

~ Chapter 5: Sign of Life ~

Bill was there, waiting for them, as they stepped off Blue Skies flight #74, into the terminal at LAX. He did not have to be there. Ryz'n understood that. She and Sheena could have just as easily met Bill at the passenger pick-up, which would have been so much easier for him. Nevertheless, Bill was there, in his wheel chair, waiting to greet each of them with a solitary long-stem pink rose. Despite his wheel chair, Ryz'n recalled Nick's Uncle Bill exuded a confident, manly air. He was a ruggedly handsome man, well tanned with lank dark brown, parted hair that dipped easily across his forehead. The flattened nature of his large, straight nose together with the scar across the upper bridge bespoke also of his ruggedness. He had the broad shoulders of an athlete. His eyes shone a bright electric blue, striking a sharp contrast with the rest of his dark male persona. Ryz'n always admired that Bill maintained a lean build, unlike many paraplegics who tended toward obesity as they aged. His chair was not motorized, so he pushed himself everywhere. He was dressed in grey slacks, brand new looking black loafers and a navy blue, short sleeved ban-lon shirt. An opened package of Lucky Strikes was wedged between a thigh and the thin, stainless steel wall that was the side of his wheel chair seat.

Ryz'n pointed Bill out to Sheena as the elder sister shook her head in wonder at the paraplegic's efforts. Nicky had been right when he had used Bill as an inspiration. "If Bill can get up everyday and go through all this stuff, then I sure as hell can do it!" That's what her husband had said whenever things had appeared to get a little too tough. He had been right, as usual. Still, when Ryz'n received her one-rose bouquet and greeted Bill warmly, bending over to hug and kiss Nick's uncle, she couldn't help but shed two big crocodile tears of joy. Sheena, who was less familiar with Bill, simply shook his powerful right hand. She received his gift of the long stem rose with a demure, reserved "Thank you."

"Bill! You're looking as handsome as ever! Gee, it really is good to see you again, Willy." Ryz'n accepted her rose and bent over to kiss Nick's uncle on the cheek.

"Well, it's great to see you, too, Ry. It really is. So this is your beautiful sister? Beauty runs in the family, I see. Sheena, isn't it? Believe we met at the wedding," he quipped curtly to Sheena who nodded politely in return.

"Yes, this is Sheena. However, I warn you, Bill. Flattery will get you nowhere with her. She's a married woman, too."

Bill smiled, "Well, that's just as well. I'm more or less spoken for at the moment, anyway." He grinned at the two girls.

"No, you're not! Why! That's great Bill. Can we meet her?"

"Think that can be arranged. Come on. Let's make a move."

The girls had carried their luggage onto the plane, so Bill took one of their bags on his lap and rolled along ahead of them leading them out to the parking lot, bypassing the luggage carousel. Sheena whispered to her older sister that Bill's dark hair and his electric blue eyes reminded her of Nick with his lone blue eye. Ryz'n agreed with her sister. She informed Sheena that she and Nick had found a nineteenth century photograph in an old family photo album in the attic of Nick's grandparent's home in Clear Lake, Iowa. The picture showed one of Nick's ancestor's whose left eye was jet black and the other, because of the Daguerreotype, was very pale.

"Yep. Would have been Uncle Nels," informed Bill. Sheena was astonished.

"I thought Nick got that two-toned stuff from the other side of the family, you know from that famous Uncle Richard, the celebrity?"

Ryz'n, however didn't answer. Instead, she had shifted gears and directed her attention to Bill. She explained the set-up to the paraplegic as they made their way to his car. By the time they got to his '65 black Caddy, Bill was mortified.

"To think that Nicky was right here under my nose and I never knew it. Shoot! That college of his sits on the bluff right above my friend's beach house, in Malibu. Why didn't I go watch one of his ball games! I feel like an ass, Ryz'n!"

"Bill, Bill, don't feel that way. You didn't know. None of us knew. The important thing is that we know now. That's what's important!"

Bill threw their bags inside the big Caddy's large trunk, while Ryz'n, still clutching her rose, slid her fanny across the Caddy's front bench seat to sit next to Bill. As Sheena took shot-gun, she whispered to Ryz'n, asking how could Bill drive a car without the use of his legs? Ryz'n winked and whispered "Just watch."

They both observed as Bill opened the driver side door. "Here Ryz'n." He offered her his pack of nails and a lighter. He nodded and she held her hands out, as he tossed first the lighter then the pack of Lucky Strikes, both of which she caught. "Just set them in the ashtray there, Ry." She did.

The girls watched as Bill set the brakes on his chair, pulled himself out of his wheelchair and into the car butt end first. To do this, he pushed off the car's seat with his right hand while he held onto the bar of the vent window with his left hand. Then he grabbed the top of the front seatback with his powerful right hand and pulled with his equally strong left, lifting himself and twisting his body in one motion. In mid-air, he pushed off the driver's seatback with his right hand to help him twist. Ryz'n and Sheena watched in awe as the paralyzed man landed in the driver's seat, facing the door with his limbs dangling outside, right leg crossed left below the knees.

The sisters alternately leaned towards the dashboard or rearward with their head hovering above the seatback, so they could observe Bill's next move. He uncrossed his legs, by lifting them, one leg at a time with his hands and swinging his lifeless limbs inside and over the front seat. The right leg went into spasms. Bill had directed his attentions to the chair and couldn't see it.

“Bill, your leg is shaking,” observed with Ryz’n with some concern.

“Hunh? Oh! Damn thing!” Bill turned to the front and smacked his right calf a couple of times, but his paralytic leg persisted in its dance. Placing both hands under the knee, he lifted the leg about six inches off the car floor and then, propelled by his hands, slammed his foot into the floor twice. His paralyzed leg became silent. He grunted, swung his body to the left and renewed his attentions on the chair. Bill reached back with his left hand and dragged the chair up next to him by tugging on the metal foot pedals, which he flipped up vertically to either side. He pulled the three-inch thick foam rubber seat cushion enclosed in green cloth, which he sat upon to prevent “bed sores,” and handed it to Ryz’n for safekeeping. She accepted it a little stunned by his almost casual manner, even though she had witnessed this act before.

Next, he leaned out of the car folded the chair up by leaning over and punching the center of the flexible leather seat upwards thereby drawing the two sides of the chair into each other, together. The metal foot pedals were side by side now. Bill turned the chair so that it faced the car. Simultaneously, he picked up and pulled the chair by the metal pedals, lifting first the pedals, then the small front wheels up over the rocker panel and into the floor of the back seat behind him. Then leaning forward, he pulled the car’s seat forward toward him reaching back with his left hand. Still leaning forward, Bill tugged, hoisted, then pushed the big wheels of the chair up into the back floor of the car, stowing the chair behind him. He leaned his seat back and closed the door. The whole process had taken Bill no more than a minute or two.

Piece of cake, thought Ryz’n. *Yeah, right!*

Both girls observed Bill’s independence with speechless admiration. As Bill started the vehicle, using the hand controls to accelerate and brake the car, Sheena marveled: “Hey, that’s really neat Bill, the way you can do that, drive the car like that, I mean.” Ryz’n felt Sheena’s icy veneer towards Bill was beginning to thaw.

“Yeah, it works out pretty well,” replied Bill lazily. “Well, now girls, I have two free rooms. You can use either one or both. I’m available to drive you anywhere, anytime. I want to find that boy, too, ya know?”

“Oh, thanks, Bill. You don’t know how much it means to us to have you here to help. I’m afraid I’d spend half my time driving the wrong way on the freeway,” replied Ryz’n.

“Well, that can happen to anyone out here, even the natives, although there aren’t that many natives. Most of ‘em are transplanted Iowans, like myself. Ya know, I believe there are more native Iowans out here than there are back in Iowa!” He chuckled.

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In Bill’s off-white stucco bungalow on San Harco Circle in Buena Park, the girls shared the larger of the two guest bedrooms, which housed twin beds. His place had three bedrooms and two baths, with a small kitchen and dining room

and a shake roof. His was a typical Southern California stucco ranch home. The place was nearly completely flat with one step inside from the front foyer down into the living room. There was one riser from the front sidewalk to the front porch. There was also a low ramp that led from the driveway and one-car garage, along the side of the house up to the side kitchen door. Both front and back yards were level as well. A flat patio lay outside his back sliding glass door that led from the dining room to the patio, which he used almost year round. A cinderblock wall, six-feet high, enclosed his grassy back yard, separating him from his neighbors and the alley that ran behind his lot. Obviously, all those level surfaces and the kitchen door ramp were designed to serve his special needs.

Once the girls had settled into their room, which featured twin wooden frame beds, Bill confirmed the name they thought Nick was using. Then he called his girlfriend who worked as a nurse at the Veteran's Administration (VA) hospital in Long Beach. Bill asked her to check into records of a patient with the last name of Strickler. He described Nick's unique physical attributes. He told her he did not have a first name other than "Dixie", but, hopefully, they could find that out the next day. Then he hung up the phone with a sense of accomplishment in his demeanor.

"Don't think there's anything more we can do tonight, girls. Best we turn in now, get some rest. We can head down to the VA hospital first thing in the morning. Esther should have found his records by then, if he has any there. Then, we'll drive over to Malibu tomorrow morning after the rush hour. See if we can't locate that coach."

"OK, Bill. Sounds like a good plan." Ryz'n surprised Sheena, as she uncharacteristically walked brazenly over to sit down in Uncle Bill's lap. Ryz'n hugged and kissed Bill on the cheek. "Is there anything you need Rip, you know, financially? I'm doing very well, you know?"

"No thanks, I'm doin' all right myself. Mr. Hughes keeps sending me checks every month. Nothing I can do about it." He grinned. "Could use a shampoo, though, like ya did for me in Clear Lake?" He smiled impishly at his nephew's wife. Ryz'n sat up in his lap, straight-backed and pinched Bill's cheek between her thumb and forefinger.

"Well, all ri-i-ight! Let's do it. Sheena? You can help."

The girls shampooed and dried Bill's hair thoroughly out under the lights of the back patio. Then they combed out his straight lank hair. From past experience, Ryz'n knew Uncle Bill liked to have his scalp rubbed as a masseuse might and to have his hair combed out slowly and very gently. She gave him what he liked. Bill was a happy camper, as was Ryz'n. Ryz'n could tell he enjoyed the pampering from two Miss America look-alikes, even if one was a newly dyed-in-the-wool hippie.

Shampooing Bill's hair kept Ryz'n's mind off her troubles, calming her down after the adrenaline flow stirred up by her flight. Initially, Sheena found the whole episode a bit odd. She told Ryz'n so, in a whisper to preclude Bill from

hearing. However, later, alone in their room, Ryz'n explained to her sister about Bill. She told how he had acquired his nickname of 'Rip,' of his heroic war exploits over the skies of Europe in World War II. She also explained his tragic personal history, his many personal and physical hardships and his impressive will to survive. Sheena admitted to Ryz'n then that she, too, was happy to have participated in the unusual shampoo.

The next morning, Ryz'n rose early, before five, to exercise and jog, as well as to fix breakfast for the three of them. Ryz'n found jogging around Bill's place, where the long blocks were flat but the traffic heavy, was just the opposite of jogging at her home or down at M&L where traffic was light, but the terrain was hilly. She had kept pretty much the same exercise routine that Nick had outlined for her five and a half years ago.

In high school, all the kids had thought she was crazy to adopt that weirdo Little Nick's crazy and unprecedented ideas into a daily regimen. Nobody worked out in those days. Running was taboo. That changed after Steve Prefontaine's rise to prominence. Yet, her routine also included, calisthenics, pull ups, sit-ups, push ups, light, very light, weight lifting (which had been unheard of in 1969 when Nick had pushed this routine upon her, unheard of even for many high school football programs, let alone for co-eds). Nevertheless, she performed the exercise routine daily, except for Sundays. Every other day, she either swam two miles or ran three to four. Usually she swam, particularly during the warm weather months and down at M&L during the school year as a member of the swim and dive team. After exercising this morning, she cooked breakfast for the three of them. Cooking breakfast for her family had also been part of her morning routine, even at school, where she had cooked for Sheena and Bryson. Ryz'n enjoyed cooking.

Due to her early morning culinary efforts, the trio were out of the house early, arriving at the nearby Long Beach VA hospital by eight a. m. Bill introduced them to his cute, little Filipino nurse friend. She was a short, attractive, slim-figured woman, probably in her late thirties, with bobbed hair, about ten to fifteen years Bill's junior. Her name was Esther. Esther had a pleasant smile and a kindly manner. Ryz'n could see why and how she would make a good nurse. Not unlike Ryz'n herself, Esther exuded a bright cheeriness about her.

Esther had found what they were seeking among the hospital files. Although there were several "Strickler's" on the hospital's rolls as outpatients, there were only a few listed as "mental" cases. Of those, only one met their criteria for Nick. Ryz'n noted if that out-patient were her Nicky, the VA had identified him incorrectly as twenty-two and with an erroneous date of birth. However, the patient's physical characteristics matched Nick's very closely.

The only differences that Ryz'n could detect were that the medical records had this individual listed almost four inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than Nick had been, when he had entered the service barely eighteen. In addition, the dental records had identified Strickler as missing his two upper front teeth, which were

replaced with an upper plate of two porcelain dentures, where Nick had had only a single upper gold-capped tooth. The color of the eyes and hair matched. That was key, because there were very few individuals that had a dark brown left eye and a bright blue, right eye. The mutilations of the left ear, shrapnel scars on the left side of his neck, the mutilation of his right buttock, the missing right finger joints and left testicle, all matched identically with Nick's wounds as Ryz'n had learned of them during the war. Likewise, this patient's vision rating matched her husband's: 20/15 for the left and 20/10 for the right eye. Ryz'n guessed this Strickler guy just had to be her Nick. She surmised he must have grown a little and gotten a couple teeth knocked out. Knowing Nicky as she did, both of those phenomena were distinct possibilities.

The patient, one James D. T. Strickler, had listed Honolulu, Hawaii, as his hometown. His current address was Atkinson Hall, Peppermount University, Malibu, California. Ryz'n stoically fought back tears when she saw he had listed no one as his next of kin. Peppermount Coach Bill Trahorn was Strickler's emergency contact. Ryz'n recognized the phone number for the Coach as the same one the operator had dialed for her the previous day. Esther directed them to the psychiatric ward where they were able to speak with Dr. Mandl, the caseworker, who counseled this "Strickler."