

Chapter VII

Tragedy and Decision

September 4, 1946 – October 4, 1946

The next day was the first day of class. He had three fifty-minute periods beginning at nine thirty, ten thirty and one o'clock with a ninety minute lunch break. From two o'clock to three was his preparation hour and wrestling practice would be from three to five. Typically he wouldn't have to be at work until a half an hour before his first class. So the hours weren't bad, after all he was retired.

In each of his three classes he began by introducing himself. He was surprised to learn that he didn't need much of an introduction. Everyone in Roanoke new who Admiral Brason was. His intention was to identify himself as Mr. Brason or Coach Brason. The students had taken it upon themselves to call him Admiral. The rest of the faculty didn't seem to keen on the idea, but they would get used to it.

He took about the first twenty minutes of each period to get acquainted with the twenty five or so students in each class, all of whom were seniors, as government was a required class for all high school seniors. The rest of the class period was spent discussing an overview of the nature of government contained in the first few pages of the textbook. He concluded each class with an assignment to read the next section covering the theories of democracy. He found that his cane came in handy for pointing to the blackboard. After the first period, he adjusted his approach slightly. By the time the third class let out, he felt pretty good about how it went.

He used his preparation hour to get ready to meet the boys who wanted to try out for the wrestling team. After school he had twenty one students show up, seven seniors who had been on team as juniors plus one transfer student. The rest were juniors who had been on the junior varsity team the previous season, hoping to make to move up to the varsity team. The first day consisted of weigh ins and a lecture on the team rules.

To qualify for the team, a student had to maintain at least a B average and have an acceptable attendance record. There was to be no bullying, smoking, or drinking, and foul language would not be tolerated. In addition team members were to abstain from sexual contact with girls. He stressed the importance of cooperation and following directions. He explained that tryouts would last for two weeks and at the end of that time the thirteen team members would be selected.

To underscore how serious he was and the consequences of breaking the rules, he brought in a guest speaker; someone who understood perfectly well how serious he was. He had Murry Austin tell of his encounter with then Captain Brason. Murry stressed that he had never been treated any fairer and had been given the opportunity to redeem himself but screwed up again which resulted in a dishonorable discharge from the Navy. He concluded by describing his current relationship with the Admiral and their friendship.

When Murray finished, Sheffield asked if anyone was unable or unwilling to adhere to the rules. If

not, all he asked that they not show up tomorrow when they would begin the conditioning phase, which would determine who would be on the team. Sheffield returned home that afternoon confident in his new career.

Over the next two weeks he got the hang of teaching government. Inspired by Geannie and encouraged by Ramona who had spent time in front of a classroom, he really tried to make government come alive for his students. As he covered the material he used role playing to put them into the picture that he was trying to paint. He found a book that told a lot of interesting stories about the formation of our nation's government.

In wrestling practice he put his prospective team through intense training to get them in shape for competition. He didn't hesitate incorporating the calisthenic routines used in the Navy, as well as the 160 page Naval Aviation Physical Training Manual on Wrestling, prepared by the Training Division of the Bureau of Aeronautics. He watched carefully at how they handled the physical demands, but also at their attitude and spirit during the workouts.

He really enjoyed doing what he was doing, especially working with young people. He found them eager to learn and willing to cooperate, both the students in his class and his team. Now he understood why Geannie had loved it so much.

During those two weeks, Ray had installed new windows, painted the house, inside and out, and installed the new cupboards. About all there was left was to redo the floors and re-shingle the roof. It would be ready to move into at the end of the month as promised.

At the end of the two week tryout period, only three had dropped out on their own, including a senior who had been on the team the year before. Sheffield and his assistant coach, Bob Karrington, announced the names of the thirteen young men who would make up the 1946 – 1947 Jefferson High Magicians varsity wrestling team. The rest were retained as alternates and would practice with the team and attend matches, in the event that a team member dropped out due to injury or disqualification. Sheffield was pleased to learn that Craig Taylor, who was a sophomore, had made the junior varsity team.

When Sheffield got home that evening, Ramona was uncharacteristically giddy. As he came through the door, she danced up to him waving a narrow piece of paper in her hand. "Would you like to see what a hundred thousand dollars looks like?" She grinned as she stopped in front of him and held it out between the fore finger and thumb of each hand.

He read aloud, "Pay to the order of Ramona Brason, one hundred thousand dollars." Then he asked, "What are you going to do with all of that?"

"For starters, I'm treating you to dinner out tonight. Then I need to find a place to keep our horses."

"What horses?"

“Why Roxy and Red, of course. In the letter that came with the check, Harvey explained that before she died, Grandma Erhart had insisted that she wanted us to have them. Harvey said that Joseph will be coming up on the train with them. So I was looking through this morning's Roanoke Times and found this.”

She handed him the newspaper opened to the classified ads. An ad outlined in red ink read, “For Sale. 40 acres with barn \$1,250. Includes 20 acres in alfalfa, the rest in fenced pasture. Located southwest of Salem on Highway 11 along the Roanoke River. Call Stan Jamison at RE5-1256.”

“That sounds like a nice place. We ought to take a look.” Sheffield said.

“How about on our way to dinner. I already called on it. We can stop by anytime.”

“You don't waste any time do you, Sweetheart. Lets go have a look.”

The place was easy to find. It was only a little more than three miles from their apartment. To get to it, they got on U.S. Highway 11 and headed west as if going to Salem. Once they crossed the Roanoke River, it was on the left. The property extended eighteen hundred feet from the bridge. At that point, the property line ran eleven hundred feet perpendicular to highway straight down to the river. The river formed the east and south boundaries. Across the highway were a set of railroad tracks.

About seventy yards past the bridge there was a lane that turned off the road past a corral and down to the barn that sat a little more than one hundred feet from the highway. The barn and corral were in good shape but were not being used.

The pasture on the east half of the property was overgrown but the fence around it was in good repair. Down along the river was a stand of oak trees. There were also a few trees along the road and around the barn. The west half was in alfalfa. It had been taken care of and was about ready to be mowed again. The hay from earlier crops was neatly stacked near the barn. Rather than being stacked loose, it had been baled. Between the barn and the hay stood a derrick and a windmill attached to a pump for watering livestock.

“What do you think?” Ramona asked as they walked hand in hand back up to the barn.

“I like it.” Sheffield replied. “It can be our own little ranch.”

“So then, should we buy it?”

“We? Its your inheritance money.”

“Yeah, but we're in this together. Whats mine is yours. After all, I'd need your help in keeping it up.”

“Property is always a good investment. I don't see were you'd lose money on it.”

“Our horses would love it here, I'm sure. I love it here, Babe. I say lets make an offer.”

After looking at the property, they drove on into Salem and had dinner. Over dinner they talked about the piece of land and what else they should do with the money. Sheffield was reluctant to say much, because it was her money. Ramona also decided to pay off what they owed on the house so that it would be

free and clear when they moved in.

“What about giving some to the church?” Sheffield asked. “Its always good to be charitable. After all we've been giving our tithe all along.”

“I hadn't thought about that. I suppose we should, after all it was gift to us. Other than that, I think the rest should go in the bank until other investment opportunities come along.”

Their conversation turned to Sheffield's classes and the wrestling team and Ramona talked about how sad it is to see Sam slowly wasting away. They planned another outing for the Taylor kids one evening next week to give Mike and Sam a break.

That evening when the got home, Ramona called Stan Jamison and offered his asking price, as long as haystack was included. After all, the horses would need some feed. Stan accepted the offer and they arranged to meet on Monday at the land title company to close the deal.

Sheffield accompanied Ramona to the bank on Monday morning. After paying off the house, she deposited all but the money for the land and a donation to the church. From there, they went to the title company and met Mr. Jamison. The deal was made and they walked away land owners. In parting, Sheffield offered to pay Mr. Jamison to cut and bale the hay in the field. After all he had the equipment.

On Wednesday Joseph and Ruth Ann arrived on the train with the horses. In addition to Red and Roxy, Harvey had included the saddles and tack. Sheffield borrowed a truck from the Austin Brothers to haul to the horses out to their place and turned them loose in the pasture. Ruth Ann and Joseph planed to stay with Shenan and Emily for a couple of days before taking the train back to Denison.

The next evening when Sheffield got home, they went out to their place and saddled up the horses and took a ride into the hills around Barnhardt Creek a little over a mile to the south.

On Saturday, Sheffield and Ramona stopped by to see the house. The roof was done and Ray was working on the floors. Again he assured them that it would be ready to move into at the end of the month.

From the house, they went over to the Taylors to pick up the kids and take them to the ranch for an afternoon of horseback riding. Over the last several days, Sam had actually rebounded and was a little stronger and had more stamina. She was feeling well enough to leave the house for a while and Mike was going to take her to a movie and maybe dinner while Sheffield and Ramona had the kids.

Once at the ranch, they introduced Craig, Norma, and Janet to Red and Roxie. Sheffield had Craig help him saddle them up and showed him what to do. They helped the girls onto the horses and began leading them around the coral. Once they were used to the horses, they handed them the reigns and let them try it on their own.

Then it was Craig's turn. Being fifteen, he knew everything, or so he thought. Having seen a few westerns, he climbed onto Red's back. Taking the reigns, he kicked his heels into Red's belly and slapped

the reigns. The next thing he knew he was laying flat on the ground. After Sheffield made sure he alright, everyone had a good laugh. Even Craig, who's ego was bruised more than backside, joined the laughing too.

Red was standing a few feet away. Craig slowly approached him and took him by his bridle and gently stroked his neck. "Sorry about that Red." he said. "If you give me another chance, I won't do that again." Craig climbed back into the saddle and gently nudged Red to begin moving. After a few times around the coral, Sheffield opened the gate and let them out into the pasture where there was more room to roam. Sheffield helped Norma onto Roxy and let her out into the pasture too.

The kids throughly enjoyed themselves and asked if they could do it again sometime. Before leaving, Sheffield had Craig help his put out enough hay to keep them fed for a couple of days. From the ranch, they took them to the Pizza Joint, that was the name of the place where they were introduced to pizza, for dinner before taking them home.

Mike and Sam had returned home only a few minutes earlier. It was the first time that they had a chance to go out since returning from Hawaii. They had had a wonderful time. Sam thanked the Brasons for taking the kids for the afternoon and letting her and Mike have some time to themselves.

On Monday the 30th, during his preparation hour, Sheffield received a call from Ramona. From the emotion in her voice, he knew that something was wrong. "Sheffield," she began, "I'm here at Sam's and something terrible has happened."

"Whats the matter, Sweetheart?" He asked.

She gave him the socking news, "Mike Taylor was killed in an automobile accident this afternoon."

"Oh no. That is terrible news. Do you know what happened?"

"He drove over to Blacksburg on business this morning and on his way back he was coming down out of the hills just outside of Shawsville when an on coming semi hit a deer, causing the trailer to jackknife across the other lane and he ran right into it before he could stop. Is there any chance you can leave early today and come over and help me with the kids?"

"Sure. I'll leave Coach Karrington in charge of practice and I'll be right over.

When Sheffield got there, Ramona was on the telephone talking to someone in Mike's family. Sam and the kids were in absolute shock. Sheffield took over the phone calls while Ramona looked in on Sam. Ramona was there when about two o'clock there was a knock at the door. Sam answered the door to find two Virginia State Police officers on her doorstep.

They asked if they could come in. Ramona came into the front room and sat next to Sam, trying to steady her trembling, frail frame as she braced for what she was about to be told. One of the officers

explained very slowly and carefully what had happened. Mike was dead when his body was pulled from the car. He said that he most likely had been killed instantly.

The shock had sent Sam into a tailspin and she was down in bed. Ramona called the schools that the kids attended and had them sent home. One by one they came home, confused at the summons. Ramona sent them into their mother's bedroom where they were given the terrible news. Naturally, they all took it hard, but Craig seemed to take it the worst. Sam told him that she needed him to be strong because she needed his help in taking care of his sisters.

Craig's initial response was demonstrated in an outburst of anger. He needed to calm himself down so he left the house and went for a walk. He was sitting on a park bench at Highland Park, which was only a couple of blocks from their house, when Edith Austin found him. She had noticed that he was missing and after school she walked to his house thinking he had gone home sick. She too was shocked by what he told her. By the time she came along, his anger had turned to grief. After a good cry, literally on her shoulder, she took him by the hand and walked him home. When she got there, she called her mother to tell her where she was.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, friends and neighbors called at the home as the news spread. Naturally, Sam was too weak and not able to receive all who came to the house. Ramona was selective as to who she would let into her bedroom to see her, and then only one or two people at a time. One who she gave unlimited access was Walt, who was a close friend as well as their former pastor.

Walt talked to Sam first and then took each of the children aside individually and then he talked to them all together. His expertise in grief counseling was helpful as he talked to them about how they felt and what to expect. But it was the listening ears of Sheffield and Ramona, who knew exactly what it meant to lose someone they loved, that seemed to help the most.

There was no need to fix dinner, as someone from the Methodist Women's Organization had organized meals to be brought in. As it got late in the evening, Sheffield went home, but Ramona stayed the night. On his way to school the next morning, he swung by to bring her the change of clothes that she had asked for when she called. Once everyone was taken care of, she borrowed their shower.

Sam was able to get out of bed and Ramona helped her get ready for the day. Naturally, the kids didn't go to school that day. Pastor Simon Springfield, who had taken Walt's place, came back over to talk about funeral arrangements. Then leaving Craig in charge of the girls, Ramona took her to the mortuary to meet with the funeral director. Ramona stayed with her as she was taken into the room to see her husband's body for the first time. She wasn't able to stay long and had to come back home.

There was so much to think about and do. More than she had the strength to do. Ramona helped her pick out some clothes for him to be buried in and took them back to the mortuary. She called the obituary

that Sam had written into the newspaper. Whatever she was needed for, she was there. Food wasn't an issue as there was more than enough to eat.

Later that day, family from out of town began arriving. That gave Ramona a break so she could go home for a while. She soon returned as she wanted to make sure that Sam did not overexert herself with all of the demands that were now placed on her. Mike's business manager assured her that things would be taken care of at the office until it could be decided what to do with it, but that could wait until after the funeral.

Throughout the day, the funeral plans began to take shape. It would be on Friday at the Green Memorial Chapel. Sam asked Ramona to sing at the funeral. She had sang at Aunt Susannah's funeral, but it was a small group in a more informal setting. This would be in a beautiful chapel in front of as many as two hundred people or more. She set her self-consciousness aside and agreed to do it. She decided to ask Sarah company her, as she was was an accomplished pianist.

That night Ramona went home as Sam's older sister was staying with her and the kids. Over the next couple of days, Ramona and Sarah worked on a number for the funeral. They decided on Abide With Me. She was in and out at the Taylors taking care of Sam and making sure that the kids were taken care of.

Not only that, but Ray had finished remodeling the house and it was ready to move into. It looked fantastic, as Ray had done an excellent job. It looked like new, inside and out. Sheffield and Ramona made plans to move in over the weekend.

But first, they had Mike's funeral to attend on Friday. It was a nice service and was well attended. It was an appropriate tribute to the loving father and husband that he was. There was also much said about his business and civic involvement. Ramona and Sarah's musical number went well too.

Sam and the kids were still in a daze and Sam barely had enough strength to make it through everything. Ramona was there with her every step of the way. Sam was very tired when it was all over and had to go to bed. Ramona helped her get ready and once she was settled in, she asked Ramona to bring Sheffield into the bedroom because she had something that she wanted to discuss with them.

A moment later Ramona returned with Sheffield and Sam motioned for them to shut the door and sit down on the edge of the bed. "Thank you for everything you have done for us over the last few days." she began.

"It was our pleasure." Ramona assured her. "It has been a hard time for you and we're just glad that we were able to be here and to do whatever we could."

"I don't know what I would have done without you. You've taken such good care of me and the kids. That's what I want to talk to you about. Mike and I had been trying to prepare them for when I die, but I never would have thought that he would be gone too. Now they are going to be left without either of us. I can count the number of months that I have left on one hand. I can feel it in my body. I don't have much left in me."

“They’re such good kids, what are you going to do about them? I assume that they’ll go with someone in your family.”

“They could. I have had offerers from from various ones in both of our families. The problem is, they would be split up and go in different directions as our families are somewhat scattered. Last night, the kids and I had a long serious talk. It wasn’t easy for any of us and there were a lot of tears shed. I talked to them about the various relatives that offered to take them.

“Craig and the girls are very much aware of the dilemma that they are facing and had talked about it among themselves and presented me with an option that I hadn’t considered. When I’m gone, they want you to adopt all three of them. They said that way they could stay together.”

Sam paused, to let what she said sink in. Sheffield and Ramona were dumbfounded and looked at her in disbelief.

Sam continued. “I thought about it for a while and realized that it would be the best thing for them. First it would keep them together, second they could stay in familiar surroundings and not have to change schools. Most important, they seem to have really taken a liking to you. Craig thinks that you, Sheffield, can walk on water. And you, Ramona, the girls adore you. When they come back from an outing with you, its all they can talk about and look forward to the next time.

“I know what a good father you were, Sheffield. I got to know Geannie and the kids when they were here during the summer of thirty eight. Sandy even babysat for us a few times. They were such good kids and you never got to finish raising them. And Ramona, I know how you always wanted to have your own children. Would the two of you finish raising mine for me?”

“We don’t know what to say.” Sheffield said for both of them.

“I know that this has caught you by surprise and I don’t expect an answer right now. But I would like to know soon, so I can start making preparations in what little time I have left. I have already given some thought to it. I’d like to take Mike’s life insurance and mine, after the expenses are paid, to go toward their college funds. Then I’m going to sell Mike’s business and put that with it. And finally, when I’m gone, I want you to sell this house and add that to it as well. I know there are still a lot of details to work out, but there is still a little time.

“I’ve probably gotten ahead of myself. First you need to think about it and let me know what you decide.”

“Its been a long day, Samantha.” Sheffield said. “As far as that goes, its been a long week. We’re flattered that you want to entrust us with something as important as raising your children.”

“I want you to do more than just raise them, I want you to adopt them and raise them as your own. I can’t think of anything I’d rather have happen.

"We'll talk it over and see what we decide. Just give us a few days, alright"

"Fair enough. Now, I'm spent. I need some sleep."

Sheffield and Ramona stood up and she pulled the blanket up over around her shoulders and gave her a kiss on her forehead. "Good night Sam. I'll come and check on you tomorrow."

They left her room and were about to leave the house. Norma and Janet had already gone to bed, but Craig, who was ready for bed, was waiting for them in the living room. "Did my mom talk to you?" he asked earnestly.

"Yes, Craig. She did."

"What do you think of our idea?"

"Its certainly something we will think about." Sheffield assured him. "I know that all of a sudden you find yourself in uncertain circumstances and we want what's best for you and your sisters."

"Please." he plead. "We just want to stay together."

"We know, honey." Ramona added. "We'll will figure something out. No go on up to bed and I'll see you tomorrow."

Craig gave them each a hug before going to his room. Sheffield and Ramona let themselves out and got in their car and drove back to their apartment in silence as they were were both deep in thought. While getting ready for bed Ramona asked, "What to you think, Babe? Do you want to have a family."

"Being around the kids as much as we have lately has made me think about Sandy and Austin a lot and how I have missed them. They would practically be raised by now." Sheffield said as he hung his shirt in the closet. "I have to admit, having them around has caused me to fantasize about having a family again. What about you?"

"I've always felt that I was dealt a short hand in life. Being around the nieces and nephews, I realize what I have missed out on all of these years. Can you unzip me?" She asked turning her back to him. "But those three have wiggled their way right into my heart. It would tear it out to see them separated. It's not their fault that they have to lose both of their parents. They deserve to be together. If there is no other way. I think we should step in."

"Do you remember what I told you when you wanted to adopt Ruth Ann's baby?" Sheffield said as he slipped off his trousers.

"Yes." she said as he slipped her slip over her head. "You said, 'not this child, not this time.' but you left the door open to the possibility of someday."

"Maybe this is that someday." Sheffield pondered as he pulled up his pajama bottoms. "Why was it so important that we come to Roanoke and that I took this job, instead of the one with the airline in Hawaii? I have always believed that God had directed my life. Is this what he has in mind for us?"

"So you're open to the idea?" She questioned as she unhooked her brassiere.

"Absolutely. I'll soon be forty eight and you're forty four, Janet is ten. By the time she graduated from high school I'll be what? Fifty six, and you'll be fifty one. That sounds reasonable to me. We have the means and the energy." He reasoned as he buttoned his pajama top.

"And," Ramona added as she slipped on her nightgown, "we already have a connection with them. Plus the fact is that this is what they want."

"Yeah, but are they old enough to know what they want?" Sheffield asked.

"Come on, Babe. They're old enough to know what it means to be a family. Did you see the longing in Craig's eyes?" she challenged as she hung her dress in the closet.

"Losing their father suddenly while watching their mother slowly dieing right before their eyes is a tough pill to swallow." Sheffield said as they moved into bathroom.

"If anybody knows what those poor kids are going through, its us. Who better to help them through it." Ramona surmised.

"So what do we do about moving tomorrow?"

"I don't know now. We could wait, its not going anywhere. So what if we have to pay another month's rent. Come to think about it, is that house big enough to raise three kids in? It has plenty of room for the two of us." Ramona suggested as she brushed her hair.

"It is rather small. It could be done I suppose. Do you remember when I said that I'd like a place big enough to hold the whole family when we get together? That one certainly isn't."

They suspended their discussion for a moment while the brushed their teeth.

"Here's an idea for you." Ramona said as they returned to their bedroom . "Why don't we sell it and build on our property. There's plenty of room for a house, there's room to roam, and we'd be close to Red and Roxy."

"Now that's an idea. That's a really good idea. If we could get started right away, it could be enclosed before it gets too cold. Ray did such a great job on the remodel, he could build a nice house. Danny could dig the foundation." Sheffield said as they turned down the bed.

"The question is, do they have the time?"

"It is the end of the season. Maybe they're looking for something to do. I'd have to ask them."

"Well, it sounds like were going to be parents, Babe." She beamed as she snuggled up next to him.

"It kind of looks that way doesn't it. I suggest we make it a matter of prayer and sleep on it and see what we think in the morning."

"It has been a long day." Ramona yawned. "Good night, Babe."

"Good night. Sweetheart."

They lay next to each other in their own thoughts as they drifted off to sleep. It took Sheffield a while as he mulled it over in his mind. Once he did fall asleep, it didn't last long. Again the Taylor children weighed heavily on his mind. He couldn't help but think what he would want for them, if they were his kids. He would certainly want them to stay together too.

He wondered if this had something to do with the impression that he received to take the coaching job. If they had decided to take the job in Hawaii, this opportunity would not be available to them. It was too big of a decision to make on their own so he rolled out of bed and onto his knees and prayed for direction.

When he was through, he remained on his knees for a moment. He still didn't have his answer, but he felt assured that an answer would be forthcoming. That was enough to put his mind at peace and he was soon fast asleep.

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In 1936, Innes invented an automatic hay baler that tied bales with twine using Appleby-type knotters from a John Deere grain binder; an improved version patented by Ed Nolt in 1939 was more reliable and became commonly used. Balers took another step forward with the introduction of the International Harvester No. 50T baler in 1945.

