

~ Chapter 1: Hope ~

White gossamer curtains danced flirtatiously with one another inside the open sash window of the Ryan's beach resort home. The sheer, light pieces of cloth fluttered, billowed and bumped to the tinkling tune of the wind chimes, hanging between them, and to the uneven rhythms of the Atlantic Ocean's salty, soft June breezes. The bright afternoon sunlight streamed through the open, lower sash, contrasting starkly with the dark, but spaciouly airy interior of the beach house. Against the south-side wall, an old black and white television set aired a commercial. Several feet to the right of the TV, Ryzanna Sheeboom stepped forward towards the sunlight to permit the hems of the flowing curtains to brush against her chest, chin and milk-fed cheeks, and to tickle her nose. She giggled. Breathing deeply, inhaling the salty scent of the moist sea air, the girl took hold gently of one of the curtains in her right hand. The camouflaging cloth was so soft, so fragile between her fingers like she used to be, but so different from the inner toughness she had been forced to develop over the last couple years. Due to her missing husband's, enforced three-year absence, Ryz'n had learned to salve her internal wounds, both emotional and mental in her own way. She camouflaged her most personal scars, even as she hid now, entwining herself in the soft, window-length curtains. A child again, she played without worry.

At first glance, due to her slight stature and the beach home's dark interior, the girl could have been mistaken for a large child. But Ryz'n had put away childish things five years ago, when she began dating Nicky Sheeboom. A closer inspection of the gossamer-enshrouded personage revealed a striking, young woman with a surprising equally wide breadth of shoulders and hips. Chiefly, it was her scarcely longer than average but unusually narrow waist, which emphasized her female form. Unlike some long-waisted women who seemed predestined to inherit short, stubby legs, Ryz'n's graceful, well toned limbs lent a subtle sense of gentle flowing to her being. Shod in sandals, she dressed plainly in a mint-green denim, wraparound, A-line skirt and a simple, light, white cotton top. The blouse was sleeveless, collarless and front-buttoned. However, her plain dress could not conceal her adult, feminine features. No, there was no mistaking her for a child, not even a large one.

Although her maiden name was Ryan, her features as well as her skin tone bespoke a Mediterranean, even an eastern, heritage. Even now, her unstable, olive complexion faded and darkened according to the available sunlight streaming just inside the window. Her thick, shoulder-length hair, the color of hot chocolate surrounding a marshmallow, was a smoky grey-brown and grew densely upon her head. Unfashionably worn in a flip and parted high up on the right side, her wavy hair held its body well. The girl's forelocks fell continually into the left side of her face, despite her ever present, yellow-gold hair ribbon. A keen observer might conclude erroneously that Ryz'n dyed her hair, because the first half inch of her roots

Almost There

were black as coal and matched the hue of her wispy-haired forearms and her expressive eyebrows. However, she did not dye her hair, nor did she wear make-up, aside from an occasional bit of pink lip gloss and matching paint on her finger and toe nails. Her natural hirsutism and the density of her thick, mop-like head of hair originated from her Indian-Pakistani grandparents. Nevertheless, somehow, her Irish-Scandinavian ancestors had sufficient input to lighten the hue of the outgrown strands, despite their severely dark roots.

Like her kid sister, Ryz'n's face had some makings of a classical beauty, though she would not agree with that assessment. She possessed clear lines, in a high-chiseled cheekbones, a firm angular jaw, smooth roman nose and a full pair of pink-red lips. However, unlike her sister and more like her mother, Ryz'n had never lost the baby fat from her face, as she had elsewhere from her svelte shape. A double layering of cheek flesh gathered into a false double chin, producing the delightful, multiple dimples, which were her trademark. The girl's face reminded one of a high-school cheerleader's, giving her a youthful appearance that belied her age, which was a day and two weeks shy of twenty-two. Her large, hazel-green irises could flash emerald green in an instant, when passion burned within her, and reminded one of her Irish genealogy. Yet, shaped like large almonds, even her eyes were not wholly Irish. Her Spanish and Greek ancestry revealed itself in her eyes as well. Protected by unusually long, black lashes and highlighted with pitch black, broadly arched brows that swept well past the corners of her eyes, Ryz'n's cat-like viewing orbs presented an appealing contrast in both beauty and heredity. Her mixed heritage rendered her features into a stark but alluring natural difference, one her husband could never resist.

They were waiting. They were waiting downstairs. Very well. Let them wait. I have a right to enjoy a rare moment of happiness, even if it is for just a moment.

She snapped the fingers of her left hand in a rhythm and blues (R&B) beat. "Disco Fever" may have begun to sweep the nation, but five years ago Ryz'n had fallen under the spell of what had become a long smoldering, obsessive fever that she could never quite shake, nor did she want to. The young woman began to dance with the curtain, slowly, vibrantly—the Queens Style, as her husband had taught her. Her feet, clad in sandals, slid easily over the wooden parquet floor, which she noted was a great surface for dancing. Up and back, Ryz'n swayed in time to the sultry tune. She began to croon in her smoky voice with that inimitable catch which had sold millions of records ...

(Snap ... snap ... snap ... snap!)
Nevah know how much I love ya.
Nevah know how much I care.
When you put your arms around me,
I get a feeling that's so hard to bear.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap ... snap ... snap ... snap!)
Listen to me, Baby. Hear every word I say.
No one can love ya the way I do,
'Cause they don't know how to love you my-ee way.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap ... snap ... snap ... snap!)
Bless my soul, I love ya.
Take this heart away.
Take these arms I'll never use.
And just believe in what my lips have to say.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap ... snap ... snap ... snap!)
Sun lights up the daytime.
Moon lights up the night.
My eyes light up when you call my name,
'Cause I know you're gonna treat me right.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap ... snap ... snap ... snap!)
Hmmmmmmmm.
Hmmmmmmmm.
Hmmmmmmmm.
Hmmmmmmmm!

Ryz'n became silent as she snapped the fingers of her free, left hand in time with the beat, dancing always dancing to the melody that played on inside her head. Then, she began to speak aloud as if she were not alone.

"You remember, Baby, the first time—the first time you taught me this dance? That was in the sea breeze, too, The Sea Breeze Café up in Rehobeth. You were so excited to have picked out Little Willie John's version of "Fever" off the juke box. You said, I remember, you said:" She paused to re-enact the memory quoting her husband verbatim, attempting to imitate his croaky baritone.

"That's a miracle, Ry. I can't believe it—Little Willie John! Who has a copy of Little Willie on a juke box these days? Hunh? Must be for us, Ry, just for us. Come on Baby, let's dance, I'll teach ya. ...Sure, sure right here. These people won't mind. Just take my hand here, move like I do and look into my eyes. Don't look anywhere but into my eyes and it will all work out fine."

"And ooh Baby, how right you were. I did and I've never been the same."

She began to move rhythmically again, keeping time with the "Fever" in both her head and her heart. She danced with him again, with her boy groom. She danced with the curtain, as if she were dancing with him, careful not to bump into the round, darkly stained, oaken, captain's table behind her.

"You know Sweetie, we're kinda like those chimes and these curtains, you and I. Life has blown us some tough, horrific gales Baby, but we keep singin' and dancin'. And just as the curtains are tethered to that rod up there, we are anchored in our faith and in our hope and we abide ... And I'm hopin', I'm hopin' Sweetie that you'll turn up soon, real soon." She sighed, "'cause I'm so, so lonely, Nicky. I started off pretty strong and perky. But lately, I believe it's beginning to get me to me, Baby. I don't believe I can take much more of this emptiness, no—it's beginnin' to get to me—"

The Wide World of Sports promotional jingle signaled the end of the commercial, airing on the TV set that perched against the wall between the two open sash windows to her left. "... Spanning the globe to bring you the thrill of victory ... and ... the agony of defeat!" The girl let go of the curtain and stopped dancing. She stepped back a few feet to where she could view the TV screen easily, but still catch the soft, moist ocean breezes through the open window. Ryz'n repeated "'The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat'"! She inhaled and exhaled deeply, speaking aloud in an empty room.

"We know all about that, don't we Baby?"

The network returned to the ball game she had been watching.

They were waiting. They were waiting downstairs. Very well, let them wait.

The University of Texas was just killing some little school from California in the semi-finals of the 1975 College World Series (CWS). Nicky loved baseball, but he would not have liked this. He always rooted for the underdog. Texas was already up six in the eighth and Longhorns were circling the bases like they were in a stampede. The girl assumed "The

Stance” as her husband had called it. With her left foot forward a foot or so and her left knee bent, she had shifted her weight to the right throwing her right hip out. Her right forearm crossed under her chest, beneath her solid bosom, while her right hand slipped into the crook inside her left elbow, which was bent so that her left thumb supported her chin. She gnawed gently on the side of her left index finger, which rested between her lips.

They should take him out before this thing becomes impossible.

A former softball most valuable player (MVP) as both a pitcher and catcher for Pocomoke High back in her senior year, Ry knew what she was talking about. “Maybe they don’t have anyone else?” The ex-ballplayer reasoned, whispering under her breath. “Never thought of that, did ya? They’ve already used three guys, at least. Probably, they don’t have any arms left with this being a double elimination tournament.” She groaned as another base hit drove one more Longhorn across the plate safely.

Loudly now, she complained, removing her finger from her mouth. “Oh! Put a fork in him, for mercy’s sake!”

Suddenly, her kid sister appeared in the screened, front porch doorway of the three and a half story, weather-beaten, wood frame, resort home.

“Come on, Ryz’n! You’re holdin’ up the whole show!”

Ryz’n diverted her attention from the TV screen for a few split seconds to glance at her sister Sheena. The salty scent of the June afternoon’s sea air wafted through the front screened porch as well as the open sash windows, permeating all within the Outer Banks beach home. Sheena was a classically beautiful young, woman. Ryz’n believed Sheena to be the true beauty of the family, though opinions varied. The only opinion on that subject which really mattered to Ryz’n was that of her husband. And it pleased her greatly that he disagreed with her. Despite their closeness in age and their competitive natures, Ryz’n loved her sister dearly. She had helped raise her kid sister ever since their mom had gone to work down at Warner-Robins to help their dad pay the bills some twelve years ago. Only fifteen months apart, the sisters knew well how to pull and push each other’s buttons. Ryz’n understood she was pushing one of Sheena’s now, by watching the television, instead of hurrying down to the family station wagon, as requested. Yet, Ryz’n also knew what Sheena did not realize. The family would not be going anywhere until Sheena’s newlywed husband exited the bathroom.

The dark haired beauty held the screen porch door open to the home’s second story porch with her foot. The summer sea breeze, passing through the porch’s floor-to-ceiling screen windows, rocked the porch ceiling swing gently but unevenly. Sheena tapped her foot impatiently.

“Come on, dammit! Everybody’s waiting down at the car!”

The muffled sound of a toilet flushing increased in volume as the door to the bathroom at the back of the home opened. A large handsome, athletic looking young man with nearly shoulder length curly brown locks and close, deep-set dark, brown eyes emerged from the hallway.

Ryz'n took her eyes off the TV set again, this time to question her kid sister who still stood in the doorway.

"Everybody's waitin' down at the car, hunh, Sheena?"

"Well, I thought they were." Exasperated, Sheena scolded her husband of almost six months. "Bryce, I thought you were downstairs taking care of Scruffy. What are ya doin' up here, Baby?"

Bryson replied by quickly raising and lowering his eyebrows repeatedly like the old comedian Groucho Marx, as he scurried down the hall and across the large open dining/game room, barking "Had to go! Had to go!" He stopped halfway to the door to speak to his sister-in-law, his senior by a year.

"Hey Ry, thought you were comin' with us?" Sheena interrupted him.

"What about Scruffy Junior, Bryson?"

"Ry took care of her, didn't ya Ry?"

"Don't I always?"

"Sure, sure ya do. Thanks, Ry. OK now, Sheena?" Bryson looked skeptically at his bride and then turned his attention back to his sister-in-law.

"Hey now Ry, whaddaya got there on the tube? Aren't ya goin' parasailin'?"

"I am, I am. I just wanted to see this for a minute."

"What? What is it?"

"It's baseball. College baseball. The World Series. Never saw it on TV before. *Wide World of Sports* is using this semi-final game for it's whole show today."

"Hey, no kiddin'. College Baseball on TV, hunh?"

"Yeah, it's kind of like the Rose Bowl, Orange Bowl and Sugar Bowl all rolled up in one deal. It's a double elimination tournament with the top eight teams in the country playin'—"

"For Pete's sake, Ryzanna! Now you're gettin' him interested in it," admonished the long-haired brunette from the front porch doorway. "Come on, we're gonna be late for our lesson. Thought you wanted to learn to parasail, Ryz'n? It was your idea to start with."

"She's right Ry, we better get goin.' We're gonna miss our turn."

The girls' mother ascended the outdoor front deck steps, wearing a wide, floppy brimmed, red fluffy, fringed, straw hat tied to her chin by a scarf. Her handbag dangled before her. Reaching the porch deck, she called through the outside screen window. The woman looked more like a sister than a mother to the two girls.

"Come on girls, your father is starting to get mad. Let's go! Girls, Bryce?"

"I've been tellin' 'em Mom, but they won't listen" pleaded Sheena.

"They're watchin' a stupid BASEBALL GAME!" The youthful matron peered in through the front window screens, searching for her older daughter inside the dark, stained wood interior. Ryz'n's mom pressed her nose against the screen.

“Ry? Is that right? Come on now, Honey. Don’t you want to learn to parasail? We all thought that’s what you wanted to do.” She peered inside to see Ryz’n.

“Oh sure, Mom. It’s, it’s just that, well, this is the College World Series and Nicky, well, Nicky always wanted to see it, if he couldn’t actually play in it, you know?”

“Sure, Baby. I understand. You can stay and watch if you want, but I think we’re going to go now. I’m looking forward to it. You’ll have to fix dinner yourself, if you stay. We’re going to grab a bite out and stop by the dunes to catch the sunset later. Know how you love that sunset up on the ridge, My Baby. But you do what you want. However, turn off the TV, please, if you *are* coming.” The mother lifted her chin from the screen, righted her fringed wide-brimmed straw hat upon her head, turned and disappeared down the outside porch stairs.

“I’m comin’. I’m comin’,” responded Ryz’n belatedly.

Ryz’n wanted to go, too. She just had not seen the need of sitting all cooped up in the family car for fifteen minutes, waiting for Bryson. Besides, more commercials were on the way now as the manager of the little school had finally decided to take Ryz’n’s advice and change pitchers.

“Eight runs down? Too late now, Bub” observed Ryz’n wryly.

Like the others, Ryz’n, wore her bathing suit under her clothes. And, of course for Nicky, she wore a yellow ribbon in her hair. Always, she wore the yellow ribbon. In one swift motion, the athletic girl snatched a beach towel and her FosterGrants off the top of the TV set, as she slapped at the set’s on-off button. She yelled to her brother-in-law, outracing him to the front door. “You’re holdin’ up the whole show, Bryce!” The pair disappeared down the front outside stairs, bumping and giggling like a couple of kids, as they ran close behind Sheena.

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Ryz’n had hit the set’s power button, but she had not hit it squarely enough on center to turn off the TV. The picture faded out for a few seconds to a white dot in the center of a dark green screen, but then it bounced back. The tube spread its light slowly outward across the dark screen, crackling as it went. The sound of the Ryan’s car engine drifted off down the street. The huge three and a half story Outer Banks resort home was empty, but not quiet as the TV and the game played on to a second floor, of empty couches, rocking chairs, tables and a gently whirring overhead fan.

“Well Leo, looks like we’re going to get the opportunity we had been hoping for to see this young man pitch, here with the bases loaded and only one down in the eighth.”

“Yes, it looks that way, Chris. He might as well pitch. He’s done everything else for his club so far, includin’ carryin’ the bats to the park!”

“As Strickler makes his way in from center, we’ll take a minute to look at his pitching stats. Let’s see, uh, here we go. As a pitcher, he’s appeared in 22

games, all in relief, winning three and losing two and recorded fifteen saves, with two no decisions. He's pitched 54 and 2/3 innings, giving up 14 earned runs on 19 hits and eleven walks and he's fanned twenty-five batters. Good numbers, Leo, for a guy who's primarily a position player."

"They sure are, Chris. The stat that pops out at me is the 35 doubles plays that he's thrown in those 54 innings. That's incredible! Tells me he's got some kind of a pitch that moves down or drops to induce that many double play balls. They tell me he has a nasty screw ball, Chris. Calls it his 'dippsy-doodle' ball. HA! Ya gotta love that name."

"There you go, Leo! We can get a good close-up look of him as he takes the mound for his warm-up tosses. As we mentioned at the start of the game, the Porpoise roster lists him at six-feet, one hundred seventy-five pounds. Nice lookin' kid, looks kind of like a movie star."

"Well, whaddaya expect, comin' from Malibu? Yeah, he sure's got a head of hair on him. Just like me," joked the infamously bald domed color analyst. "Now that the young man's removed his cap to wipe his brow, it does look like he got a bad haircut though. Nipped off the top of his ear, there."

"Glad you brought that up, Leo. We were unable to work this kid's story into the broadcast earlier with all these runs that have been scored. But Strickler is actually quite a story. Precisely, because he has no story. He came to out of a coma following brain surgery over in the Philippines with no memory whatsoever. Naval hospital records indicate he had been flown to Manila from Saigon to have a bullet removed from the back of his brain by a specialist at the close of the War. Coach Trahorn of the Peppermount Porpoises spotted him playing service ball over in the islands and, eventually, persuaded him to sign with the Fish."

"Well Chris, maybe some of our viewers will recognize him. Officially, he goes by the name of J. D. T. Strickler, although he really has no idea, what his true identity is. Unofficially, he goes by "Dixie," a name his teammates in the Islands hung on him, I understand. Say, can we get a close up of the way he grips that baseball on these warm-up tosses? There! You see it? He's missing the upper two joints on the ring and pinky fingers of his right hand, which, they say, is what allows him to throw with that downward break, away from lefties. He grips the ball with his fore and middle finger together on the left seam while tucking the right seam inside that stump of his ring finger. You know, there was a pitcher I watched as a kid by the name of Mordecai Brown—"

"Sure, Three Finger Brown, they used to call him."

"That's right Chris, and he, too, could throw a mean, quick downer, more of a straight sinker though than a legitimate screw ball."

"Well Leo, looks like the kid's ready to go. He's been handed quite a mess. Bases loaded, one out and down 13 runs to 5 here in the bottom of the eighth. It doesn't look too good for the Fish. Let's see what the kid's got ... He checks the runners and deals. The batter swings. It's a come backer! Strickler

fields it cleanly, throws home to the catcher for one and then onto first for the double play! WOW! And just like that, Leo! The Fish swim out of it.”

“The kid did it! Coaxed the batter out in front. It was the screwball, Chris.”

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The fireball of a sun appeared to be sinking, slipping quickly into the Albemarle Sound. The hundred-foot high sand dunes on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, known as Jockey Ridge, rode a few curious spectators along their soft, sandy spines. The youthful Bryson and Sheena quit playing tag long enough to hold one another in their arms and watch the awesomely beautiful spectacle of the sunset. Scruffy Junior, the family’s taffy-hued, ten-inch high skye terrier settled down at the newlywed’s feet. Even little kids, who had been skylarking over the dune, ceased their energetic activities momentarily to watch the sun mysteriously disappear. Thin, wispy, purple, pink-orange and yellow clouds stretched gloriously across an ever darkening cobalt, blue sky.

Ryz’n dug her pink toenails into the soft, cool, grey sand. She sang softly to herself, as she too watched the sun melt into the Sound. With her left hand, she fingered the crucifix hanging from her fine-chained, gold necklace, as well as the miniscule bottle opener that hung next to it. With her right hand, she slid her fingers over the air holes of a USMC harmonica inside the right hand pocket of her self-made, cuffed short, shorts. The harmonica, like her necklace, she carried on her person at all times. The mini-opener and the harmonica had been given to her by her husband three years and five months ago, to keep for him until he returned home from military service for them and for her. She had kept everything for him, just as he had left them, but he had not returned, not yet, anyway.

Ryz’n fingered these keepsakes, as she sang softly, “Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love To Town,” a song that had been popular five or six years ago. She glanced back at her parents, who also stood barefooted atop the dune, some twenty-five feet upwind of her. As she did so often, Ryz’n stood alone, consciously apart from her family. When she gazed westward, the spectacle took Ryz’n out of herself, filling her with peace and serenity. From where she stood, it looked as if the sunset had a similar effect upon her family.

Behind her, Ryz’n spied her dad placing his right arm around his better half, squeezing her mom tightly from behind in a love embrace, as they too watched the spectacular western horizon. With the Atlantic Ocean behind and below them, the couple gazed westward, diagonally out over the precipitous sand dunes and across the still waters of the Sound towards the green mainland of Eastern North Carolina. Rose Ryan stood with her husband Roy on a beaten down swath of sand atop the huge dune. Ryz’n watched them surreptitiously as her mother rose up on her tiptoes, turning her mouth up to bestow a pert, wifely kiss on her husband’s lips.

Smiling, Rosalie Ryan faced westward again, while the sun slipped away quickly now, dissolving right before their eyes into the Sound. Ryz’n’s eye

met her mother's. Caught staring at her mom during a private moment between her parents, Ryz'n self-consciously turned back around to watch the sun slip into Albemarle Sound. She resumed her song, wondering why the sun did not hiss and steam as it melted into the blue-green waters. Though Ryz'n sang with her back to her parents now, with her keen sense of hearing, she managed to catch their conversation as the salty, Atlantic sea air gently gusted her way.

"Oh My Baby, My Baby," clucked Rose Ryan, evidently without realizing the breeze carried her voice as far as her daughter. "Oh no, Roy, she's babbling to herself again."

"That damned war! That damned war! You better go to her, Dear."

That damned war!

That was her dad's singular remark for all that he thought concerned her. Her mother would be coming over now to comfort her when she did not need it. Ryz'n needed comfort most in the night, when she lay alone in bed unable to sleep for the aching want of missing her husband. But her mother could not provide Ryz'n with that kind of comfort. Only her absent Marine could offer the intimate consolation she needed, in his own inimitable way.

A sly peek over her left shoulder told Ryz'n what she had expected. Mrs. Ryan had left her husband's embrace to visit her, to console her poor, babbling daughter. Ryz'n could feel her mother's eyes upon her, as she came. This unsolicited sympathy made Ryz'n cringe. Without turning around to acknowledge her mother's presence, the astute girl spoke softly to her mom, as if they had been carrying on a conversation for several minutes.

"He's out there, Mother. I can feel it. I can just feel it. Just as I felt you coming up behind me just now. He's coming home to me. I know it. I do."

From behind Ryz'n, Rose Ryan slipped her lightly tanned, darkly hirsute, olive-skinned forearms around her daughter's long but narrow, twenty-two inch waist. She caressed her elder daughter and whispered, "Of course he is, My Baby. Of course he is. But don't expect too much, Dearest. It's been over two years since he was reported missing. Just keep praying. Keep praying."

"Two years, four months and eleven days, actually. And I am praying, Mother, all the time. I pray so much—I even pray in my sleep. I know I do, 'cause Sheena said I kept her awake sometimes down at school. So then we'd pray together."

The sun had set completely now. The two women stared in wonder at the purple, pink and orange afterglow on the western horizon.

"It's so peaceful, isn't it Mother? So gorgeous. Those long, thin, colorful clouds reach across the sky, like, like the fingers of God, don't they, Mother? Maybe Nicky is seeing this awesome sunset somewhere right now, like us?"

"I hope so. I hope he is. Oh, My Baby, one of the reasons we nicknamed you Ryz'n is because it rhymes with horizon. And look at the horizon now, isn't it gorgeous? Just like you, My Dearest. 'Like the fingers of God ...' Why yes, that's very well put, Dear." The two held each other tightly with

their faces cheek-to-cheek and stared at the sky, awestruck by nature's glory. "Yes, the horizon is simply gorgeous this evening. Just like its namesake, you, My Baby." Ryz'n felt her face warm, as her mother hugged her, again. "You know the story of how we came by your name?"

"Yes, Mother. You've told me a thousand times. Daddy wanted to name me after you, but you thought a child should have its own name, so you—"

"Compromised. That's right Dearest and your father remembered his grandmother's name, a Gaelic form of 'Rose'—Ryesin. And we compromised, because I preferred Ryzanna, but we opted to call you Ryz'n for short."

"Yes Mother, I know. And Sheena's name is the Irish for God's gracious gift. But that's not what I was thinking about when you came up behind me just now."

"No? Of course not. What *were* you thinking about My Baby?"

"Well, you remember, Mother, when we stood here and Nick played this harmonica?" Ryz'n produced the young man's mouth organ from her pocket. "Remember? He played 'Taps' at sunset for all those who had passed in service to our country? He had two cousins killed over there, you know?"

"Yes, My Baby, I know. And I remember, he played the harmonica. He had that cast on his leg and Bryce had to carry him up here. And they both fell back down the dune." She chuckled, as she recalled the incident.

"That's right. And he played 'Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town,' about the paralyzed war vet?" Ryz'n arched her eyebrows hoping for some recognition from her mother, but none was forthcoming. "Well, that's what I was singing when you came over, Mother." Ryz'n broke her mom's grip around her waist by turning into the concerned mother hen.

"I wasn't talking to myself, Mother. I know that's what concerned you. I heard you and Daddy when the wind gusted. I know you think that the war has, has ..."

"Well dear, it's just that, well ..." The elder woman fumbled for the right words as she stroked the bangs off her firstborn's forehead.

"You don't have to say anything, honest, Mother." Ryz'n could view the sincere look of concern in her mother's eyes.

"I know I don't, but ... Dear, you know how I feel about you, how, well, you're just so special to me, Ryzanna Christine. I carried you my entire senior year of high school and I had only been eighteen a week when you were born! And I was never so, so happy in my life! You have been my, my pride and my joy, Ryzanna. But it just tears me up inside to see you so unhappy. If I could bear these painful burdens for you, I would do so gladly, gladly My Dearest, but I can't. And it hurts me that I can't."

"Oh, I'm sorry Mother." In a turnabout, Ryz'n consoled her mother, stroking her hair gently. "Really, I am, but you needn't feel that way. I know you sacrificed your youth to have me. And I feel bad for you, feeling bad for me. Nicky's absence is my burden to bear, not yours. I know what you mean

though. I know you were as depressed as I was when I lost the baby. I know I let you down then and you got so blue. I don't want you to feel so bad for me now. Some things the Lord wishes us to experience for ourselves, Mom."

"Oh! My Baby!" Mrs. Ryan stared at her eldest with sober, steely eyes. "Don't ever think that! You have never let me down. Never! But, as for the Lord ... well your faith has always been so strong. It is your rock, for certain." The matron softened. "But your father is right about one thing. 'That dammed war,' indeed!" The mother hen hugged her daughter tightly and the tears flowed.

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear?" Mrs. Ryan sniffled.

"Mother, I confess that I do pray out loud often. I sing to myself, too. And sometimes, I even talk to Nicky out loud. It helps me, you know? It helps me keep him alive in here." The girl tapped her chest with her left fist. "You understand? I'm all right, really I am. Please don't cry."

"All right, all right." She sniffled deeply. "I'm OK now. Ok, My Baby, but I believe you would feel better if you'd see that Dr. Hodgekiss. You haven't seen her for a while and she might help you feel better."

"Help ME feel better? Or help YOU feel better? I tell you what Mother. You set up the appointment and I'll keep it. That is, if it will make YOU feel better."

"Yes My Baby, it will. I'll set it up for you, then." The two attractive brunettes smiled contented with one another.

Ryz'n's dad always said that she and her mother could pose for one of those mother-daughter TV commercials that invites the viewer to guess which one is the mother and which is the daughter. Ryz'n looked so much like her mother, it was uncanny. Her mom was a week away from forty. Yet, she remained still beautifully youthful in appearance, though her frame may have rounded a bit with age and the birth of two children. Ryz'n's father was a couple years older than her mom. Ryz'n knew her parents, neither of whom had so much as attended college, were young to have two married daughters, one of them a recent college honors graduate, and the other only a semester behind her older sister in earning a degree. Ryz'n also understood her folks were justifiably proud of their two handsome, accomplished daughters.

Mr. Ryan had approached the pair and waited for the right moment to speak, "Well, are my lovely girls ready to go? The show's over for this evening and I believe the cards are calling us." He smiled wistfully.