

Chapter XV Letting Go

December 8, 1942

The Reprisal laid at anchor just offshore. Sheffield anticipated going ashore as the captain's barge approached the pier jutting out into the ocean. He wasn't really sure why he was there, what he would find, or even where he was for that matter. After disembarking from his launch, he began walking down the beach. In the distance he saw someone sitting on the beach under an umbrella. They were too far away to see who it was, but he knew. Somehow he knew, at least he hoped it was who he thought it was.

As he drew nearer, there was no doubt. She looked up from the magazine that she was reading and waved, but didn't get up to come to meet him. Rather, she remained seated on the old, well used picnic blanket beneath the equally old and well used beach parasol. For some reason, the farther he walked, she was always the same distance away. Desperately wanting to join her, he began to run as fast as he could.

As he ran, everything before him began to spin like a spiraling kaleidoscope. Ignoring the bizarre curtain around him, he ran right through it and instantly found himself at his destination. "Hi Flyboy. Its about time you got here."

"I'm not exactly sure where I am." He said with some uncertainty.

"Why we're in the funny pages, silly. Remember, you always said that you would see me here."

"I don't think that this is quite what I meant by that."

"Nevertheless, you're here aren't you." She patted the blanket beside her indicating for him to join her under the parasol.

Sheffield sat down beside her, looking out over the beach toward the ocean. It sure looked a lot like the beach at Coronado, but maybe not. It didn't matter where they were, she was there by his side. She looked terrific in the red dress that he never got to give her. The white hat and white shoes matched the white collar. "You look great Sweetheart. I always imagined how it would look on you."

"I really like it. It's too bad that you never got to give it to me."

"Wait a minute. I got a purse to go with it, not a hat."

"I don't have anything to put in a purse. I really don't need one so I exchanged it for a hat. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not."

"Any way, I think it was really nice of you to give it to Debra. She's really been through a lot you know. That was a really big thing you did. Keeping it all this time was keeping you tied to me, and me to you. Now we can both move on. There is so much I need to learn, I can't do that when I keep getting pulled back into your world. And you, you can move on too. You have your live to live and I don't want you to do it alone.

"I'm glad that you took Paula to your banquet. That was a good for both of you. Are you going to call her when you get back to Norfolk. You should, you know."

"I've thought about it, but I'm not sure I'm ready."

"Just take baby steps, Curly. Call her and take her out. Get to know her. She can help you get on your feet again. She will help you to be ready for when you find the one you will spend the rest of your life with. Just be careful not to betray what we have. Don't let yourself get drawn into a snare.

"I really hope you have a good time when you finally get to take Ramona out to dinner and a the movie that you promised her. She has sure come along ways since I first met her, especially in the last year, thanks to your encouragement."

"Are you sure that you're alright with me seeing other women and maybe getting married again someday?"

"Absolutely. You probably don't remember it, but we talked about it a few years ago."

"I guess I don't remember that. So how are the kids?"

"There doing great. I wish you could see them. They send their love. They wanted me to tell you that you are a great dad. Maybe someday you'll get to finish what you started with them."

"I sure miss them too. But not as much as I've missed you."

"You've got to stop missing me so much, Curly. But I still want you to always miss me just a little. I miss you too. But the time I have ahead of me until we can be together again is only a blink of an eye compared to how long it will be for you.

"I notice your not wearing you ring. That's good too. That's another big step."

"But you're still wearing yours I see."

"Yes." she said holding her hand out in front of her to admire it. "Thats because I can't go on in the same way that you can. I will always belong to you and you alone. But you can have another and you should."

"You're willing to share me with someone else?"

"As long as its the right someone. So choose well."

"Why don't you just make it easy on me and tell me who it is."

"What would be the adventure in that. You'll know."

Sheffield didn't quite know how to respond, and he wanted to change the subject. Geannie perceived his thoughts.

"Listen, Curly. Don't get me wrong. I'm still in love with you. I always have been and I always will be. With the perspective I now have, I love you more deeply than I could have ever imagined." At that, she dropped the subject. She had told him what he needed to hear.

"That's a fine looking ship you have there Captain." she said gesturing in its direction. "I was just reading all about it in Life Magazine. That's a nice article about you too. And wow! The picture on the cover. That's my man!

"I reckon it's time for you to go back to your ship now." She stood up and shed her clothes, leaving them on a the beach. Standing naked before him she said, "I'll come around from time to time. Take care of yourself Curly and remember what I said."

As she walked toward the water's edge she stopped and looked back at Sheffield, still sitting on the blanket, and said " I'll see you in the funny pages." As she waded out into the ocean Sheffield stood up and started after her. By the time he reached the water's edge, She was in almost up to her waste. She dove in, her tail rising above the water. She bobbed to the surface once and turned around and waved. Then with another splash of her tail, she disappeared.

He took a step into the water after her when the spiraling kaleidoscope reappeared before him. The next think he knew, he was laying awake in his bed in his stateroom aboard the ship.

It was all so vivid and real, like he was really there, wherever it was. Was it just a dream he wondered or was it an actual communication from Geannie from beyond the grave? In his heart he wanted to believe that such a thing was possible. In any event, he did something he had never done with a dream before, he got out of bed and went over to his desk and wrote it all down. He certainly had something to think about for the rest of the day and would for the next several days too, as far as that goes.

That day, there wasn't much time to think about it. Before breakfast, he went to see if Debra and Molly were up. He listened at the door but heard no signs of life. After breakfast he met with the senior officers in his ready room. There was a lot on the agenda that meant it was going to be a busy day.

A little later in the morning they were to rejoin Admiral Weston's task group which had been joined by the Gunnison and her escorts. Once the rendezvous took place, the Reprisal and her escorts would refuel. While the destroyers were refueling, the burial at sea would take place for the three men killed in the crash the day before. Another plane had already been drawn from the spares to replace it.

Sheffield cautioned the senior officers to warn the men to be respectful to Mrs. Watson. There was to be no whistling or cat calls. Any offenders would spend a couple of nights in the brig. To show how serious he was, he reminded them of Petty Officer Pucheskey. While on the subject of Mrs. Watson, Lieutenant Gates reported that Chief Audmanson and his men had come up with some clothes for them.

Sheffield asked for a status report on the POWs. He was assured by Major Jerbowsky that the arrangements and security were adequate. He ordered the POWs to be brought up on deck in groups of twenty at a time for thirty minutes for fresh air, sunshine, and exercise. Major Jerbowsky added that Captain

Gottfried of the Edelweiss had requested a meeting with him. Captain Brason turned to Yeoman Gover to schedule a time.

After the meeting, Sheffield checked on his guests again before going up to the bridge. Still no sign of life. Right on schedule the the two groups merged and the task force reformed. While the destroyers were fueling, Sheffield presided at the funereal service for Lieutenant (jg) Daniel Weighman, Aviation Radioman 3rd Class James Tuff, and Seaman 2nd Class Thomas Wakefield.

His busy morning concluded with a meeting with Capatin Gottfried. He was escorted to the Captain's office by one of the Marines. Upon entering he saluted his captor. Captain Brason returned the salute and invited him to have a seat. Captain Gottfried, who spoke English, began. "Thank you for the good treatment that you are providing for my men? I always saw to it that the people we detained were well treated. It helped that we were once a luxury liner."

Captain Brason responded, "I had read that about you in the briefing material I received. I knew that you would have a large number of detainees, as you call them, aboard. It was my desire that your ship only be disabled so we could take everyone off before deciding on her fate. Things didn't go as planned, they seldom do. That's why I sent along two planes loaded with life rafts."

"I appreciate that Captain Brason. I can tell that you are a man of honor and integrity. A man after my own heart. You see, I don't subscribe to the mindset of the powers that be in my country. I am a career naval officer, as are you; what can we do but follow orders. I told myself that it was in defense of the homeland. At least operating independently, far from home as we were, I had a great deal of latitude.

"That is except for the political officer that was assigned to the ship to look over my shoulder. Most of my officers are of the same opinion as myself. Many senior Kriegsmarine officers are. But don't underestimate them, they will fight to the end. As for me personally, I'm glad that the fight has come to end. Tell me Captain, what is to become of us?"

"Well, we'll put in at Rio the day after tomorrow. You will be transferred ashore and I would imagine eventually put on a ship bound for the United States where you will be interred in a prisoner of war camp somewhere. I can speak on behalf of the United States and guarantee that you will be treated well."

"If I may, I would like to make a request of you Captain Brason."

"What's that?"

"For the remainder of the time that we are in your charge, could you keep my men busy so they don't get restless. They will be easier to manage if they are working. I assure you, they will work hard and not cause any problems. I understand the need to keep us under guard. That is how I took care of so many on my ship. I saw to it that they were treated well and kept busy, but not over worked."

Capitan Brason hadn't considered that. "What you say makes sense. Let me see what I can do."

For the remainder of the meeting, the two men visited as if they were old friends, swapping stories and talking of home and family. Sheffield told him of the time that he and his family had visited the Edelweiss when she was in San Diego on her around the world maiden voyage. At the conclusion of the meeting, Captain Gottfried was escorted back to his men in the repair hangar.

Sheffield left his office and headed toward the bridge. He saw Mrs. Watson and Molly in his wardroom having breakfast so he stopped in to check on them. "How did you sleep?" He inquired.

"That was the first good nights sleep I have had since before my husband was shot."

"I checked on you earlier but didn't hear a sound coming from your cabin, so I let you sleep."

"Molly woke up before I did and was hungry and woke me up. I figured that you were busy so I found Yeoman Gover in his office. He arranged with Reggie to make breakfast for us."

"Are you alright? I mean are you finding everything you need?"

"We could use some more clothes."

"Funny thing you should ask. I have been informed that chief Audmanson has rounded up some things up for you. I don't have a clue as to what he has. I have to take care of some business on the bridge right now, but I'll have Yeoman Gover take you down after breakfast."

"Oh, I think I can find it on my own."

"I'm sure you can, but with all due respects Missus Watson, I can't have you go anywhere unescorted."

"I understand."

"I really have to go now, but I will catch up with you later. Alright?"

"That will be fine. When you have some time, I really need to talk to someone. I think you would understand better than anyone."

"Very well. I'll look forward to it. I'll talk to you later then."

Sheffield left them to finish breakfast and made his way up to the bridge to be there when the Gunnison came alongside. He talked to Mace about his visit with Captain Gottfried and his request. Commander Owen took it upon himself to talk to the senior officers and find work for them to do. In the meantime, two groups of POWs had already been brought up on deck as ordered. From the wing of the bridge he could see them doing calisthenics on the flight deck. There wasn't any other activity on the flight deck during fueling operations. The afternoon patrols were parked at the aft end of the flight deck, waiting in readiness. Sheffield remained on duty on the bridge and had Reggie bring his lunch to him.

After Breakfast, Debra and Molly poked their heads into Yeoman Gover's office. Smiling, he looked

up from his work, "There you are. The Captain told me to expect you. Let me just file this and I'll take you down to the tailor's shop. Would you like to help me Molly?"

She nodded shyly and went to him. He gave her a sheet of paper and showed her which drawer to open. He spread apart a folder and had her drop it in and shut the drawer. Taking her by the hand he said, "Should we go see what Chief Audmanson has for you?"

"Uh huh." she said, willingly taking his hand.

"You're sure good with kids." Mrs. Watson observed as they left his office. "Do you have children?"

"Oh, no ma'am." he answered as he led them down the stairs to the second deck. "I'm not married. Not yet anyway."

"Do you have a girl friend?"

"Well sort of. I have a really good friend back home who happens to be a girl that has been writing to me, but its nothing serious yet."

"So you're just naturally good with children?"

"I guess you could say that. I come from a big family and have a little sister about Molly's age."

Molly wanted to know her name and all about her.

"Well, Molly, her name is Holly." He told her a little bit about his sister as they descended the stairs to the second deck.

"I don't have much in the way of family." Mrs. Watson confided. "It must be nice to have so many people care about you."

"It is. So, what about your family?"

My mother died when I was in high school. All I have is my father and an older sister. I really don't know my extended family."

"Thats too bad." Yeoman Grover said as he led them down the passageway. "I have so many aunts and uncles and cousins that it is hard to keep track of all of them. Nearly all of them live nearby in the same little town. In fact I think I'm related to just about everyone in town in one way or another. Here we are." He opened the door and let them go in ahead of him.

"Oh good!" Chief Audmanson exclaimed. "You're here. After you left here yesterday it occurred to me that if all you escaped with were those dirty, ragged nightgowns that you didn't have anything else to wear and could use a change of clothes. I started looking around to see what I could find.

"Using your measurements, I modified a pair white trousers and shirt from a chief's uniform for you. I hemmed the pants to come about midway on your calf, just to be stylish. I hope they fit.

"And For Molly I made these." He showed her a pair of shorts and a couple t-shirts. "When I was eating supper last night, I noticed the table cloths and a light went off in my head. There were three different

patterns and I'd wished I'd thought of it when I threw together the denim jumper. So I went to the storeroom and got one of each and made these.

"Now, unfortunately, we don't have any ladies undergarments aboard, so I did the next best thing. I improvised. I took some empty flour sacks and fashioned a couple pair of bloomers for each of you, complete with elastic waist bands. And here are a couple of sleeveless undershirts that should fit you. I took the liberty to modify them by adding some pleated cups for your. . ." Holding one up for her to see, he concluded, "Well, you get the idea. I even added an extra layer of fabric to provide some modesty. I know they aren't what women are wearing these days, but I hope it will do."

Stifling a snicker at the Chief's embarrassment, she said. "Yeah. I get the idea. Thank you for thinking of me."

"I cleaned up the supply closet for you and put a mirror in there for you. Go try them on."

They took the clothes and disappeared into the closet. A moment later they returned sporting their new duds.

"I can't believe you did all this. They fit just fine. How on earth do you know so much about women's clothing when you work with all these men?"

"That's easy. I have a wife and three daughters at home. Being a tailor by trade, I have made a lot of clothes for them over the years.

"Oh I almost forgot. I have these too. Yesterday when you were here, Molly left a footprint on a piece of paper that was on the floor. I took it to the shoe shop and had them make a pair of sandals for her. Try them on Molly."

She put them on her feet. "See Mom." she said holding out her foot. "They fit."

Without being coached she gave chief Audmanson a hug, "Thanks for the clothes, Mister."

"You're welcome, honey."

"And now for you Mrs. Watson, I found the smallest white sneakers we had. I hope there is pair that will fit you. She tired on two or three pair before finding one that fit. "These are just a bit wide, but they will do. I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't have to. It has been my pleasure. It has let me do something out of the ordinary. I'm not done yet. I used your old nightgowns as a pattern and made a new one for each of you out of parachute silk." He pulled them out from under the counter and handed them to her.

They each held them up to themselves to see how they looked. Debra burst out laughing at the thought of the chief making them for her and her daughter. Then she burst into tears.

While she regained her composure, he said to Molly, "I have one last thing for you, honey."

Her eyes got big as he handed her a rag doll that he had made from the same tablecloths. It had

orange strands of hair coming from under a bonnet. Molly had another hug for him.

"You must have been up all night working on this." Mrs. Watson said.

"It was no big deal." he said gesturing around the shop, "As you can see, I had some help. I hope it works for you." He produced a cardboard box and neatly folded the red dress and Molly's jumper and the other items they weren't wearing and put them in it. Yeoman Grover was quick to take it when he handed it to her.

"We should go so you can get back to work. You have spent enough time on us as it is. Thank you again."

"Don't mention it."

Yeoman Grover opened the door and they stepped out into the passageway. As they began making their way back, He said, "I haven't had a chance to tell you that I'm sorry about your husband."

"Thanks. Me too." she sniffled. "I haven't really had time to let it sink in. So much has happened so fast with all we've been through."

"I remember when my Grandfather died. Of course he was pretty old and had been in poor health for as long as I can remember. It was comforting to know that he was in a better place."

"A better place?" she asked. "What better place? When you die, its the end."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I don't know what I believe anymore. I used to think that but now I hope I was wrong."

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked as they neared the stairs.

"Sure." She agreed.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I have always hoped there is some sort of higher power, whatever it might be. But I have never really had thought about it much, until now. What about you?"

"Oh absolutely. Without any doubt."

"How are you so sure about that?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes. I think I would. Can you tell me."

"I have to get back to work right now." he said as they reached the galley deck. "Can I come to your stateroom this evening when I'm off duty? I'd be happy to answer your question. Can I bring one of my buddies? Together I think we can answer a lot of questions that you might not even realize that you have."

"That would be fine, Yeoman Grover."

"Please ma'am, call me Morris." He walked with them to their door and said, "I'll see you tonight."

Captain Braosn picked up the telephone on the bridge and rang the number to the admiral's stateroom. "Hello." Mrs. Watson answered.

"Oh. good you're back. How would you and Molly like some fresh air and sunshine? Besides I have some time to talk to you right now."

"That would be great. What do you have in mind?"

"I'll have Yeoman Gover bring you up to bridge wing. See you in a few minutes."

"We'll be right there. Good bye."

A few minutes later he saw them out on the bridge wing and left bridge to join them. That way he was close by should anything require his attention. From that vantage point they could see the entire length of the flight deck in both directions. The planes for the afternoon patrols were parked aft. Half of the escorting ships were spaced out along the one hundred and eighty degree panorama beneath a bright blue sky, highlighted by a few scattered clouds.

Sheffield had an empty ammunition crate for Molly to stand on so she could have a better view over the shield. "That is the most incredible view." Debra gasped. "You can see forever from here."

"I thought you needed to get out and about a little rather than stay cooped up in your stateroom. We'll be launching some planes here in a few minutes and bringing some others a board. I thought you might like to watch. I always find it thrilling anyway. In the meantime we can talk."

"Thank you for thinking of us, Captain Brason."

"Please call me Sheffield." He insisted.

"As long as you call me Debra."

"I understand you don't smoke, but do you mind? I really need a cigarette."

"Go ahead." he consented. After all they were out in the open air.

She went on to say. "The reality of what has happened has began to set in and I didn't want to be locked up down below all alone. I really need someone to talk to right now. You of all people should understand. Tell me Sheffield, how did you cope with loosing not only your wife but your children too?"

"It hasn't been easy. It has been a long difficult year for me. The war has been a mixed blessing. At least I have been busy which helped to occupy my mind. On the other hand, sometimes the routine of being at sea has given me too much time to think. I suppose the biggest thing that has helped me has been the caring people in my life.

"My family back home in Roanoke have been a big help. Being stationed in Norfolk while getting the ship ready for duty allowed me to go home on a few occasions. My father and one of my brothers are both ministers. They have known just what to tell me when I needed to be told. We have a good friend back in Hawaii who has been writing to me. She has been widowed twice and she can really relate to me. Besides

she was my wife's best friend and knew us very well. And then there is Commander Owen, my executive officer. He lived next door to us in Hawaii and our families became very close friends. He and his wife have looked after me.”

“You're lucky. About all I have is Molly. She's my lifesaver. Taking care of her through all of this has given me something to focus on rather than pitying myself.”

“You need to take some time for that. You need to grieve to get it out of your system. Otherwise you'll bottle it all up until you're ready to explode.”

About then the planes on the flight deck started up. The roar of the engines made it difficult to carry on a conversation, without shouting. The pilots and crewman scrambled across the deck and boarded their aircraft. Soon the lead plane was directed into position. With the drop of the flight deck officer's flag, it lurched down the deck and into the air. For the next several minutes, there was a continuous parade of planes passing below the bridge wing as they took to the air. The sky was soon filled with planes as they formed up. Soon they dispersed into groups and went their separate ways.

When the noise subsided, Debra continued. “That's the way I feel. I'm starting to feel like I could just burst out in tears, yet I haven't been able to yet.”

“Believe it or not, but a good cry will do you some good. I had several of them. I know, a man isn't supposed to cry; but I can tell you, it helps. You're still in shock and haven't had a chance to let it out yet. It hasn't helped to have had two ships sink out from under you in the same day.”

“That has been traumatic enough alone. I'm surprised that Molly isn't completely traumatized.”

“I have always been amazed at how resilient children can be. She seems to be taking the loss of her father pretty good.”

“Oh, Jerry wasn't her father. Her father and I were divorced when she was just a toddler. She was about five when I married Jerry.”

“Tell me about him.”

“Well, he was a career naval officer, like you. He served mainly on cruisers over the years. We met by chance at a night club. I was there with a couple of girlfriends and this handsome officer asked me to dance and bought me a drink. He was stationed in Washington D.C. at the time where he was assigned to Naval Intelligence. I was working as a secretary in a law office at the time. We went together for several months before we were married nearly three years ago.

“Just over a year and half ago he was promoted to Captain and given a two year assignment as the naval attaché to the American embassy in Rio. When that assignment was up, he had been promised the command of his own ship. He was really looking forward to that. Then over a little petty cash, someone senselessly ended his career and his life.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I guess Molly and I will go back to Washington and get on with our lives.”

At this time their conversation was interrupted by the steady stream of aircraft coming aboard. One by one they approached from astern, touched down on the deck, grabbed a cable, and came to a stop. Molly was particularly impressed by all the different colored jerseys the men on the deck wore. Over the noise, Sheffield explained that once the planes came to a stop, a man in a green jersey unhooked the cable. A man in a yellow jersey motioned the plane to taxi forward to where men in blue jerseys moved the plane into position. The plane captains in brown jerseys helped the pilot out of the plane and checked it over. Some of the planes were left parked on the forward end of the flight deck while others were taken below on either the forward or outboard elevators.

Once the last plane had been parked, a group of men came out and began scrubbing the scorched section of the flight deck while others brought out buckets of stain. Molly, who had been curious about the colors of the jerseys the flight deck crew wore, pointed at them and asked, “Why dose those men's shirts say 'pow' and why are those men standing around them holding guns?”

“Those are the German prisoners from the Edelweisses. Someone must have stenciled the letters POW on their shirts.” Then he explained to Molly, “POW stands for prisoner of war.”

“Shouldn't they be locked up?” Debra asked.

“I agreed with their Captain to keep them busy and asked Commander Owen to find work for them. It looks like he came through.”

“Oh.” Molly answered satisfactorily.

“Now,” Sheffield said to Debra, “let's continue our conversation. I need to tell you that the next several months are going to be pretty difficult to deal with. My brother told me to expect a rough road for at least a year before things get back to some semblance of normal. I found that to be true when we lost our baby and again this time around. It has been exactly a year now and I am now to the point were I can begin to let go and move on with my life. Giving that dress to you was really big step for me.”

“What can I expect? You know all to well. I remember when my mother died, and how lost I was without her. I imagine this will be much the same.”

“Yes, I'm sure it will. From what I have learned is that everyone grieves differently and the same person may handle two occasions differently. My brother had an analogy that really made sense to me and I found it to be very true. He said that in the normal course of life our emotions are usually pretty much in check. He compared it to a bookshelf full of books; each book representing a particular emotion.

“Then something like the death of a loved one comes along and your bookshelf gets knocked over, scattering books all over the floor. You've heard the term picking up the pieces. He said, and its true, that is

exactly what you have to do. You have to pick up each book one by one and put them back on the shelf in their proper place. As you do, you have to deal with the emotion that the book represents.

“I didn't realize there were so darn many of them, until our son died. At least then, Geannie and I had each other to go through it with. Let me tell you, it's a lot harder by yourself. I found myself grieving in triplicate. I know it sounds daunting but if I can do it, you can.”

Debra didn't respond. She just stood there looking out to sea over the shield. Sheffield could see tears well up in her eyes. All of a sudden, she cut loose like an afternoon squall. She turned and threw her arms around him and buried her head deep in his shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably. He remembered doing the same with Ramona and how she put her arms around him and held him tight. He responded the same way, holding her tightly in his assuring arms. He could feel her tears soaking his shirt. It didn't matter, she needed comforted.

Molly too did what she could to comfort her mother as well. She put her arms around her mother and buried her head in her waist.

Sheffield found that he needed to comfort her for his own reasons. For the first time in a year, he found himself on the comforting end of the process. It was part of letting go on his behalf and it felt oh so good. He found himself shedding tears. Of all of the tears that he had shed in the last year, this time they were for someone else.

Some of the men standing watch on the bridge didn't understand the scene that was playing out on the wing of the bridge. Some began to snicker and point their fingers at the captain holding a woman in his arms right there for everyone to see. The ever protecting Commander Owen put a stop to it right there and had a few choice words to explain what was going on. Once they got it through their heads, they shamefully resumed their duties.

Debra held on tightly for what seemed like a long time. Finally when no more tears would come, she let go. Sheffield took his handkerchief and wiped her face. After catching her breath she apologized, “Forgive me Captain. I didn't mean for that to happen.”

“That's exactly what needed to happen. It felt good didn't it.”

She simply nodded as she regained her composure. “Do you believe in God?” she asked.

“As a matter of fact I do. Very much so. That has been a big factor in my healing. I'd hate to have gone through this without my faith in God. I have always been a religious man. It was something my father instilled in me at an early age. Geannie was the same way. In fact her faith was much stronger than mine.”

“And still, she got killed. How does that work?”

“Having faith in God doesn't keep bad things from happening. That's just life. Faith helps you get through the bad things when they happen. And they will happen sooner or later. Nobody gets off that easy.”

What about you, do you believe in God?"

"I'm not sure anymore. Morris, I mean Yeoman Gover, asked me if I believed in God. I told him that I had always wanted to believe there was some sort of higher power but never necessarily believed in God. This has made me reconsider that notion. That is why I asked you. In fact, Morris and one of his friends are going to meet with me tonight to answer some of my questions along those lines. He seems to know a lot about it."

"He should." Sheffield answered, "He was a missionary before the war."

Just then Commander Owen stepped out onto the bridge wing. "Sorry to interrupt you sir, but there has been an incidence that requires your immediate attention."

"I'll be right there Mace." Captain Brason responded. He then turned to Debra, "Listen, I have to go now. I hope our talk has helped. You're welcome to stay here as long as you'd like. When your ready to return to your stateroom, Commander Owen will have someone escort you back. I'll catch up with you later, alright."

He stepped onto the bridge and asked, "What's up Mace?"

"One of the POWs has killed a crewman."

"What happened?"

"As you requested, we found work details to keep the prisoners busy. Some of them were working in the laundry when one of them got a hold of cord or something and strangled one of the ship's servicemen."

"I'd better get down there. In the meantime, I want all prisoner work details suspended and all of them returned to repair hangar immediately. Oh, and see to it that Missus Watson is taken care of."

Sheffield left the bridge in a hurry, heading down to the laundry on the fourth deck. Mace retrieved a folding chair from a storage locker and gathered up some old magazines and took them out to Mrs. Watson. As an after thought he asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

"A scotch would be nice."

"I'm sorry ma'am, this is a dry ship. How about a soda and one for your daughter?"

"That would be nice, Commander. Thank you."

Mace had someone fetch a couple of sodas and Debra and Molly settled down in the shade to enjoy the fresh air and just being outside and looked through the magazines. Having been out country for a while, the old magazines were new to her. She found the June 15th edition of Life Magazine very interesting.

When Captain Brason reached the laundry, he found not one but two dead men. The rest of the prisoners were being held at gunpoint by the marine guards. The dead sailor was Ship's Serviceman (Laundry) 3rd Class Jeremiah Porter, a colored man. The other dead man was the German prisoner who had

killed Petty Officer Porter. Sheffield demanded to know, "What happened here?" Then he rescinded the question. "Before you answer that, I want Captain Gottfried brought here."

"Right away, sir." the Marine Sargent in charge of the guard detail answered and directed one of his men to go get him.

Lieutenant Bashor was already there when Sheffield arrived on the scene. There was nothing he could do. While waiting for Captain Gottfried, Sheffield asked for witnesses to the incident. Three colored laundry attendants and the two Marine guards stepped forward.

It wasn't long before Captain Gottfried was brought into the laundry room. His first words were, "I'm so sorry Captain. I promised you that nothing like this would happen."

"Well it did. Do you know this man?" Sheffield asked pointing to dead German.

"Yes. His name is Joseph Reader, he was the political officer I was telling you about. He was not an actual member of my crew, nor was he a naval officer. He was a member of the Nazi party. I wouldn't put such a thing past him."

"Because of this I had to suspend all work parties and have ordered your men back to the detention area. Yes, this might be an isolated incident, but I can't take that chance for the safety of my crew and yours as well. It's a good thing we will be in port the day after tomorrow."

"I understand Captain. I would have made the same call."

Captain Brason asked the witnesses to tell what they saw. They all gave the same story. Petty Officer Porter had been in charge of the laundry detail. He was showing Reader how to bundle a stack of clean towels with a cord. He took the cord and in a flash had it around the sailors neck. The marine guards immediately brought their rifles to bear, but couldn't get a clear shot without hitting Porter. Finally as he began to slump, Corporal Arthur Simons had clear shot and took it. It was too late for Petty Officer Porter, he was already dead as was his attacker.

Captain Gottfried questioned three of his men who also witnessed the whole thing and they told the same story. "Captain," he said, "I suspect that this was about the fact that your crewman was a Negro. Knowing him, he resented being told what to do by someone he considered inferior. The Nazis hate anyone who is not like them and take great lengths to rid the world of anyone who is different. That is why I told you that I was glad that the war is over for me."

Sheffield directed that Captain Gottfried and his men on the work detail be taken back to the repair hangar, the bodies to be removed and prepared for burial, and the blood on the deck be cleaned up. He was rarely in a foul mood, but this put him in one. He really wanted to be fair and decent to the prisoners. Keeping them busy was a good idea in and of itself, in a perfect world. Several details had been formed throughout the ship, from re-staining the section of the flight deck and working in the laundry. Others sorted

through spare parts, polishing fixtures, restocking the pantry in the galley, and various odd jobs. In fact, it was a group of prisoners who had stenciled "POW" on the backs of their shirts.

Still upset by the death of one of his men, Sheffield went to his stateroom and put on a record and sat in the easy chair with a bottle of Coca-Cola. It was time well spent. Relaxed, he returned to his office and wrote a touching heartfelt letter to the Porters expressing his sincere regret for his loss.

When he returned to the bridge, Mrs. Watson and Molly had returned to their quarters a little earlier. The last flight of the afternoon was being launched and the previous flight would soon be coming aboard. Sheffield didn't stay on the bridge long as he had dinner guests joining him in his wardroom and he didn't want to keep them waiting.

Reggie had prepared a special meal for his guests, which included Mrs. Watson and Molly, and the more senior British and Brazilian officers, both military and merchant marine, of the survivors who had been rescued from the Edelweisses. He hadn't had much time to devote to them since they came aboard. Yeoman Gover was also present, although not a guest at the table. He was there to interpret for the Brazilians. After dinner, Sheffield returned to bridge to learn that a Seahawk Avenger had made an attack on a U-boat seventy five miles to the east. The sub escaped by crash diving. Sheffield remained there until after the Bat Team had been sent aloft.

After dinner, Debra and Molly retired to their stateroom. As promised, Morris and one of his friends came to see her. She was amazed that they could answer all of her questions, even the questions that she didn't know that she had. Even more surprising was their answers and what they had to say rang true.

It was late when Morris and Simon left. Debra and Molly got undressed and ready for bed. The parachute silk nightgowns felt sleek against their bodies as they climbed into bed.

As he got ready for bed, Sheffield complemented the events of the day, beginning with the dream that had awakened him. It had been in the back of his mind off and on all day. Being there for Debra to comfort her in her grieving had been as much help for him as it was for her. For the first time in a year, he had actually been on the giving end. He took great satisfaction in the fact that he was now ready to let go. As he took off his wristwatch and put it on the dresser, he instinctively went to take off his wedding ring, but realized that he hadn't worn it all day. Aside from the incident in the laundry room, it had actually been a landmark day one year and one day after losing Geannie and the kids. Oh sure, he missed them but he was ready to let go. The only question was, "How do I go about doing it?"

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The pants that Chief Audmanson made for Mrs. Watson would later be known as capris. They were formally introduced by a European fashion designer in 1948.

