

## Chapter XXIV

### Reunion

May 19, 1943 – May 30, 1943

19 May 1943

Aboard the *USA Reprisal*

Scapa Flow, Scotland

Dear Ramona,

It was so good to hear from you. It took a while for your last letter to catch up with me. We've been busy too. I can't tell you everything that has happened just yet, but we have been very successful despite taking a beating. Let me just say, we dished out more than we received.

Congratulations on your promotion and your new position. I can't believe that you actually asked for a transfer. That sounds like a lot of responsibility that you'll be taking on. I know that you're up to it. Enjoy your time off, you've earned it. How long has it been since you've had a significant leave?

Set aside some time for that date we've been talking about, because I'm coming home and should be back in a few days. I'm really looking forward to seeing you again.

You asked about Paula. Well things didn't work out there. There just wasn't any spark so we decided to just be friends and leave it at that.

So what will this move mean for you and your mystery man. Have you got through to him yet? If he's so blind that he can't see what's right in front of him, then he's a fool. If your heart wasn't already with someone else, I'd like to see if there might be a place in it for me. Regardless, you'll always be a dear and true friend. I'll never forget what you have done for me.

Now that you're in Washington, we can at least get together. I don't know how long we'll be in port. At least long enough to patch us up. Who knows where they'll send us next. Now that you're on the East Coast, just watch, they'll finally send us to the Pacific. At least we can make the most of what time there may be.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Love, Sheffield

Sheffield put the letter in with the out going mail so it could be sent out before they sailed. Who

knew, he might get there before the letter reached Ramona. He set his attention on getting ready to sail with the satisfaction that Ramona would be there when he returned. That was a comforting feeling. During the last nearly a year and half there had been no one to go home to.

On Saturday morning, the boilers had built up a full head of steam. At eight o'clock, Sheffield gave the order to weigh anchor and get under way. Some of the destroyers had already made their way out to sea. As the Reprisal began making her way out into the open water of the North Atlantic where she fell in behind the The United States.

Once at sea the task force formed up and set course for Norfolk. Just because they were going home was no reason to let their guard down, since they still had dangerous waters to cross. As the air group came out to meet the ship, all but the anti-submarine patrol and the morning search came aboard. Air operations continued until the Bat Team was recovered well after dark and resumed with their pre-dawn patrol the next morning. And so it was every day. Readiness drills and gunnery practice were the order of the day every day, except for Sunday.

It was an uneventful voyage from Scapa Flow to Norfolk. The air group provided air cover for a west bound convoy. The only excitement was when a U-boat was forced to crash dive when a pair of the Dauntlesses happened upon it while on a search patrol.

On the morning of Wednesday, May 26<sup>th</sup> the air group was launched and sent on ahead to the Norfolk Naval Air Station. Just before noon the task force slipped past Cape Henry and into the Chesapeake Bay, between Rip Raps Island and Willoughby Spit into Hampton Roads. All except the Reprisal berthed at the navy base; she proceeded up the Elizabeth River to the Navy Yard at Portsmouth.

It was estimated that the repairs to the damage suffered at the Battle of Bear Island would take four weeks. As the carrier approached the dock, Lieutenant Commander Joel Williams, the navigation officer commented, "Well will you look a that. We've got a Hollywood movie star here to welcome us home."

Naturally everyone had to take a look at the pretty blond wearing a spring green dress with a vee neck, and a brown collar. To accessorize the dress, she wore a wide, brown belt that gave the illusion of a figure, and brown high heels, and a brown clutch. The hem of her dress came to her knees and her legs were bare. There was something that looked very familiar about her. Captain Brason picked up his binoculars for a closer look.

The woman in question was quite petite, about five foot two and a hundred and twenty pounds. She wasn't necessarily what Sheffield would have been physically attracted too. He preferred taller women who were rather shapely and curvy, like Geannie was. Paula Drussell fit that description.

But this woman had a rather straight figure; small busted and narrow hips. The only curve was her behind. Nevertheless, she was quite pretty. She had fine, delicate facial features with a small nose and

rosebud lips; almost forming an 'O' with the bottom and upper lips about the same size. She was wearing rose lipstick. Her rounded face was further accented by a pointed chin and large, bright blue eyes. She had a look of innocence about her. She reminded him of a pixie that was in a bedtime storybook that he used to read to Sandy and Austin. She had a dark complexion, like she had spent several years in a tropical paradise. Her blond hair, bleached by the sun, was longer than the last time he had seen her. As usual, she had a white gardenia tucked above her right ear.

"That Mr. Williams is a Commander in the Navy Nurses Corps. You'd better render a salute, she outranks you."

Sheffield put down his binoculars and stepped out onto the outboard wing bridge. As the ship was being eased up to the dock by three tub boats, Sheffield could now see her plainly and waved.

The woman on the dock moved closer and was virtually standing directly below him, waving vigorously.

Sheffield called down to her, "Wait right there. I'll be down in a minute."

He stepped back inside and said, "You have the bridge, Commander Williams."

At that, he began making his way down to the quarterdeck. As soon as the gangplank was in position he rushed down to the dock. By then the pretty lady had attracted the attention of every man on deck. They watched as she rushed into his arms and cheered as they watched her kiss their captain right on the lips – with one foot raised behind her.

Sheffield expected the hug. It was a tight embrace like she always had for him. But the kiss he did not expect. Her lips were soft, warm, and tender against his. Even more surprising than the kiss itself was the passion and excitement that it conveyed. Oblivious to the cheering, Sheffield basked in the moment.

After what seemed like a very long time for a kiss, their lips parted, she relaxed her hold on him and she stood back down on her feet. The heels on her shoes made her taller than he remembered.

Sheffield was stunned and didn't know what to say. What she said next stunned him even more. "Did that do the trick or do I need to hit you over the head with a club too?"

Sheffield was speechless. Finally he said, "I'm the mystery man that you have been talking about?"

"Uh huh." She nodded her head.

"And just how long have you felt this way?" He asked as the reality of what had just taken place began to set in.

"For about fourteen years now. Since not long after Tom was killed."

"Boy do we need to talk. There's a nice little place called The Yardarm just outside the navy yard. Lets go have lunch."

Together they walked arm in arm down the dock away from the ship. "Gosh, it's good to see you

gain Ramona.”

“Tell me about it.” she said. “That was a long thirteen months. I was beginning to wonder if this moment would ever come.”

“You look terrific, Ramona. Just like in the picture you sent me.”

“I wanted you to see me for the woman that I am and not just a Navy nurse. You look pretty good yourself Sheffield. Just like I remember you, except for a little more gray hair.”

“Yeah I know. That's what fighting a war can do to you.”

She asked about the voyage home and he asked her about her flight from Hawaii and on across the country. She told him about the place she found to live as the small talk continued as they went across the street to the Yardarm.

They were quick to be seated and had their menus in hand. Selecting what to have detracted Sheffield from the bombshell that had just gone off in his mind. He decided on a roast beef sandwich on wheat, some potato chips and a Coca-cola. Ramona ordered a ham and swiss on rye, chips, and a 7up.

“What, no beer? You always have a beer with lunch.”

“Not any more. I gave it up.” she replied. “There are a lot of things about me that have changed since I last saw you. At first I did it to try to become someone that you would want. But then I really liked that person I was becoming so I did for myself despite what you might ever think. I like myself so much more now. I feel a lot more confident and free.”

“I could tell from the tone of your letters. By they way I really appreciated your letters and looked forward to them.”

They were interrupted when the waitress brought their lunch.

“I meant what I said,” Sheffield continued, “about you being my best friend, I truly love you as such. But I'm not in love with you.”

“That's understandable, Sheffield.” Ramona responded. “You haven't had a chance to fall in love with me.” Then she added, “Not yet anyway.”

Sheffield wanted to know, “Did Geannie know about this?”

“Oh, I think she figured it out. She wasn't the kind to be jealous. She had you and I had a fantasy. Besides it was safer for me to be in love with someone who I couldn't have.”

“That's an unusual comment. Why do you say that?”

“Think about it. Every time I found a man and fell in love, they were taken from me a short time later. If I loved someone that I couldn't have, I wouldn't have to deal with losing him.”

“That sounds pretty empty.”

“I know, it was. Then Geannie died and everything changed. Don't get me wrong, She was

everything to me and her death hurt me deeply. Not as much as it did you, I'm sure. She was the first true friend I had ever had. I couldn't betray that friendship over how I come to feel about you. So now here we are nearly a year and a half later and I hope that you might give me chance."

Sheffield reflected for a moment. "Do you remember me telling you about Paula Drussell?"

"I knew it." Romona groaned. "I was afraid of this. You've fallen in love with her haven't you."

"Oh no, not at all. You must not have got my last letter where I told you about it."

"No I haven't got it yet."

"Then how did you know that I'd be here."

"I have my connections."

"Any way, about Paula. We saw each other for about six weeks and there just wasn't anything between us and so we mutually called it off. What I was going to say is that I learned from her that I can be with another woman and yes even someday fall in love again. I wanted there to be something with her, but we were just too different for anything to happen.

"To tell you the truth, I have often wondered if you and I ever got together again if there might be something between us. So, If you're patient with me and give me a chance, I'd really like to see what might come of it. Perhaps with time I can feel the same way about you that you feel for me, I must say, there was some encouragement in that kiss. When I kissed Paula, there just wasn't any zing to it. Well let me just say, your kiss was a zinger."

"Really!" Ramona beamed. "If you're willing to give me a chance, I promise not to be too pushy. I realize that will take you some time."

"Well then. Why don't we get started by letting me keep my promise to you. How about dinner and movie tonight?"

"Why Sheffield, I thought you'd never ask. Yes, I'd love that."

"Why don't you wear what you have on. You look absolutely sensational. Would you rather me come as an officer or a gentleman."

"You're always both, but since you asked, come as gentleman. Lets forget about the Navy for a while and lets just be normal people without all of the stuffiness."

"Shall I call on you at, lets say six thirty?"

"Six thirty would be just fine. I'm staying at the Tazwell."

"Alright then, at long last its a real date." Sheffield concluded. "That evening in Honolulu when you accompanied me as my dinner companion to Admiral Halsey's going away party for me didn't count.

"So, when do you have to report for duty?"

"On the twenty first of June."

“What are you going to do with yourself until then?”

“I was hoping to stay around here and spend as much time with you as possible. That is if its alright with you?”

“Absolutely. I'd like that. There will be times when I'll be a little busy, but I can always make time for you. In fact, I'm going home to Roanoke on Friday afternoon for about a week. Why don't you come with me?”

“I'd love to. I have always wanted to meet your family. They sound so wonderful.”

“They don't know that I'm coming so this will really surprise them. Besides it will give us a chance to spend some time together away from here.”

Now that they got that out of the way, they got caught up on the last thirteen months over lunch, especially his latest engagement above the Arctic Circle. As they left the Yardarm, Sheffield hailed a cab to take her back to her hotel. As she got in, he kissed her. “I'll see you at six thirty.” he said as he shut the door. As he walked back to the ship, he had a whole new perspective on what the future might have in store. It was a pleasant possibility. One that he wanted to pursue.

Dressed in his double breasted gray pinstripe suit and fedora, Sheffield was picked up on the dock by Yeoman Gover in his staff car. “You look mighty dapper tonight, sir. Dose this have anything to do with the pretty lady on the dock this afternoon?”

“Oh so you saw that, did you? Yes, Morris it does. I think you'll like her. I've known her for a long time.”

“Do you mind if I ask her name sir?”

“Not at all. Her name is Ramona Katmuth.”

“Oh so she's the one in Hawaii who's been writing to you all this time.”

Changing the subject, Sheffield asked, “So are you going to take your two weeks and go home?”

The rest of the way to the Twazwell, Captain Brason engaged his trusted personal assistant in causal conversation. Morris waited at the curb, while Sheffield went in to get his date. When they returned, Sheffield opened the door for her. She slid over and he got in and sat beside her. They looked like a normal couple going out for the evening, not the captain of a ship and a navy nurse.

“Ramona, this is Yeoman 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Morris Gover.”

“I'm pleased to meet you. Sheffield has had told me all about you.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma'am.”

Morris could overhear their conversation as he drove them to the restaurant. He could tell that they were longtime, good friends. He had a good feeling about them. There seemed to be a connection between

them that he hadn't noticed with Mrs. Drussell. After letting them off at the curb, Morris parked the car and went into the restaurant and took a seat at the counter.

Sheffield and Ramona had an enjoyable meal and an even more enjoyable conversation. When they were ready to go, Sheffield called for the tab. He asked the waiter to add Yeoman Gover's to it. That was Morris' signal to go get the car. After Sheffield helped Ramona to her feet, he left a generous tip for the waiter. When they went outside, the car was waiting for them.

Next Morris drove them to the Colley Theater. Again he dropped them off at the curb. As he got out, Sheffield handed Morris a quarter, for his show ticket. It was interesting what was playing. "Action in the North Atlantic" starring Humphrey Bogart as First Officer Joe Rossi on a cargo ship in a convoy to Murmansk. Sheffield thought that it was ironic since that is where he had just returned from.

Morris parked the car and got in line to buy his movie ticket. He went in and selected an aisle seat toward the back.

Sheffield and Ramona went up to the balcony and selected a seat in the same general area where he and Paula had sat when he took her to a movie. They settled into their seats and Ramona did something she was never free to do before, and snuggled up next to him as they shared a carton of popcorn.

After the show, Morris had the car waiting for them at the curb. As they got in, he asked, "Where to now sir?"

"How about that ice cream shop over on Colonial."

"Yes, sir." Morris knew exactly where it was because he had driven the Captain and Mrs. Drussell there. It was actually a favorite destination that he often took Geannie and the kids to when they lived in Norfolk. Morris waited in the car with a recent magazine while Sheffield and Ramona went in to enjoy a chocolate malt, one glass – two straws.

Ramona invited him to come up to her room when he took her back to the hotel. He could only stay for a minute as he had a busy day the next day with inspections and the paperwork before the repairs could get started. But he did arrange for Yeoman Gover to pick her up and he would meet her at the Yardarm for breakfast. The deal was sealed with a goodnight kiss.

When he got back in the car, Yeoman Gover said, "I'm glad that you had a nice evening sir."

"Yes. It was, indeed. The best in a long, long time." He confided.

Sheffield had a busy day ahead so after breakfast, Morris drove Ramona back to the Tazwell. On the ride to Portsmouth and back, Ramona volunteered the nature of her relationship with the Captain.

Most of the morning was taken up with a meeting of the senior officers, the repairs were the main topic on the agenda. Captain Brason authorized a two week leave for the crew in two shifts. At the

conclusion of the meeting he proposed a plan to show appreciation to the crew for all of their hard work. His plan was basically a repeat of the crew barbecue and an officers appreciation banquet. Chief Evans was given responsibility for the barbecue. In the absence of an executive officer, the banquet was assigned to Lieutenant Commander Joel Williams and Lieutenant Commander Bashor, the chief medical officer.

In the meantime, Ramona went shopping. Not for clothes but for car. She had sold her little Dodge coupe and needed another car to get around with.

There was couple of dealerships nearby so she went have a look. To exude confidence and let the salesman know that as tiny as she was, she was no push over so she wore her uniform. New cars were impossible to come by as all of the automobile manufacturers had halted production after producing only a few 1942 models and converted their factories to producing material for the war effort.

Even used cars were hard to come by, because people had to keep what they had. She did however run across a rare find, a 1941 Ford Super Deluxe Coupe in Lockhaven Green with a tan interior and only seventeen hundred and fifty miles on the odometer. It had just come back to the dealer the day before when the initial owner defaulted on his payments. Taking a cue from her dearly departed friend, she talked the salesman into selling it to her for the amount remaining on the dept. She too knew that pretty face can get a girl a long ways. The uniform and a purse full of cold, hard cash certainly were to her advantage as well.



The rest of her day was taken up with the business associated with purchasing a car. That evening Sheffield called her from the ship. "Hello, Ramona. How was your day?"

"You'll never guess what I did today." She blurted.

"It must have been exciting, whatever it was."

"I bought a new car!"

"Wow, that is exciting. Tell me about it."

She went on to describe the car and deal that she got. Then she added, "Listen, I was thinking. Instead of taking the train to Roanoke tomorrow, lets drive."

"That sounds fun. However I do have a few things that I want to take back with me. After the officer cabins were destroyed during that last battle I got to thinking, what if that was my stateroom. I have some sentimental things in there and I'd hate to lose them. You remember Geannie's Victrola. Do you have room in your trunk for it?"

"Yeah, I remember it. It should fit with plenty of room to spare. What time should I come and get you?"



"Let's make it ten o'clock, I still have a few last minute things to take care of before I can leave. You've been in the Navy long enough to know all the paper work there is that goes with everything."

"Tell me about it. There is a ton of paper work in the medical end of things."

They went on to chat about various things for the next quite a while. Before they knew it, they had talked for an hour and a half.

At ten minutes to ten the next morning Ramona pulled up to the gang plank. Even though she wasn't in uniform, her military identification got her into the shipyard without any problem. She thought she might have to wait a few minutes for him, but he, also dressed in civilian clothes, was already waiting for her. The things he wanted to take home and his luggage fit into the car without any problem.

Before getting on the road, he asked if she minded taking him by the bank. Of course she didn't. He went into the bank and got into Paula's line.

"Hello Paula." he said as he stepped up to the window.

"Sheffield, its good to see you. I heard that your ship was back. How are you anyway?"

"I'm fine thank you. And how are you?"

"Since you asked, I'm seeing someone." she said. "I know it didn't work with us, I think this one will. I have you to thank for it. Going out with you gave me the confidence to really start exploring the possibilities. And we'll always have our song."

"That's terrific Paula. I'm really happy for you."

"So, what can I do for you today, Sheffield?"

"I have three pay checks to deposit and I'd like one hundred dollars in cash. I'm headed home to Roanoke for the week."

As she posted his checks and counted out the cash, she asked, "What about you, are you seeing anyone?"

"Actually I am. An old friend showed up at the dock to meet me when the ship came in. I had promised her a date several months ago and I finally got to make good on it. In fact she's going to Roanoke with me. Its too early to tell, but I think there may be some potential with us."

"Good, I'm happy for you. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No that should do it. Thanks Paula and good luck to you. I'll be seeing you."

"I'll be right here. Take care of yourself, okay."

Sheffield left the bank and got into the car and they got on the road. Around noon they stopped in Richmond for lunch. As they left the diner, Ramona handed him the keys and asked, "Would you like to drive for a while?"

“Yes I would. I haven't driven for a long time. Once they make you a captain, they think that you can no no longer drive yourself around.”

Sheffield opened the passenger door for her and she got in and slid over to the middle. Sheffield got in behind the wheel and with Romona by his side, started the engine and put in into gear and got back onto the highway.

As they drove through the splendid Virginia countryside, Sheffield told her about the people that she would be meeting. She had met Emmett and Ellen and Marie when they came out to San Diego. She already felt a connection to Sheffield's mother in particular, since she too had been a nurse. Ramona was especially eager to meet Sarah. She had heard so much about her over the years that she felt she already knew her. He went on to explain the annual Brason Family Memorial Day picnic that would the next morning since Memorial Day was on Sunday that year.

The drive was a great opportunity to talk and get reacquainted. Sheffield saw their relationship in a whole new way. In the months after Geannie and the kids were killed, it was more one of need and dependency. Now that he was free from all of that, he got a better appreciation for the woman that she was. In some ways it was like getting to know her all over again with a fresh start. He felt at a disadvantage because she knew him more intimately. He came to the conclusion that he liked her, a lot, and definitely wanted to pursue a relationship with her.

At twenty minutes after five they pulled up in front of his parents house. “Emmett, someone just pulled up out front. See who it is.”

Looking through the front window he said, “I don't recognize the car.”

Ellen came to his side as they saw Sheffield get out of the car. They had no idea that he was coming, let alone that his ship had returned to Norfolk. They both bolted for the front door and tried to go through it at the same time. Emmett held back and let Ellen go first. As they rushed down the sidewalk, they were surprised to see a pretty blond woman also get out of the car.

Ignoring her for a moment, they clamored all over Sheffield, welcoming their son home from the war if only for a little while. Finally when they settled down he said, “Mom, Dad, do remember Ramona?”

Ellen looked at her for a moment, “You're Geannie's friend, the nurse aren't you. Lands sake, yes, I remember you.”

Emmett asked, “How long are you here for this time, son?”

“I have to leave a week from tomorrow, so that gives us a week.”

“Where are my manners?” Ellen asked herself. “Please come in. I'll bet you're hungry aren't you. I was just getting ready to fix supper for Emmett and me. I can add to it and make enough for you all.”

“Thanks Mom. We haven't eaten since lunch.”

They all went in the house and while Ellen was fixing supper, Sheffield told his father all about his last cruise and the Battle of Bear Island. While engrossed in the details, Ramona, who already felt right at home, slipped into the kitchen to see what she could do to help Ellen. Ellen wanted to know all about her and listened eagerly as Ramona told of her transfer to Bethesda and being reunited with Sheffield. Ellen's motherly instinct could tell that this girl was in love with her son.

During supper, Ellen suggested, "Why don't I call Walt and Shenan and see if they could come over for the evening?"

"Do you know what I'd really like to do. I want to surprise everyone when they come over in the morning."

His surprise came sooner than planned, as Walt and Sarah stopped by after supper. Regardless of the timing, they were indeed surprised. Since the cat was out of the bag, Emmett called Shenan and invited them over because he had a surprise for them.

So the Annual Brason Memorial Day picnic got off to an early start. They visited until late in the evening. When Sheffield announced that he would really like to turn in, Ellen realized the dilemma. They only had the one bedroom available. That certainly wouldn't work. Sarah came to the rescue and invited Ramona to stay with them.

Ramona really connected with Sarah. They stayed up even later getting to know each other. Ramona opened her heart and told her about her feelings for Sheffield. When Ramona got dressed for bed that night, she basked in the feeling of a loving family, something she had longed for.

The next morning, Sarah set about finishing preparing what she was bringing to the picnic. Ramona told her that she would like to make a coconut cream pie for Sheffield. Not having any coconut on hand, Sarah told her where the market was.

As she strolled through the store, she was pleased to find whole coconuts. She was afraid that she would have to settle for prepared coconut. With her ingredients in hand she paid for them and returned to Sarah's and set about making her pie.

First came the crust. She lovingly rolled it out, hoping that the man of her affections would be pleased. While the crust was baking she turned her attention to the coconut. Sure it was the hard way, but she split the coconut open, saving the coconut milk. Next she shredded the coconut. After taking out the crust, she spread the shredded coconut out on a baking sheet and put it in the oven to let it toast until golden brown.

While waiting for the coconut, she mixed together the ingredients, including one cup of cream, one cup of milk, and one cup of coconut milk. When the coconut came out of the oven she mixed it all together and poured it into the pie shell. To top it off, she whipped up some whipping cream. Once her pie was done,

she helped Sarah and together they took their goods over to Emmett and Ellen's.

The first order of business was to take the flowers that Ellen, Sarah and Emily had gathered the day before to the cemetery. This time as Sheffield stood over the graves of his family, the pain that had experienced on previous visits was not there. Instead he had a fond longing for those who he had lost.

For Ramona, it was very difficult. She held on to Sheffield tightly as she gazed down at their headstones. True, she had been there at the mortuary in Hawaii when their caskets were closed, but seeing their final resting places brought the finality of it all to closure. How she had loved Geannie. She was the sister she never had and her best friend. And Sandy and Austin were like her niece and nephew. Oh the good times that they had together. In her grief she turned to face Sheffield as he buried himself deeply in his arms.

He was fine until she broke down, then he too broke down. After a good cry, they both regained their composure they lingered a little longer at the cemetery after everyone else had left.

In the days when the grandkids were younger, the morning was a time for games and races. Now that they were all older, the nature of the events had changed. Now they played horseshoes, checkers and chess, along with other adult games.

Everyone was there, except for Shenan's son Danny and his wife Mellisa and their daughter who were the with him in Corpus Christi were he was still in flight school. There were two new great grandchildren on the way. Emmaline and Seth were expecting as were Joe and Adelle. Seth was also not there as he was stationed in Hawaii with the Marines. Joe was still working with Shenan in their surveying business. Sylvia and Ruth Ann were just finishing up a year at Hollins. Wendalynn, Delbert and Curtis were waiting for school to be out. Curtis was particularly anxious for school to be out so he could play baseball.

At one o'clock Emmett called everyone together for eat lunch. As he said Grace tears came to Ramona's eyes when he said, "And Lord, we are especially pleased to have Ramona join with our family this day." It was a typical Brason picnic. Some years its ham, this year it was fried chicken. Everyone enjoyed the meal and more particularly the company of one another.

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