

Chapter XXV

Ramona

May 30, 1943 – June 6, 1943

After everyone had finished eating, the men resumed their horseshoe tournament. The Brason women, even the younger girls, all sat around the picnic table visiting. They were all intrigued by Ramona. Sylvia commented, "I can tell that you've been in Hawaii for the last several years, that's a great tan. I'm envious."

Ramona replied, "Geannie was always envious of it too. Actually I come by it naturally, you see I'm a quarter Choctaw Indian. My blue eyes and blond hair come through my father's German heritage."

"Won't you tell us all about yourself?" Ellen asked.

"Alright, but I'm afraid there isn't much to tell."

"Just start at the beginning." Ellen encouraged.

"Well, I was born on the Choctaw Reservation near Durant, Oklahoma on June third, nineteen oh three."

That was all the further she got before Ellen interrupted, "Land sakes. That's this Thursday! We'll have to have a birthday party for you."

"Really Mrs. Brason, that isn't necessary."

"Of course it is. We're always looking for a reason to get together. Shoot, most of the time we don't even need a reason. What a minute, did you say nineteen oh three? That makes you forty. That's all the more reason to have a party. I insist."

"I've never had a birthday party before. Oh sure, Geannie and Sheffield had me over on my birthday a couple of times, but I wouldn't call it a party"

"That's all the more reason to have a party. I'm sorry for interrupting your story. Do continue."

"Anyway, my mother's name was Poloma, which means bow. She was half Choctaw and half white. She was born sometime in 1885 on the Choctaw Reservation in what was then Indian Territory, now it's in Oklahoma. Her father was an Army officer assigned to the reservation. When his assignment was up, he retired from the Army and returned to his wife and family in the east, leaving Poloma and her mother, Tallula, to fend for themselves. Being a halfbreed, she was an outcast among both the Choctaw and the whites.

"One day when Poloma about seventeen, a young cowboy was brought to the settlement. Cyrus Valoy Erhart was his name. He had been sent by his father, a wealthy Texas cattle rancher, to round up some strays that had wandered across the Red River from his ranch near Dennison into the Oklahoma Territory. His horse was spooked by a rattlesnake and threw him off. He broke his leg after being thrown from his horse and was bitten by the snake. The tribal medicine man treated him for his injuries and

Poloma was given the task of nursing him back to health. The cattle had found their way into a herd on the reservation and they were turned over to Cyrus upon proving their brand. She and the young cowboy fell in love during his recuperation. They were married by the Justice of the Peace in nearby Colbert on twelfth of November in nineteenth oh two.

“When Cyrus informed his father that he had married an Indian girl, he was told to keep the cattle and not to bother coming home. With a few head of cattle and new wife, Cyrus was invited to stay on the reservation where he attempted to establish a ranch. That's when I came along. I was born in the one room log cabin that my father had built.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt you again.” Sarah apologized. “You're turning forty? I have to say, you don't look a day over thirty.”

“Thank you. I've always looked much younger than I am. I don't know, but this might just be the reason. Because my mother and I were not full blooded Choctaw, we were outcasts. Soon after I was born, my great grandfather, who was one of the elders of tribe, gave me my name and blessing. My Choctaw name is Anumpa, which means counsel, advice or decision. It translates into Ramona in Spanish. At the time he prophesied that for much of my life I would be an outcast and alone. To compensate for my misfortune he blessed me with prolonged youth. Both seemed to come true.

“At first, things were looking up as the ranch began to prosper. Two years later, my brother was born in nineteen oh five. About then the area was plagued by a drought and the ranch began to fail. By the time Oklahoma became a state in nineteen oh seven the area began to grow. Feeling squeezed out, my father sold his property in nineteen oh nine and we loaded our belongings into a covered wagon and we set out for the gold fields in the Arizona Territory. On the way, my brother died and was buried somewhere in the New Mexico Territory.

“We settled near Apache Junction, east of Phoenix, and he staked a claim at the base of Superstition Mountain, the site of the fabled Lost Dutchman's Mine. There he built another a cabin where we lived. When I turned six I couldn't go to school on the nearby reservation because I wasn't “Indian enough” and it was too far to go into town. My mother was illiterate, but my father taught me to read from the only book we had, the Bible. He also taught me to do simple addition and subtraction.

“The claim wasn't very successful, but a rumor went around saying that he had hit pay dirt. One day when he was twenty nine years old, while extracting gold dust from some soil samples, he was confronted by a claim jumper, challenging his right to the claim. My father reached for his rifle. I'll never forget it, I was playing nearby and witnessed him be murdered over a worthless piece of ground. My mother and barely had a chance to gather a few things before being forced from our home at gunpoint. That was the eleventh of June nineteen twelve, just after my eighth birthday. Even in nineteen twelve the wild west was very much a

part of the culture in Arizona, which had only become a state in February of that year.

“With statehood, came an influx of newcomers. Poloma, my mother, was hired as a nursemaid for a wealthy banker in nearby Phoenix. We were allowed to live in a modest apartment above the stables. The best part was that I got to go to school. In the evenings I would read to my mother from my father's Bible. I got to know the stories from the Bible but never understood their meaning.

“Although we believed in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, we never did join a church. My mother always spoke of a legend that was handed down to her grandfather through the generations. Remember, my great grandfather was one of the tribal elders. She said that he told of a book that would come out of the ground containing the teachings of the Great Spirit to our ancient ancestors. She died waiting for that book.

“By the time I was twelve, in nineteen fifteen, the banker moved his family to Sacramento, California and took his servants with him. In our new surroundings I became embarrassed by my Indian blood and my halfbreed mother. I hid the fact from my friends at school. I never forgot the day when I got in trouble at school over something and my mother was called to come and resolve the problem. I was so mortified that my illiterate, halfbreed mother dared to show her face at school. I ended up hurting her feelings. After realizing what I had done, I sorrowfully begged her forgiveness. Citing a story of Jesus, she freely forgave me. After that, my shame became my pride. I finally realized that I should be proud of who I was.

“It was during that time that I began to go through puberty and blossom into a young woman, only something was wrong. I never did go through the cycle. At first my mother told me to be patient, but it never happened. I'll never forget when my mother told me that I would never have children. It wasn't until I was in nursing school that I found out why.

“I was late to get started to begin with and when I was at the age that it should have been over, my brain sent a signal to my body that I was through and to stop. Consequently my growth was stunted and I never did completely develop all of my physical womanly features, both inside and out. I hardly have a figure at all and have the body of a fourteen year old girl. I suppose that is another reason my youthful look.”

“Golly, I wish I had that problem.” Emily said.

“Its not always what its cracked up to be. You don't know how many times I have been mistaken for someone much younger. Sometimes its kind of embarrassing. So many times I'm not taken serious at first glance. Thats what I like about my job. My rank makes it clear that I'm not some kid. It's actually kind of funny, more than once, a new nurse has mistaken me for a young Ensign and started ordering me around. Boy did they have to eat crow when they found out that I outranked them. And I'm always approached by men much younger than me. That always makes for an award moment when they find out that I'm not who they think I am.

“Sometimes when I look into the mirror, I wish I that were taller and filled out like a woman. Geannie might have been envious of my tan, but I was always envious of her body.”

“I think your lovely just the way you are.” Ellen interjected.

“Thank you Mrs. Brason. Geannie once told me that in the resurrection God would make it up to me and I would go through eternity with the body that He intended me to have.

“Then there was that awful day day when I was sixteen. I was cleaning the bathroom off the master bedroom when I was accosted by the banker. The much older man, probably in his fifties, grabbed me in an attempt to have his way with me.

“Kicking and clawing, I fought him off, causing a deep gash across his cheek. With my clothes ripped open, I escaped and ran screaming from the house. The banker accused me of trying to solicit him. He said that I had ripped my clothes on purpose and scratched his face, causing it to bleed. It was the word of a rich and powerful banker against the sixteen year old daughter of a halfbreed nursemaid. Panoma was fired and we were evicted from their home.

“With enough money for two train tickets to San Francisco, we set out on our own. We stayed in San Francisco for only a short while. Together we worked as nursemaids, the only thing that Panoma knew. With a combination of Choctaw remedies, what she had learned of modern medicine along the way, and a natural gift of healing, she had become very good at what she knew. We found San Francisco to be too crowded and bustling and we soon moved on. Over the next three years we made our way north, stopping to work along the way. I attend school wherever I could during those years, but it was my mother who taught me everything she knew about nursing. I felt as if I had found my calling in life, except I wanted more than to be a nursemaid.

“Eventually, in nineteen twenty one we settled in Tacoma, Washington where we remained. By that time I was eighteen. While finishing high school, I worked at whatever I could to help with our living expenses and saved the rest for my dream of attending nursing school. I finally graduated from high school at the age of nineteen. The thing that kept me going was the fact that I needed a high school diploma to get into nursing school. I had only saved a little money, far from enough to afford cost of tuition. At that point, I had almost lost sight of my goal and was about to give up on it.

“It was during that time that I met a young man by the name of Oliver North. After a little over a year, he asked me to marry him. Oliver was a strong, handsome young man who was only a year older than me. He had a respectable job as fireman and offered me some modest security. We were married on the twenty first of October nineteen twenty three there in Tacoma. Working as nursemaid over the years, I had come to love children. I lamented the fact that me and Oliver could never have any of our own.

“For nearly six months we were on cloud nine. We had each other and the world seemed to opening

up to us. We even began to talk of adopting children someday. Then on March fourth, nineteen twenty four, firefighters from seven companies responded to a fire at a three story factory. The fire that broke out at seven forty in the morning was caused by the explosion of tar being heated on an oil stove by workmen who were remodeling the lower floor of the building. The firemen fought desperately to save the building built in eighteen ninety seven but flames swept through the three story brick and concrete building as they worked with ladders and hoses from the outside. Oliver was on a ladder manning a fire hose spraying water through a third story window, when a portion of the wall and roof collapsed onto him. Severely burned and badly injured, he was pulled to safety and rushed to the hospital. Four days later he died leaving me a widow at the age of twenty years old.

“Grief stricken, I moved back into my mother’s two room rented hose. Now more than ever I wanted to pursue my dream of being a nurse. As a result of my husband’s death, I was awarded a sizable amount of money, enough to see me all the way through nursing school, including living. In the fall I enrolled in The University of Washington School of Nursing in Seattle.

“When I graduated two years later, I was recruited into the Navy Nursing Corps as an Ensign with orders to report at the San Diego Naval Hospital. It was there while working with the Red Cross that I met an enthusiastic volunteer by the name of Gennie Brason who became my best friend. Aside from my late husband, Geannie and Sheffield were the only real friends I ever had. It was through Geannie that I met Tom Katmuth, who flew with Sheffield. We were married on August fifteenth nineteen twenty eight in San Diego. He was killed five months later when his plane collided with Sheffield’s over the Pacific Ocean off Panama. His body was never recovered. After a memorial service for him, I went home and spent a month with my mother.

“After being widowed for the second time, Geannie and Sheffield were so good to me. Sheffield went out of his way to make sure that I was taken care of. I came to depend on him, probably way too much because I found myself falling in love with him.

“Hoping or a new start, but mostly to distance myself from Sheffield, I requested a transfer and received orders report to the Naval Hospital at Pearl Harbor Hawaii in September of nineteen twenty nine. But first I had a thirty day leave and went home to see my mother. It was the last time I ever saw her. Poloma, who had never learned to drive, was hit by a car and died at the age of forty five on the twelfth of November nineteen thirty in Tacoma. Because of the logistics of travel, and the isolation of the Hawaiian Islands, I was not able come home in time. She was given a simple graveside service and buried in the Tacoma Cemetery. I was given time off and went home to settle her affairs and dispose of what few belongings she had.

“After returning to Hawaii I never left, except for once when I was sent to Bethesda Naval Hospital in

Bethesda, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. for some specialized training. That was while Sheffield and Geannie were living in Arlington. I loved living in Paradise, besides there was no place to go. Then in October of nineteen thirty nine Sheffield was transferred to Pearl Harbor and Geannie and the kids followed on New Year's Day nineteen forty. The next two years were the highlight of my life in Hawaii, until that fateful day when I watched my best friend in the whole world die.

"After all that Geannie and Sheffield had done for me, I tried to reciprocate. Now the roles were reversed and it was me trying to be there for Sheffield. After he was transferred back to the east coast in April, we remained in touch by mail until I was transferred to the Bethesda. When Sheffield returned from his last cruise, we finally got together and here I am with all you today."

After listening to her incredible story, no one said a word for a moment. Finally Ellen spoke up. "That is quite a story. If you stick with Sheffield, you'll never be alone again. You'd have all of us."

Ramona answered, "It all depends on if he wants to be stuck with me."

"Just let me take care of that." Ellen said.

"No thank you Mrs. Brason, he needs to come to that conclusion on his own."

By then the horseshoe tournament was over and the men rejoined the women for a round of desert. Ramona served Sheffield with a slice of her coconut cream pie. He took one bite and his taste buds were in ecstasy. All he could do was shake his head, pointing his fork at his plate. Without saying a word, he took another byte. It was as good as he remembered it to be.

Finally he spoke, "Will you marry me?"

"That depends," Ramona answered, "do you want to marry me because you love me or because of my pie."

"The pie! With pie like this, I could fall in love."

"Let me have a slice of that." Emmett asked.

He took one byte and exclaimed, "Forget Sheffield, will you marry me?"

Ellen chimed in, "You silly old fool. What would a beautiful woman like Ramona want with an old cute like you. Besides, I'm the best thing that ever happened to you, and don't you forget it."

To which Emmet said, "Then you've got to get her recipe."

After the pie episode, Sheffield said, "Oh mother I almost forgot something. I'll be right back." He disappeared into the house and returned a moment later with a large rolled up piece of paper. "What on earth do you have there?" Ellen asked.

After the Battle of Bear Island, we went to a navy yard near Liverpool, England for temporary repairs. I had a little time so I took the train over to Sheffield where your grandfather came from. It didn't take long before I found all kinds of Sheffields. I was directed to a lady by the name of Roberta Flemming who had

spent her life researching the Sheffield line. It turns out that she is your second cousin.”

Sheffield spread the chart out on the picnic table and continued, “She gave me this chart with the whole family tree on it going back several generations. She was excited to have me in her home because she always wondered what happened to Peter Sheffield. I was able to tell her what I new. She gave me her address to give to you and would love it if you dropped her a line.”

Everyone studied the chart with amazement. This was all new information. Prior to coming to America, all that was known of Peter Sheffield and his wife was that they were from Sheffield.

“Oh Sheffield, this is a real treasure. How can I ever thank you?”

“Don't thank me, thank Roberta.”

“I'll be certain to do that.”

The rest of the afternoon and into the evening was spent visiting and enjoying being home. For Sheffield, the war was a distant thing and he didn't give the repairs to his ship a second thought. That evening after everyone had left, he and Ramona had a chance to have some time to themselves. Sitting out under the stars, Ramona was overcome with emotion.

“Hey, whats the mater?” Sheffield asked.

“This is the first time in my life that have felt such love and acceptance. I want you to fall in love with me so I can become part of this.”

“I'll work on it, but like I told you its going to take some time. I like you an awful lot and you are my best friend. Wouldn't you say thats a good start?” Then he kissed her.

Ellen, who happened to see it from inside the house, beamed with delight. “Maybe theres hope.” she thought to herself. “Shes such a lovely girl.”

Sheffield took Ramona's dainty hand in his and helped her to her feet. Hand in hand he walked her back to Walt and Sarah's and said goodnight and kissed her again.

On Sunday, Sheffield and Ramona attended services with the entire Brason family. Nearly everyone in the congregation were wanting to know who the lovely woman was sitting beside Sheffield. Being Memorial Day, Walt's sermon paid tribute to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation, both in times past as well as at the very moment. With Sheffield's consent, he shared the story of bravery exemplified by Commander Southrige in at the Battle of Bear Island earlier that month. He said that such sacrifice goes along ways toward the forgiveness of sins, and that man had more than his share.

He said that not everyone is called upon for such self sacrifice, but there were plenty of opportunities all around us every day in which we can go out of our to help another. Such small efforts on a daily basis means more in the sight of God than one big blaze of glory.

After the service, several people approached Sheffield to say, "its goo to see you" and "how goes the war" and the such. To each who greeted him, he introduced Ramona as his "friend". Other closer friends like Bill and Marge Casper and Mike and Sam Taylor particularly lingered to visit a moment and get acquainted with Ramona. Sheffield told Samantha about having spent time with her cousin, Paula.

Ramona and Samantha particularly seemed hit it off and she thought that Craig, Norma, and Janet were such good kids. "You're blessed to have them." Ramona concluded.

They were invited to Austins for Sunday dinner and Ramona got to meet all of Geannie's family. She was received with the same warmth and love as the day before. During the conversation, Sheffield learned that Murry Pucheskey had indeed made his way to Roanoke and was working for the Austin brothers. When asked if he had given them any trouble, they reported, "Not a bit."

"Are you sure were talking about the same person?"

"He produced the letter of recommendation you wrote for him."

"Well, I guess I need to stop by the lumber yard to see how he's doing."

After dinner, Sheffield took Ramona out to the shed to show her the things that he had set aside for her. There was one hat that would fit, with a little adjustment. She had forgotten all about the book that she had loaned to Geannie. From the location of the bookmark, it didn't look like she had a chance to finish it. Then she sorted through the things that she wanted.

They spent the rest of the afternoon with the Austin's. Marie remembered having met her in San Diego and the tender letter that she got from her after Geannie and the kids died. Marie looked even more frail since he was last there in February. Sarah said that she was afraid that Marie was failing and worried that she wouldn't live too many more years. It saddened Sheffield so to see one of the pillars in his life in such a way.

On Monday, Sheffield took Ramona on a guided tour or Ronaoke, particularly all of the places that had been such apart of his and Geannie's lives. While downtown, Ramona saw a shoe store and wanted to go in to have a look. Sheffield knew that if she was like most women that this would take a while.

The fact that her birthday was the third of June hadn't stuck with him. Thanks to a tip from his mother, he wouldn't let it go unnoticed. While she was busy trying on shoes, he slipped out of the store and dashed across the street to Muldoun's Jewelers. When he returned a few minutes later, she hadn't even noticed that he was gone.

After lunch at the Corner Drug Store, they continued with the tour. As they were out and about, they stopped by the lumberyard. Sheffield wandered out back where he saw the young man who he had once agonized over. Murry's first instinct was to salute, but offered a hand instead.

"I heard that you were here and I wanted to come and see how you're doing, Murry."

"Thank you, Captain, sir. When I got home and was discharged I did exactly what you told me not to do. I went home to my old neighborhood. I wasn't home a week before I did something stupid and spent the next six weeks in jail. I'll tell you that gave me some more time to think and I realized that you were right. When I got out, I began making my down here. At first I was hesitant to take you up on your recommendation. But I got down on my luck and I had a choice to make, either turn to a life of crime or turn over a new leaf. I chose the latter and I haven't been in trouble since. These guys are good to me and treat me with respect and I'd never do anything to let them or you down, sir."

"I'm glad to hear that Murry. Keep up the good work."

Murry asked him about the ship and where all they'd been since he left her in the Azores. He was disappointed that he missed Rio. "Just as well." He said. "I'd probably have done something stupid and would still be sitting in a Brazilian jail." As far as the North Atlantic voyage, he didn't feel bad at all about missing that one. He was sorry to hear that the ship took a hit and that several of his former shipmates had been killed. After visiting for a little while, he excused himself so he could get back to work. A truck needed to be loaded so it could get out to a job site on time.

Ramona was impressed with the area. As he drove her back to his parents house she said, "I could live here. I really could. It seems to be such a nice place."

"I have always thought so. In fact, after the war when I retire from the Navy, I'm going to come home to stay."

Ramona could picture it in her mind her and Sheffield growing old together in Roanoke. Of course she kept the thought to herself.

On Tuesday, they attended Wendalynn's high school graduation and yet another Brason get together, this time at Shenan's place. But Sheffield had something special in mind for Wednesday. He got up early and put together a picnic lunch and dug out the picnic blanket and the fishing poles. It was still early when he walked over to Walt and Sarah's.

Sarah explained that Ramona was still asleep. He quietly entered the guest room where she was staying and just stood over her bed looking down at her. He really wanted things to work out with her. Then the romantic that he was, he bent down and in true fairytale tradition gently kissed her lips. His mustache must have tickled her face because she rubbed her face before opening her eyes. "Are you my Prince Charming come to carry me away to your castle?"

"Something like that." he said. "No visit home is complete without tip to the cabin."

"Thee' cabin?" Ramona asked sitting up in bed, her hair in curlers and with no make up. "The cabin that I have heard about all of these years?"

“Uh huh.” Sheffield nodded. “No one is using it right now, so pack an overnight bag. Oh, and bring your bathing suit.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She was not alarmed to have him see her that way. That was the real Ramona, about as real as it gets. She figured that if he saw her in her natural state and not be scared off, he must like her. She patted the bed next to her indicating for him to sit down.

“I'd really like to get started. Can I have the keys to your car. I'd like to get it loaded while you get ready.”

“Okay.” she yawned. She got out of bed and went over to the dresser to get the keys. As she did, the early morning sunlight filtering through the window made the thin fabric of her he nightgown translucent, revealing the form and features of her body. As a man, he took it all in for about one second. As a gentleman, he quickly looked away. Someone had once told him, “If you don't look once you're not a man. If you look twice, you're not a gentleman, and the third time is pure lust.”

He realized that the package isn't so important as what's inside. So far he was really liked what was inside. Maybe it was true about big things sometimes coming in small packages.

“Here you go.” she said handing him the keys. “Come back for me in about a half an hour or forty five minutes.” She threw her arms around him reached up to kiss him and said, “I'll see you then.”

As he held her close, he could feel her body through her nightgown as she pressed against him. It was as if there was a spark electricity between them. He wanted to touch her. Instead, he let go and said, “I'll be right back.”

When Sheffield returned for her, she wasn't quite ready. While he waited, he asked Sarah for the key to the cabin.

“What do you think of Ramona?” he asked.

“I like her. I think she's has quite a story. You and Geannie sure made a big impact on her life. The only thing I can say is go slow and easy and not rush things.”

“My sentiments, exactly.” Sheffield said, as Ramona emerged from her bedroom.

“I'm all ready to go.” she announced.

“Well, the two of you have a good time.” Then she added, “Oh I almost forgot. You asked for the key.” Sarah reached for the key hooks next to the telephone.

“Thanks Sarah. We'll back tomorrow morning sometime.”

As Sheffield and Ramona walked out to the car, she took him by the arm. “Would you like to drive? You know the way.”

“Sure.” he replied.

He took her around to the passenger side and opened the door for her. When she got in, she slid to

the middle of the bench seat so she could be close to him when he got behind the wheel.

Sheffield started the car and shoved in on the clutch, but when he shifted into reverse, her knees were in the way and she had to turn them away from him. Once he shifted out of reverse, she turned her knees back toward him, pressing them against his leg.

"I've heard so much about this place." Ramona began as they started up the highway. "I just love the story of how Geannine swung the deal to get it back. I can just see her doing that."

"I have a lot of good memories there. The last time I was there was a year ago, and it kind of haunted me. If you see me staring off into space, you'll know that I'm remembering something."

"Yeah, like your honeymoon." She nodded her head. "Geannie told me all about it."

"Oh she did. She was always kind of open about what I felt should be private." he said. "Well, this trip isn't about her. It's all about us. Just you and me. If any ghosts show up, I'll tell them to leave."

At that, Ramona held on a little tighter to his arm and moved a little closer, yet giving him room to drive. Again Sheffield thought he felt a spark arc from her body to his.

As they got up into the hills, Ramona commented, "This is absolutely beautiful."

Just then a deer appeared out of the thicket along the road and darted in front of them. As she slammed on the brakes, Sheffield instinctively flung his arm out and across her chest to hold her back. The deer went on its way and Sheffield retracted his arm.

Unflinched by the whole episode, she asked, "Are, there many deer up her?"

"Lets just say, that won't be the last one we see."

Before long, they tuned off Highway 311 into the driveway of the cabin. Sheffield parked the car and and got out. Ramona slid under the steering wheel and got out behind him.

As Sheffield opened the trunk, Ramona looked around and proclaimed, "This is simply beautiful. It's quite a contrast from my beach house."

"Yeah, I really like it here. I always enjoyed going to your beach house too." he said as he handed her their overnight bags.

She waited while he grabbed the sack of groceries and the picnic basket. Then together, they walked up the front door. Sheffield set down the picnic basket in his right hand and reached into his pocket for the key and opened the door. Once inside, he said, "Just set those on the floor." while he took his his arm load into the kitchen.

He he came back out, Ramona was looking through the big picture window in the front room. "You can have this room." he said as she followed him into the bedroom. "I hope its comfortable enough for you." he said as he put her bag down.

Ramona laid back on the bed and said. "Oh yes. This will do just fine."

He reached out his hand to pull her up of the bed. "Lets put away the groceries and get our picnic ready." he said as he raised her from the bed.

Before long, they were hiking up the trail to the lake loaded down with the picnic basket, fishing gear, and bag with their bathing suits. Once they arrived at the lake they put down their gear and sat on the old log and looked out across the lake.

"Oh look," she exclaimed. "That must be the rock."

"Thats it. We'll swim out to it later."

Sheffield reached down and picked up a smooth flat rock and skipped it out across the lake toward the rock. It bounced off the water at least a dozen times before it sank.

"How did you do that?" she asked in amazement. He reached down and selected two more rocks and handed one to her. "Its all in the wrist. Watch." he said as the rock went skipping across the water. "Now you try it."

Ramona tossed the rock and it went "plunk."

"Here let me help you." he said as he picked up another rock. He handed it to her and got behind and took her hand and guided it as she tossed the rock. This time it actually bounced of the water once before it sank.

After dunking a few more rocks, Sheffield suggested, "Lets try our hand at fishing."

They broke out the fishing gear and cast their lines out. While they waited, they talked about a number of things. The fish must have sensed their need to visit, because they didn't bother them. Not even a nibble. They were more interested in talking than fishing anyway. After a while Sheffield asked, "Are you getting hungry?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Hand me your pole and I'll put them away. Why don't you set out the picnic?"

"I remember this blanket." Ramona said as she took it out of the well worn old picnic basket.

"That was one of the tings I wasn't able to part with." Sheffield replied.

They visited some more while they sat on the ground in the shade. After lunch was put away they stretched out on the blanket, side by side and talked some more while their lunch settled.

After a while, Sheffield asked, "Are you ready to go swimming?"

"Sure." Ramona said as she sat up and reached for the bag that had her bathing suit and towel.

"Do you see those bushes over there by that tree?" he said pointing off to the left. "Thats the lady's dressing room. The men's is over here."

Ramona walked over to the bushes and secluded herself. After taking off her clothes, she got a wicked idea. "I bet he's naked too." She climbed up on the log that was used as bench so she could see

over the top. She watched as Sheffield, who already had his shirt off, stooped down as if he were taking off his pants. Even though she couldn't see him below his chest, she held her hand over her mouth as she snickered. She watched as he stood back up. She figured he was reaching for his swimming trunks. "Yup, he's naked alright. If I could only see more clearly. At the risk of being seen herself, she stood up higher, but still couldn't see anything as he bent over to put on his trunks.

Obviously, he didn't see her spying on him. She got down off the log and put her bathing suit on. Once she was decent, she emerged from the bushes with her towel in hand and met up with Sheffield at the log.

"The water will be a little on the cold side." Sheffield said. "Are you up to it?"

Without answering she ran down into the water and plunged in. When she came up she yelped. "My lord, this is cold."

"It will feel good once you get used to it." Sheffield replied.

After a few minutes, it started to feel good and she was able to enjoy herself. They swam out to where the water was deeper and could dive under. They were like a couple of teenagers as they played in the water. After awhile, they climbed up on the rock and stretched out in the sun and talked some more. When they got back into the water they had to get used to the cold water all over again. After swimming and playing for a while longer, they decided to get out. The picnic blanket was now in the sun and they laid down next to each other. While they talked, the warm sun dried their wet swimming suits and their bodies. At one point, Ramona rolled over and pulled herself up onto his chest.

Sheffield didn't mind the closeness. It actually felt good and he reached up and put his arm around her and held her closer. That set the scene for a kiss, which led to another and another. Each one longer than the one before. After a few minutes, Sheffield suggested they change their clothes and head back. Ramona took her towel and returned to the "lady's dressing room". This time she didn't try to spy on him.

However, while she was taking off her bathing suit, she was startled by some rustling in the bushes. It stopped, so she went ahead and took it off. She had no sooner laid it over the log when a deer came through the bushes into the "dressing room". Ramona froze, as the doe came to within about four feet from her. The two of them just stood there looking at each other and after a moment the doe went on her way and Ramona went ahead and got dressed.

When she rejoined Sheffield, she told him all about her encounter. "It was probably more surprised to see a naked lady," he laughed. "than you were to see a deer."

Later that afternoon they built a campfire for a wiener roast and later made smores. They sat by the fire and talked until it was completely dark and the stars were out. "I think its time we went to bed." Sheffield suggested. "I'm pretty tired."

“Me too.” Ramona yawned.

Sheffield put out the fire and helped Ramona up and led her by the hand into the cabin. Pausing at her bedroom door he pulled her close. “Thank you.” he said. This has been a nice day.” Then he kissed her and said, “Good night.”

“Good night.” she replied. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

At that she went into her room and got undressed and ready for bed. As she lay in bed, she reflected on how she had thoroughly enjoyed the day. It was quite a different setting from her beach house on Oahu. Sheffield had a way of making her feel like a kid again and it made her love him all the more. She found herself fantasizing about him, something she did often. There was a time in her life when she would have gone into his room and given herself to him, but she was no longer that person. Especially not to Sheffield because she knew what it would do to their relationship, after all, look at what happened when Paula tried it.

On Thursday morning, Sheffield knocked softly on her door.

“Come in.” she called.

She sat up in bed as he approached. “Good morning.” she said as she patted the bed beside her, indicating for him to sit down.

Sheffield sat next to her and declared, “Happy birthday!”

“Why thank you. I’m glad that you remembered.”

“So I hope your hungry?”

“I am. What do you have in mind?”

“Why don’t you get dressed and come find out.”

When she came out of her room, Sheffield gave her a birthday kiss and ushered her into the kitchen where he had breakfast waiting for the both of them. He had made a batch of buttermilk pancakes and eggs over easy and a pot of coffee. To go with it he had maple syrup and some orange juice.

“Oh Sheffield. You did all of this yourself? For me?”

“Uh huh” he said as he sat her down to the table.

Sheffield sat down across the corner from her and took her hand to say Grace. He then took two steaming hot pancakes off the top of the stack and put them on her plate.

“Oh look!” She exclaimed, “This has a heart in it and this one has a face.” She looked up and said, “I love you Sheffield.”

He wasn’t quite ready to say it back to her in the way that she had said it. “And I think I just might love you a little more today than I did yesterday.”

That was good enough for her. They visited as they had breakfast together and while cleaning up. Then he suggested they go out for a stroll around the yard. When they came to the cherry tree with its small fruit, he stopped her under one of the branches. He glanced up into the tree and remarked, "That's strange. I've never seen these growing on a tree before."

Ramona looked up to see a pair of dainty diamond earrings, each attached to a cherry stem. She reached up to pluck them off the tree.

"Don't you want to let them grow bigger and ripen?"

"Oh, I'd say their in season. Their beautiful. Thank you Sheffield."

"What makes you think I put them there?" he joked

She laughed and jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow as she put them on. "How do they look?"

"Lovely. Just lovely. Happy Birthday Ramona. And this goes with them." Then he kissed her again.

They went back in the cabin and changed the bedding and put everything away before coming back down off the mountain.

In the evening Sheffield's brothers and their families gathered for the birthday party. First there was a barbecue, with some of Walt's homemade root beer, followed by opening her gifts. She was overwhelmed at all of the gifts. There was something from everyone. Mostly things that she still needed for her apartment. Sarah had got her tell her what she still needed the other day when she was describing her apartment. Of course she had to show off the dainty earrings that she was wearing. After the gifts came the birthday cake, complete with forty candles, homemade ice cream, and a rousing round of Happy Birthday.

Again she was overwhelmed by the love that she felt exuding from Sheffield's family. It was the most fun that she had had in a long time, and it was all in her honor. Following the cake and ice cream they played a host of parlor games until the party broke up, but not before she profusely thanked everyone for coming, and especially Ellen for hosting it for her.

"It was my pleasure, dear." Ellen said. "Be sure to come back next year and we'll do it again. Everyone in this family gets a birthday party."

On Friday and Saturday, Sheffield and Ramona simply spent the time together, alone and with his family. On Friday evening they went out to dinner and a picture show with Walt and Sarah. They saw a musical comedy titled "DuBarry Was a Lady" starring Red Skelton, Lucile Ball, and Gene Kelly. The light hearted film was just what Sheffield needed. The other option was "Bataan" and he didn't particularly want to see a war movie. He had come home to get away from the war.

On Saturday, Sheffield had a special surprise for Ramona. He took her for what he said was going to be a ride. That was only an excuse to take her to airport north of town where he had arranged for the use of a Piper Cub for the afternoon. The tandem seat aircraft with an enclosed cabin made it so they could visit

during the flight, as opposed to the open cockpit Stearman. The only time she had ever flown was when she was transferred from Hawaii. She enjoyed the flight, but more importantly she enjoyed being alone with Sheffield in his world. For the next two hours they got to know each other better

The week seemed to pass as a dream and it was over. On Sunday morning they attended services and went home to change for the drive back to Norfolk. Rather than staying for dinner, Ellen had a boxed lunch for them to take with them. They had their hugs and their tears and their goodbyes and got into the car to leave. Not only did Ramona love Sheffield, but she loved his family and longed for the day when she might invited to join it. As for Sheffield, he definitely wanted to let the relationship develop and see where it might lead. As she sat next to him on the drive back, he felt the sparks arching between them. There was something there for sure.

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