

Chapter XXXV

To Second Chances

January 21, 1944 – January 23, 1944

On Friday, Ramona worked just a half a day. On her way home she picked up Sheffield in her car. As he went to open the driver's side door for her, she dangled the keys in front of him. "Do you want to fly?"

He grinned and took the keys from her and asked, "How high do you want to go?"

They both chuckled as he took her around to the other side and helped her in. It felt good to help her in for once, rather than the other way around. By the time he got in behind the wheel, she had slid over to the center of the seat so she could sit next to him. They went to her house long enough to change out of her uniform into some civilian clothes, have a quick bite to eat, and put her bags in the trunk. By evening, they were back in Roanoke again. After dinner and an evening of visiting with family, they went there separate ways. It was the last night they would have to do that.

The next day, Sheffield didn't see Ramona at all. She was busy with all of the last minute preparations. About the only thing Sheffield had to do was try on his new suit and have his mother put a cuff on the pants. They had decided not to wear their uniforms for the wedding. Everyday he was Captain Brason and she was Commander Katmuth. On this occasion they just wanted to be Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield Brason.

When it came time to get ready, Sheffield showered and shaved. He thought how nice it was to shower again without worrying about that cast. After he was satisfied that he had shaved as close as possible, he splashed on a generous amount of Old Spice. He knew that Ramona liked the fragrance, besides it was all he ever used. He couldn't help but remember how Geannie loved the aroma. She always said that it made him smell like a man of the sea.

He slipped on his trousers. "Mom sure did a good job with these cuffs." he thought to himself. Next he slipped on a freshly pressed and starched white shirt and buttoned it up. Then he sat down on the bed and put on a pair of calf high stockings followed by the shoes that he had spent a considerable amount of time shinning that afternoon. They were much better than what was required to pass inspection.

Standing in front of the mirror, he tied his bow tie. Over the years he eventually got pretty good at it. For the first several years, he always had to have Geannie help him with it to get it right. Next he slipped on his suit coat and buttoned it up. He topped it all off with his fedora. He picked up his walking stick and stood in front of the mirror to have a look. The walking stick actually made a handsome accessory, giving him quite a debonair appearance.

He walked out into the front room and asked his mother and father were already, "How do I look?"

Ellen said, "There is one thing missing." and went to the refrigerator and retrieved a white gardenia boutonniere. After pinning on him, she responded, "Now, you look like you're about to marry a very special

lady.”

Together with his parents, they walked next door to the church and went in through a side door into the private office suite. As the wedding guests began to arrive, Sheffield was sequestered in Walt's office. It reminded him so much of another time in his life. Other than a lot of years in between, the differences were, then it was his father's office and it was Geannie that he was marrying.

He felt a little guilty that his thoughts kept turning to Geannie on the day that he was to marry someone else. Someone that he loved every bit as much as he had loved her. All of a sudden he felt a shiver. It lasted ever so briefly but he knew what it meant. He had felt it on several occasions over the last couple of years. It meant that she was near. After it passed, he knew and understood that she was indeed very pleased with step that he was about to take and that he had her blessing.

At the appointed time, Walt stepped into his office and said, “Everything is in place. Are you ready?”
“Absolutely.” he said calmly.

Escorted by his brother, he entered the chapel through the rear doors. As he walked to the front, he took note of the several people in attendance. Naturally all of the Brasons were there. He couldn't help but notice that his mother, his two sisters-in-law, and all of his nieces had a white gardenia tucked above the appropriate ear. Those who were taken on the left, those who were available on the right. That is when he noticed Morris, who had come down on the train that day. Wearing a navy blue suit with a white shirt and tie, he was seated next to Ruth Ann with the rest of the family, She was holding on tightly to his arm. “The poor girl,” Sheffield thought, “is setting herself up for a heartbreak. Morris clearly doesn't have the feelings for her that she has for him.”

Also present were the entire Austin clan. He noticed Murry Puchesky sitting with Winslow's family next to Maxine, with her daughter on his lap. Sheffield smiled, “There's hope for everyone.” Also in attendance were many neighbors and friends and people from church. He noticed Bill and Marge Casper. He also saw Michael and Samantha Taylor and their children Craig, Norma, and Janet.

All in all it was a respectable gathering. “Poor Ramona,” he thought, “she has no family to celebrate with her.” But,” he continued, “from this day on, these will also her family.”

When they reached the front of the chapel, Walt took his place as the pastor, with Sheffield standing before him, facing those assembled. That was the cue for the organist to begin the wedding march.

The doors at the rear of the chapel swung open and Ramona stepped through. All alone she walked slowly down the isle. She looked every bit as glamorous as she did in the photograph that she sent him. She wore the white satin dress that he had sent her from Algiers.

The curved pleates swept down from the shoulders across her bust and back up to the opposite shoulder. The pleats continued down off shoulders, forming a rounded sleeve. The gathers that began at the

narrowest point of the waiste that angled up toward the bust, with a seam in the center drawing the attention away from her narrow hips and complimented the bust. A zipper ran up the back from the waiste. From the high angled waist, vertical pleats came over the hips down to just below the kness, which emphsized the hips. The style enhanced her figure overall.

The complete her ensemble she wore the silk stocking that Sheffield sent along with the dress and a pair of white high heels. Her trademark gardenia tucked in her blond hair, above her left ear. She was taken! She wore her hair up, with thin twisted ringlets on either side. Around her neck, she wore three white gardenia leis. As she came down the isle, she looked from side to side, with as broad of a smile as her small mouth could make.

Sheffield's heart melted as he watched her slowly draw near. He wanted to leave his assigned post and rush down the isle to her. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer and did just that. Arm in arm they walked the the last few feet together. When the reached the place where they where to stand, she let go of Sheffield and removed one of the leis and placed it over Sheffield's head and around his neck. Standing on her tip toes, she put her face next to his and breathed in is spirit. Sheffield knew enough about the tradition to return the salutation. Next she did the same thing with Walt, except he didn't know what to think of her breathing in his spirit.

With the three of them decked out in leis, Walt began the ceremony. "Dearly Beloved; we are gathered her, in the presence of God and of this company, that Sheffield Brason and Ramona Erhart Katmuth may be united in holy matrimony. We are here to celebrate and share in this glorious ordinance that God is about to perform – the act by which He converts their love for one another into the holy and sacred estate of marriage.

"This relationship is an honorable and sacred one, established by our Creator for the welfare and happiness of mankind, and approved as honorable among men and women. It is designed to unite the hopes of two hearts into one; and it rests upon the mutual confidence and devotion of husband and wife.

"May it be in extreme thoughtfulness and reverence, and in dependence upon divine guidance, that you enter now into this holy relationship. The apostle Paul compared the relationship between husband and wife to that between Christ and the church. Marriage is a decision of two individuals to share the same type of pure, Christian love described by Paul. Love is patient, it is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, nor is it easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...

"This kind of love enriches each part of life and marriage enriches love. Two lives shared with this kind of love can hold more fulfillment and happiness than either life alone.

“Sheffield Brason, do you take Ramona Erhart Katmuth to be your legally and lawfully wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in holy matrimony? Do you promise to love her, to honor and cherish her, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, and to be to her in all things a good and faithful husband as long as you both shall live?”

Sheffield confidently answered, “I do.”

“Ramona Erhart Katmuth, do you take Sheffield Brason to be your wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in holy matrimony? Do you promise to love him, to honor and cherish him, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, and to be to him in all things a good and faithful wife as long as you both shall live?”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Ramona barley managed to say, “I do.”

Walt continued, “Sheffield, place the ring on her finger and repeat after me but speak to the bride.

“I, Sheffield Brason take thee, Ramona Erhart Katmuth, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. According to God’s holy ordinance, and thereto I pledge thee my faith.”

Walt paused phrase by phrase as Sheffield repeated the vow. When he was finished he turned to Ramona and continued, “Ramona, place the ring on his finger and repeat after me but speak to groom. I, Ramona Erhart Katmuth, take thee, Sheffield Brason, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. According to God’s holy ordinance, and thereto I pledge thee my faith.”

Again he paused phrase by phrase to allow Ramona to repeat the vow. When she was through, Walt continued, “The wedding ring is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual bond which unites two loyal hearts in endless love. It is a seal of the vows that you have made to one another.

“I now offer the following invocation upon this union. Father in heaven, You ordained marriage for your children, and You gave us love. We present to You Sheffield and Ramona, who come this day to be married. May the covenant of love they make be blessed with true devotion and spiritual commitment.

“We ask that You will give them the ability to keep the covenant they have made. When selfishness shows itself, grant generosity; when mistrust is a temptation, give moral strength; when there is misunderstanding, give patience and gentleness; if suffering becomes a part of their lives, give them a strong faith and an abiding love.

“Our loving Father, we know that you are the witness of every marriage and the sealer of every spiritual union. We give thanks knowing that it is your love and light that fill the hearts and minds of Sheffield and Ramona. They have pledged their love and vowed their commitment to one another, on this their wedding day.

“Grant that they may be true and loving to each other, living in such a way as to bring peace and joy into their lives and to family and friends, who support them with your love and concern throughout their life together. May You continually rejoice with them, just as You do this day. Bless this their wedding day and may they always be aware of Your abiding love throughout their lives together.

“We ask these things in Jesus Christ, Our Lord; Amen.”

In conclusion, he said, “Sheffield and Ramon, you have declared your commitment to each other before your family and God. By the authority vested in me by the Commonwealth of Virginia, it gives me the greatest of pleasure to pronounce you husband and wife.

“You now may kiss your bride.”

Sheffield took Ramona in his arms, she raised up on her toes and received a tender, yet passionate kiss.

When they were through, Walt said to those assembled, “Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield Brason. You are invited to join them in the hall to greet the bride and groom.”

Sheffield and Ramona walked together down the aisle arm in arm, with the help of his cane; their guests followed. In the hall, Sheffield and Ramona mingled informally with their guests. Ellen, Sarah, and Emily had worked for days to make the refreshments, which consisted of pineapple cake with a generous amount of coconut on the frosting. The drink was non-alcoholic Hawaiian pina colodas made from canned pineapple juice, coconut cream, club soda, and crushed ice. In the background, a phonograph player emitted soft Hawaiian music. Obviously the theme reflected all of the years that Ramona had spent in the Islands.

There was an outpouring of love and support to the couple from family and friends alike. Several of the guests ignored the request of the bride and groom that gifts were not necessary.

Before anyone had a chance to leave, Sheffield, with Ramona at his side, picked up the microphone and addressed their guests. “On behalf of Ramona and I, thank you for coming and sharing this special occasion with us. Some of you might not know this, but we have actually known each other for going on eighteen years now. She was there for me when Geannie and the kids died. After I transferred back to the east coast we stayed in touch as she continued to help me through tough times. Then eight months ago after not seeing each other for better than year, she met me on the dock when I returned from a cruise. It was then that she told me how she felt for me. I had no idea. Over the next few months and through some rather miraculous circumstances, I fell in love with her too. I want to publicly express how I feel.” Looking at Ramona he said, “I love you with all of my heart.” To prove his love, he kissed her. Turning back to his audience, he concluded, “And now here we are today with a new beginning and many years ahead of us.”

Sheffield raised his glass of punch and said, “Here's to second chances.”

Ramona was too choked up with emotion to make any remarks of her own. After she regained her composure, they cut the cake and posed for pictures. The cake was a simple double layer white cake set up on a pedestal. Loving to bake, she actually made it herself earlier that day at Sarah's.

The open house lasted better than an hour before people started to leave. It was still fairly early in the evening when Sheffield and Ramona left the church to go to the hotel. Ramona's car, which was parked at Walt and Sarah's, was appropriately decorated as they drove off, dragging tin cans behind them.

With only an overnight bag in one hand and each other's hand in the other, they entered the hotel lobby. The desk clerk greeted them, "Good evening. May I help you?"

"Yes." Sheffield said. "We're the Brasons and we have a reservation for tonight."

"Oh yes, we are expecting you. Now it says here that you had originally asked for the honeymoon suite. The party who had it reserved called in this afternoon and canceled. Would you still like it?"

"Yes, please." Ramona insisted, before Sheffield could answer.

"Very well, then. If I could get you to sign in."

Sheffield set down his bag and removed his cane which hung over his wrist and leaned it against the counter. He let go of Ramona's hand in order to sign the register. As he handed the pen back to the clerk, he explained, "Just take the elevator to the sixth floor. It is room 601. Here is the key. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Oh, you can bet on that." Ramona said.

As they walked over to the elevator, Sheffield asked, "So what's so special about the honeymoon suite?"

"That is where Joe and Adelle stayed on their wedding night. She told me all about it and I decided that it was what I wanted too. Only when I called to reserve it, it was booked. I can't wait to see it."

As they stepped into the elevator, another couple got in with them. They got off on the third floor and for the rest of the ride, they had it all to themselves. Sheffield took her in his arms and kissed her. That embrace and kiss lasted through the remaining three floors and after the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. It wasn't until the doors began to close again that he released her and reached out to stop the door from closing.

Sheffield put the key into the lock and turned it. At the click he pulled the key out and turned the knob to open the door. Ramona was anxious to go on in but Sheffield, who still had a hold of her hand pulled her back. "Don't you know, there is a formality here that he has to observe." He set his bag through the door and tossed in his cane. With his arms free, he swooped her up into his arms. His left leg began to buckle under as she reached around his neck. Steadying himself, he carried her through the door.

Once inside, he pushed the door shut with his elbow and kissed her again. Finally he put her down and together they looked around the suit. The first thing they saw was the recessed bathtub in front of the fireplace. On either side of the hearth was an ample amount of firewood.

The room was exquisitely decorated and furnished. Fine art work, both paintings and figurines were everywhere. Off to one side was a comfortable looking sofa, to the other side was a table and two chairs. Through the door at the other end of the room was the large spacious bedroom, featuring a large bed. At other end of the bedroom were two wingback chairs on either side of the dresser with a mirror above it.

To the other side were two doors, each featuring full length mirrors. Through one door was the closet. Through the other door was the bathroom. The bathroom featured a freestanding claw foot bathtub with a high back. Above the tub was a shower head and a bar for the sheer shower curtain.

They moved back into the front room and Ramona drew open the drapes. They revealed large picture windows that looked out over the city. Another door led out onto a terrace with table and chairs that would be nice for other than a chilly January evening.

“Wow, Adelle was right about this place.” Ramona exclaimed after taking it all in. “We should take advantage of every moment.”

“We'll need to go downstairs to eat some time.”

“Not necessarily. Here's the room service menu.” Ramona said as she picked it up off the table and fanned herself with it. “This is going to be really, really nice.”

“So, where should we begin?” Sheffield asked with anticipation.

“Why don't you start a fire while I draw a nice bubble bath.” she directed.

“Now that sounds like an idea.” Sheffield agreed.

He took off his tie and jacket and neatly laid them over the arm of the sofa and began placing wood on the fireplace grate while Ramona turned on the water. Testing it with her hand, she made sure that it would be nice and hot. She had come prepared. She reached into her bag and retrieved the bottle of Avon bubble bath that Sam Taylor had given her. Before long, a good fire was going in the fireplace and the tub was full of nice hot water, covered in a thick blanket of bubbles.

They stood at the foot of the tub, the bubbles inviting them to get in. They turned back toward each other and looked deep into one another's eyes. The look invited another kiss, their hands now free, she began to unbutton his shirt while he unzipped the back of her dress. That is when she pushed way.

“Whats the matter?” Sheffield asked.

“I'm just not ready for you to see me yet.”

“That's okay sweetheart. We can take our time.”

Ramona suggested, “Why don't you get undressed out here and get in. I want to undress in the

bedroom. I'll join you in a minute."

"Okay." A somewhat puzzled Sheffield agreed.

As Ramona closed the door behind her, he finished undressing and neatly laid his clothes with his jacket. Lastly he slipped his dog tags over his head and laid them aside. The water felt so good as he stepped down into it and sat down.

Meanwhile, in the bedroom Ramona took off the white satin dress and put it on a hanger and hung it in the closet. After removing the rest of her clothes she stood in front of the full length mirror looking at her petite, shapeless body. She had never been self-conscious about her body before, but all of a sudden she was. She had fantasized about this moment for years. Now that it was here she was apprehensive. She wanted so badly to give herself to the man that she loved but the image of Geannie and her perfect, shapely body made her wonder if he would want her after having been loved by her.

The complexion of her skin looked almost as if she were a native of the islands where she had lived for so long. It was something that she was proud of, thanks to her Choctaw heritage. She looked more closely at herself. She certainly didn't look forty years old, but rather a good ten years younger. What she saw was a strong, fit, healthy body that was nothing to be ashamed of. She was what she was, regardless of the package that she came wrapped in. She thought of the man waiting for her out in the other room. She had no doubt that he loved her completely, regardless of her body. A body that she was about to give to him.

She opened the door a crack and called out, "Close your eyes."

"They're closed."

"Okay, now cover them with your hands."

"They're covered."

"Okay here I come. No peeking."

"I wouldn't dream of it." he lied.

True to his word, he kept his eyes closed and covered while Ramona came out of the bedroom and stepped down into the the water and sat across from him, with only her head and shoulders showing above the bubbles. "Okay, you can open your eyes now."

At first they just enjoyed relaxing in the hot water, concealed by the bubbles, and talked about how nice the ceremony was and the fact they were actually married.

"Then its time we did something about that." Ramona concluded.

After what came next, she whispered, "I'm ready to give myself to you."

Without hesitation, they surrendered to each other and made their marriage complete, joining together as one in body. It wasn't the first time for either one of them, but it was their first time. With the

energy of couple half their age, they drew closer to each other and truly became one in a way that was not possible before that night.

Throughout the evening and later into the night they took advantage of all of the amenities that the honeymoon suite and each other had to offer. Sheffield stoked the fire while Ramona called room service and had dinner brought up to their room. With some candles that she found, they ate by candlelight. Before going to bed, they slipped back into the tub where they enjoyed a dish of ice cream.

The next morning, Sheffield awoke to the sound of singing coming from the bathroom. It was the sweetest voice. At first he didn't recognize the song. A feeling of Déjà vu came over him as if he had experienced the moment before. He got up and went to the door and put his hand on the door knob and held it for a moment, before turning it. The door opened a crack, letting the full volume of the singing out.

It was then that he recognized the song as "You'll Never Know", that was sung by Alice Faye in "The Gang's All Here", the movie that they had went to on New Year's Eve. He opened the door and went in to find Ramona buried up to her shoulders in the high back claw foot bathtub. He just stood there looking at her and softly said her name.

"Who else were you expecting?" Then she invited, "Why don't you join me?" she said looking up adoringly at him as he stood before her.

Sheffield stood frozen with hesitation as he tried to figure out why this all seemed so familiar.

"For heaven's sake, we've been married for how long now? I'd say its been about twelve hours, its alright, you can get in."

Hesitation turned to confusion as he tried for the life of him to remember.

"Well if you're not going to get in, I guess I'll have to get out." she said as she went to stand up.

"No, no. I'd love to join you." He said. "If I acted a little strange there for a minute," he said as he removed his robe and stepped into the tub, "its because it was if we have played out this scene once before."

After getting settled, he continued. "I just remembered, it was a dream I had the night before the ship was hit back in September."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it was one of those experiences I mentioned at the reception that helped convince me that we were destined to be married. I've never heard you sing before. You have a beautiful voice, you know."

"Do you really think so?"

"I sure do. It is as sweet as an angles voice."

"You're just saying that."

"No, seriously. You really have a nice singing voice. You shouldn't hide it. It's a gift from God and

you should use it more. Sing something else for me.”

“Alright.” She paused for a moment to think. Here’s one...

“I’m in the mood for love, Simply because you’re near me.

“Funny, but when you’re near me, I’m in the mood for love.

“Heaven is in your eyes, Bright as the stars we’re under.

“Oh, is it any wonder? I’m in the mood for love.

“Why stop to think of whether This little dream might fade?

“Let’s put our hearts together Now we are one, I’m not afraid.

“If there’s a cloud above, If it should rain, we’ll let it;

“But for tonight forget it, I’m in the mood for love.”

“Thanks, that was lovely. Frances Langford couldn’t have done it any better.”

“Do you really think so? Oooo, do you know what I’m in the mood for?” Ramona asked. “I’d love it if you washed my back.”

“I’d be happy too.” Using a soaped up washcloth, he began scrubbing her back.

“That feels so good!” she sighed. After a couple of minutes she turned around and did the same for him.

By the time they got out, they were hungry and ready for breakfast. After discussing what they wanted to do, they decided to go downstairs to the restaurant for breakfast. All the way down they had the elevator to themselves, again they couldn’t keep their hands, or their lips, to themselves.

Knowing that they would not have a honeymoon for some time and had to return to the real world the next day, they wanted to take advantage of their honeymoon suite for the few hours they had left before having to check out.

The morning passed quickly as they continued to get to know each other in an intimate way. All too soon it was time to check out and leave.

Before starting for home, they went back to his folks to get their luggage and the rest of Sheffield’s items from storage. As they walked into the house, Ellen noticed, “My, you two have such a glow about you this morning.”

They visited with his folks during lunch. They had already been to services and had just returned. “You missed a fine sermon this morning.” Emmett commented. “Walt always does such a wonderful job. He always knows just what to say.”

“He’s a chip off the old block, eh Dad. He gets it from you, you know.”

While eating lunch, Ellen said, “You missed out on all of the drama after you left last night. Morris broke Ruth Ann’s heart.”

“How so, Mom.”

“Well you saw how she was clinging to him. He told her that while he was home for the holidays that he began to get serious about the girl from home who he had been writing to. He told her that he liked her, but that he really had no feelings for her.”

“The poor girl.” Ramona remarked.

“Oh, she'll get over it.” Emmett predicted.

“How did she take it?”

“Well, she ran out of the hall in tears. You'd naturally think that he ripped out her heart and stomped on it.” Ellen related.

“She's find another guy someday.” Ramona encouraged.

“Where's Morris now?” Sheffield asked.

Emmett replied, “I took him down to the depot early this morning and he took the train back to Washington.”

Soon it was time to hit the road. Sheffield loaded the rest of his things from storage into Ramona's car, and they were off.

On the drive home they reviewed the weekend from the wedding to the wedding night. “I just have one regret.” Ramona said.

“Oh really, what's that?”

“That I can't give you a child. I know what kind of a father you are and I have always wanted to be a mother.”

“At this point in my life, I'm kind of old to start a family. Why if we were to have a child, we'd be in our sixties before they were raised.”

“I've seen couples at our age have children. But its a mute point any way. I'm just not physically able to have a baby.”

“That's alright sweetheart, we still have each other to grow old with.”

“Promise?” Ramona asked.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Toward evening, they arrived home and unloaded the car. This time Sheffield didn't have to leave. Even though it had been a busy weekend and long drive home, their brief honeymoon carried on into the evening before turning in for the night.

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