

Chapter XXXIV

Home For the Holidays

December 7, 1943 – January 21, 1944

At the conclusion of his remarks, the crew and those assembled, with accompaniment from the ship's band, sang "Happy Birthday" followed by a round of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow". With emotion swelling in his breast he took his seat. As Captain Callister paid tribute to his predecessor, Sheffield listened with mixed emotions. The Reprisal, her air group, and their men had been his life. They had sustained him through the most difficult time of his life and brought him through.

Of course, they weren't the only ones. The most important component of his regeneration was sitting beside him, tightly holding his right hand in her left, the one sporting an engagement ring. A glance into her blue eyes revealed the love and adoration that she had for him. She was beaming with pride in him as she listened to Captain Callister pay tribute to him.

Now, just like everything else in life becomes, this was behind him. In one way it was a disappointment and a let down. Being relieved of command was inevitable after a year and half. It was a wonder that he remained in command during the last three months as it was. If the ship had been operational during that time, it certainly would have been a different story.

There was one more hole in his heart. He found himself missing Geannie terribly. For twenty years, and before, she had been at his side and had been there to be apart of every major event in his life. The reality of the fact that it had now been two years to the day that she and the kids had been taken from him weighed heavily on his mind. The first year had been extremely difficult as he worked through the pain. During the second year he learned that not only could he love again, but he found that love.

Now, Sheffield had much to look forward to. He was excited for his new assignment. It would give him the opportunity to pursue something that he felt strongly about. He had had a free hand in utilizing the capabilities at his disposal for conducting combat flight operations at night. Now he could devote his energy in promoting the concept throughout the naval aviation community.

More importantly was what it meant for him personally. For one, time to allow his body to heal. He found that the body healed much more quickly and with less pain than healing his heart had taken. The most important aspect the change afforded him was the freedom to marry Ramona and settle down with her. With his injury, it was unlikely that he would be going to sea again any time soon, if ever again. He could devote his time and energy to starting a new life with her.

At the conclusion of the change of command ceremony, Captain Brason lingered for a while and mingled with the officers and crew for some personal goodbyes. It was one of those rare moments when the boundaries set by rank and command were dissolved, allowing for a free exchange between the captain and the officers and enlisted men who had served under him. There were even a few gifts of appreciation

bestowed upon him. There was no other captain any more beloved by his crew than was Captain Sheffield Brason of the USS Reprisal.

Finally, it came time for him to disembark. He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening with his fiancé, father and mother, and his brother and sister-in-law, the people he loved the most. It had been sunny during the ceremony and the superstructure had made a good windbreak. But now it had clouded up and the breeze felt cold as a cold front began moving through. They moved their gathering to the Tazwell where they took over one of the lounge areas.

As they visited, the fact of what day it was brought Geannie into the conversation. Reminiscing brought up several stories about her. In some circumstances, the subject of a late wife might be uncomfortable for a woman in Ramona's situation, but not for her. Except for Sheffield, she had known and loved Geannie as much as anyone else. She said, "Geannie was the sister that I never had."

Sarah agreed, "Although we were cousins, she was also the sister that I never had. I have the advantage over you because we were practically raised together."

"Since we were both her sisters," Ramona deduced, "doesn't that make us sisters too?"

"I don't see why not." was Sarah's answer.

With that, the two women shared a hug. In the short time that they had known each other, they had really connected and had already formed a bond between them. From reminiscing about Geannie, the conversation turned to getting to know Ramona better.

"Now that you two are formally engaged," Ellen said, "I can't be happier for you. I'm sure I'm speaking for Emmett too when I say that you are a welcome addition to our family, Ramona."

"So when is the big day?" Emmett wanted to know.

Looking at Sheffield, Ramona answered, "I don't know. We haven't had a chance to talk about that."

"As soon as I can get this thing off." Sheffield responded, referring the cast on his leg. "I have already asked Walt to marry us in the church, is that okay with you sweetheart?"

"By all means. That sounds wonderful. So if your cast can come off around the middle of next month, I'd say six weeks sounds about right."

"All of a sudden there is so much to do." Ellen interjected.

The discussion turned to their wedding plans. In the end it all boiled down to something quite simple. The guests would mostly be family and friends with an informal open house. Since Ramona had absolutely no family at all, it would be strictly a Brason affair. The only unresolved question was whether to make it a military or civilian wedding. They leaned to a combination of both, perhaps wearing their uniforms but without the ceremony that accompanied Sheffield and Geannie's wedding.

"What about a honeymoon?" Sarah asked with a wink.

“Oh dear, I'm afraid that will have to wait.” Ramona lamented. “I won't have a chance to get away until sometime in the summer.”

Sheffield added, “And with me being off duty now and starting a new assignment, it will be a while before I can get away too.”

From the wedding, the conversation turned to what the future may hold, especially once the war was over. By then it was time for dinner, which found them seated at a table for six in the hotel restaurant. After dinner, they retired to one of the four rooms that Yeoman Gover had arranged for them were they visited until late in the evening. The first to drop out of the conversation were Emmett and Ellen. Finally when it was quite late, Sheffield went to his room and Ramona to hers.

The next morning, Sheffield and Ramona saw the Brasons off at the train station. It was time for them to head back as well. Rather than flying back as originally planned, Morris drove them in the Captain's staff car. As it turned out, the car was assigned to Sheffield personally and not to the ship. Captain Callister didn't really see a need for it. He preferred using one of jeeps for his transportation needs. Besides, once Sheffield began his new job in Washington, he would need a way to get around.

Ramona returned to work the next day. Sheffield continued his therapy, which mostly consisted of working with weights from a seated position or lying on his back. The purpose at this point was to rebuild his upper body strength after weeks of inactivity. The real therapy on his leg would begin once the cast came off.

On his next checkup with Commander Stansfield, he reported that the tingling in his leg persisted, although to lesser degree than what it had been. Doctor Stansfield took that as a good sign but concluded that only time would tell.

The next two weeks passed slowly for Sheffield. His therapy only took an hour each day. Sometimes he would go to Ramona's office and pester her until she had to shoe him out so she could get her work done. Morris was already busy gathering information that they would review later. To give the Captain something to do, he brought some of what he had already collected for him to look at.

Some afternoons he had Morris drive him around the area just to get out and about. Even though he had his staff car, he still couldn't drive himself. With his left leg in a cast, he couldn't operate the starter pedal or the clutch. All in all he was getting impatient and bored.

After work, Ramona would take him home with her for and fix dinner for him. They would spend the evenings talking and making plans. Sometimes they'd go out. One Friday evening, it had been snowing all day. As the evening progressed conditions got worse, making it too treacherous to drive. As it got late, Ramona offered him one of her spare bedrooms. An offer he had no choice but to accept. Not having his

pajamas with him, as he was accustomed to sleeping in, he had to sleep in his skivvies. Once in bed, Ramona, in her nightgown and robe, came to tuck him in. She ended up lying next to him on top of the covers and they talked longer. Finally she got up to go to her own room and went to bed.

During the night, she heard a commotion coming from Sheffield's room. She got up and went to check on him. She found him thrashing around and moaning and groaning. Knowing that he was most likely having a nightmare, she reasoned that he might be unpredictable if she attempted to wake him up. They had encountered that a lot at the hospital.

Instead, she pulled back the covers and climbed in bed with him to see if that would settle him down. After more moaning and groaning and trashing he called out Ramona's name. But it wasn't until he softly said her name that he finally settled down. At that point, he had his arm across her. Not wanting to wake him by getting up, she decided to stay and soon went back to sleep herself.

The next morning, Sheffield didn't know what to think when he woke up to find Ramona in bed with him. As he stirred, she woke up too.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in horror.

"You were having a nightmare and I wanted to see if I could settle you down. After you did, I didn't want to wake you so I stayed."

"I didn't do anything that I wouldn't be proud of, did I?"

"Nothing more than rest your arm across my chest."

"Well whatever you did, it must have worked. I keep having the same nightmare, only this time it ended differently."

"Tell me about." she said lying on her side next to him.

Sheffield sat up and began to tell her his dream. "I was back on the bridge of the Reprisal when the Germans attacked us with at least a dozen of those guided bombs. I was out on the wing bridge trying to keep track of all of them. When the first one slammed into the flight deck I jumped through the hatch onto the bridge. The hatch slammed shut on my leg. As the elevator crashed into the superstructure, I could feel my foot being ripped right off.

"Within seconds, the entire ship was on fire and exploding. Everyone on the bridge had been cut down by shrapnel, leaving no one to help me. I felt the ship rolling over and before long it was on its side and water was pouring in all around me. The salt water was making the open wounds on my leg burn. As the ship continued to roll over, I was hanging upside down from the hatch and completely immersed in water. That is when I saw Geannie. She had come for me. At that point, I could hold my breath no longer and water began filling my lungs.

"That is usually where it ends and I wake up in cold sweat. As it turns out, my leg is asleep inside the

cast causing it to tingle more than usual. But this time it was different. At the last very minute, you showed up out of nowhere and pulled me free and saved my life. This time I didn't wake up."

"What an awful nightmare. No wonder you wake up. After you said my name, you settled right down. I didn't want to disturb you so I stayed. I hope you don't mind."

"As long as you're sure that I didn't do anything else."

"Well you might have, but I'll never tell." she teased.

"Tell me that nothing happened." he pleaded emphatically.

"No Babe. Nothing happened." she assured him. "We both slept restfully for the rest of the night. That's all. But I must tell you, it was comfortable sleeping next to you. Your arm across my chest made me feel safe and secure. Only another few weeks and we can sleep together for real. There was a time when I would have said why wait. But not now, not with you. It just wouldn't be right."

"No it wouldn't be right." Sheffield agreed. "Can we just keep this little episode between us?"

"Of course, I wouldn't want to ruin your squeaky clean reputation." She said as she pushed him back down on the bed. She rolled over on top of him and kissed him. "I'd better go now, before I change my mind." She got up out of the bed and extended a hand to help him up as he swung his cast over the side of the bed.

He reached for his crutches and stood up. That is when he realized that he was only in his skivvies. His face went flush with embarrassment.

"Don't be embarrassed, Babe." she said as she left the room. "Remember, I've given you sponge baths. I've seen it all."

Sheffield never did have that nightmare again.

The following Monday afternoon, Sheffield had an appointment with Lieutenant Commander James. He told Sheffield that his broken leg was healing sufficiently that the cast could be removed in another four weeks. He was so confident that an appointment was made for January 17th to do just that. Doctor James went on to tell him that once his cast was off, it would be at least another six weeks before Commander Stansfield would release him to return to duty because he needed therapy for his leg to further mend the nerve damage and strengthen his lower body, particularly his left leg.

After leaving Doctor James, he went to Ramona's office. "I've got some good news." He called out as he entered.

"Really, I have some good news of my own." she replied.

"Okay, tell me yours first and I'll tell you mine."

"Well, Babe." She had recently begun to call him that. He wasn't sure how he felt about the term of

endearment just yet, but he was getting used to it. "As it turns out, I was able to clear my schedule for all of next week so we can spend the holidays in Roanoke, not just Christmas as we had planned."

"Gosh, that is pretty good news. But mine is better. I just came from Commander James. He says that I can get my cast off on the seventeenth of next month. In looking at the calendar, why don't get married on the twenty second?"

Ramona looked at her calendar. "I could probably leave early on Friday afternoon, but I would have to be back Monday morning. It doesn't look like it will be any better than that for the foreseeable future. Are you sure you don't want to just do it while we are there for Christmas?"

"It's like I have said before, I want to walk down the aisle under my own power. Besides wouldn't this thing get in our way for our wedding night?"

"You've got a point there. So the twenty second it is. We can make all of the plans next week when we're at home. Do you know what, what I'm doing here can wait until tomorrow morning. How about I take you out for dinner?"

Ramona got up and left things on her desk just as they were and put on her coat and walked with Sheffield out to her car. In a role reversal that had been going on ever since he was able to leave the hospital, she helped him into the car. She then got behind the wheel and took him to what had become one of their favorite restaurants in the area.

Ramona left her office at noon on Thursday the 23rd and stopped by to pick up Sheffield. He was ready with his bag packed for the trip to Roanoke. She had brought her luggage with her when she left for work that morning. After loading his suitcase and Christmas packages, the only thing to do before getting on the road was to stop for something to eat.

Just as the sun was setting, they pulled into Roanoke and drove straight to Emmett and Ellen's where Ellen was putting the finishing touches on dinner. After an evening of visiting, Ramona went over to Walt and Sarah's where her room was waiting.

On the day before Christmas, Walt's son Tim arrived from New Jersey where he was still stationed. He was the last of the Brasons that were able to come home for Christmas to arrive. It was a rather bleak time for Walt's family, particularly Emmaline who was still reeling from the recent death of her husband.

Shanan's son Danny, who had recently reported to his squadron on the west coast, was not able to come, but his wife Melissa and their daughter Christina planned to split their time between her family and the Brasons during the holidays. The same was true for Joe and Adelle. Ruth Ann was disappointed that Yeoman Gover wouldn't be joining them as he had at Thanksgiving, he had gone home to Utah to spend the holidays with his family. Since Thanksgiving, she had written to him a couple of times and was thrilled to get

a letter in return.

Those of the Brason Family who were there attended Christmas Eve services that evening. For Ramona, it was a real treat to spend Christmas with so much family. Prior to this, the only real Christmas that she had was in 1940 when she spent it with Geannie and the kids, while Sheffield was in Bremerton with the Enterprise.

For Sheffield, this was his first real Christmas in five years. He and Geannie and the kids spent the Christmas of 1938 in Roanoke. In 1939 he was in Pearl Harbor while they were in San Diego. Then in 1940 he was in Bremerton while they were in Hawaii. And then there was the awful Christmas of 1941. Even though he was home, it just didn't feel like Christmas that year. And finally, the previous year he spent Christmas in Rio de Janeiro.

Ramona got up early on Christmas morning and went over to spend Christmas morning with Sheffield. Besides, Walt and Sarah had all of their family there that morning. They would come over a little later, the same with Shenan and his family. Sheffield was dressed and ready for the day and Ellen was just setting breakfast on the table. Perfect timing.

After breakfast, they retired to the living room to open their gifts. Sheffield had got a musical jewelry box for Ramona. Ramona had gone all out for Sheffield. Since his entire wardrobe had been destroyed when the ship was hit, she bought him a new, charcoal gray pinstriped, three button suit complete with a matching fedora. (After all, he had sent her the dress form Algiers.) She got his sizes by going through his clothes while he was confined to bed in the hospital. Yeoman Gover had helped her get it right as he knew his size when he got new uniforms for him. The jacket fit just right, but the trousers needed to be hemmed up. The only problem was that he wouldn't be able to wear it until his cast was taken off.

In addition to her gift from Sheffield, Emmett and Ellen had something for her too. She had come prepared and had gifts for each of them. What she wasn't prepared for was when the rest of the family gathered around mid morning, each bringing more gifts. Ramona was overwhelmed by the number of gifts there were to open. She felt a little embarrassed because she had not planned on all of the extended family. In anticipation, Sheffield had already added "and Ramona" to the gifts that he brought.

It was a magical day, just the way Christmas was supposed to be, including a dusting of snow on the ground. Ramona felt like she had finally come home to a place where she belonged. Not only had her love for Sheffield deepened but she also had fallen deeper in love with the entire Brason Family.

At one point after dinner, she was able to get alone with Emmaline and talk to her. She told her that she knew what it was like to be a young widow, except for she didn't have a child too. She listened and understood as Emmaline poured out her heart to Aunt Ramona. That day a special bond developed between Ramona and Emmaline.

A day or two after Christmas, Emmaline received a letter Seth's commanding officer, Major Guy Danpora. It was one of those dreaded letters that Sheffield had written on too many occasions. This is the same Captain Danpora who had led the Marine Raiders on the Bordeaux mission. He began by expressing his deepest sympathy to Emmaline over the loss of her husband, Corporal Seth McClury. He told of the great asset that he had been to his company. Then he went on to explain what had happened.

“When the Marines stormed the beach at Betio in the Tarawa Atoll on November 20, 1943 we were met with heavy opposition from the enemy. After making little headway, our company was pinned down by enemy fire coming from a fortified bunker and was taking heavy casualties.

“On his own initiative, Corporal McClury lead his squad, crawling through sand and coral to within several yards of the bunker. Leaving his rifle with his squad, armed only with several hand grenades he scrambled the remaining distance and made it to the bunker. Heroically, he went along the bunker below the the gun ports where he could not be seen and and tossed several grenades inside at various places. His action silenced the enemy fire. He then lead his squad inside to make sure the bunker was secure. That is when a mortally wounded Japanese soldier shot your husband. He died only a moment later, before he could receive medial attention.

“Because of the selfless actions of your husband, the company was able to advance and take our objective, contributing to the over all victory at the battle of Tarawa. After the battle, he was buried with full military honors along with his fallen comrades on the island. I have enclosed what personal effects that he had with him, including his dog tags.

“The courage and heroism of Corporal McClury deserve and will receive recognition through the highest honor that this nation can bestow. I know that this is of little consequence to you, who will never see him again. Medals, honors, and recognition can not heal a broken heart, but it is the least that a grateful nation can do for one who gave his all in its behalf.”

Major Danpora's letter brought a measure of comfort to Emmaline. At least now she knew what happened to her husband. In her grief, she could hold her head high knowing that he was brave and courageous to the very end. His belongings also brought her comfort. None of this, however, would bring him back. Her daughter would never know her father. He would not father other children. They would not grow old together. Sheffield saw first hand the comfort that a letter from a commanding officer can do for the loved ones at home. He hoped that all of the letters that he had to write had a similar impact. Again, Emmaline turned to Aunt Ramona for comfort and advice.

During the week, the wedding plans were formalized, including a visit to the courthouse for a marriage license. Later in the week, Sarah hosted a bridal shower in honor of Ramona and her forth coming wedding. It was her way to say, “Welcome to the family.” The guests included all of the Brason women,

except for Emmaline, who didn't feel up to socializing, Marie Austin and her daughters-in-law, and some friends from the neighborhood and church; like Marge Casper, Samantha Taylor, and others. Again Ramona again was touched by the outpouring of love and support. There were fun games, refreshments, and gifts. Some of the gifts were practical. Others brought hoots of delight as they were opened.

For example, Emily gave her a slinky nightgown, that was sure to be seductive. Among the laughter, Samantha said, "Oh you won't wear that – for very long, that is."

After the laughter subsided, Ramona said "Geannie was somewhat liberal in talking about their intimate affairs, I have a pretty good idea of what kind of a lover Sheffield can be. He would die if he knew some of the things I know about them."

Marie said, "That's my fault for always being open with her when she was younger. She used to share some of their special moments with me as well."

From there, the discussion got kind of dicey for a bunch of church going ladies as they shared some of their own secrets. All of it adding to the entertainment. Sarah let a story slip that caused some of the ladies to see their pastor in a whole new light. He too would die if he ever knew about it.

"So where are you going for your honeymoon?" someone asked.

"Unfortunately that will have to wait."

"Oh that's too bad." another lady consoled.

"Well then, what about your wedding night?"

"Do any of you have a suggestion?" Ramona asked.

Adelle, the most recently married of the bunch suggested, "Joe and I stayed in the honeymoon suite at Hotel Roanoke. Its only a few blocks from here, just across the railroad tracks."

"Oh, yeah." several responded. One of them said, "That would be the place."

"Tell me about it, Adelle." Ramona asked.

"Well, it is quite spacious with a separate bedroom, and living room. In front of a fire place is a huge bathtub that you step down into."

"Really?" Ramona said. "This Avon bubble bath that Samantha gave me would come in handy."

Someone else added, "And the restaurant downstairs is the best place in town. They put on quite a Sunday brunch, too, you know."

"Well then, I think I found the place." Ramona decided.

"You'd better call and reserve it right away. It's pretty popular. It might already be taken."

Sarah grabbed her telephone directory and quickly looked up the number. Ramona called only to find out that it was already reserved. So much for that. Instead, she reserved one of their nicer rooms in Sheffield's name. She asked them to call her in case there was a cancellation in the honeymoon suite.

By then, the party began to break up as some of the ladies had to leave. The first to go was Marie, who was in frail health. Before long, all that remained were the Brason women. Ramona loved it. Sarah was quite pleased with how it turned out.

The week passed quickly and it was New Year's Eve. The Brason boys wanted to do something to celebrate, other than staying home. Because of Sheffield's broken leg, dancing was out. About the only other option was dinner and a movie. Shenan wanted to see "Destination Tokyo" starring Cary Grant. The war weary Sheffield wanted something light. They ended up going to "The Gang's All Here", at the Grandin Theatre. It was a guy meets girl musical comedy featuring Benny Goodman and his orchestra. Perhaps the highlight of the film was Carmen Miranda as the "The Lady in the Tuti Fruiti Hat" and the dancing girls with the bananas. After the show they all went back to Walt and Sarah's house to welcome in 1944.

On New Year's Day, Sheffield and Ramona went through the things that he had in storage and loaded as much as they could fit into Ramona's car to take back with them. Since he was finally settling down, it was time to put it back to use again. Besides Ramona's house was still rather sparsely decorated. On Sunday after services, they drove back to Bethesda.

The next two weeks were much like the two weeks before the holidays, then the long awaited day arrived. On Monday the 17th, Sheffield meet with his doctors. First Commander Stansfield who thought that the nerve should have healed by then, but still held out hope that it would continue to improve. "But," he warned, "this could be as good as it gets."

He next met with Lieutenant Commander James and had his cast removed. For the first time in four months he was able to stand up on his own. No sooner than the cast was removed, he began the therapy necessary to regain his strength. His first steps were quite wobbly. Not only was his leg weakened, but because the tingling and numbness persisted, he tended to drag his left leg behind him. Doctor James recommended that Sheffield us a cane to assist in walking.

At first he resisted the idea. Only old men use canes; he was just forty five, much too young. With a little encouragement from Ramona and the doctor, he tried various sizes and settled on a light weight wooden cane with a curved handle, a woman's cane actually. Doctor James suggested that he hold it in his right hand since his right arm naturally swung with the left leg. "That way," he said, "the tip of the cane is down at the same time as your left foot, giving you more stability."

After a few steps, he got the hang of it and found that he did much better with help from the walking stick. The term, "walking stick" sounded more fashionable than the word "cane". At least he would be able to walk down the isle come Saturday.

Commander James meet with Sheffield and Ramona again after his first therapy session. "Now

Captain Brason,” he began, “at this point in time, I am going to fully discharge you from the hospital. However, I am not releasing you to return to duty. You will need to come for therapy three days a week for two hours at a time. In between I want you to do a lot of walking and get any other exercise that you can. I also want you to check in with me every two weeks so I can monitor your progress. Now Captain, do you have any questions?”

“Yes. I have a question. What does this mean to my flight status? Even though I have not been assigned to flight duty, I have managed to keep my status active all this time.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this Captain, but I can’t let you keep your active status with you in less than perfect condition.”

Sheffield didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he responded, “I always knew this day would come. I have had time to think about it and I figured that this would be the case.”

“Perhaps in time,” Commander James continued, “the nerve problem in your leg will correct itself sufficiently, if so your status can be reevaluated. I’ll see you in two weeks, alright.”

Sheffield left feeling a little deflated about not being able to fly again. The four hours that he spent in the air every couple of months had been good for him. Now he didn’t have that to look forward to anymore.

But there was something else to look forward to. The rest of the week was spent in anticipation of and preparation for the big day. Each day he got better at using his leg but he realized that there was still a long ways to go. Now that he was free from his cast, he was able to drive again, even if he couldn’t fly. For the rest of that week, he stayed at the quarters provided for him near the hospital. Once he got back from Roanoke over the weekend, he had a new place to live and someone to live with.

* * * * *

