

## Chapter XXVIII

### Meltdown

July 30, 1930 – April 9, 1931

A couple of days later, Senator Austin arrived in town to select office space for his Arlington campaign headquarters. He and Geannie spent the next day looking around and found an office right downtown. The best part of the deal was that the building belonged to one of his Republican colleagues in the State Assembly and he let him have it rent free.

The Senator spent about week in Arlington. After selecting an office, he and Geannie set about hiring a small staff of two assistants. Once telephones had been installed and office equipment secured, Geannie and her staff went to work on planning their big kickoff rally.

The first order of business was to secure a venue for holding the event. Not being familiar with the area, she turned to her assistants. One of them suggested the Arlington County fairgrounds. After a couple of telephone calls, they had it scheduled for a week from the following Friday afternoon.

That took care of half of the kick off rally, the public event. After a few more telephone calls, they had secured the banquet room at one of Arlington's finer hotels for the fund raising dinner. The fairgrounds was easy, finding a hotel with an opening that soon was a little more difficult.

Geannie's staff next went to work getting the word out while Geannie tackled the task of getting some high profile individuals to commit to attending. They would serve two purposes, one was to draw a crowd and the other was to obtain endorsements. The first such individual she contacted was State Senator Archibald McDryer from Arlington, who had so graciously provided the office space.

Geannie began to think big. She wanted someone really special. Since the Democrats controlled the Statehouse and the majority of the State Assembly, she had to look elsewhere. But where? Who? Then a light came on.

As the Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover had worked closely with the banking sector to promote a new long-term home mortgage, which dramatically stimulated home construction. Along with others, Senator Austin had met with Secretary Hoover on a number of occasions in putting the plan in place. During the 1928 presidential election, he had headed up the statewide campaign for Herbert Hoover. He even hosted Hoover at a campaign stop in Roanoke and invited him to spend the night at the Austin Mansion. With the help of Senator Austin, Virginia's twelve electoral votes went to Hoover. The first time Virginia had gone Republican since Ulysses S. Grant was elected in 1872.

She decided that she had nothing to loose and dialed the operator and asked to be put through to the White House. Of course she couldn't be put directly through to the President, but she did speak with an assistant to his chief of staff. She told him that she was calling on behalf of the senate campaign of Senator Charles Austin of Virginia and asked if it would be possible if President Hoover could attend a rally and fund

raiser in Arlington on the given date.

The man on the other end of the line was cordial as he took the message and the telephone number where she could be reached. She gave him the office number and their home telephone number. Geannie honestly didn't think that she would be able to get the President of the United States to attend, after all he was a very busy man. She wrote it off and put the notion out her mind.

That evening while cleaning up after supper, the telephone rang. Since Curly was the closest to the telephone, he answered, "Hello. This is the Brason residence."

The voice on the other end of the telephone said, "This is Herbert Hoover calling."

Before the Commander in Chief could say anything else, Curly snapped to attention. "Yes sir! Mr. President, sir! Lieutenant Sheffield Brason, United States Navy. What can I do for you sir?"

"At ease, Lieutenant. Actually I'm calling for Missus Gean Brason. Is she available?"

"Yes sir. One moment sir."

Holding his hand over the mouth piece, she said to Geannie. "Why on earth is the President of the United States calling you?"

Without answering him, she took a deep breath and took the receiver from Curly's trembling hand. "Hello, Mr. President. Thank you for returnin my call."

"I hope I am not calling at an inconvenient time, Missus Brason. I apologize for calling you at home, but when I got your message I wanted to help out my old friend and return a favor. I was scheduled for an engagement that I really wanted to get out of. I just got word that my schedule has been rearranged and I would be honored to be there. I will have someone on my staff contact you for the details."

Trying not to let her excitement show, she replied. "Thank you, Mr. President. Daddy... I mean Senator Austin will be every honored to have you attend."

"So, you're his daughter? Did I meet you when I stayed at his home?"

"No sir. My husband was stationed in San Diego at the time."

"Well then, Missus Brason, I certainly look forward to meeting you. I will see you then."

"Thank you, Mister President. I look forward to it as well. Good night, sir."

"Good night Misus Brason."

Before Geannie could put the receiver back on the hook, she let out a "Whaaa Whooo!" "I can't believe I actually talked to the President of the United States. He's comin to Daddy's kick off rally!"

"How on earth did you pull this one off?"

"I was tryin to think of someone with a lot of visibility to come and I remembered how Daddy had helped to get President Hoover elected. I reckoned I didn't have anything to loose, so I placed a call to the White House this afternoon. I never dreamed he'd call back. I need to tell Daddy."

Geannie next placed a call to her father.

"Hello. Austin residence."

Hello, Mother. Is Daddy available?" Geannie said with excitement in her voice.

"Why, yes. Just a minute, Baby Girl." Geannie heard her mother say, "Charles. Its for you. Its Geannie and she sounds pretty excited about something."

A moment later, her father came on the line. "Hi Geannie."

"Daddy, I just wanted to tell you that everything has come together for your kick off rally. I just got off the telephone with an old friend of yours who is willin to come. He said he owes you a favor."

"And who is that?"

"President Hoover."

"Really! How did you pull that off?"

"I just called him up and asked him. Actually I left a message with someone on his staff, and he called me back personally just a few minutes ago."

"You're kidding, right? This is really a big deal. I'll have my campaign manager give you a call tomorrow to work out the details. I don't know how to thank you."

"Just doin my job, Daddy."

"Oh, and be sure to get a press release out first thing in the morning. Thanks sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy. Bye."

The next morning while Geannie was preparing the press release, she received a call from President Hoover's press secretary. With his help, she put together a press release stating that the President of the United States would be in town campaigning for US Senate candidate, State Senator Charles Austin.

Since his opponent was a newspaperman, all the the papers in Virginia had endorsed him, but news of the President stumping for Senator Austin was to big to ignore. Even though they ran the story, it was minimized and obscured in the back pages. Now the local radio station was a different story. They were enthusiastic to run the story. They went so far as to provide live coverage of the event.

The news quickly spread and Geannie's office was inundated with calls from people wanting to reserve a place at the one hundred dollar a plate banquet. Within three days, all two hundred and fifty reservations had been made.

On the day of the rally, the fairgrounds began filling up with people, others lined the route to watch the presidential motorcade make the five mile trip from the White House. As the President's car entered the arena, a band struck up "Ruffles and Flourishes". As the president emerged from his car, the band played

“Hail to the Chief” as he made his way to the rostrum. After shaking hands with Senator Austin, he waved to the crowd and sat down next to his host.

Senator McDryer was the master of ceremonies and made a speech of introductions. Other speeches followed and concluded with first Senator Austin and last but certainly not least, President Hoover.

At the conclusion of the president's speech, the rally became an informal gathering. While still on the rostrum, Senator Austin introduced Geannie to the President. She in turn introduced him to Curly who was at her side. Wearing his uniform, he snapped to attention and saluted the Commander-in-Chief before shaking his hand.

The politicians mingled with the crowd, shaking hands and kissing babies. Several hundred people came to see the President and went away knowing who Senator Austin was. Hundreds of hot dogs and bottles of Coca-Cola were handed out and there were red, white and blue balloons for the children.

At the conclusion of the rally, the crowd dispersed and the dignitaries retired to the hotel prior to the banquet. After all two hundred and fifty guests were seated, the President and Senator Austin were introduced and took their seats at the head table. Geannie had the privilege of being seated to the President's left. During dinner, he engaged in casual conversation with his hosts. He asked Geannie about herself and was particularly interested in visiting with Curly about naval aviation. After dinner, there was another round of speeches. During the reception, Geannie and Curly had their picture taken with the President of the United States. He found her to be very charming and invited she and Curly to take a tour of the White House. “When you arrive, tell them that you're my guest and give them your name. If I am available, I'll see if I can break away for moment.” The president left at nine o'clock and made his way back across the Potomac River.

By the end of the day, Northern Virginia had a good idea of who Senator Charles Austin was. The campaign contributions were more than enough for Geannie to work with over the coming weeks and months and more and more was added each week. The momentum of the campaign picked up and they were able to make headway as support for his candidacy increased.

A couple of days later, Geannie received the following letter from Ramona:

*August 12, 1930*

*Dear Geannie,*

*I received your letter telling of Curly's transfer to Washington D.C. I trust I got your address right. If I didn't, I guess you wouldn't be reading this. I do hope that you are*

all settled in by now. I still wish you could have come to Paradise. You'll have to write and tell me about your new place and what you've been up to. Knowing you, you're probably up to your eyebrows in something or another.

I do hope all is well with you. I know that it has only been four months since you lost your baby. Knowing a thing or two about losing loved ones from personal experience, I'm know that you still find it difficult. These things take time. All I can say is keep busy, which shouldn't be hard for you.

I sure enjoyed my stay with you in San Diego while I was on the mainland. Geannie, I've been giving a lot of thought to what you said. I appreciate your frankness. I can always count on you to tell it the way it is. I now realize that my rationale was flawed and down right reckless, when it comes to my relationships with men. I'm not writing them off completely and will still go out with them, but thats all the farther it will go. No more hopping in bed. I promise.

I do have a couple of exciting pieces of news for you. First of all I bought a beach house. Its just a small two bedroom home located on a secluded cove just east of Diamond Head. The house was only built seven years ago, but had sat vacant for sometime and was in foreclosure. Because of that I was able to buy it for only \$2,500.

You might ask, "Were did you get that kind of money?" Well, there was some money left from my mother's life insurance after her final expenses, plus she had some money saved up that I didn't know about. It was enough to buy the house and some to fix it up with. It doesn't have electricity or running water, but its not my intention to live in it.; its my getaway hideout. I do plan to eventually get it hooked up to services. So come on over and I'll put you up.

The other exciting news is that I'm going back to school in the fall. You see most nurses, like me, only have two years of nursing school. The Navy wants some of us to get some additional education and I have been selected. Isn't that great news! I'll have a reduced work load while in school, but I'll still get paid the same. Its a two year course at

*the University of Hawaii and when I'm finished, I'll receive my bachelors degree and a promotion the the equivalent rank of Lieutenant. The only catch is, I have to commit to an additional four years of service when I'm through. So there you have it. This should keep me busy and take my mind off men, wouldn't you think. The nice thing about it is that my beach house isn't too far from the university.*

*So what have you been up to? I'd love to hear back from you and what all you've got going on. Be sure to tell Susan hello for me. I seemed to have misplaced their address. At least you have a friend there. Give Sandy and Austin, and especially Curly my love. Write back when you can.*

*Love Ramona*

Geannie wrote back and told her how happy she was for her about her beach house and going back to school. She particularly encouraged her in the turn around she had made in her life when it came to men and promised that she wouldn't regret it. She also told of her involvement in her father's campaign, especially meeting President Hoover, and about Curly's new responsibilities.

His job was completely different from what he had been used to. It was a regular eight to five office job so he didn't have to leave his family for months at time for war games. He did look forward to his four hours of flight time every other week.

During the summer, they explored the attractions offered by the nation's capitol. Nearly every Saturday they took in something. At the invitation of President Hoover, they took a tour of the White House. As his special guest they were invited into to Oval Office for a brief informal chat. On a couple occasions they attended a Washington Senators' baseball game. Geannie was thrilled to finally see some major leaguers in action.

As the summer days began to cool down, fall was in the air. Curly and his crew had become very efficient in their task. One unexpected byproduct of his job was learning what had gone into making naval aviation what it had become as he reviewed the files to determine whether they should remain on file or be archived.

Senator Austin's campaign was doing very well and he was gaining on his opponent. He had always held a strong lead in the southern part of the state, but thanks to his efforts in Arlington, he was making considerable progress in the north as well. It looked as if he might have a good shot at winning in November.

His campaign ran in to serious trouble during the remaining month before the election. A nationwide banking panic began in October 1930, just one year after the stock market crash. Banks began to fail as the public began to lose faith in financial institutions as a safe place to keep their money. Runs on various banks around the country became worse after some big banks in New York and Los Angeles failed, resulting in public scandals.

Senator Austin became distracted from the campaign by urgent affairs at the bank in an attempt to shore up his institution and maintain the confidence of his customers. His opponent seized on the public's distrust of banking institutions and bankers in general. Senator Austin's support dwindled resulting in a sound defeat on election day.

He still held his seat in the State Assembly until after the first of the year when the new assembly was seated. Rather than being bitter about losing the election, he saw it as a blessing and came out of semi-retirement and once again took control of the day to day operations of the bank in an attempt to save the institution that had thrived for sixty-two years through the hard work of three generations of Austins, four if you count Charlie's brief tenure.

The bank was founded by Charles' grandfather, Charles Austin, Sr. after the Civil War. When his father Francis Marion Austin died in 1851, he left the plantation, the sawmill, and his fortune to his only son, Charles. Three years later, the area had grown to the point that the town of Big Lick was incorporated. As Big Lick continued to grow, Charles became very wealthy as he sold off more of the plantation to new settlers, then he sold them the lumber to build their homes and barns. At the same time that the town and Charles's wealth grew, so did discontent in the southern states over the issue of states rights, which included the right to own slaves.

Charles himself was not a slave owner and found the idea immoral. Nevertheless, he sided with the South under the principle of states rights. Although he agreed in principle, he was uncertain that the South would prevail in the coming conflict with the Union. Therefore, he secretly moved the vast majority of his wealth to a bank up north. He reasoned that if the South lost, the currency they were beginning to issue would be worth less than the paper it was printed on. After the dust of war had settled, he would still have his money that was recognized by the United States Government. On the other hand, if the Confederacy won, he devised a plan to reclaim his fortune and convert it to Confederate currency. Either way, he would win, regardless of who won the war.

When war did come, he sent his two sons off in gray uniforms. Only one of them, Charles, Jr., came back. In the wake of defeat and reconstruction, Charles retrieved his wealth and put it to good use by opening the Roanoke Bank and Trust. He sold off all but the sawmill and forty acres around the house. The bank thrived from the interest generated from the money loaned out during the reconstruction era, not to

mention the availability of capital form new depositors.

When Charles Sr. died in 1884, one year after Big Lick had been renamed Roanoke, Charles Jr., who had been involved in the bank, inherited the family fortune. In turn, Geannie's father inherited the bank and Sarah's father inherited the sawmill.

With the campaign over, Geannie was free to pursue her own personal interests. First she advertised for piano students and soon had all she wanted. She involved herself with the Methodists Women's Auxiliary at the Calvary Methodist Church. The Navy Wives Organization was not a close knit group like it had been in San Diego and it was hard to break into the already established circle dominated by the wives of admirals, so she let that go. She did however join a book club.

The one thing she focused on the most was her calendar. It had been seven months since Charles Emmet was born. Geannie knew that she could not replace him but wanted so much to fill her empty arms and hold a baby to her breast once more.

When they went home for Thanksgiving, she told her mother that she was trying to have another baby. Marie tried to counsel her that it was too soon and that she hadn't healed emotionally from losing Charles Emmett yet. Geannie wouldn't listen. Even Walt counseled her to wait. She wouldn't listen to him either. While in Roanoke, she kidnapped Curly and took him to the cabin, knowing that she had been successful there once before.

Geannie was obsessed with the notion of having another baby. The truth was she was not completely healed emotionally and her obsession proved to be a set back. The longer it took, the more impatient she became and she lost focus. For the first time in their nine year marriage, there was a real strain on their relationship.

Geannie had become irritable and edgy and was quick to fly off the handle, which was so unlike her, and it was Curly who bore the brunt of it. When he tried to talk to her about it, she became upset and told him that he was the one with the problem. This continued on through Christmas and into the new year. Curly got to where he started working late just to avoid her, especially on those days when her calendar demanded his presence.

On one of those days in January when he came home late, it all came to a head. Geannie had plans for him and became infuriated when he wasn't there for her. Emotional instability, flamed by ragging hormones, did not make for a pretty scene when he finally came home. Curly was totally unprepared for what awaited him.

It was about eight thirty when the taxi dropped Curly off at home. As he walked into the house, Geannie met him at the door. Before he could say a word, she unleashed on him. "Where have you been, Lieutenant!" she screamed.



Taken back by such a display, he countered. "I told you I needed to work late tonight. You know that that I'm up against a deadline to get this archival project wrapped up." (That was the excuse he had been using.)

"You I knew I needed you tonight." she blasted. "Today was the last day for my best chance. I needed you and you weren't here. I had a nice supper waiting and everything."

"But Geannie..."

"Don't 'but' me mister. You have a responsibility to me, you know."

"Look, Geannie." He said as calmly as he could. "I don't know if I have any more to give right now. You've worn me out."

With anger in her eyes she replied. "So you're tellin me you can't? Or do mean you won't?"

"I'm saying you're obsessed with the whole idea. Can't we take a break?"

"Obsessed!?! " Geannie shouted. "Obsessed!?! What's wrong with wantin to have another baby?"

"It's the way you're going about it. It has become more about biology than love, it has to be scheduled rather than spontaneous."

"Do I need to remind you what it takes to make a baby?"

"No. Its just that I feel like I'm nothing more than breeding stock."

"What kind of man are you anyway? If you are incapable or unwilling to give me what I want, I'll just find someone who is! Y'all can just go straight to hell." she shouted, pounding her fists on his chest. "I don't need you anyway." Geannie stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door.

The commotion awoke Austin, and Curly went into his room to settle him down. Once he came back into the front room he sat down in shock from what had just happened. Her reaction left Curly dumbfounded. Even though she had displayed a foul mood over the last few months, he had never, ever seen Geannie like that before. Words like "hell" or "damn" never escaped her lips and she got after him whenever he used such language, which he rarely did.

That was the first real fight they had ever had. He felt it best to just leave her alone. He found something to eat and cleaned up the kitchen and bunked out of the couch that night. The next morning, things were still pretty cool between them as he got ready for work. Geannie barley spoke to him and then only when absolutely necessary.

That evening when he came home at his usual time, she and the kids were gone. On the table was a note telling him that she had gone home for the weekend and may or may not be back Sunday evening. He found something to eat all alone in the empty house. Without the car he couldn't go anywhere so the solitude gave him time to think over the weekend.

He knew that Geannie wasn't well and it hurt to see her such an emotional wreck. There had to be

something seriously wrong to make her the way she was. There was only one person who could help her and that was her mother. Curly wrote her a letter explaining what was going on and that he needed her help.

Over the weekend Geannie's hormones settled down and she came home Sunday afternoon. Not knowing what to expect, Curly went out greet them and help her with their bags. Once inside, she took him in his arms, but wouldn't look him in the face. "I'm so sorry," she apologized, "for blowing up in your face like that. I'm so ashamed of myself for getting out of control."

"Its alright." Curly frankly forgave her. "Don't worry about it, Sweetheart." Then he took a chance and added, "I know you're not well."

"What do you mean, I'm not well?" she got defensive. "I don't have a problem." she said as she pushed him away.

Curly was smart enough to drop the subject in order to keep the peace.

Geannie's unannounced trip home was a real eyeopener for Marie and she could tell that things weren't right. In a way that no one else could, she was able to get Geannie to open up to her. She told her how she hadn't been feeling well. She admitted to experiencing mild to server abdominal cramping, feeling bloated and a loss of appetite. She confided in her mother her frustration of not being able to get pregnant and confessed her outburst with Curly.

Marie just listened, without passing judgment. Frankly, she didn't know what to think.

By Sunday, Geannie was feeling better, and after attending services, she and the kids drove back to Arlington.

On Monday, Marie got Curly's letter. The insight that he provided and what she had observed over the weekend convinced her that Geannie wasn't well at all and that something needed to be done about it. It didn't take her long to find a reason to invite herself to come for a visit. She used the excuse that Charles was so busy trying to keep the bank afloat, that she needed to get away. Geannie was glad to have her come for a stay the first part of February.

She rode up on the train and Geannie met her at Alexandria Union Station and brought her home. After she arrived, Marie was able to observe Geannie and the situation more thoroughly. Not long after her arrival, she had an opportunity to talk to Curly when Geannie left them to watch the kids while she had some errands to run. She assured Curly that it had nothing to do with him and they both agreed that Geannie's problem was caused by some kind of physical abnormality, which also affected her emotional wellbeing. After having a few days to think about it and careful observation, Marie came up with a diplomatic solution, but she had to be careful in how she approached it.

"Geannie." she began, "Would you consider going to see a doctor about why you're having trouble

getting pregnant?"

She got the response she expected. "There's nothin wrong with me. Its Curly."

"Well then, why don't both go to see a doctor for fertility tests."

Curly knew what she was up to and went along. "I'm willing if you are."

His willingness made Geannie decide to give it a try.

They made an appointment to see a specialist in Washington and on the appointed day, Curly had to take time off from work and went with Geannie to Georgetown University Hospital, while Marie watched the kids. It was not a pleasant experience as it involved samples and examinations on the part of both of them. Curly found it embarrassing even though it was much more involved and personal for Geannie.

After the initial examinations and tests, they had to go back a week later for more thorough tests. Again Marie watched the kids. Curly was given a clean bill of health rather quickly. The doctor determined that he should have no problem fathering more children, but wisely withheld his diagnosis until all of Geannie's results were in since her anatomy was more complicated and took longer to determine. With each of her three children, it took her a longer amount of time to conceive than should have been normal.

They went back again the following week. It was discovered that she had a condition called Endometriosis which had gradually rendered her infertile. The doctor thought it was related to when she had the influenza when she was twenty. The violent coughing that caused lesions in her abdominal muscles, also affected her uterus. The condition was also causing a hormonal imbalance causing her to be emotional and irrational. The doctor told her the only way to solve the problem before she began experiencing even more severe pain, a worsened emotional imbalance and in his opinion, the eventual possibility of uterine cancer, was to have a total hysterectomy. Of course that meant that she would never be able to have anymore children.

For Geannie, the news was devastating and hit here like loosing Charles Emmett all over again. She felt that they might as well cut out her heart as the very things that made her a woman. The only one who could comfort her was her mother. Marie told her that she wasn't well and that it was taking a toll on her marriage and family. She was able to convince her that by going through with it, she could return to her usual self, the one everyone loved and needed. She told her that God had given her the high privilege of being a mother three times, and had two beautiful children that needed her and one that was on loan to God. She reminded her of what a wonderful husband she had who she was beginning to alienate.

Geannie listened to her mother and agreed to have the surgery and had the operation later in the month. Again on the day of the of the surgery, Curly took the day off to be at the hospital with Geannie. Susan McGowan took Sandy and Austin for the day so Marie could be there as well. The operation was successful and the doctor assured them that he expected her to make a complete recovery. She remained

there for several days and Curly took a long lunch hour each day that she was in the hospital, which was three miles from the Navy Building where he worked. During that time, Geannie healed quickly and was able to come home.

Marie stayed with them until she was well enough to resume her normal activities. Once her hormones stabilized, she became the old Geannie once again. Looking back, she realized that she hadn't been well and wondered who that person was who had taken over her body. However, it took her longer to resolve the idea that she would never have another child.

After spending the entire month with them, they saw Marie off at the train station. As for Geannie, she had to rearrange some of her emotional bookshelf that she thought she had already dealt with, plus a few more still scattered on the floor from losing Charles Emmett.

Curly finished his archival project at the end of March and was able to take a few days off and they went home to Roanoke at the first of April for Easter, which was on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Marie and everyone else were relieved that Geannie was back to her old self.

A few days after returning home, they commemorated the first anniversary of the life of Charles Emmett, and she was able to face the fact and accept it. For Geannie it was big step in letting go. She and Curly were finding the thought of Charles Emmett more of a sweet memory, rather than a bitter sorrow. They were both able to move forward from that point on, with only minor setbacks every once in a while.

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State Senator Archibald Dyer is a fictional character.

Herbert Hoover, the 31<sup>st</sup> President of the United States, was elected in 1928 with 444 electoral votes, including 12 from Virginia. Prior to becoming president, Hoover served as the Secretary of Commerce from 1921 to 1928. As such he was responsible for working with the banking sector in developing a long term home mortgage. He also revolutionized the relations between business and government.

The University of Hawaii didn't have a nursing program until 1932 and didn't offer bachelors degrees until 1944.

Endometriosis is a female health disorder that occurs when cells from the lining of the womb grow in areas outside of the uterus. Among other problems, it can lead to problems getting pregnant and hormonal imbalances.