"Exhausted."

Then Gennie continued, "I wish Curly was here. I need his strength. Maybe this would be easier to go through if he were here."

Marie said, "Do you remember the rest of the stanza in that poem?"

"Oh, you mean To a Mouse? Not off the top of my head." Geannie answered.

"I do." Marie replied. "'The best laid schemes of mice and men go often askew.' It goes on to say,

'And leave us nothing but grief and pain, for promised joy!'"

"I remember now," Geannie said. "That's not very comfortin, is it?"

"No dear. It isn't. I'm afraid that instead of the promised joy you had looked forward to, you have a lot of grief and pain ahead of you.

"I know all too well. I want you to know that I know what you are going through and what lies ahead. You never knew your sister. She came and left five years before you were born."

"I recollect her picture that hung on the wall with the rest of us. I know that she died as a baby, but that's all." Geannie answered.

"Carolyn was only three months old when I lost her. One afternoon I went to get her after her nap and she was gone. Crib death, they called it. I put a perfectly healthy baby girl down for a nap, an hour later I picked up a corpse. I blamed myself."

"It wasn't your fault, Mother." Geannie interjected.

"I know. But I always wondered what if I would have went to wake her up sooner, or not have put her down at all that afternoon. I learned that 'what if' is a dangerous question to ask. You will find out what I mean.

"Everyone deals with these things differently. I probably didn't handle it the best. I bottled it up inside of me and wouldn't talk about it. I'm sorry, but that is why you never heard me talk about Carolyn. I couldn't bear to let anyone else talk about her either. Now after thirty six years, talking about her with you still tears my heart out.

"I don't know how you will handle it. I hope you don't make the same mistake I did. I thought that if it wasn't mentioned, it didn't happen. I was only fooling myself.

"When my sister died and I took over the roll of mother to Sarah, in some crazy mixed up way I felt that I finally had both of my girls. Even though she continued to live with Bill, she fit right into our family. After all she was both a Winslow and an Austin."

"Sarah is more like my sister than a cousin." Geannie agreed.

Marie continued, "Now your father, he's one to talk. He couldn't talk to me so he turned to Emmett. He seemed to be able to work through things much more quickly. He threw himself into his work which took his mind off things. It took a good year for either one of us to return to some semblance of normalcy.

"You need to know that Curly will likely handle things different from you. Don't misinterpret that as uncaring like I did.

"Speaking of Curly, why don't you write that letter and I'll see that it gets posted today."

Geannie laid still in her bed for a moment. Then she sat up and said, "Thanks Mother, for tellin me about Carolyn. I always wondered what she would have been like. And thanks for tellin me what you went

through.”

“I know that you are a strong woman. That came from your father and not me. But listen to me Baby Girl when I tell you to brace yourself for a roller coaster ride. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't be telling you this.”

“Thanks, Mother. I know that you are only tryin to help. I know how I felt when I thought that I had lost Curly.”

“Yes, but that had a happy ending while you were still in shock and denial.” Marie cautioned. “Here's a pad and a pencil. Why don't you write that letter while I go get something to eat. Do you want something?”

“No thanks, I'm not hungry.”

“I know, of course you're not.”

Marie left Geannie alone to explain to Curly what had happened. She thought for moment and began to write.

10 Apr 1930

Dear Curly

This isn't easy for me, but I have some terribly sad news that you need to know. I don't know how else to tell you this, so I will come right out with it. Yesterday our son, Charles Emmett was born. He was a beautiful baby. He was strong but not strong enough. He had a heart defect of some kind and he only lived twelve hours and died in my arms.

I miss you so much right now. I don't know how I am going make it through the next two weeks until you come home. But I need you now. You helped me through tough times before. I need your strength and your shoulder to cry on.

I know that this is going to be hard for you, too. I'm sure

your heart is breaking right now. If ever we need to be together, it is right now. I don't even know if you will get this before you come home.

I hope you can even read this through my tear stains. I love you so much. I don't know what I would have ever done without you in my life. You have always been there for me. You will be here soon, just not soon enough. I will do my best to hold on until then.

Love Seannie.

P.S. The kids are with Walt and Sarah. They got to see their baby brother.

She couldn't think of anything else to say. She carefully folded the tear stained piece of paper and put it into an envelope. Before sealing it, she kissed the flap as she always did on the letters she wrote to Curly.

While she was at it, she wrote a second letter, this one to her dear friend Ramona in Hawaii, who she had stayed in touch with. She had just finished addressing the envelopes when Walt and Emmett came to see her. They didn't come as her brother-in-law and father-in-law, but as her pastors. After a heartfelt expression of sympathy, the senior Pastor Brason offered a prayer.

Marie was about to enter the room when she realized he was in the middle of a prayer. Not wanting to interrupt a plea to the Divine, she waited until he was finished.

After extending their greetings to Marie, Walt told of outpouring of love and support there was the night before at the prayer vigil. More than fifty people showed up at that late hour on short notice. Emmett informed them that word of little Charles Emmett was getting around. People had been calling at the Austin home all morning.

"Geannie," Emmett added, "I called the Office of the Chief of Navy Chaplains in Washington to see if they could get a message through to Curly. They said they'd see what they could do but due to the nature of the exercises that he is involved in that there was no guarantee."

"Thanks. I wrote him a letter as well. Between the two, maybe he'll get one of them."

"Now, Geannie," the younger Pastor Brason asked in a serious tone, "what do you want to do about a service? Would you prefer a funeral or a simple graveside service?"

Geannie's face went white as she was doused with another dose of reality. "A funeral." she gasped. "I hadn't thought about that. It sounds so final."

They patiently waited for her reply.

Geannie continued, "Every life lived deserves a proper funeral, regardless of how short it might have been. A graveside service sounds so empty, I want his life to be celebrated."

"Very well, then." Walt agreed. "We'll start putting something together. Would Monday give you enough time?"

"Monday?" Geannie asked with a start. "So soon? Can it wait 'til Curly comes home?"

"I knew that is what you would want," Emmett replied. "I spoke with the mortuary about that. They say that it is nearly impossible to keep a body that long, especially an infant. They recommended that he be buried as soon as is convenient."

"Then I reckon, Monday will be alright. Today is Thursday, that should be enough time. There is so much to think about before then." Geannie replied.

As an after thought, Walt assured her, "Sandy and Austin are fine. Sarah was feeding them breakfast when I left this morning. Sandy asked, 'When is mommy coming home?'"

"Tell Sandy that Mommy misses her and will come home when the doctor says I can; and Walt, thank you to you and Sarah for watching them for me."

"We're happy to do anything we can." he said, Then he asked, "Is there anything else I can do for you? Perhaps there is someone you want me to contact?"

"As a matter of fact, there is." Geannie said reaching for her handbag. "Could you call my friend Susan McGowan in Washin'ton and tell her when the funeral is. Here is her telephone number."

As Walt copied the number from the slip of paper that Geannie handed him, he asked, "Is she a friend?"

"The best!" Geannie responded. "Her husband, Freddy, and Curly flew together for a while. After he was transferred to another squadron we remained good friends. In fact, after he was transferred to Washin'ton, we moved into their three bedroom duplex."

Walt and Emmett had to leave to go and take care of matters and excused themselves. This had been the most difficult visit they both had to make in their professional ministries. Ministering to long time friends and neighbors or even complete strangers was one thing. This was their first experience ministering to a close family member. After all, this was Emmett's grandson, who bore his name.

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The 26-bed Lewis-Gale Hospital, dedicated in 1909, was a modern technological marvel featuring central radiator heat, hot and cold running water, and an electric elevator. The hospital was enlarged in 1916 to accommodate 66 patient beds and, in 1938, a major expansion increased bed capacity to 166. This facility served until 1972 when a new hospital was built. Eventually the original building was demolished.

The condition that Charles Emmett had is now known as Hypoplastic left heart syndrome. It is a rare congenital heart defect in which the left ventricle of the heart is severely underdeveloped. There wasn't a name for this condition until 1959.

In a healthy human, the left side of the heart receives oxygen-rich blood from the lungs and pumps it out to the rest of the body; with these structures underdeveloped, they cannot circulate blood to other organs, and the right ventricle must pump blood to both the lungs, as it would normally, and to the rest of the body, a situation which cannot be sustained for long.

The story of Charles Emmett is essentially the story of my own son who had this condition and only lived for 26 hours before dieing in my arms.

