

Chapter IX

Ready Made Family

December 13, 1946 – February 22, 1947

By the end of the second week in December, the house had progressed to the point where they were ready to start putting up the drywall on the interior walls and ceilings. That Friday, both the JV and varsity wrestling teams had a bye. Since there wasn't a meet to prepare for, both Sheffield and Craig skipped practice and Sheffield took Craig to get his drivers license. He passed both the written test and the driving test and came home with his licenses. It was hard to say who was the most proud, Craig, or his mother. In anticipation of his success, Ramona and his sisters baked a special cake for the occasion.

Wanting to exercise his new found freedom, on Saturday he picked up Edith and took her for a ride. Later they picked up a couple of their friends and went to an afternoon *matinée*, as Samantha insisted that he be home before dark. After all, his license was only good during daylight hours until he turned sixteen.

Not only did it give Craig freedom, but it was a tremendous help to Ramona as well. He could now take himself and his sisters some of the places that they needed to be and freed up some of her time. Samantha now required more attention as she began to slip fast. There was less and less that she was able to do for herself. The last time her doctor called on her, he told her that she probably only had two months left at the most.

That really put a damper on the upcoming holidays for the children. They were literally grieving the loss of their mother as she was dieing. Walt said that it was quite common in situations where a terminal illness was involved. Their grieving was compounded by the fact that it was their first Christmas since they lost their father. Walt had been stopping in at least once a week to work with them, but now he was seeing them twice a week.

Samantha, despite her weakened condition and constant pain was determined to make the holidays the best that she could for them. The doctor had prescribed stronger pain medication but it made her sleep all the time and she felt that she was missing out on her remaining time with her kids, so she skipped her afternoon dose so she could be awake in the afternoon and evening, even though she was in pain. Her condition required more of Ramona's time as well. She had to bathe her and change her bedpans. Every few hours she had to move her so she wouldn't get bed sores. She was down to one hundred five pounds, so she was virtually skin and bones with very little cushion left on her body.

School let out for the holidays on Friday the 20th so there weren't any more matches until after the first of the year. The next morning, Sheffield loaded the kids into his car and took them up to the cabin to look for a Christmas tree. The kids selected a rather spindly six foot tree and Sheffield selected a four foot tree for their small apartment. After cutting them down, they tied them to the top of the car and brought them home.

Rather than putting it up in their front room, Sheffield made room in Sam's bedroom by moving a dresser out into the hall. She watched in delight as the tree was clothed with Christmas. Earlier in the week, Sam gave Ramona some money and a specific shopping list for what she wanted to give the kids. The gifts had been bought, wrapped and were hidden away in their apartment.

The day before Christmas, Sheffield and Ramona stopped by to pick up the kids the take them to Christmas Eve services. Samantha asked them and the kids to come into her bedroom because she had something to tell them.

"Earlier today," she began, "the attorney stopped by to give me this." She said holding up a manilla envelope."

"What is it, Mom?" Janet asked.

"This Sweetheart, is an early Christmas present." she said as she removed its contents. "These are the adoption papers, with the judge's signature authorizing it to take place. I think you should hear the details directly from me so that you know that this is the way I want it to be."

"Its what we want too." Craig said, speaking for all three of them. "Yeah, we would rather have you, but since we can't, it is the second best thing."

Hearing him say such a mature and grownup thing made her swell with emotion. She continued, "Me too, but I won't be with you much longer. You know that and its a hard thing for you to have to watch me waste away before your very eyes. We all die sometime and its all in God's hands. Why its my time so soon, I don't know.

"God sent the three of you to me, knowing that this time would come. I believe that God has a plan and things happen for a reason. Sheffield lost his family and Ramona never had any children. God brought them together. Now that your father and I won't be here with you, I firmly believe that God wants you to be their family now. Now I can spend my last days not having to worry about what will become of you."

Sheffield spoke for he and Ramona, "We can never take the place of your father and mother, but we can be your mom and dad. We realize that those are titles that we must earn. We want you to know that we love you and promise to do our best to take care of you and raise you. We too believe that this is what God wants. Of course you would rather have your parents, but that can't be. At least this way you can stay together as you have expressed that it is what you want."

"We love you too." Craig said. "The girls and I chose you when we found out that if we went with the relatives that we would be split up. We have had a lot of fun together and you've done so much for us, like helping me get my drivers license and taking us places." Again said with grownup resolve.

"Yeah." Norma said. "Like helping us with our homework and taking us out to pizza and letting us ride your horses."

"And baking goodies." Janet added.

"I'm happy that you all agree." Sam said. "I expect you to pitch in and then help out like I have taught you. I'm sure they'll have some chores for you to do."

"As a matter of fact we do." Sheffield said. "For starters, Craig you can help by feeding the horses and taking out the trash."

"And Norma and Janet," Ramona added, "you can help out by washing and drying the dishes and helping with the housekeeping. Does that sound fair?"

They all agreed.

Sheffield continued, "To make it worth your while, you each will be given an allowance so you'll have some spending money, how does that sound?"

Again they all thought it would be a good deal.

"Now I want you to know what's going to take place. The details are all in here pretty much as I dictated them. The adoption is to take affect immediately upon my passing. You will take Brason as your last name and keep Taylor as your middle names.

"Adoption means that they will be your legal parents and you will be their children just as if you had been born to them. Its better this way than if they were simply your guardians. Do you understand?"

"I think so." Craig said.

"Why's that Craig?" Sam asked.

"I guess I really don't know."

"One reason is that if they were simply your guardians, they would have to be supervised by the court. As you parents, they aren't. A judge or someone could step in at any time and appoint someone else as your guardian, or even split you up. By being adopted, the relationship is permanent and nobody can change that. Now do you understand, Craig."

"Uh huh."

"What about you, Norma?"

"Uh huh."

"So Janet, what does that mean?"

"It means we will always be a family and have a mom and dad."

"Thats right. I'm glad that you understand. This is important, because after I'm gone, we won't be able to talk about it. Now this won't happen until I breath my last breath. At that very moment, this will take affect. This way it will all be automatic and you won't have to worry about it when I'm gone. That's why I said that this is an early Christmas present. Under the circumstances it is the best thing in the world that I could ever do for you.

“Now there is something else I want you to know. There is some money from your father's life insurance, and there will be some from mine too. In addition, there will be some from your father's business. I'm in the process of selling it. Also, after you move to the Brason's new house, I want them to sell this one and put the money with the other money. It will be divided evenly between the three of you. That money is for you to go to college with. Once you graduate from college, the rest is yours to do with what you want.”

“But what if we don't want to go to college?” Craig asked.

“Your father and I always wanted to send you to college but we struggled to save very much for it. Now you can. If you choose not to go to college or you don't finish, then you can't have the money until you are thirty years old. The idea is to encourage you to go on to college and graduate. Your father and I never went to college but Sheffield and Ramona did. They know how important it is.”

After talking to the kids, she addressed the Brasons. “I want you to take whatever you can use from the house to furnish your new home. That way the kids will have familiar surroundings in your home. I already told you to take the car so they'll have it. This way they can sleep in their own beds. I want them to be in familiar surroundings as much as possible. They'll be in the same schools, but I realize that you'll be attending a congregation in Salem, but at least it will be something that they are familiar with.

“I know that this has been a hard thing to talk about and you've all been brave little troopers. In the coming days its going to be really hard for you. Now are there any questions?”

Her question was answered with silence and stifled sniffles.

Ramona spoke next. “How about after Christmas, you come out to the new house and pick out your rooms. They'll be painting them soon and you can pick out color you want them painted.”

“Do I get my own room?” Norma asked.

“That's right sweetheart.”

“Goody. I won't have to share with Janet anymore.”

“Now,” Samantha said, “you'd better be on your way so you're not late for Christmas Eve services. I'll rest while you're gone, alright.”

After a round of hugs for their mother, they left for church with Sheffield and Ramona.

On Christmas morning, Sheffield and Ramona came over early while the kids were still asleep and let themselves in. Quietly they came into Samantha's room and placed all of the gifts under the tree. In the process, Samantha heard them and woke up. After the gifts were placed, Sheffield went out into the living room while Ramona bathed Sam and got her ready for the day.

First Craig stumbled out in the living room. He was joined by his sisters a few minutes later. When Sam was ready, Ramona opened the door and invited them in. Sam was propped up in bed so she could

see the joy on their faces as they opened their gifts. In addition to what she had Ramona get for them, Sheffield and Ramona had gifts for them as well. Later in the morning, they let Samantha rest and took them with them over to Grandpa and Grandma Brasons for Christmas dinner.

Later in the week Sheffield and Ramona took the kids out to see the house. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. Each one had a gabled window looking out over the front of the house. The kids got to pick which rooms they wanted and the color and decor for their rooms.

As the year wound down, it turned off cold with the daytime high temperatures dropping into the low thirties. On Sunday it began to snow an accumulated about an inch each day through New Year's Day.

On New Years Eve Sheffield and Ramona took the kids bowling and out for pizza at the Pizza Joint. Bowling was something that Samantha and Mike used to do and often took the kids. They spent the rest of the evening playing games until ushering in 1947. After sending the kids off to bed and checking in on Samantha, they went home to their apartment.

On New Years day Sylvia and Scott announced their engagement after he proposed the night before. Walt and Sarah and Sheffield and Ramona were having what was left of one of Ramona's coconut cream pies. "So how well do you know Scott?" Sheffield asked.

"We don't know him all that well." Walt admitted. "He has come to dinner on a number of occasions and attended services with us a few times. He's from a Mormon family out in South County, but he lost his way while in the Marines. We've smelled tobacco on his breath, but he's never smoked in our presence. His family is active in their church and Sylvia has attended with them a time or two. I really don't know much about the Mormons, I didn't know there were any around here. I thought they were all out west in Utah."

"Evidently not." Sheffield said. "I know there are some in Brazil. Do you remember Morris Gover, my personal assistant? He was a Mormon missionary in Brazil before the war. If all Mormons are like him and his friend Simeon Ballard, then you don't have much to worry about."

"I don't know. I've heard some strange things about them." Sarah said.

"Oh I don't know about that. You can't believe everything you hear." Ramona defended. "I've been around Morris enough to know that he's as straight laced as they come."

"I don't know if they're Mormons or not, but there are a couple Rowan kids on my wrestling team, they're cousins. It seems like they're always volunteering to offer the team prayer before matches. One of them has a younger brother on Craig's JV team. They're some fine young men. If they're related to Scott, he's from a good family."

"So," Ramona asked changing the subject just a little, "where will the wedding take place?"

"They're talking about having it at the Mormon church. Evidently his uncle is an elder of some kind in their congregation and they want him to marry them."

"When is it again?" Sheffield asked.

"They're looking at Valentines Day." Walt said. "Speaking of your team, who's your next match with?" From there, the conversation went off in another direction.

School didn't resume until Monday the 6th, after a two week break. The Magicians had their first next match that Friday in Harrisonburg where they picked up another win, making them six and two for the season. Work on the house was progressing with the interior being painted. The house was right on scheduled to be finished and ready to move into during the first week in February.

It was going to be just in time as Samantha began fading fast. She slept more and when she was awake she was in great pain. It was hard on the kids to watch her and they struggled in school because of it. Fortunately their teachers were sympathetic for the most part and allowed them to turn in assignments after they were due. Ramona and Sheffield worked with them to keep them caught up as much as possible.

The mood of the children sank lower as their mother came ever closer to death's door. Ramona felt that perhaps she should be admitted to the hospital. Samantha rejected the notion and wanted to die at home, with her children around her. When she was awake, she spent what energy she could muster being with the kids. As weak as she was, Ramona was concerned about her picking up a virus of some kind and insisted that anyone who entered her room wear a gauze mask.

She also limited the amount of time anyone other than family could spend with her. One afternoon she called for Pastor Springfield to come and see her. He had been a regular visitor, but on this occasion she wanted to discuss with him what she wanted for her funeral service. As far as she was concerned, that was the last matter to resolve. The matter of the adoption had all been taken care of and Mike's business had been sold. She was at peace with God and trusted that she would soon be going to heaven.

Despite her weakened condition, Samantha didn't want her illness to detract from Janet's eleventh birthday on the 20th. With Ramona's help, she planned out a small birthday party for her baby. Naturally she wasn't able to do much and Ramona did all of the work, according to what Sam wanted. Ramona baked the cake and arranged for Janet's friends to come over.

Since Sam's contact with people was limited and she couldn't participate. Before the guests arrived, there was a private gathering with just the immediate family, which included Ramona. Janet opened her gifts from them and blew out the candles on the cake after a round of Happy Birthday. When the guests began arriving, they gathered in the living room. Sam listened in from her bedroom at the laughing and giggling little girls as they played games. She could hear her daughter's delight as she opened her gifts. Then there was another rendition of Happy Birthday and the serving of the cake and ice cream. Oh how she wished that she could have been more involved. She knew that this was the last birthday that she would share with any of her children.

Because of the demand placed on Ramona in caring for her sole patient, Sheffield and Ramona decided to forgo a formal celebration of their third anniversary on the 22nd. The event was affectionately observed with the exchange of cards and gifts between them.

During the rest of January, the floor coverings were put down and the cabinets and fixtures were put in place. At the end of the month, there was very little left to do. Sheffield's team had two more matches, winning one and losing one. Craig ended up forfeiting an out of town match, choosing to stay home with his mother and sisters. He felt like dropping out altogether for the rest of the season, but his mother insisted that he stay with it.

The house was close enough to being finished that Sheffield and Ramona moved in on January 31st in order to avoid having to pay an entire months 'rent for only a few days. All that remained was installing knobs on the cabinet doors and drawers and putting up the curtain rods and a few incidental details. Noting that couldn't be done with them in the house. Ray said that he could work around them.

The house was everything they had envisioned. They couldn't wait to have the family over to inaugurate the large dining room. The kitchen had every modern convince of the day, but the feature that Ramona was the most excited about was her double oven.

Their bedroom was spacious with a plenty of closet space and a master bathroom. There was also a guest bedroom on the first floor, giving them five bedrooms in all. There was a main bathroom on the main floor as well. A family room was just around the corner from the dining room, the combined space was an L shape. At the end of the family room was the rock fireplace with glass doors on either side that opened up onto the back porch which ran the length of the house.

The front of the house had a wainscot of rock, like that used in the fireplace and chimney. Another porch ran across the front of the house with a beautiful wooden door that opened into an entry way. Off to one side was a cozy formal living room and on the other was as small room that was intend for an office.

On the east end of the house was double car garage that opened into a utility room between the living room and the kitchen. The barn was just across the driveway and slightly behind the house, making it easy to access for taking care of the horses during the winter.

By the end of Saturday night, the 1st, they had things pretty much in place. The house still looked bare as they didn't have a lot of household furnishings. That would be taken care of when they moved the kids in and brought some things from their house, so the kids would have some familiar surroundings.

On Sunday, they picked up the kids and attend services at First United Methodist Church in Salem for the first time. After Church, they tried out the dining room and had the entire Brason family, including the Taylor children over for Sunday dinner. With a folding banquet table, it accommodated everyone nicely.

During the next couple of weeks, Samantha struggled to hang onto life. By then she barely weighed

ninety five pounds. She was so weak that eating was difficult. The cancer and starvation were in a race to claim her life. She was asleep most of the time and when she was awake, she wasn't very cognitive. Her doctor called on her once a day and Ramona was there practically around the clock, sleeping on the couch and hadn't got to enjoy her new home. The kids could hardly bare to see her in such a way.

On one of the rare occasions when Samantha was awake and responding, Ramona convinced her that she needed to be in the hospital. She agreed and also said that it was time for the kids to move in with them. Both were arranged and were taken care of that very day.

On Valentines day, Sheffield, Ramona, and the kids dressed up in their Sunday best to go to Sylvia's wedding. They found the Mormon chapel on the corner of Patterson Avenue and 12th Street. It was a two story white wood frame structure, with a basement lower level with daylight windows. The building was thirty five feet wide and seventy feet long. What made it interesting was the steeple above the double front doors and one slightly shorter at the rear of the building. Each of the four corners mounted a smaller spire, giving it six in all. The round windows in square frames also gave it character. A set of wrap around concrete steps led up to the double doors. It was probably built sometime around the turn of the century.

Just inside the front door was a narrow foyer with an open cloak room along the outside walls under a set of stairs that led to the second floor. They took off their coats and hung them up with the several that were already there. On either side, the foyer led around the corner to a short hallway that entered into the chapel.

At the front of the chapel was a small podium with organ pipes across the back. Between the pipes and the pulpit was a short pew that seated about eight people. To the right was the organ and to the left was a piano. Directly below the pulpit was small table covered with a white cloth and two chairs. It appeared to be the communion table. The chapel had six pews that would seat about twelve people each. In all, the chapel would seat about seventy five people. The chapel was fairly plain. There was portrait of Christ on one side of the chapel and the portrait of man dressed in early nineteenth century clothing, who Sheffield didn't recognize, on the opposite side. He mentioned to Ramona, "Don't you find it odd that there isn't a cross anywhere in sight?"

Sheffield saw Shenan and his family on the second pew so he lead his family to pew directly behind them. There were several other people in the chapel as well. In looking them over, Sheffield recognized the two Rowan brothers. Wade was on his team and Read was on Craig's team. A couple of minutes later, Emmett and Ellen came in. The made their way past Sheffield's family and sat in the center of the pew.

Then Walt entered the chapel with another man who looked familiar to Sheffield. Walt took a seat in front of Shenan's family, while the man went around to the other side of the chapel to where the Rowan boys

were seated. He pointed to the front and the boys nodded their heads. They got up and went to front and moved the table out of the way.

The man who had come in with Walt made his way around the back of the chapel and up the aisle and approached Sheffield who was seated on the outside of the pew. With a smile and an out stretched hand, the man said, "Hello Admiral Brason, I'm Roger Rowan. My son, Wade is on your wrestling team."

Sheffield stood and took his hand, "I'm pleased to meet you, Roger. I've seen you at some of our matches."

Roger went on to further identify himself, "I'm the presiding elder of our congregation and I'll be performing the marriage. Scott is my nephew."

"This in my wife Romona." Ramona remained seated but extended her hand. "And these are Craig, Norma, and Janet."

"Are they your children?" He asked as he waved to them.

"Not exactly." Ramona answered. "We sort of borrowed them for the evening."

Roger didn't respond, but had curious look on his face. "I know who Craig is. He and my other son, Read, are on the JV wrestling team." He then went behind the pew to introduce himself to Emmett and Ellen. After greeting them he introduced himself to Shenan and his family.

Roger visited with the Brasons for moment and asked a little about them and got acquainted. While he was visiting with them, his boys joined him. "Now if you will excuse me I need to attend to some matters before the wedding. I look forward to visiting with you some more afterwards."

After Roger left, nearly everyone else who was in the chapel came over to introduce themselves as well. As other people came in they too introduced themselves.

When they had a moment to themselves, Shenan commented, "Boy, these Mormon's are a friendly bunch."

In the process of meeting people, Walt introduced them to Tom and Eve Rowan, Scott's parents. Again, Sheffield recognized him from some of the matches. His son Dean was also on Sheffield's team.

Before long, the Austin brothers and their families came in one at a time and took up the right side of the remaining pews. They too received the same greetings from the Rowan's family and friends.

The small chapel was mostly full when Roger re-entered the chapel. He stood below the pulpit where the communion table had been, facing the audience. "Family and friends," he began, "It is my privilege to introduce the prospective bride and groom. Miss Sylvia Brason and Mister Scott Rowan."

At that moment, both doors at the front of the chapel opened and Sylvia accompanied by Walt came through the door on the right. At the same instant, Scott and his mother came through the door on the left. The bride and groom proceeded to the spot directly in front of and facing the presiding elder, while their

escorts sat in the pews with their respective families. It was odd that the Wedding March was not played. They also noticed that the wording of the ceremony was considerably different from what they were accustomed to. There was no giving away of the bride or exchanging of rings. They did not exchange rings until after they had been declared legally and lawfully married. After the kissing of the bride, they were formally introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Scott Rowan.

After the ceremony, the guests were invited into to what was called the cultural hall for the reception. The cultural hall was directly behind the chapel, separated by a large folding door that opened to either side. Several tables were set up with six chairs around each table. A simple centerpiece adorned each table and cut out valentines were plastered to the walls around the hall. The hall was slightly smaller than the chapel and had a stage at the far end. On either side of the stage were stairs that led to the second floor and door that exited to the outside.

The bride and groom and their parents formed a reception line, standing before a backdrop that had been set up in front of the stage. Their wedding gifts were on long tables set up on the stage. Sheffield, Ramona, and the kids got in line and waited for their turn to greet the newlyweds. As he gave his niece a hug and a kiss on the cheek, he couldn't help think of Sandy. Sylvia was only six weeks younger than Sandy and the two of them had been very close.

Once through the reception line, they sat at one of the tables and were promptly served a small piece of cake, a handful of mixed nuts and some punch. As promised, Roger Rowan and his wife, Chantalle, stopped by to visit for a moment to get better acquainted. While they visited, the kids involved themselves with the Rowan kids and their cousins and friends, many of whom they knew from school.

They learned that Roger was a lay minister and that he and his brother ran a cattle ranch in South County along the base of the hills on US Highway 221, about five miles south of where Sheffield lived. Naturally Ramona chimed in about her ranching roots. Roger in turn asked Sheffield about his naval career and particularly about his war service. He and Sheffield ended up talking about the wrestling team. Likewise, Ramona got acquainted with Chantalle. Besides Wade and Read, they had four other children, two of which were close to the same age as Janet and Norma, their youngest was five. The Rowan brothers had been born and raised in South County, but Chantelle was from Idaho of all places. The reception was a nice social event with the Methodists and Mormons mingling together. It was difficult to tell who was who.

On the morning of Wednesday, February 19th Samantha was in her final hours. Her doctor called Ramona and told her that he didn't expect her to last until noon. Sheffield arranged for a substitute for himself and kept the kids home from school. Ramona drove into Roanoke to the Lewis-Gale Hospital to be with her while Sheffield explained to the kids what was happening and got them ready for the day.

About a quarter to ten, Ramona called and told Sheffield to bring the kids to say goodbye. When they got there, Sam was asleep and Ramona gently woke her. "Sam," she said, "the kids are here."

Samantha opened her eyes to see them and a faint smile crossed her lips. She weakly motioned for them to move in closer to her. In a hoarse whisper, she said, "I'm glad that you came so I can tell you good bye."

With Craig on one side of the bed and the girls on the other, she took Craig by one hand and Janet by the other. Norma placed her hand over her bony fingers. Ramona and Sheffield stood at the foot of the bed with an arm around each other.

With tears streaming down the kids' cheeks, Samantha said, "This isn't how I want you to remember me. Think of me as I was before I got sick and keep that image of me alive in your hearts. I want you to know how much I love each of you. You have been the joy of my life." She paused and gasped. "Now I must leave and go to heaven and you can't come with me. I know that you'll be alright and that gives me peace." Again she gasped for air. "Now you have to let me go. Your father is waiting f..."

Samantha was unable to finish the sentence. Her loose grip on their hands relaxed, her head tilted to one side, and she closed her eyes in death.

The kids began sobbing, Sheffield and Ramona pulled all three of them into their arms and wept with them. After a moment, Ramona stepped out into the hall to summon a nurse who promptly came into the room. She put her stethoscope on Samantha's chest to listen for a heart beat or breathing. Finding neither, she said, "I'm so sorry."

Sheffield and Ramona ushered the kids out of the room and took them home with them. Ramona had a list of people that Samantha wanted her to call. First she called Pastor Springfield who came to the house. Sam already had her funeral planned and those she wanted to participate had already been notified, including Ramona with the song that she wanted her to sing.

The only real question was when to hold the funeral service; that in part would depend on the mortuary. By the time Ramona called, they had already received her body. After a quick conference with the pastor, it was decided that it would be on Saturday the 22nd at eleven o'clock. Next, Ramona called Samantha's next oldest sister, and then Mike's brother and gave them each the news and the time and place of the funeral. They in turn let the rest of their respective families know.

Then Ramona called each of the kids' schools to let them know that they would be out for at least the remainder of the week. Sheffield made arrangements for a substitute for the rest of the week and for Coach Karrington to take care of the team, as well as their match in Lexington on Friday.

Later that afternoon Walt came to see the kids. As much as Sam, Sheffield and Ramona, and Walt had tried to prepare them, they naturally took it hard. They turned to Sheffield and Ramona, who they knew

understood how they were feeling. Both of them had suffered personal loss, unlike Walt and Pastor Springfield; they understood in theory, but not from experience.

Over the next couple of days, friends and neighbors called on the children at the Brason home. The Methodist Women's Organization from Green Memorial coordinated meals to be brought in and began planning a luncheon for the family after the service. Members of Mike and Sam's family began arriving from out of town on Friday.

On Friday evening, They had the kids dress in their Sunday best and took them to the mortuary for the viewing. By then they had come to grips with finality of their loss and had their composure about them. Samantha would have been proud of their courage and bravery. Beginning with Craig, then Norma, and finally Janet, they stood at the head of the open casket that bore the body of their mother. Ramona and Sheffield stayed with them in the room, but stayed back as family and friends came through the line to greet them and offer their condolences and comfort.

As they mingled with the well wishers, Sheffield felt a tap on the shoulder and turned around to see who it was, only to be embraced by a pair of arms that he hadn't felt around him for more than three years. They held each other tightly for a moment and when they released each other, she kept a hold of his hand.

She looked at Ramona and said, "You're probably wondering, 'who is this woman who had your husband in her arms?' I'm Paula."

"You remember me telling you about Paula Drussell, don't you, Ramona? She is Samantha's cousin."

"Oh sure. Paula. Yes, I remember. I'm pleased to meet you Paula."

"So you're the lucky woman who landed Sheffield. I couldn't seem to hook him for some reason."

"Gosh its good to see you again Paula. You look great."

"Why thank you. Sheffield."

"I came into the bank about six months after the last time I saw you, but they told me that you had remarried and quit. Is your husband with you?"

"No. That was premature and didn't last. He was separated from his wife when I started seeing him. Once they were divorced, we where married. Six months later I found out that he was having an affair with his ex-wife. He left me and went back to her. You were right, you can't force the spark. If its not there, its not there."

"I'm sorry to hear that Paula. So are you still in Norfolk?"

"Yes I am. But hey, whenever I hear our song, I think of you. You taught me that I could love again after I lost my husband. You'll be happy to know that I am seeing someone. This time there is a spark without having to force it."

"I'm glad to hear that, I'm happy for you. So how are Brent, Evelyn, and Jillian?"

"When I told Evelyn that we had broken up, it broke her heart and she cried her eyes out. She really liked you. Well, Brent is twenty. He went into the Army after graduating high school in forty three. He's out now and is going to school. Evelyn just turned eighteen a week ago yesterday and is a senior in high school, and Jillian is now fourteen. They're all doing fine."

"So I understand that you'll have a family again. I think its swell that you're adopting the kids like that. They need to stay together. I can't think of anyone better than you to take them. I'll never forget how good you were with my kids. I had hoped that you could step in and be their father. Say, I see your walking with a canew, Sheffield." Paula observed. "What happened?"

"I was injured when my ship got hit in the Mediterranean. My leg got broken and it left some some permanent nerve damage. Ramona here, was my angel of mercy and nursed me back to health."

"So is that how you met Sheffield?" Paula asked Ramona.

"Thats a long story. I have known him for twenty years." Ramona answered. "But to make it short, his late wife was my best friend. How did you meet Sheffield?"

"Though my neighbors, Pat and Mace Owen."

"Oh you know the Owens too. They're good friends of ours. I first got to know them when they lived next door to Sheffield and Geannie in Hawaii."

"So what do you hear from them these days?"

"Well," Ramona answered, "Pat is in Oakland while Mace is stationed in Japan. He's due to be rotated back to the states in the fall, but they don't know just where."

"I hear that you did a wonderful job of taking care of Samantha right up to the end, Ramona. That was good of you."

"Thats what Ramona does best." Sheffield replied. "She was a nurse for twenty years."

"Twenty years? You don't look much over thirty." Paula complimented. "Well, it was so good to see you again Sheffield. And Ramona, it was nice to meet you. I see some of my cousins that I haven't seen in years. I'd better go say hello. We can visit more later."

"It was good to see you Paula."

"Yes, Paula. It was nice to meet you."

As Paula walked away, Ramona said to Sheffield, "She's beautiful woman. I can see why you were attracted to her. Her figure and her height kind of reminds me of Geannie. I'll bet you broke her heart."

"Not really. She hadn't felt anything either. Thats what she meant about trying to force the issue. She did do one thing for me for which I will ever be grateful."

"And what is that?"

“She showed me that I was capable of loving again and where I needed to focus my affection.”

“And where was that?”

“On you.”

“Oh Babe, that's so sweet. I guess I need to thank Paula for getting you on the right track then don't I. Just look at yourself, now you have me, and now we have them.” she said gesturing toward their children.

“The Lord giveth,” Sheffield said, “and the Lord taketh away. In my case, he gave it all back to me.”

“Yeah.” Ramona concluded. “Kind of like the story of Job.”

The next morning, Sheffield and Ramona took the kids to the church for another viewing and the funeral. It was much as it had been the evening before. The kids held up well, until the moment the casket was closed. It was so final. Sheffield and Ramona were right there with them. Again the three of them clung to the two amazing people who has stepped forward to assure that they could stay together. The five of them cried together.

As the casket was taken into the chapel, Craig followed directly behind, holding the hands of his sisters, one on either side. Sheffield and Ramona were right behind them. Once in the chapel, they were seated directly in front of their mother's casket. Sheffield sat to one side with Ramona on the other.

Throughout the service, mention was made of Samantha's brave, but losing battle with cancer and Mike's untimely death. Tribute was paid to Ramona of caring for her so diligently right up to the end. When it came Ramona's turn to sing, she got up and left the kids to go up on the stand where Sarah joined her for a repeat performance of “Abide With Me”, at Samantha's request.

In his remarks, Pastor Springfield talked directly to the three children who had been orphaned by a tragic turn of events over the last view months. He tried to assure them that even though life seems unfair, God's purposes are at work. He used the analogy of “When God closes a door, he always opens a window.” In this case that window was the Brasons and assured them that they would be alright. He went on to tell the congregation how they were faced with the prospect of being split up and how they asked their mother if they could be adopted by Sheffield and Ramona.

He told how Samantha approached them and that they agreed. It became her final act of love to put all of the pieces in place so that when she was gone, it would all be taken care of. Many in attendance, even some among the family were not aware of the arrangement. Pastor Springfield praised them for their selflessness love. He reminded them of how just over five years ago in that very same chapel, Sheffield had sat through the funeral of his wife and children.

Following the service, the Brason car was the first in the funeral procession that followed the hearse to the cemetery. Again they followed the kids as they walked hand in hand behind the casket to the grave

site. After Mike's funeral, Sam had a headstone placed over both plots, knowing that she would soon be joining him. On one side, it said "Michael Lane Taylor, May 16, 1906 – September 30, 1946, Age 40." on the other side it said, "Samantha Summer, March 4, 1908 – February 19, 1947, Age 38." When she had it erected she left her death date and age blank, but it had been engraved prior to the funeral. On the back, it listed the names of their children.

After Pastor Springfield committed the body to the grave, those assembled mingled and visited. Many of them again came to offer comfort and support to the children, One tender moment that Sheffield observed was when Edith Austin, came up to Craig and put her arms around him. She held him tightly as he cried on her shoulder. And then she tenderly kissed him on the lips. For the rest of the afternoon, she remained at his side, holding his hand. She even rode with the Brasons back to the church for the luncheon. Janet rode in the front seat between Sheffield and Ramona to make room for the extra passenger.

The luncheon was typical of so many. For the kids, it was the first real family reunion they had been to in a long time. Their aunts and uncles went out of their way to thank Sheffield and Ramona for what they were doing and promised to stay in touch with the kids. For some reason, their promise seemed hollow because there really hadn't been that much contact over the years.

Sheffield and Paula had a chance to visit some more. They reminisced about the time they had together, beginning with the banquet prior to sailing with the Reprisal on her first combat deployment and the month that they dated before sailing for the North Atlantic. They both expressed how their relationship had helped them to move on after losing their spouses. Even though things didn't work out between them.

The kids had already selected the things from the house that they wanted to take with them. What was left was offered to Samantha and Mike's families, but there were no takers. After the first of the week, Ramona would donate what was left to the Goodwill Thrift Store. They would even come and pick it up.

It had been a long four days for the kids when they went home with their new family. They had been grieving for so long that they were actually relieved that their mother had been released from the pain and suffering that they went through right along with her.

It had been an emotional roller coaster for Ramona as well. Taking care of two households and Samantha had run her ragged. She too was relieved. The relief was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, she had watched another dear friend die. On the other hand, she was now free to pursue her own life. The biggest miracle of all is that she now had three children of her own, something that had been denied her until now.

When they got home from the funeral, Sheffield built a fire in the fireplace. Everyone changed their clothes and gathered around the fire place in their pajamas and talked about the day and the service and all of the people who came.

Speaking for himself and his sisters, Craig said, "Thank you for all that you've done for us, but most of all thank you for taking us in. You don't know how much this means to us."

"Thank you for wanting us." Ramona replied. "This is your home now, and we are your family. I know it will take some getting used to."

"We like it here." Norma said. "It feels like home."

"We're glad that you feel that way." Ramona said.

Then Craig said, "I miss mom and all, but I'm glad that she doesn't have to suffer anymore. It hurt so bad to watch her be sick for so long. It was worse than having her die. Is it bad to feel that way?"

"No, Craig. It isn't. You all have grieved for so long for her already. Do you remember what Walt said about that?" Sheffield said. "You'll still have times when you feel sad, but it will get better."

"I'm just glad that we still have a mom and dad." Janet remarked.

"Me too." Norma agreed.

Then Craig summed it up the best, "After all, we did get to choose our new parents. As much as I loved my mom and dad, I'm proud that I get to be your son. I like the sound of my new name; Craig Taylor Brason."

"And I'm proud to have you as my son, Craig Taylor Brason." Sheffield said. "And I'm proud to have you as my daughters; Norma Taylor Brason and Janet Taylor Brason. I'm the luckiest man in the world to be a father again and to have such great kids. I thank God for the blessing that you are to me. In fact, lets get down on our knees and thank God."

Sheffield got down on his knees and beckoned for everyone to join him. Holding hands, they formed a circle and bowed their heads as Sheffield expressed the gratitude that they all felt. "Dear Lord above, we are thankful that you have brought us all together as a family and for the love that we have for each other. Help us to live together in harmony as we adjust and help the kids to heal from their loss and adjust to their new circumstances. Help Ramona and me to be the kind of parents that they need. Please watch over us and bless our new home and our new family. Amen."

Tears streamed down the cheeks on five faces. They were not tears of sorrow of the past but tears of joy for the future.

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South County is the name of the area in Roanoke County south of the City of Roanoke.

The chapel described is fictional and is reminiscent of the Salt Lake Temple, however according to one source, the branch chapel was located somewhere along Patterson Avenue prior to 1949. The location in the story is a vacant lot.

Goodwill Industries was founded in 1902 and the store in Roanoke opened in 1932