

~ Chapter 3: And A Hint ~

Although hurricane season perhaps had not begun officially, the tempest had raged nonetheless. Something less than a tropical depression, the storm had knocked out power and phone lines in its path. The next day, Ryz'n learned the extent of the damage at her parent's place. There were some missing trash cans, a broken window and some missing shingles. Access to the Oregon Inlet bridge was blocked due to a traffic accident that had occurred in the wake of the storm at the east end of the bridge. Likewise standing water at high tide blocked the bridge to Manteo. Bryson had to drive a hundred miles south out of his way, taking the ferry down the Banks, to reach the kids' summer football camp, which he helped run for M&L's coaching staff near Lexington, Virginia.

The Ryans extended their leaves a few days longer to help clean up their place and make external repairs after the upheaval. The Ryan sisters took advantage of the situation to get in some great surfing in the aftermath of the storm. Ryz'n was well aware there was no better surfing on the East Coast than on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Just before or after a big blow like the last one the Ryan's had just experienced, the ocean waves could sometimes reach above ten feet high.

By Thursday, however, it was past time for the family to return home, back to Crest Hill Heights, Maryland. The Ryan's had promised some friends from Mrs. Ryan's job at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL), the use of the beach house for a long weekend that Thursday through Tuesday. Then, the kids planned to return for another long weekend of their own, with their parents joining them later to celebrate Ryz'n's twenty-second birthday on Sunday, the twenty-second. Overall, Ryz'n, like her parents and sister, were satisfied with their little family vacation, even though they had had some rocky moments. Apologies had been exchanged and accepted. And so, the storm had quelled within the Family Ryan as it had upon the Banks themselves.

Ryz'n and Sheena drove home together in Ryz'n's open convertible Starfire. They followed their parents who had driven down in the station wagon with Scruffy Junior. The weather was delightful. It was a glorious June day. On the way, the sisters discussed their extended stay at the beach resort, including Ryz'n's tiff with their dad. Their little vacation had begun after the family had witnessed Ryz'n graduate from the private and prestigious Madison & Lee University in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The girls naturally bantered about the band's chances of catching on with another label, since Halo Platters had dropped their option. With Double J's great baritone vocals and his singularly incredible guitar-playing talent newly in fold, Ryz'n and Sheena believed they had more than a good shot to hook up with another label. Ryz'n only hoped J.J. had not been turned off by her dad's gruff ouster of him and the

other band members from the Ryan's beach home ten days ago. Because with the undiscovered, precocious Double J now playing lead guitar for them, the sisters believed *Good Rockin' Tonite (GRT)* could top the charts again.

Their trip home was uneventful, though they made the customary stop at Farmer Kemp's peanut plantation near Wakefield, Virginia to drop off some chocolates. Ryz'n always tried to stop by his place, either on the way down or back, to provide the kind gentleman with his favorite confectionary. Some five years back, the tall, lean farmer had pulled her and Nicky out of his muddy peanut fields, after Ryz'n's old Monza had suffered a tire blowout on highway 460. Ryz'n had been driving, when she lost control of the vehicle and ran off the road. The car had been stuck up to its axle in the muddy peanut field. The kindly farmer had stopped his chores to pull them out of his muddy field with his tractor and then he had changed their tire for them.

Wearing a cast on his left leg at the time as a result of an accident on the baseball diamond, Nicky had been pretty helpless. However, having come to know Farmer Kemp's kind nature as she did, Ryz'n understood he would have changed her tire, even if Nicky had not been incapacitated. When Ryz'n had apologized for tearing up his field. The kindly farmer won her heart when, rather than being angry, he had told her, they had planned on using that front section for peanut butter, anyway.

That summer of 1970 had been her first with Nicky, back when he was in the leg cast. Ever since then, she had brought the chocolates. Usually, Mr. Kemp would invite them in for a bite to eat, but today he was busy with his crop. He knew Nicky's story and never failed to ask if there wasn't "any news about our boy." When there was none, he'd reply, "Well, no news is good news. Ellen and I will keep praying. You can rely on that. And remember now Miss Ryzanna, the Lord derived more satisfaction from bringing home the one lost lamb than He did the other ninety and nine which were with Him always". The kind farmer always brightened Ryz'n's hope.

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Back home, in Crest Hill Heights, the family had to replenish the refrigerator after their absence. Ryz'n had made a pit stop and dumped Sheena off at home, in her parent's sand-colored brick rambler. She intended to fill her car with gas after the six-hour homeward trip, when her mother asked Ryz'n to stop also at the grocery and liquor stores. After some three weeks, it seemed as though they were out of everything. As Ryz'n drew on her wraparound FosterGrants, which she wore almost everywhere, she told her mother she'd bring home the provisions on her return from the service station. She had tied her hair back in a pony-tail with the yellow-gold ribbon she wore for Nicky, She dressed plainly in a dark brown, cotton skirt and a yellow, sleeveless, back-zipped cotton blouse.

Ryz'n drove a long mile down Stuyvesant Street and Coolbrook Drive, past the twenty year old red brick homes with their tall shade trees, past the faded yellow-bricked shopping center and on to the Gulf Station at the intersection of Veer

Avenue and Fairgrass Street, near the end of Stuyvesant Mall. The balmy day lifted her spirits. She liked to trade at the station, owned by Mr. Hawks and Mr. Gasch, two men who knew Nicky well. They had coached Nicky in boy's club sports for years. Mr. Gasch had also coached Nicky in American Legion Baseball. Ryz'n always received a warm reception from them as well as from their employees. She also favored their station over others, because their mechanic Kenny was a whiz, who specialized in maintaining older model convertibles, like her powder blue '61 Starfire and Nick's '63 Pontiac Bonneville. Although she and Nick could afford any car on the road, they preferred the older, big convertible models. The '61 Starfire convertible was one of only 7,604 production models made. The 1963 midnight blue Pontiac Bonneville, Nick had loaned to Bryce. Each car had less than twenty-five thousand miles. Kenny insured the cars were always in excellent running order.

The Gulf Station was a red brick affair with three garage doors and a low sloping, shingle roof that blended in with the homes in the area. A short cupola with a rooster weathervane on its crest served as its distinguishing characteristic. Behind the station was the seven-year old Stuyvesant Mall. To the east lay Veer Avenue, or Route 5, a four lane highway which swathed from the District of Columbia down into the bowels of Southern Maryland. The intersection of Coolfont and Veer required a traffic signal. The Royal George Motor Inn lay on the other side of Veer. Across Coolfont, stood the six-story Stuyvesant Medical center professional building made of beige brick and surrounded by an asphalt parking lot. To the west, the route Ryz'n had just traversed, stood the brick ramblers and duplex homes of Crest Hill Heights and her in-laws home.

Steve Gasch, Mr. Gasch's elder son, was sitting outside the door to the gas station office. He leaned back against the brick wall on two chair legs. Steve wore dark blue mechanic's pants and light blue shirt with his name embroidered in red inside a white oval, over his heart. When he saw Ryz'n pull in, he smiled broadly, leaned the chair forward, and rose quickly to his feet to serve her.

"Ry! How ya doin', Honey?"

Steve had graduated high school with Ryz'n and Nick, although Steve had not graduated exactly in the top ten per cent of the class. Fact was, Steve had been lucky to graduate at all. He wasn't dumb. He just didn't care for school. Steve was a good looking, phlegmatic kid with sandy brown hair and eyes, who was always "kool." Affable and easy going, in some ways, his phlegmatic manner reminded Ryz'n a lot of Nick. Ryz'n knew that Steve knew that, as well. Steve always acted like her big brother, even though he was only six weeks older than she. Ryz'n legged out of the Starfire to greet him. They hugged each other warmly. A married man with a brand new, little Steve at home, Steve let her hold the hug a few seconds longer than usual. They both knew she was a lonely girl.

"Steve! I'm doin' well. Ya know, OK." She drew off her shades, allowing him to see her more clearly.

"Sure you are. Ya look terrific, Ry, just terrific."

“Thanks Stevie, I try. How are you and your young family getting’ along?”

“Great, really great. But I ain’t gettin’ much sleep, ya know?”

“I can imagine.” She chuckled.

*She could imagine?* She imagined all the time what it would have been like had she not lost Nick’s baby through negligence down at the beaver ponds almost four years past. Steve interrupted that depressing memory.

“Well Ry, what can I do for ya today? Fill it up? Check under the hood?”

“Hunh? Oh, sure. That’d be great Steve.”

“Premium?”

“You bet, Stevie.”

As Steve went about his business, The elder Gasch came out of the station office. Mr. Gasch was the same height as his elder son, about her own dad’s size, but more roly-poly. He looked like he could have been a handsome mobster in the movies with his suave good looks. In real life, he was an ex-cop, a recently retired D. C. police detective who, in part, because of his good looks and suave demeanor, had been assigned a highly visible security role during the recent Congressional Watergate hearings. He had always stood in a position behind the witnesses as they testified on the Capitol floor and, as such, had been seen across the country by millions of viewers during that entire real life soap opera.

“Ryzanna! How the hell are you, girl?”

“Just fine Mr. Gasch? How are you? How’s business?”

“Both of us are great. In fact, we’re thinking about buying another station over off of Auth Road, over in Sunnyside.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. Is Kenny gonna stay here or go over to the other station?”

“Don’t know yet. Hey, got some good news for you, maybe.”

“Oh, what is it? Can always use good news.”

“Well, Chris said he saw a guy who looked a lot like Nicky on TV the other day.” Ryz’n stopped watching Steve give her car the once over and zeroed in on the elder Gasch.

“What? No! Where?”

“Some ball game he was watching on TV. Wait a second I’ll get him. He’s in the garage with Kenny.” Mr. Gasch turned and yelled toward the garage Hey Chris! Chris! Get your butt out here boy.” The spitting image of Mr. Gasch, about thirty years younger, meandered out of the garage wiping sweat from his brow and grease smears from his hands.

“Yeah, what’s up, Dad?”

“Ryz’n Sheeboom’s here. Tell her what you told me the other day.”

Chris was sixteen, an athlete and well muscled for his age. His eyes lit up when he saw Ryz’n.

“Ryz’n. Hello!” The youth walked briskly towards her.

“Hello, Chris!” Ryz’n smiled somewhat coquettishly at the teenager to watch him blush. Chris obliged.

“How are you? Your Dad says you saw something on TV the other day.”

“Yeah, yeah, I did.” The boy was self-conscious, but he proceeded with his tale, as he wiped sweat from his brow with his right forearm because his hands were too grease-smearred. “Well gee, I, I was watching this ball game see, and all of a sudden there’s this guy pitchin’. And, gee, he looks like Nicky, only a little different.” Steve had finished up with the Starfire.

“Your battery was a little low on water Ry, so I added some.”

“Oh thank you, Steve,” she smiled appreciatively at him. “Now, what was that Chris? What do you mean, he looked ‘like Nicky, only a little different?’” Steve sauntered over to listen to his kid brother’s story.

“Well, he looked a little older, ya know. But he threw like Nicky! Same motion, everything. He never smiled, though. I remember Nicky was always smiling when he played ball, grinning actually, like he knew something the other team didn’t. Know what I mean?” The boy stopped to look at Ryz’n, who nodded and smiled anxiously.

“Well, go ahead, Boy. Tell her the rest,” urged Chris’s father, impatiently.

Chris took a deep breath and refocused. “Well, this guy, the one who looked like Nicky? Was kind of messed up a bit. He was scarred up, here.” Chris ran his fingers along the right side and back part of his neck. “And he was missing the top half of his ear. You could see it clear when he took his cap off to brush his hair back, out of his face. Ya know?” Chris cut an imaginary line across the top of his ear with his fingers, indicating the exact location of the deformity.

Ryz’n’s mouth dropped open, as her eyes also widened. She covered her mouth with her left hand, as she was prone to do when she was astonished. Then she seized Chris’s right hand, the hand he had just used to indicate the area covered by scars.

“Which ear Chris, was it the left or the right?”

Chris stopped to think. He had just rubbed the right side of his neck, but that had been wrong.

“It was ... It was his first base ear,” he quipped triumphantly.

Formerly a gifted softball pitcher and catcher, Ryz’n knew what the kid meant. “Then, it was his left ear, right Chris?”

“Hunh?”

“Your left ear is towards first when you face the batter, isn’t it?”

Chris, a pitcher himself, replied as the light went on. “Yeah, yeah that’s right. I meant left.”

“Oh, Sweet Jesus!” cried Ryz’n in praise. “It’s got to be him!”

Mr. Gasch intervened again. “Tell her about the fingers, Son.”

“Oh yeah! The announcers were talkin’ about his screwball. They said he could throw such a good screwball because of his fingers. They got a close up of his grip on the ball. And he was missing these parts of his fingers. On his RIGHT hand!” His emphasis on the word “Right” made sure there was no mistake, this time. Chris had indicated the top two joints of the ring and pinky fingers were

missing. Ryz'n clapped her hands together, leaning forward so quickly that the small gold crucifix hanging from the fine gold necklace popped out of her blouse between the two top, unhooked buttons. Ryz'n had dropped all pretense of kool. She was jubilantly ecstatic.

"God in heaven! Thank You Lord, thank You Sweet Jesus!

Chris, what was his name?" she asked impatiently. "What ball club is he playing for?"

"I dunno Ryz'n. I was just flippin' through the channels. They said his name, but I don't remember. It wasn't Sheeboom! That's for sure. I'da remembered that. But it was the College World Series on the Wide World of Sports. That, I remember. Texas was one of the teams ... They won the game. But I don't know who the other team was, some little school, I think. Believe they had a 'P' on their caps. I think. But the guy that looked like Nick was on that team, not Texas. And he came in to pitch from center field in the eighth." Chris nodded with triumph at his recollection.

Ryz'n thought that's when she had been watching the game and left to go parasailing! She mentally flogged herself a couple of lashes, then quit abruptly. This was not the time for self-flagellation.

"GOD BLESS YOU, CHRIS!" The girl hugged the sweaty, greasy kid, kissing him profusely on both cheeks. "Thank you. ALL OF YOU. I gotta run. 'Bye-bye.'" Chris beamed proudly.

Steve called out somewhat concerned, "Ry, Don't ya wanna pay for the gas?" Mr. Gasch pulled Steve's arm down, shaking his head.

"Oh yes, yes. Here's a twenty. Keep the change, Stevie" cried Ryz'n anxiously. Ryz'n extracted a twenty dollar bill from her purse, tossed it to Steve and pulled out of the station on two wheels, as she made a U-turn, causing traffic to part for her, as angry motorists blew their horns.

Steve looked blankly at the twenty in his hand and then at his dad.

"She's seventy-five cents short."

Mr. Gasch placed an arm around each of his sons' shoulders. The Gasches watched the bantam of a girl, with the Wonder Woman figure and the gold ribbon streaming from her hair, tear down the street in the direction from which she had come.

"Well now, I believe she's good for it, Steven. Besides, that little girl is not short right now. She's on cloud nine." Both boys looked at their father and nodded, before they turned back to watch the tail fins of the Starfire disappear down the street out of sight.

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Ryz'n rushed into her childhood home nearly in a tizzy. Scruffy Junior came scrambling from the back of the house, but Ryz'n had no time to play. She brushed Scruffy aside, as she surveyed the room for the ever present newspapers, which to her sad disappointment were nowhere in sight. She glanced frantically

around the living room. To her right, she ran her eyes over the forest green sofa and the beige hassock next to it. The oblong glass, coffee table top in front of the sofa was bare but for a couple of magazines. The lamp stand and table between her parents' his and her brown leather recliners at the far end of the room held only the TV Guide. Ryz'n cried out:

"Where's the Sunday Sports section? Where are the newspapers?" Scruffy yelped excitedly. "Quiet Scruffy. Shhh!"

"What is it, My Baby? What's wrong?" Mrs. Ryan came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron.

"I gotta have the Sunday Sports section, Mother. Where is it? Do you know?"

"Well, I don't know, Honey. Your father had all the newspapers over there."

She pointed to the corner, behind her dad's easy chair, just outside the dining room alcove. Ryz'n rushed across the plush, sculpted forest green carpet to her dad's chair, finding almost three weeks worth of newspapers wedged between the chair and the living room wall and under the side window curtain. The anxious young woman fell to her knees next to the lamp stand, combing through the daily papers, one by one.

"Honey, did you get the groceries already? That was mighty fast ... Ryz'n?"

Ryz'n chose not to reply, as her eyes scanned the newspapers feverishly. She found last Sunday's paper, folded and unopened. Hurriedly, she flipped through it quickly, locating the large sports section. Saturday had been a big sports day with much news to report. Ryz'n found what she was looking for on the inside back page with the race results and other miscellaneous scores. There were two box scores under the heading College World Series. South Carolina against— Nah, that wasn't it. Here it was, Texas against ... Peppermount? *What the heck is a Peppermount?* She had never heard of the school, had never caught the school's name on the tube the other day. She scanned her fingers across the batteries underneath the box score: Madrigal, Jones (4), Kaine (6), Rasmussen (7), Stickler (8) and Danielson. Stickler?" She ran her left forefinger along the names in the box score batting order. Batting third was "Strickler cf." Which was correct "Strickler" or "Stickler?"

"RYZ'N"!

"Hunh?"

"Where are the groceries, My Baby?" asked her mom with an edgy tone.

"Groceries? Uh, I dunno. At the store, I guess. Where's the dictionary?"

Ryz'n's tone was close to desperate.

"The dictionary is right over there where it has always been. Over there in the bookcase beside the coat closet." Her mother stood motioning with the kitchen hand towel towards the bookcase, then placed her hands akimbo. "I'm more concerned with the groceries, Ryzanna. We're out of everything. What is wrong with you, My Baby?"

Uncharacteristically ignoring her mother, Ryz'n jumped up, leaving the newspapers where they lay, which, also, was very unlike her. She was a very

neat, some, like her sister, would say overly neat, girl by nature. She hopped across the room to the short, dark cherry wood bookcase that stood between the TV and the front door. “There’s plenty of fish in the freezer downstairs,” she reminded her mother absently. Then to herself, she whispered under her breath, “Webster’s, Webster’s, Webster’s.” She extracted the reference book from the top shelf, flipping to the back of the dictionary to look up colleges and universities. She opened the dictionary and rested it upon the top frame of the three foot-high case. “P’s, ‘P’s. Here we go, Pacific, Pan American, Pennsylvania, Pepper—Peppermount? Malibu, California est. 1935? Be darned!”

Ryz’n ran back across the room past her gawking mother, through the dining room to the olive-hued wall phone next to the open swing door to the kitchen.

“Operator?”

“Yes, this is the Operator. How may I help you?”

“Yes, I’d like to place a long distance call to Malibu, California, please.”

“Whom do you wish to call in Malibu, Miss?”

“Umm, that would be the Athletic Department at Peppermount University.”

“Very well. Hold please, while I place that call.” Scruffy Junior padded into her crib in the kitchen to observe the proceedings from a comfortable vantage point. Her short tail drooped down between her legs.

The phone rang several times. Ryz’n knew Malibu was three hours behind the East Coast. It would be a little after one out there.

“What’s this all about?” asked Mrs. Ryan slightly perturbed.

“Well—”

A female voice answered in a sing-song fashion. “Peppermount University, Admissions Office, Nancy speaking. May I help you?”

“Yes, Nancy I’m calling long distance from Maryland and I thought I had been given the Athletic Department.”

“In the summer, all calls are routed through the Admissions Office, Ma’am. With whom do you wish to speak in the Athletic Department, Ma’am?”

“The baseball coach, please.”

“Oh, I’m afraid he’s not in his office today Ma’am, but he should be back tomorrow. I can leave a message, if you like.”

“Well, is there anyone there who might be affiliated with the baseball team?”

“Hold on a second, please.” Ryz’n heard Nancy’s now distant voice—“Janet, have all the baseball players gone home? I thought there were a couple still on campus?” There was a pause then the speaker returned to the phone.

“Yes Ma’am. I understand there are a few local members of the team over in the training room. Would you like me to transfer you?”

“Yes, yes. Please do.”

“All right, hold please while I make that transfer.” Ryz’n held the line and started to speak with her mother when a squeaky, tenor male voice answered the phone. Ryz’n held up a forefinger and nodded politely to her mother, as Ryz’n picked up the voice on the other end of the line. Mrs. Ryan’s opened mouth

closed without speaking. Ryz'n's gold cross pendant dangled against her chest, refracting the late afternoon sunlight, which was streaming in through the uncovered, west dining room windows, against the wall and ceiling.

"Yeah?"

"Hello?"

"Yeah?"

"Excuse me, but I was trying to reach the Athletic Department of Peppermount University?"

"Yeah, you got it. What can I do for ya?" squawked a squeaky male voice.

"Well." Ryz'n cleared her throat. "I was hoping I could speak with the baseball coach, but I understand he's not available. Is that correct?"

"No he ain't here right now. I work with the team. Somethin' I can do for ya?"

"Well, perhaps there is. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"Booger."

"Booger? Is, is that it? Is that what you said?" Ryz'n's mother became more interested in her daughter's conversation, taking a couple steps towards her through the dining area.

"Yeah! Booger Phelps. I'm the part-time trainer and I, ah hem, assist the coaching staff in other areas, too." The pitch of his voice lowered noticeably.

From the background, through the phone line, Ryz'n heard loud guffaws. Someone shouted, "He's the flippin' manager, for cryin' out loud! Coach leaves for a few days and now the runt thinks he's Casey Stengel!" Then, more muffled, Ryz'n heard a squeaky response.

"Shut up you guys. Coach left me in charge, didn't he? I'll handle this."

"Yes Ma'am, what can I—"

There was a loud crash and the bells on the phone rang on the opposite end of the line. Ryz'n jerked the receiver from her ear and thought she had lost the connection until she heard an irate squawk—

"You sons o' bitches! You can hurt a guy like that. Now get outta here!"

Ryz'n spoke up, "Hello, what was that?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ma'am. I wasn't talkin' to you. It was just these a-hol—I mean, I'm sorry, Ma'am, really. Coach won't be back until tonight or tomorrow. Maybe I can help ya."

"Well, I tell you, Booger, I'm looking to contact an individual who I believe plays baseball there at Peppermount."

"Yeah? What's his name? I know all the ballplayers."

"Well, I'm not sure. It's either Stickler or Strickler?"

"Strickler? Yeah! Dix. He plays for us."

"Well, could you give me a number for him? I really need to talk to him."

Booger's voice was muffled again. "It's another one of them chicks that wants Dixie's number." Ryz'n heard him speak in falsetto, in a vain attempt to mimic her to those who were with him on the other end of the line "She says, she 'really needs to talk to him.'" He laughed and Ryz'n heard the others join him in

laughter. Then the voice reappeared in its natural squawky tone, “Look lady, I suppose you saw Dix on TV last Saturday and you’re his long lost sweetheart or sister or something. You know, we’ve had a zillion calls like that. Now why don’t you—”

Ryz’n was angry and she cut him off.

“I’m his wife, darn it! And I want to talk to him now! Please put him on the line, immediately!”

“His wife?!?! Look lady—Hey, what are ya doin’? Hey, Mooney?”

“Gimme that phone!” This was a different voice, a little deeper, but still a tenor, thought Ryz’n as she listened intently. “OK, Honey. Now what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t, but it’s Ryzanna Sheeboom!”

“Sure, sure I remember you. My wife, yeah right. Uh, look Honey, suppose we meet at this little motel I know, up the coast a ways, where we can get, you know, get reacquainted? Just like old times Baby, whaddaya say?”

“I don’t know who you are but you sure aren’t my husband, so put him on the line please.”

“How do you know I ain’t him?”

Because you got a lousy tenor voice and Nicky’s a baritone. When he speaks it sounds like two bullfrogs fighting to get out of his throat at the same time!”

The voice on the other end was muffled again. “Dang, this one knows what Dix sounds like.” The voice spoke clearly into the receiver again. “Look lady, I don’t now what kind of game you’re playin’ and I don’t care. But Dix left for the summer like the rest of the guys. The only ones of us left here now are rehabbin.’ So good-bye!” The receiver slammed down loudly into Ryz’n’s ear. She was repulsively astonished.

“Why, that’s the most arrogant, rude, insolent individual I’ve ever had the displeasure to speak with!”

Mrs. Ryan had overheard Ryz’n’s side of the conversation. Before she could speak, Sheena entered the dining room, coming from her bedroom at the opposite end of the house.

“What’s all that hub-bub about? What’s going on? You got the groceries, already?”

“No, *forget* the groceries!” Ryz’n had no patience for talk of mundane items like groceries. She dialed Information. “I’m not goin’ for groceries. I’m huntin’ for husbands! Yes, Information? Please give me booking for Blue Skies Airlines ... Yes, please do. Yes, I’ll hold.”

“What is this all about, Ryzanna?” her mother demanded. Ryzanna covered the mouthpiece and held it under her chin.

“They’ve put me on hold. I think I’ve found Nicky. Chris Gasch saw him on TV last Saturday. In that very game, you all dragged me away from! I knew I should have stayed to watch it. I had a feeling about it. I—Yes, Blue Skies?”

“Yes, I’d like to fly to LAX as soon as possible. Could you tell me what flights you have available? Six fifty-two tonight out of Dulles? Arrives in LAX at nine forty PDT. Unh-hunh? OK, hold on a second, please.” Again, Ryz’n covered the phone’s mouthpiece with her left hand. “Well, Sheena do you want to come with me for the weekend out to sunny California or do you want to stay here and go grocery shopping?” Ryz’n was beaming from ear to ear. She was ebullient.

Sheena caught her sister’s buoyant spirit. “Well, lemme see, grocery shoppin’?” She pretended to hold something in her left hand, palm up, and weigh it, “or sunny California?” She formed the same pretense with her other hand, weighing her imaginary options in the balance. “Guess I’ll have to go with sunny California.” She grinned as well.

“Yes, make that two seats, first class to Los Angeles ... No, one way. Yes, thank you very much. The name is SHEEBOOM, Mrs. Nicholas Sheeboom. That’s right, the very one in the same. Yes. Thank you, goodbye.” Ryz’n hung up the phone with a grin that ran from ear to ear.

Mr. Ryan came in through the kitchen from the back porch wearing his red and blue plaid Bermuda shorts, a white tee shirt and his favorite red, white and blue golf hat to ask what was happening. He looked like a walking American flag. Ryz’n explained the whole thing to all of them in great detail. When she had concluded, she waited for a positive, enthusiastic response from her family. However, none was forthcoming. Only Sheena sympathized. She patted the back of her sister’s hand and smiled encouragingly.

“Well, y’all think what you want, but I’m going after my MAN! Sheena, you had better hurry if you’re coming with me, because we don’t have a lot of time. Mother, I’m sorry about the groceries, really but this is just too, too important.” After the girls had packed, Ryz’n thought to call Bill Fankell, Nick’s uncle, who lived in Buena Park, California, not far from Knott’s Berry Farm. Bill, as he always did, offered to open his house to her as well as his ‘round the clock, personal chauffeur services.

Mrs. Ryan approached her daughter with a tear in her eye. “Go, go after him, Ry Your faith has always been so strong.” Her mother sniffed back her tears, as she hugged her daughter and whispered into her ear. “Your faith has sustained you, just like when you stayed up all night praying for Scruffy Senior to come home that time she ran away. Remember, Dear?”

“Yes, Mother. I remember.”

“And darned if Scruffy wasn’t whimpering outside the backdoor the next morning, scratching to get in.” With both of her arms, Mrs. Ryan squeezed her daughter tightly. “You go Ryzanna. Take Sheena with you. And don’t worry about the groceries. You’ve always been the faithful one.” Ryz’n turned her head to kiss her mother’s wet cheeks.

“And it’s that faith that sustains me, Mother.”

“Ahhh, Bull Shine!” The Ryan girls looked to the head of the household with shocked disapproval.

## *Almost There*

Stubbornly angry, Mr. Ryan refused to drive his daughters to the airport, declining to participate in these shenanigans. He warned Ryz'n against "being disappointed again." If things did not work out as she had planned, as they had not, so often in the past, he would not be responsible. He strongly suggested she let her L. A. based PI run down the long distance lead, but Ryz'n complained that she didn't trust him. She said the only way to insure the matter is handled properly, "is to track it down myself." Thankfully, one thing tempered his resentment, their longtime next-door neighbor Allena Larrabee Yikes.

As the Ryan girls were leaving, the Larrabees came over with their younger daughter Allena, one of Ryz'n's closest and longest friends, and her husband Matt Yikes, toting their three-year old son Mikey. They confirmed to Ryz'n and her family what Chris Gasch had told Ryz'n earlier. They also had seen the Wide World of Sports broadcast last Saturday. Ryz'n drove herself and Sheena to Dulles in the powder blue Starfire. The sisters had to fight through and around the DC rush hour, but they made it. By seven p. m., the ravishing Ryan sisters were taxiing down a Dulles runway, filled with hope for what lay ahead.