

Just before she crested the hill, Ryz'n caught a glimpse of her cheating spouse in the rear view mirror with his bandaged hands outstretched, like Christ on the cross. He had been anointed with oil by a lovely lady and now he was crucified. And, as far as Ryz'n was concerned, he was no Messiah who would rise again on the third day, either.

With her long, smoky brown tresses flying in the breeze, Ryz'n tore over the hill away from Nick and his cheating heart. The Amazon twins' charity act in Nicky's behalf had not played well with Ryz'n. In size and shape, those two women were almost dead ringers for that adulterous Donna Dixon. Hmmpf, thought Ryz'n. *Well, he must be in seventh heaven now with, not one, but two sets of big, buxom, blond breasts to play with.* The irate Ry was a good mile down the road before she realized she was headed in the wrong direction. Rather than turn about and retrace her steps, potentially running into her husband on Old Veer Avenue, she kept north on past the Mary Surratt national historical home up to Piscataway Road. There, she turned right and then turned right again onto Veer Avenue extended.

Ryz'n paralleled John Wilkes Booth's escape route down to Duley's Bar where she rolled directly onto the notorious assassin's historic trail. Unlike Booth however, Ryz'n did not have a broken leg, merely a broken heart, but it was nonetheless painful. She flew southward, fuming as she drove down to Woldorn, where she had sequestered the band in the *Starlust* Motel. With sheer willpower, she forced herself to erase Nicky from her mind and concentrate on the band.

Strange wasn't it? The same force of will I had used to keep Nicky alive, when all others had said he was dead, I must now use to eradicate him from my mind. If I don't, I fear I might explode into little bits and pieces. I can't think about this now. I must think of something else. But what? The band, yes, I'll think about the band.

Clarence Muddy, owner of the *Starlust*, of both the motel and the night club, had allowed GRT to make use of their nightclub facilities during the day. In return, he asked band to fill in a recently vacated club date for the following Monday night. The *Starlust* stood right next door to the Woldorn Restaurant and *Mr. Rowdy's Loft*, which rested above the restaurant and was itself a nightclub. GRT was scheduled to play *The Loft* next Tuesday night. Therefore, not to be outdone by his neighbor and competitor Clarence Muddy, Mr. Rowdy also had offered the use of his club to GRT for daytime rehearsals. Playing back to back nights at neighboring clubs would seem odd under most circumstances. However, Woldorn had a unique history, which promoted friendly competition among the night club owners there and, then, GRT had name recognition.

Ry knew that, at one time, the County had permitted gambling and Woldorn had become known as Little Vegas. It seemed that almost every grocery store, bakery, gas station, restaurant and club had housed slot machines. County fathers had looked to lure some dollars from travelers flying up and down the East Coast on the heavily traversed traffic Rte 301, which ran from Maine to Miami, and right thought the heart of an impoverished Southern Maryland. However, as the rural county grew into more of a Washington, DC bedroom community, indignant locals fearful of the influences of

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organized crime decried the “Sin Strip” along 301 and the slots that financed it. Besides, the new interstate Rte. 95, about twenty-five miles to the west, sapped away much of the north-south, east coast travelers. While, in its hey-day, the “Strip” had lured big name entertainers like Doris Day, Fats Domino and many others, they also had employed strippers and “go-go girls” as late night entertainment. The good residents of Southern Maryland indignantly appealed to their elected officials to remove the gambling machines and their resultant corrupting influences from all establishments. That they did, with the machines being phased out over five years from July 1963 to July 1968. The few surviving night clubs had formed a kind of brotherhood of the survival of the fittest by featuring live entertainment, dancing and drinking, but there were no longer any slots for the amusement of the Southern Maryland populace or their northern neighbors, enticed from further up the road, closer to DC and Baltimore.

Now, having two clubs almost next door to one another on the Woldorn “Strip” was great for night clubbers, who always had an alternate option if they were less than pleased with their initial club choice for the evening. Ryz’n had explained to the two club owners that she thought it would be defeating the purpose for GRT to play both clubs on back-to-back nights, but they disagreed. They understood better than she the power of the local band’s draw.

Upon arriving in Woldorn, Ryz’n found the band members dining hardly a stone’s throw from their motel in the “Teepee” restaurant (so named because of its unique Native American structure). They wanted to know where Nick was. They thought she would have brought him along. Under great internal stress, which she tried to hide from the others, Ryz’n said she did not know or care where her husband was or with whom. Of course, she knew that was a lie, but she preferred to think it was true for their sakes. She was ignoring him, blocking him from her mind, and wanted them to follow her lead. Furthermore, she requested them specifically *not* to mention him or even acknowledge that he was back.

“Everyone thinks he’s dead or in a VC prison camp, so there’s no reason to tell them any different, is there? It will just cause trouble for us all.”

When they looked at her askance, all she said was “Trust me.” She was going to let the Lord handle Nick from here on out like he had done with Matt and Lena Yikes, because Nick and his philandering were just too much for her to deal with right now.

Ryz’n wanted to get back to work to get her mind off of Nicky. Rehearsal would do just the trick. They collected their instruments into GRT’s truck, which their drummer Mickey Saxon maintained and operated, and drove about five miles down to his spacious brick rancher on old Rte. 911. Mick lived alone there lavishly on his wooded, multi-acre lot. The band rehearsed in his finished studio basement.

Ryz’n cracked the whip over them that night. Sheena, in particular, really needed the work. Mickey was rounding out fine. He always did. She learned he practiced daily, keeping kept his inherent timing and his sturdy wrists in excellent shape. He and Jimmy had jammed together a great deal, since Jimmy Jax and Jax’s bride Neece had moved in with Mick, once Jax’s grandmother finally passed in early May. Of course,

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Ryz'n herself had needed fine-tuning, as well. She threw herself into the music, both vocals and keyboards, with everything she had, as she always did with any endeavor she undertook. Sheena was Sheena and always would be. When she cared enough, Sheena could hold her own with the average bass player. The problem was that she often did not care that much, although she cared a great deal when the royalty checks and her share of the gate receipts or gig cash came around. However, realistically, Sheena's play just was never tight enough to suit Ryz'n.

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After practice, Ryz'n went up to the Woldorn restaurant alone, for a cup of coffee and a late bite to eat. She dawdled over her food, as she sized up the band and its chances of catching on with another big label. Her newest band member impressed Ryz'n more and more, certainly more favorably than the others, because he never complained, never tried to dodge rehearsal and actually made the whole process cool. Jax had been wallowing in the slums of East Baltimore his whole life, when Mickey had found him backing up some strippers at a burlesque club on The Block. Ryz'n could tell the kid was hungry, ready to bust out and he wasn't about to let anyone or anything screw up his big chance.

Jimmy, Jimmy 'Jax' Jackson or J.J. or Double J or just plain Jax, but never James, was truly the consummate definition of a diamond in the rough. Jimmy's idol had been Jimi Hendrix, but Jax claimed he never wanted anyone to compare himself to the late, great rocker, even though everything he did begged such a comparison. Even so, Jax wore his hair, sideburns and mustache, like Hendrix and dressed like him as well, and, largely, could play like him, when he focused his attentions in that direction. Once the public got to know of him, Ryz'n expected such comparisons would be inevitable.

From a musical perspective, Jimmy Jax was made to order for GRT. His guitar play was excellent, smooth and tight, his style unparalleled. He could make his instrument sound like three guitars at once: lead, rhythm and bass. And yes, he could pluck the strings with his teeth, just like his idol, but he almost never did so in public. In addition, Jax was a gifted blower of the harmonica, as Nick had been. Of course, he couldn't play both instruments simultaneously as well as Nicky had done, but not many could. Jax's singing voices was rich, resonant and close to Nicky's sound, very similar to the celebrated Ben E. King's plaintive baritone. However, J.J.'s speaking voice was smoother than Nicky's rough, sandpapered croak.

Jax had impressed Ryz'n the first day of their get-acquainted sessions, when he arrived down at her folks' Outer Banks resort, after her graduation over a month ago. She could tell right away that he had been practicing, using the tape and albums she had provided him over three months earlier as aids. He was only nineteen and he truly was hungry, as they had all been once. With what she had experienced the last three years, and as the senior band member now at twenty-two, Ryz'n felt as if she were already over the hill.

Jax maintains a cool façade as if nothing ever fazes him. Partly, it was due to the ever-present toothpick he held between his teeth. However, Ryz'n recalled that time down at her family's resort home last May, when Jax had let his icy exterior melt. The

band had practiced all day, forcing her parents out of the house. Her mom and dad had taken the ferry down to Ocracoke for a day excursion to “escape the noise.” With their work for the day finished, the band had changed into their swim suits and headed down to the beach for a little fun, bonding. The others were gone when Ryz’n had descended the inner of stairs of the resort home to find Jax chewing on his toothpick and still in his street clothes at the bottom of the stairs.

Perfectly ensembled in one of her many two-piece swimsuits under her yellow, short, terrycloth beach jacket, Ryz’n had found Jax waiting at the foot of the stairs. His large hands hid inside his pants pockets. His ever-present Afro topped his head and he was wearing his street clothes. Long and lean, Jax was scratching his platform-soled shoe toe at the hardwood floor, as if he were a chicken scratching at dirt. She remembered the conversation clearly ...

“What is it, Jax? Don’t you want to come to the beach with us?” When he failed to respond, choosing to stare at the floor instead, she joked lamely, “These beaches are integrated now, you know? Seriously, don’t you want to come down to the beach with us? Don’t think there are any sharks out there—today, anyway.” Ryz’n laughed self-consciously. She climbed down the stairs to the living room floor, where she looked up to the taller, slim-waisted, broad shouldered guitarist, who held GRT’s future in his talented hands.

“Tell me, Jax. What is it?”

“Got no suits,” he whispered around his toothpick, but he kept watching his shoe toe scratch the hardwood floor below without looking her in the eye. “Me ‘n Neechie got no ...” He shrugged his shoulders without looking up at her.

“Is that all? Well, that’s no problem. We’ve got extra suits here, plenty of ‘em, men and women’s. I’m sure we can find something. Let’s go look.” She took him under his the arm, but he didn’t budge. He held his hands in his pockets.

“What, Jimmy? Tell me. I’m not a mind reader you know.” She smiled as sprightly as she could for him, though he refused to look at her.

Jax cleared his throat.

“Look Ry, I uh, don’t know what to say. Don’t want you trippin’ out none. This ain’t, this ain’t cool, girl.”

“Well, you can tell me Jimmy, you know that. We’re not just partners, we’re pals, right?” Ryz’n grinned hopefully.

Jax shrugged and mumbled, “I hope so, ‘deed I do.” He shifted the toothpick with his tongue to the other side of his mouth.

“Well, sure Jimmy, go ahead talk at me Baby. I’m hearin’ ya.” But Jimmy didn’t speak. He just chewed his toothpick and scratched the floor. “Jax you know your bone jackin’ off James Dean now and, if he were here, Nicky might consider that sacrilegious.” Ryz’n stumbled as she moved toward him. “You’re not buggin’ out on me now, are ya JJ?”

“Naw, I ain’t bookin’. Wouldn’t send you on no bumper like that.” That was a relief thought Ryz’n. He had her worried there for a minute. Ryz’n was concerned, she

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thought Jax might be leaving them before he even got started and GRT needed him badly. In fact without him, GRT was finished.

“Sure, Jimmy. I know that. So talk at me. How can I help?” Again, she grinned perkily. I’d like to help, you know. Is it Neechie?”

“Well no, not ‘x’ctly. It’s ... well, ya heard ‘bout my grandmoms?”

“Yeah, I sure did. Didn’t you get the flowers Sheena and I sent?”

Jax bobbed his head. “Yeah, yeah. That was cool, real decent of ya. Y’all didn’t hef ta do that.”

“Nonsense, it was the least we could do under the circumstances. I’m real sorry Jimmy. I know she raised you as if you were her own son. I’m really terribly, terribly sorry.” Her smile faded, as she searched his face for clues to what was bothering him.

Still faced downward, Jax spoke up without meeting her gaze, seemingly studying his chicken-scratching shoe.

“Well, no it ain’t that actually.”

“What do you mean, Jax? What are you talking about?” Ryz’n was kind but firm.

Yet she was perplexed. “I, I don’t know what you mean. Please speak plainly Jax. I gave you—”

“You’ve been very generous Ry, back at Nathan’s with the three G’s and the way you had Mickey take me and Neechie in and all, up in Woldorn. It’s just that I never thought I’d blow that much bread in two months. Ya see, the fun’ral was more than I thought and the nursing bills ... Well, you said if I ever needed—”

Ryz’n reached up and placed her fingertips over his lips. He looked up and met her gaze finally. “Shhhh, shhhh ... Sure, I understand.” She removed her hand from his mouth but held his gaze. “Sometimes dying can be more expensive than living, I guess—Oh, I’m sorry for that remark. I meant no offense.” Jimmy nodded, as Ryz’n agreed with him. “Sure, sure, I remember my promise to you at Nathan’s. It’s not a problem. How much do you need, Jimmy?”

“Mebbe ... maybe two G’s? Could you front us a couple grand, Ry?” He wasn’t cool now. He looked at her as if he were a little boy asking his mother if he could stay up a little longer, and just hoping she would agree.

Ryz’n sighed and smiled for that was chicken feed to her.

“Believe we can handle that Double J, although it is a bit past normal banking hours. But you just wait here. I’ll be right back.” She beamed brightly and patted him on the forearm. Then she bounded back up the stairs to her “cash stash” which she always maintained wherever she went, “just in case.” She counted out thirty Benjamins and stuffed them into a new business envelope. Then she bounced back down the stairs, where she handed him the envelope.

“Go ahead,” exhorted Ryz’n. “You can count it.”

He shook his head. “That’s cool. Real cool.” He nodded the thanks he could not speak. “You be stylin’ in that outfit, Ry.” Then he grinned broadly and left to look for his bride Neechie.

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... Ryz'n stepped out of her reverie to sip her coffee in the diner, but her thoughts strayed back to Double J and his sweet bride Denise. When Ryz'n had returned from her west coast search for Nick, she had learned the Halo Executive VP Jerry Stiehmohr and his sidekick Leonard Varmint had contacted Jax and were offering him a huge deal to work for Halo. However, Jax had remained loyal to Ryz'n and the band and Jax later had admitted his allegiance was due largely to Ryz'n's kindness and generosity towards him previously.

Now here they were in Woldorn preparing for their first gig together. Double J had brought his young bride Denise along. Denise or "Neechie," as he called her, had turned out to be a very sweet girl, indeed. She offered to help however she could—run errands, or do whatever. Jax had promised Ryz'n that his bride had a natural singing voice which projected well in the club scene atmosphere. He claimed she could tickle some boards too, although, like her husband, the girl didn't read music. Down on the Banks, Neechie had convinced Ryz'n she did possess some talent. Now it was up to Ryz'n to figure out a way to mix her talent in with those of the others for the betterment of the band.

Ryz'n sipped on her lukewarm coffee. Daydreaming proved much superior to reality and her worries of Nick. Funny, Ry had tried to foist reality on her recalcitrant husband and pull him out of his dream world, too. Now he had turned the tables on her and again she was drifting back to when she first had auditioned Jax ...

Ryz'n recalled Mickey Saxon had stumbled onto Jax and Denise accidentally, on a fortunate excursion to East Baltimore's "The Block" back in February. Both Denise and Jax had been anxious to leave "Naughty Nathan's Burlesque Revue," when Mickey Saxon arrived one winter evening with a couple of friends to take in the floor show. Mickey could have cared less about the back-up band. He and his buddies had come to enjoy the strippers, who took turns doubling as waitresses. However, Mick always had his musical ear open. When he heard Double J cut loose behind one girl's act to Hendrix's version of "Foxy Lady," Jax blew Mickey away.

Mickey approached the gifted guitarist/vocalist afterward and bought him a drink. He told the musician that Mick was looking for someone just like Jax. When Jax asked the name of the band and Mickey told him it was GRT, Nick said Jax nearly fell off his barstool. Mickey couldn't promise anything, but he took Jax's number and said he would check with GRT's band leader. Mick called Ryz'n at M&L and notified her of his great find: "A diamond in the rough," he had said. And Mick had been right on with that assessment.

Little over a month later, when the Ryan girls and Bryson were home from school for spring break, Mickey had dinner with them. He reminded Ryz'n of his glowing review of the black kid up on East Baltimore Street. Mickey convinced her, as well as the Sheena and Bryson, to accompany him up there to audition the kid. Of course, Mickey had not told Ryz'n their prospective guitarist worked in a strip club. She had found that out soon enough for herself.

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Ryz'n remembered that she had dressed incognito that night as much as she possibly could. She had worn her favorite old princess dress, which was hopelessly out of fashion and would not draw unwanted attention to her. The conservative garment was a spring green item that she had worn in high school. She was proud of the dress because the outfit was the first of many, which she had altered to fit her new slim but curvy figure, back after her successful physical transformation during her junior year. Ryz'n had been as pleased with her figure then as she had been of her needlework. She still was—pleased, but not proud, she hoped. Her mother often had told Ryz'n that she would make an excellent homemaker, because she cooked well, sewed well and possessed a natural gift for nurturing. The compliment always pleased her warmly.

Although only fifteen months separated the siblings, where Sheena may have matured faster physically than her older sister, Ry had always seemed to be wiser beyond her years. She had been the surrogate mother for her kid sister when their mom was working outside the home. Mrs. Ryan had had no compunction about leaving Ryz'n "in charge" when she went to work to supplement the family income and pay for that resort home on the Banks. Her mom often had credited Ryz'n for helping to raise Sheena. Considering how Sheena acted some times, Ry had wondered just as often, if that was much of an endorsement. But Ryz'n was digressing from her digression ...

On that raw, early March evening of the audition, Mickey had escorted Ryz'n while Bryson had escorted Sheena into Naughty Nathan's Comedy and Burlesque Revue. It was a bitter cold, windy March night. Ryz'n was appalled at what she found on 'The Block', East Baltimore's unique version of Sodom and Gomorrah. Bryson was enthralled with what he had found and Sheena hovered somewhere between the two of them. They had parked outside the club on the street, which they had found littered with spitting snow flurries, blowing newspapers, empty wine bottles and other debris. Graffiti covered the walls of the businesses lining The Block. Iron bars or boards protected all windows. Les femmes de joie walked the streets in their fake furs amid the light snow, sneering at Ryz'n and Sheena derisively. They spewed their visible breath from their mouths as if it were dragon fire, as if the Ryan girls might be some new competition for them. At the alley corner, Ryz'n thought she was witnessing a dope deal going down, either that or she had watched too much prime time TV. Shoot! The police station was just down the street! They had passed it driving in for crying out loud, but these seemingly nefarious activities proceeded unimpeded. Ryz'n shook her head, wondering what she had gotten herself into by listening to her drummer. She had half a mind to abort their mission, before they reached a point of no return.

Mickey directed the GRT band members into the smoky, dark and sparsely decorated Naughty Nathan's. The building had a turn of the century look and feel to it. For sure, the club had not been renovated in some time nor cleaned for that matter. A tall, slim, light-skinned, feline-looking hostess/hat check girl met them at the door. The hostess, who had dressed as a Play Boy Bunny, sans the ears, took their coats and showed them to one of many vacant tables. It was the middle of the week, a Wednesday night, Ryz'n thought, if she remembered correctly. There were hardly a

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dozen customers in the place. They were all male and mostly drunk. The tablecloths looked as if they had not been changed in a week. It was just past nine-thirty. Tobacco smoke hung in the air, thick as fog. Cigar smoke seemed to predominate.

As Ryz'n and her party walked in, a stripper "danced" her routine up on the low stage to one of Ryz'n and Nick's favorite R&B tunes, Little Willie John's "Fever." Ryz'n had loved that tune ever since Nick had introduced it to her down at the beach that momentous Fourth of July weekend when they had become one in mind and spirit. However, she hated the whole concept of stripping, so she made a U-bie to exit that den of inequity. Nevertheless, Mickey snagged her by the arm. Both Bryson and Sheena urged Ryz'n to stay. After all, they had driven over an hour in inclement weather to get up there. She should at least hear this guy. It was no comfort to Ryz'n that she and Sheena were the only females in the audience. However, she let the other three persuade her and she relented.

Well, they all sat down and ordered a drink from a waitress. Her tassel-covered chest and abbreviated mini-skirt provided a better show than the one onstage, surmised Ryz'n. Despite the darkened interior, Ryz'n refused to remove her sunglasses. She would die of mortification if anyone recognized her in that place. Sheena copied her sister, but the two boys removed their dark glasses. "Damned things were blocking the scenery," noted an annoyed Mickey. By now, the skinny dancer on stage had removed all but her short, short skirt. She took a dead microphone and played with it seductively, dangling it up and down her arms. Then she wrapped the cord around the back of her neck. Using her neck as a fulcrum, the dancer released the cord with one hand and lowered the mike slowly down over her flat chest. By releasing the cord from her opposite hand, she provided the slack needed to lower the mic. The girl bounced the mike downward from one side of her body to the other. Ryz'n had placed an elbow on the table. Embarrassed, she looked down at the soiled tablecloth, holding her forehead in her hand and wondering why she had come. The sustained shouts of the male audience induced Ryz'n to look up from beneath her hand. Ryz'n could not help but notice that both she and Sheena were far better endowed than the slender dancer onstage. Yet, more importantly, she also noticed amazingly that the slim stripper held her limited but appreciative audience in a trance.

The entertainer continued to lower her prop, slowly bumping and grinding all the while to the strains of "Fever." The besotted customers hooted and whistled, loudly yelling their encouragement. The dancer built up to her finale, by bouncing the mic, tossing it from one thigh to the other to the beat of the music. Ryz'n lowered her covering hand to the table to watch the act unencumbered. She, too, had become mesmerized by the tiny dancer's spell, but for reasons different from her male counterparts. The finale came when the enthusiastic performer bounced the mike far out in front of her. She let out the cord on the return swing. The cord caught the hem of her tightly spread leather skirt near the mike head, with the centrifugal force of the heavy head flipping up and disappearing out of sight under her skirt, where the dancer caught the mike between her thighs. It was a demonstration in physics unlike any other Ryz'n had ever witnessed, leaving her aghast.

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All the men in the audience, except for Bryson, railed and cheered as if the entertainer had just scored the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. Then, bent over at her waist, double-bubble butt out behind her, knees knocked, toes touching, with her heels spread outward, the cheesy entertainer finished with a fury and a furry flash. The girl reached up inside her skirt, pulling out the dead mike with one hand, while, at the same time with her free hand, she unwrapped her skirt to reveal all. *I could have done without that last!* Out to her sides, in the formation of the iron cross, the tiny dancer held aloft both mike in one hand and the skirt in the other, separately for all to see. However, aloft was not the direction in which those ogling, aping gapers cared to look. Then the dancer bowed deeply, hands and arms still spread out as wide as her demure grin, as if she were closing her act as a prima ballerina who had just performed *Swan Lake*. Her drunk but enraptured audience provided her an enthusiastic standing ovation.

Her male audience went crazy. Two of the drunks rushed the stage enthusiastically, requiring a couple of bouncers to forcefully restrain them. After several bows, the smiling young entertainer huskily whispered into the mike the sexiest “Thank You” that she could muster. She held her skirt high out to her side as she accepted tips. Mickey stepped up to the stage and donated a ten-spot. Then she wiggled off backstage like a debutante, stooping gracefully, as she went to pick up previously discarded articles of clothing and dollar bills thrown by the animals in the audience. The girl obviously had been proud of what little she had and how she had displayed it.

Ryz’n had frozen in her seat. She could not believe what she had just witnessed. Mickey returned to their table and joined in the standing ovation, helping the thin audience bring the dancer back for a curtain call. Bryson had started to rise after Mickey, but Sheena clamped down firmly on her husband’s forearm, holding him in place. After the applause faded, Sheena said something odd, which Ryz’n could never get out of her head.

“You know Ry that little girl really had no rhythm. She can’t dance at all. And gee, we moved sexier than that as kids with the belly dancing Gran’ma taught us. We certainly have more stuff to shake than that dancer does. And I use that term loosely.”

Still frozen, Ryz’n stared at the empty stage, disbelieving what she had witnessed. The stripper’s raunchy act had burned an impression into Ryz’n’s brain that she could not erase, even though she tried. That performance was the most ingeniously suggestively, indecent act, Ryz’n had ever seen. How could that be legal? She could not help but wonder at how her husband the old Nicky would have reacted had he been here. No doubt, he would have been leading the audience in their lewd, rude cheers. Ry thought that maybe she should perform like that just for him, when he returned from Nam, in a kind of a command performance in the secret confines of their bed chamber.

The thought of her MIA husband brought Ryz’n briefly to herself only to recall that she had tried and failed at a similar, salaciously lewd and lascivious act with him the other night in his motel room. Had she succeeded, maybe they would be together right now, instead of her sitting here alone, wondering what might have been. Irrked at stooping to think of him now, Ryz’n forcibly returned to her reverie ...

But Sheena had been right, either of them could out dance the girl they had just witnessed and with more goods to display as well. What grabbed Ryz'n about the whole performance were the wild, lusty reactions of the men in the audience. The focused, entranced stares of those men, the rapt, hypnotic connection between the male audience and the female performer was unlike anything she had ever witnessed. It was uncanny. Then too, Ryz'n had to admit, the little entertainer had mesmerized her as well, though for different reasons. To think a female could hold that kind of power over men, drunken men to be fair, but still ... Ryz'n kept these salacious thoughts to herself, remaining impassive to the world, hiding behind her dark glasses.

Sheena had deadpanned. "Well the best to be said for her number, I suppose, is that she acted like you Ry, when you down some of Dr. Tux's feel-good pills."

"What!?!? What are you talking about? I never—"

Attempting to make up for his wife's faux-pas, Bryson quickly intervened between the two sisters as he had done often. "She was only kiddin' Ry. Forget it." Then he turned to his spouse beside him. "But I do go agree with you, Shee, you got a lot more to offer than that chick. That's right Baby, you sure do." He pecked Sheena on the cheek and hugged her close to him to prevent an argument between the sisters. Ryz'n held her peace, but she did not forget her sister's remark. That Bryson was no dummy. He knew what side of the bread his butter was on.

The MC had introduced a stand-up comic, while the three-piece combo took a break, except for the drummer, who provided the *ba-da-dup-ching!* sound effects for the stand-up. The imitation Play Bunny hostess wore many hats, as now she came around with a cigarette tray. Sheena purchased a Tiparillo. Bryson chuckled, shaking his head. Mickey purchased a cigar for both him and Bryson, even though they knew Ryz'n abhorred tobacco smoke. Ryz'n stared at the stage. She could not stop the microphone number from replaying repeatedly in her head. She could not keep the whole scene from playing out in slow motion before her, particularly the effects of the dancer's bumps and grinds upon the male audience. Ryz'n had it all memorized. Of course, it wasn't that difficult. Her thoughts drifted to her M.I.A husband and of some of the desultory performances she had forced upon him when they had been newlyweds and she wanted to cry. However, she willed back the tears, as she did so often in public. She had thought then that she would have done anything for him, if only he would just come back home to her. She believed she would even replicate the performance she had just witnessed for him, if ever he returned ...

Ryz'n lifted herself from her East Baltimore Street daydream long enough to realize again she had *tried* that night in the motel room, despite her lack of sleep and a terrific headache. However, in all honesty, that flat-chested stripper had blown Ryz'n's paltry efforts way. When the reality is too real, she reasoned, the only thing to do is to escape from it and return to the daydream. This, she did ...

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After igniting his Havana cigar, much to Ry's disdain, Mick caught the eye of the guitar man from the club's back-up band across the floor of the dark, dingy club. The comic onstage was telling jokes ranging from corny to vulgar, but they were all bad.

"Why did Silly Willy cut a hole in the floor? He wanted to see the floor show. Why did Silly Willy cut the toilet seat in half? Because his half-assed brother was coming to town ..." When some customer complained about the comic's lack of originality and said he could do better, the clown responded that "Sure! And if a frog had wings, he wouldn't bump his ass so much." However, he let the customer up on the stage where he did tell a funny story about a pilot and a stewardess, but that was the extent of his material, so he sat down, mildly placated. However, unfortunately for the rest of the patrons, the "professional" clown droned on in a never-changing, slow monotone.

As that melodrama ensued, Jimmy Jax had drifted over to Mick, who gave the young musician the black man's handshake. Mickey introduced the young guitarist to the rest of the table, all the while puffing proudly on his cigar. Double J pulled up a chair. He turned the seatback to the table and sat with his elbows hanging over the back of the chair, resting them on the table between Ryz'n and Mick. His back was to the stage. Ry noticed that he wore two-toned brown and gold platform shoes, beltless, brown, flared, double-knit slacks, a shiny, dark gold lamé, snug-fitting, long-sleeved shirt with French cuffs and an opened, wide, pointed collar. He had failed to close the top couple shirt buttons, revealing a hairless, chocolate brown chest. A gold and brown headband encircled his wild afro, leaving two uneven streamers falling down the side of his head. Medium height, with a lean angular frame, the black kid sat placidly before them, chewing on a toothpick. Long, steep sideburns and a Chu partly hid the age of his youthful face. Ry noticed the young man possessed extraordinarily long fingers. She liked that in a guitarist. Actually, Ry thought Jimi Hendrix had been resurrected and was sitting directly across the small, cocktail table from her. Except, this boy was far prettier than the famed rocker, due to his smooth, even features and arched eyebrows. If this kid could play the guitar half as well as Hendrix, GRT would be all set.

An awkward quiet prevailed until Mickey realized Ryz'n's silence meant she was content to let him drive this train. After all, he had discovered the kid.

"Well, hey, how ya been Jax?"

"Cool." He nodded with a faint smile.

"Oh, well hey, that's, that's great Mann, that's cool," replied Mick in a forced attempt at being cool himself. Jax nodded slowly. Then the kid got coolly serious.

"Been a while, Mann. Thought maybe you was just trippin' me out, ya know?"

"Oh no, no Jimmy. I took a little siesta down in Acapulco for a few days. Get out of this frickin' cold and ice up here. You know how it is, Mann." Ryz'n grimaced behind her shades at her drummer's thoughtless remark.

Jimmy grinned revealing some pearly white teeth, which clenched the round toothpick in the gap between his upper front pearls. With that toothpick, Ryz'n thought the kid looked a little like a poor man's black unicorn.

"Ha. Well, I sure know about the cold and ice part of it, anyway."

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Ryz'n turned to Mickey on her left and tapped her long fingernails twice on the table, a signal to Mickey to cut the crap and get down to business. Mick understood.

"Yeah! Say Jax, you, uh, gonna be slammin' that thing tonight or what?"

"Sure, what do ya want?"

"How 'bout that number you did for me?"

"That's cool." He turned around spotting the table's waitress.

"Hey, Shirley?" The buxom Shirley approached with bust bouncing, tassels swaying.

"Yeah J.J. You want another root beer?" She asked as she bent over the table between Jax and Mickey. Ryz'n suppressed a grin to maintain a straight face because Shirley's buxom nature forced the woman to arch her back and neck to keep her right tassel from dipping into Mickey's drink. She wore the tassels on her chest as if they were a pair of medals. With her tail feathers stuck up behind her and her head aloft, the pose strangely resembled one of those nineteenth century swells wearing a bustle. The contradiction for this place was almost too much for Ryz'n to bear.

"No, Baby," explained the musician. "I was thinking maybe you could switch with Emily and do your number next. These people here are interested in hearing, I mean, seeing it."

"Oh sure, Honey. I'll tell Em and we'll go for it as soon as Manny's finished."

Turning to the rest of the table, Shirley asked if she could get them another drink, but they declined. Then she sashayed backstage, ostensibly to change into her costume. The entertainer, who had just performed the microphone number, emerged from backstage, clothed as a waitress now and took Shirley's place. As she walked by, Ryz'n told the girl how impressed she was with her number. The girl seemed genuinely pleased to receive such pleasant professional feedback from a fellow female. She told Ryz'n to come back sometime and watch her do it with the microphone "left on. That really drives 'em nuts, but it's a bit rugged on me, the electricity, ya know." Then she assumed her server's duties. But her last remark had left Ryz'n curious. Jimmy turned back to the group and winked slyly, as he tilted his head and nodded towards Mick.

"So like, you're real down with this, right Mann? This is no B.S.?"

"Oh yeah, totally solid, Mann. Serious as my heartbeat," responded Mickey, puffing on his cigar.

"Righteous. Cool, but righteous." He raised a black fist.

The young black man rose languidly, still nodding and smiling. He repeated the handshake ritual with Mickey, turned the chair back, right way round. Still cool, the kid removed the toothpick and waved it in a parting salute and sauntered back to the band on the far lower left of the stage.

Jimmy had impressed Ryz'n. He had never ogled her or Sheena, never made any cute remarks and, most importantly, never lost his cool. She had not even given him the courtesy of removing her dark glasses. Ryz'n rarely did when business was involved, for three reasons. One: she had difficulty maintaining a poker face, so the glasses helped her maintain that cool facade. Two: her visage was so becoming, it often proved to be a distraction in conducting business with members of the opposite

sex. Three: she had learned that removing the glasses or peering over them to look her opposite party in the eye at the appropriately strategic moment could often sway a deal in her favor. The only negative to wearing her dark glasses in this dingy, dimly lit nightclub was that she was almost blind as a bat. She did not share her husband's genes for night vision.

Her first impression of Jax was positive. The young man had not reflected any negative attitude, despite his obvious disappointment to this overdue meeting. He had rearranged the club performance schedule for them without ruffling any feathers. If he truly did drink nothing but root beer, that would be a huge plus. Then maybe that suggestion had been a plant. Ryz'n would see.

Shirley replaced Manny onstage as Jimmy Jax and his quartet struck into Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady." Shirley danced with fox furs tied around her body, stripping off one fake dead fox after the other to the delight of the catcalling audience. Ryz'n had to admit the woman performed with a certain panache that could be considered entertaining. However, Jimmy Jax really wailed, making his guitar cry and moan, as he sang the song in a voice Ryz'n almost recognized as her husband's voice, except it was not nearly as raspy. When Shirley had concluded her performance and exited the stage, Jax and his two band members regaled his special audience with a little known GRT song "Silver Right," which was more of a ballad Nicky had written about his and Ryz'n's first night at the beaver ponds. Jax took the opportunity to replicate Nicky's soulful harmonic solo, which doubly impressed Ryz'n. The trio finished with a sensually, rocking version of "And I Thank You," which Jax both played and sang, but Ryz'n wished to hear another.

The drunks were enjoying the music but they wanted some more stripper action. Ryz'n leaned forward in her seat, prompting her brother-in-law to elbow Mickey, who sat beside him. She had Mickey signal for one more number, even though a few customers clamored for the next stage act.

Jax fulfilled both requests by performing his idol's "Purple Haze," while Emily stood up to do her thing on stage. Ryz'n had liked to think that the stripper "'scused" Jax while he "kissed the sky." Jax's talent seemed lost on the inebriated patrons, who preferred Emily's lewd gyrations.

Ryz'n was overwhelmed. This kid was a heck of a talent! Why was she so lucky to find him here of all places? What was he doing working in a dive like this? She could not figure it. Ryz'n signaled Mickey to hail the kid back to their table. After Emily had concluded her piece de resistance, Jimmy set down his guitar. He strolled amiably across the room to resume his previous seat in the same position as before. He was calm, as if what he had just played were all in a night's work, which it was, but Ryz'n guessed his heart was racing nonetheless. This was a big opportunity for him.

Ryz'n turned on the charm with her three-dimple smile, the first time she had smiled during her visit to Naughty Nathan's, but she kept the shades on her face, nonetheless.

"Well James, THAT was quite a performance." Jax spoke in what Ryz assumed was his best uptown, honky accent. Because it sure was different from how he had spoken to them a few minutes ago.

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“Thank, you ma’am. I had hoped you’d like it.” He smiled pleasantly, featuring his ever-present toothpick.

“I’d like to buy you another root beer. That’s your beverage of choice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s cool. Then I don’t have to sip cola and eat aspirin for breakfast.”

She laughed. She was warming to this kid more every minute. Because he responded with Nicky’s preferred prescription for a hangover, as well.

“Yes, I know what you mean.”

He chuckled easily, showing she was not the snob she had appeared to be. Jax chewed on his toothpick and seemed to relax, while he leaned forward over the back of the chair, which once again he had turned with its back to the table. His elbows and forearms hung over the chair, resting on the table surface with his chin down on the top of the seatback. He knew of her fame. They chatted. Mickey had said Jax had always appreciated GRT’s style, that is, until their last album had popped a little but fizzled even more. Ry chose to ignore that remark.

“You are an amazingly talented young man, James.”

“Please ma’am. You can call me Jim or Jimmy, J.J., Double J or Jax or even Jimmy Jax, but please, ma’am, please don’t call me James,” pleaded the musician.

“OK, Jim, Jimmy, J.J., Double J, Jax and Jimmy Jax: all of you are most talented.” They chuckled some more.

“However, I confess, I’m more than a little curious as to why you are playing in this, this establishment and why I am so lucky to find you available. You are available, aren’t you Jimmy?”

“Right on! As much as any of them workin’ girls outside, dancin’ the curb.”

“Excuse me?”

Jimmy re-donned his white accent.

“Uh, that is to say my skills as a musician and singer are very much available, ma’am.” He smiled pleasantly again. Ryz’n caught onto his act and she played along

“Good, very good. And why is that? Why aren’t you playing in the Hollywood Bowl instead of this, this ...?”

“Why am I playing Naughty Nathan’s?”

Ryz’n nodded.

“Well, don’t you like it here? Why, this is like the garden spot of The Block. Customers come from all over the globe to enjoy our superior brand of entertainment here at Naughty Nathan’s Burlesque Revue.”

The kid had some education, but Ryz’n was a bit miffed. She didn’t care for the sarcasm. She turned her head to Mick, who merely shook his head and grimaced.

“Well, I’m afraid I’m not one of them,” replied Ryz’n calmly. “But if you’re trying to be a comedian, you’re not cutting it, not with me, anyway. You better stick to music.” Ryz’n began to rise from her chair, as did the others who followed her lead.” Jax held up his hands.

“Whoa! Hold on ma’am, hold on. I apologize for my poor taste in jokes. Please, do sit down. I didn’t mean anything by it. Honest!” Ryz’n sat back down.

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“Go ahead then and explain,” ordered Ryz’n as she nodded to the others, to follow her example and sit down, too. She had to show she was the boss of this outfit. If this talented kid wanted to get into the band, he had to know the way to the Promised Land passed through her door.

“Well, the truth—Shoot! You won’t believe the truth, if I told ya.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m a pretty fair discerner of truth. Got a little helper inside who—” she tapped her heart with her fist “—steers me straight. So go ahead, spill it. I’m all ears, as long as you aren’t jerkin’ my chain.” She smiled briefly and Jax nodded.

“Well, OK, OK. The truth, as uncool as it may sound, is my grandmom’s got a lymphoma. Doctors say she’s got a month, maybe two at best. She’s my onliest fam’ly who ever gave a hang ‘bout me. So, I told her I’d stick around. Somebody’s gotta pay the Man, help her out.” Ry studied his earnest visage. His eyes weren’t lying.

“That’s got to be true, Jimmy. It’s too real to be anything but true. Look, Jimmy. Let me say that I’m terribly, terribly sorry to hear about your grandmother.” The others concurred.

“Yeah, well thank ya much, but ...” He looked away, a bit choked up, before he shifted gears, lifting his voice over Ry’s head. “The other reason I’m here has been loafin’ ‘round behind you, stylin’ like she ain’t EAVESDROPPIN’, WHEN I KNOW DARN WELL SHE IS.” Jax both sat and spoke up. “SAY BABY! NEECIE! Come on ovah here, Baby.”

The teenage hostess, hatcheck, cigarette girl, girl of all trades in the play bunny outfit strolled over, feigning surprise. He motioned for her to come, stand by his side where his long arm could wrap around her thin waist, as would an octopus around its prey. Ryz’n thought the girl’s waist to be as narrow as hers and the curvy bandleader did not know many women who could claim that distinction.

Necie was a long, slender, modestly curved, light skinned, black girl with big brown calf eyes that featured doe-like lashes and even longer eyebrows. Her hair was pulled tightly about her head and she wore a fall in the manner of the ancient Greeks and Romans which drooped down past her shoulder, resting against her right collar bone. The girl looked Cajun to Ryz’n.

“Baby, this is the famous band ‘Good Rockin’ Tonight.’” With Mick’s help, he introduced each band member in turn finishing with Ryz’n, who was the last to shake the girl’s hand. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is my permanent fiancée Denise Marie Fontenot.” He introduced her proudly.

Denise backhanded Jax softly across the crown of his head.

“Permanent fiancée? Now Baby, why don’t you tell these people the truth?” She turned back to the table. “The truth is, we’re gettin’ married a week from Saturday.” All present delivered sincere congratulations to the young couple.

Ryz’n studied the pair. They were obviously happy, young and in love. You cannot fake that kind of genuine, glowing happiness. Their life was before them. Ryz’n was only a few years older, so why did she feel like a senior citizen? Why did their closeness re-emphasize her loneliness? Why did this talented, young, black man

remind her so much of Nicky? They caught Ryz'n staring into space, even though they still could not penetrate the dark glasses to see her eyes.

"So Ry, what's goin' on behind those Foster-Grants?" asked Mickey. "Ry! Hey Ry!" He snapped his fingers quickly to break her spell.

"What? Excuse me. I, uh." She giggled nervously to conceal her wistfulness.

"I say Ry, what do you think about my man here, Double J?" Mick patted Jax on the shoulder. "You think, maybe he could fit in with us?"

"Well, what do you think, Mick?"

"Hell yeah, seein' as how he is exactly what we need. I think he could fit in good, real good, like a hand fits a glove."

"Bryson?"

"He's got my vote." Bryson slapped the table twice for emphasis.

"Sis?"

Like her sister, Sheena still wore her shades. She had remained reserved in her actions and stoic of visage, acting cool when Ryz'n knew her kid sister to be probably the most uncool human alive. Like the Roman mob, Sheena began to turn her thumb down, but reversed direction, pointing both thumbs upward. She smiled briefly but said nothing.

"Well, Nicky and I agree," declared Ryz'n. "In his absence, I speak for him. So I believe that makes it unanimous." Ryz'n grinned broadly, as did they all.

"Now, Jimmy Jax, you'll get a full share of everything. If you write any hits, you'll get an extra share for the revenue brought in by your songs. If you collaborate with me or someone else, we'll work it out accordingly. Perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself. Do you even write music?"

"I've done some things, but uh, I dunno. I'm a musician more than a songwriter. I don't write music so much, but I've composed some songs up here," he pointed to his head, "and down here," he tapped his heart, "and on her," he played the air guitar, "but writin' it down, no. I don't write or read music."

"Well, that's fine. Don't worry about that. Now, Look! This is key to the whole deal. Drugs are out. If you're doin' drugs and I find out, I'll warn you once. If it happens again, I'll warn you twice and fine you twice as much the second time. There won't be any third warning. I don't care how good you are." Ryz'n tapped the table three times rhythmically for emphasis and thumbed outward. "Just like baseball, Jimmy, three strikes and you're out. That includes weed." She looked over her shades to peer into his eyes. "OK?"

Jax removed the toothpick from his teeth. The beauty of her eyes seemed to throw him off stride for a second, but he focused back on her as the boss.

"Yeah, if you say so, I can do that I guess, but what about medicinal drugs?"

"Medicine's not a problem, if you need it. If you have a chronic condition, maybe we can help. I occasionally have to take some prescription drugs myself from time to time to help me perform." Bryson and Mickey looked sheepishly down at the table, while Sheena turned her head away from Ryz'n. "What, what's the matter with you all?" They shook their heads and kept quiet.

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Bryson answered, “Nothin’ Ry, nothin’ at all.”

“Well OK, then. Is there something we can help *you* with, Jax?”

“No, I’m cool.” He sat back a little, chewing on the toothpick.

“Great! Now you should know that our option with Halo is up in about five weeks and they’re dropping us for sure. But I’ve put together a little, what I call, ‘a get reacquainted’ tour for us starting the end of June and running for a few weeks this summer. The gigs are down in the DC area and over at the beach mostly. We’ve got one deal up here at *Johnny’s*. I’ve got some tunes I wrote and there are a couple of Nicky’s we haven’t published yet, and we’ll see what you have, Jimmy, in here and up here.” She pointed first to her heart and then to her head. “If we get lucky, maybe another big time platter company will take a flyer on us.

“And just so you know the full score: Sheena and Bryson go back for their last year of college in September. If they work hard”—Ry tapped the table in their direction as she turned to look sternly at her sister and brother-in-law over her dark glasses, before she returned her glasses to their perch—“they should graduate in December. Sheena’s our bassist and helps with percussion.” Sheena nodded stiffly and Jax returned her nod.

“Bryson here is our behind the scenes man. He does a little bit of everything, security, transportation, instrument and equipment maintenance, etc. You name it, he can do it. You’ll find him to be a great asset. Anything you need, you can see him and if he can’t help you, then come see me.”

Bryson held up the peace sign and Jax acknowledged him by taking his toothpick from his mouth, pointing it upward in a salute. “And you already know what the Mick does.” Mickey patted him on the shoulder and Jax winked.

“This Fall, I figure you, Mick and I can handle things, kind of like a power trio, until Sheena and Bry finish school. There’s an outside chance I might go to grad school, if things are slow but we’d still play the local club scene on weekends. Now, that’s worst case you understand. Best case—and with you on board Jax, I figure best case is the most likely case. So best case is we land a contract after our little tour, get into the studio and come up with something, some album, which we can start to tour on by the first of the year, when everyone is available. And I’ve already got some tunes in mind, some ideas goin’, OK? Does that sound like a plan or what?”

“A winter tour?” Jimmy Jax was not overly enthusiastic. He confessed that he had thought he would be moving right into the big time with GRT. What Ryz’n had laid out was a little different from what the musician had anticipated. He had thought GRT was already in the big time, not trying to break into it. Ryz’n removed her shades all together, lowering them to the table, but still holding them in her left hand. With her right, she reached across the table and took hold of Jimmy J’s forearm, which rested on the table before him.

“Are you’re willing to gamble along with me, Jimmy Jax?” Sans shades, again, she peered into the kid’s eyes. She felt his cool facade melting right down beneath her gaze, as she had with so many business acquaintances and how she used to do with her husband, as well. Ryz’n had a way with men, when she chose to employ it. She always had, ever since her junior year of high school. However, she could not explain why that

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was so, and she did not abuse the privilege. Jax's large Adam's apple bobbed twice. Finally, he replied simply.

"That's cool." Ryz'n patted the teen's arm and nodded.

"Good, very good. I think we can help each other out, don't you?" She beamed the three-dimple beam forcing him to return her smile.

"Yeah, sure. We'll get it done, Ry."

The two new partners grinned at one another. Denise cleared her throat, as she squeezed her fiancé's shoulder and upper arm.

"Oh, yeah. I, uh, forgot to mention. Neechie here can sing a little, too."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sheeboom, I have sung in Church as a soloist."

"Really?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Look, Neechie, is it?"

The girl nodded, "Denise or Neechie. Either way is good."

"OK, Neechie, call me Ry or Ryz'n, OK?" She nodded again.

"Do you play an instrument?"

"Kind of, I played a little piano at church, but I never learnt how to read music, either."

"Well, I tell you what, we'll see what you can do and go from there, OK?"

"OK." She grinned gratefully. "Anything I can do to help."

"Great! Now Mick, have you got the, uh, the uh ..." Ry snapped her fingers twice.

"Oh yeah!" Mickey fumbled and bumbled before he pulled out two business envelopes from his inside pocket of his tan, corduroy sport coat. Mick handed the bulky one to Ryz'n. Ryz'n promptly handed it over to Jax.

"This is a cassette copy of part of a typical session tape which shows how Nicky did things, how he thought. That's what we want to recapture with you in the band now, Jimmy. We want to get back to his raucous, raw sound, his R&B-based style and get away from what we did with that last album. Of course, we don't have a sax or any horns, but we'll work around that, don't worry. That's my problem to figure out. Besides, the electric guitar is king today and you'll be the king of kings, Jax. You can lead us back to the sound and style for which GRT is renowned."

"Righteous, I can dig that!" Jimmy raised a black fist.

"Why, Jimmy, are you saying you didn't approve of our last album?" Ryz'n played coy.

"Well, it was, uh, different from the others—for sure."

"Yes. Most of the songs, I wrote alone. A few were with Nicky, but I arranged them. Largely though, that was my album, ya know? Soft rock, they call it." Unable to feign sincerity any longer, a giggle bubbled up out of her throat.

He chuckled when he realized he had been had. Ryz'n rejoined him.

"Well, I didn't care for it that much either, but don't tell that to Halo Platters! Let's keep that in the family here, OK Jimmy?"

"Cool."

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“Anyway, study that tape. And practice to our old albums, everything—your lead, the harmonica and the vocals—Nicky’s vocals. You have a couple months to get it right. We’ve got some albums in the car, if you need them.”

“No, that’s cool. I got ‘em all, all but the last that is.” He sheepishly whispered the end of his statement.

Ryz’n let his remark slide. “Great! Then you’re all set.” Ryz’n turned again to the envelope bearer.

“Mick? The envelope, please.”

Her nod signaled the drummer “with wrists extraordinaire” to hand Jax the other envelope. Jax opened it and his eyes widened as he fingered thirty, one-hundred dollar bills.

“Whoa! Like what’s this for?” His toothpick fell from his mouth to the table.

“For you,” replied Ryz’n. “Consider it a retainer or even a wedding present if you want, but I can’t ask you to wait around empty handed for a couple months, while I finish school, now can I? If you need more, especially with your grandmother’s situation, contact me or Mickey. Our cards are in the envelope, too. OK?”

“Solid, mann. Right on!” He stuck the envelope full of cash into his pants pocket.

“Now one other thing Jimmy: I don’t want you to take offense, so I’m telling you straight out, but, and this is just business now.” Ryz’n leaned forward and placed both hands flat on top of the table. “You may hear of a man askin’ around about you. He’ll be my man.” She took his forearm and smiled sweetly again. “I’m sure he’ll confirm what I know to be true: that you and Neechie here are good people. It’s just the nature of the business, that’s all. And together, we’ll all put GRT back on top. We can work out a more formal deal then. OK, JIMMY JAX?”

Jimmy took his right arm from Neechie’s waist and placed it over Ryz’n’s right hand. She placed her other hand upon his forearm.

“Yeah, solid, Ry. I’m down with that. It’s all cool.”

Mickey reached across the table to put his hand over Jimmy’s. In turn, Bryson and Sheena did the same. Neechie stood alone. Ryz’n looked up at her.

“Well, Neechie, you feel exclusive or something?” grinned Ryz’n. Neechie beamed and joined her hand atop the pile.

“—HEY, JACKSON! What the hell are we runnin’ here a social club?” Naughty Nathan himself approached them. “Get your black ass over there and earn your salary, you frickin’ black Prima Dona!” The hand fest broke up and Jax’s smile melted, but Jimmy Jax neither hurried nor slackened his actions, but remained cool, as he had all night, except for when he had counted that cash. He rose to leave, but turned back to Ryz’n with a question.

“Just one thing, Ry?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What about ... well, what if Little Nick comes back? Will you *still* run the show?”

The question caught Ryz’n by surprise.

“That’s a good question. I honestly don’t know. Well, we’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it. Like I said, we could use a good sax or a horn, too. Nick

never enjoyed the guitar as much as those other instruments. Anyway, as far as your security within the band is concerned, it won't make any difference, as long as you check out—and I'm certain you will or I wouldn't have given you the cash—you're in! It was unanimous. I voted Nick's proxy. That's why I put two hands on you: one for Nicky and one for me." She grinned to reassure him.

"I'm totally down with that."

He left to back-up the next number—a stripper who had appeared onstage, already stripped except for a button and a bow and a red garter on each of her limbs. Having concluded her business for the evening, Ry was about to leave when she noticed the number of patrons had trebled within a matter of minutes. Mick asked her to hold up a minute to watch this act, but he wouldn't tell her what the act was. So Ryz'n asked Neechie what was up. The girl explained rather painfully that it was eleven thirty, time for "Whoa Black Betty." Ryz'n looked at the dancer, a slightly built, poorly endowed, five-foot sixish black girl with a tremendous Afro, who danced to an expedited version of an old blues tune called "Whoa Black Betty." Ryz'n told Neechie that she had not remembered seeing the dancer doing any waitressing. Neechie turned up her nose and explained this performer did not waitress. She only performed this one number once a night. Observing nothing particularly noteworthy of this act, except that the dancer was already nearly naked, Ryz'n asked Neechie what was so special about her that attracted the undivided attention of the additional gentleman patrons. Neechie advised that, in this case "seeing is believing." Then she shook her head in disgust and left to peddle her cigars and cigarettes.

Mickey told Ryz'n that this was the act to top all acts. "You gotta see it to believe it," he noted, smacking his lips. He turned and swatted Bryson on the shoulder. "You'll love this Bry," he cackled.

So Ryz'n returned to her seat, skeptically curious to see what the act offered. Who knew? Maybe it was something she could employ, clothed of course, in her own material. The girl danced close by the edge of the short raised platform as the men clamored right up next to the stage. Bouncers had moved down to stage front, just in case the patrons got out of hand. Something was in the air and it was more than the raucous Blues tune of "Whoa Black Betty." Everyone in the place except Ryz'n seemed to know what was coming.

What Ryz'n witnessed next was simply unbelievable. The black girl's act was the most vulgar, obscene, disgusting money-grubbing thing Ry could ever expect to see. Ry had to take off her shades to make sure of what she saw. It was unbelievable!

"Sweet Mother of God, St. Brigid and all the saints!" cried Ryz'n, who never, ever under any circumstances took the Holy Mother's name in vain. Her entire table sat in stunned silence to watch Black Betty do her thing.

Finally, Black Betty pranced off the stage to a standing ovation, two fistfuls of cash and thunderous screams for an encore. Disgusted, Ryz'n quickly gathered herself to leave, but Black Betty returned and provided an encore, holding Ry anchored in her seat. The music renewed and the dancer came forward as before but one jerk jumped onto the stage. Black Betty caught the drunk off balance and shoved him back into the

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now-teeming crowd, as routinely as if she were swatting away a fly. The other patrons started to beat on the jerk, who prematurely had ended their entertainment by precluding any encores once the bouncers had jumped into the fray.

Wisely, Double J and the band had struck up the music for the next number, while bouncers rudely escorted some of the rowdier patrons from the club. The next act was a thick woman, who simulated taking a bath using an old bathtub as a prop, which cued Ryz'n to wash her hands of Naughty Nathan's . . .

Now Ryz'n shook her head at the memory of Black Betty. Truthfully, after her three plus years of boredom and in the depths of her lengthy, unrequited loneliness among the solitary confines of her bedroom or bathroom these last three months, Ryz'n had come to practice both the dead microphone and the Black Betty acts with moderate success. In some obscene and twisted way, Ryz'n admired those bawdy strippers. Primarily, she admired the power they had held over their male audiences. The idea that those skinny bawdy, earthy girls could hold the attention of their audience, when everyone knew in their souls that the dancers were performing such lewd and illicit acts, yet no one, not even Ryz'n could tear their eyes away from their lascivious machinations. That thought chilled Ryz'n to the bone. The hypnotic power those girls held over their audience was at once both incomprehensible and thrilling to her. As a practicing and faithful Roman Catholic, Ryz'n knew she was wrong to think in this impure manner, to covet the power these women held, no less the crudely vulgar manner by which they held it. Yet, try as she might, periodically, the earthy, lewd sights and sounds of Naughty Nathan's kept returning to scorch her brain, prompting her to re-enact privately the very numbers she despised. She negatively contrasted the entrancing powers of those strippers over their male patrons with her own pathetically failed strip act in the motel room with her husband. Had she had held such power over Nicky that second night back in the motel room as the strippers had held over the drunks on East Baltimore Street, why Ryz'n could have brought her husband to his knees and commanded him to please her just how she wanted.

It wasn't as though she was incapable of such a feat. Before Nick had enlisted, she had proved to her husband and herself that she was more than capable of seducing and pleasing him, if she were high enough to overcome her ingrained, Roman Catholic inhibitions. Surprisingly enough, Ry had learned all the right moves from her childhood dance instructions, given to her and Sheena by their grandmothers of all people. Her Gran'ma Jessie especially had taken great pains to teach her and Sheena the intricacies of various Mediterranean folk and fertility dances. Gran'ma Jessie had learned to dance during her vagabond, gypsy upbringing in the various places she had lived in the Middle East, Greece, the South of Spain and North Africa. Jessie had gushed over Ry, avidly proclaiming her oldest granddaughter's natural talent for the earthy dances. And not to be outdone by her in-law, Ry's India-Pakistani Grandmother Urmila had taught Ryz'n and Sheena the Indian belly dance the "Katak." Yet for Ryz'n to break down and actually demonstrate her knowledge of those suggestive dances, the circumstances had to be just right and she had to be alone with Nicky and no one else.

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“Two glasses of wine,” Nick used to say, “and you’re loose as a goose, Ry. Three and you can be a regular wild woman. Four, close the door, cuz we need privacy. Five, turn out the lights cuz the party’s over.” It was true. She had to admit it.

Unfortunately, that night at the motel, all of Raybo’s wine had worn off her before she had landed Nicky in the motel and she had been left only with that horrible headache.

Ryz’n forced herself to think of something else, so she returned to thoughts of Jimmy Jax and the band. As she casually sipped some more coffee, Ryz’n’s reflections moved forward to the middle of last May. After Ryz’n had graduated from M&L, both old and new band members had gotten together at the Ryan’s resort home on the Banks. Jimmy Jax and Necie were newlyweds and they had moved in with Mickey after Jimmy’s grandmother had passed. The three of them had been rehearsing together daily until the whole band could get together to rehearse and frolic on the beach for about ten days. All that occurred after Ryz’n’s graduation from M&L on the seventeenth of May. Then Ryz’n’s parents had come down Memorial Day weekend to join them, but Mr. Ryan had requested some quality family time alone together after the holiday. He halted the rehearsals and, effectively, kicked the other band members out. Then, the news of Nicky’s reappearance had disrupted further rehearsal plans, not to mention her psyche. Ryz’n finished her coffee, left a tip for the waitress and left for her room and bed, too exhausted to think anymore.

* * *

June ended with Ryz’n cracking the whip over the band in rehearsals. Necie had made herself useful performing chores and Ryz’n had noticed the Cajun-born girl did have some natural musical ability. Ryz’n had decided to start her off with some background vocals and playing percussion to create some special sound effects when necessary to mimic various hit songs. The girl doubled as a “go-for,” too. For executing these duties, Ryz’n promised the novice a half share, after she had gained the consent of Bryson, Sheena and Mickey. Necie was thrilled. She hadn’t really expected any financial compensation for herself. Being with her man and experiencing the excitement of the world of Rock’N’Roll had been compensation enough for her. Yes, Necie proved to be a real asset for the band. And if a half share kept Necie happy, then presumably, she would keep her husband happy with his full share of her. That was Ry’s reasoning.

The new GRT had begun to come together as one cohesive unit. Ryz’n had wanted to make sure they could not only play perfectly their own material, but also a few years’ worth of select Top 40 hits that suited GRT’s style, as well as the oldies that Nick always had made a staple of GRT shows. Nicky had taught her that when they covered a song for a dance club, it was imperative they sound as close as possible to the original band which had recorded the hit. That’s how Nick had gotten GRT started. He used to say, “People like to dance to what they hear on the radio. Audiences don’t like any variations, by some hotshot out to make a name for himself.”

Ry had scheduled a series of fifteen one-niters at various clubs between DC and Baltimore and on the Delmarva Peninsula. Their “tour,” as it were, had begun with *Gusti’s* in Small Springs. Ryz’n’s first public performance had been there back in 1970

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at the urging of Nick and Mr. Gusti. The following night, the band had traveled forty-five miles northeast to a sold out *Fin and Claw* in Annapolis. Saturday, they had played *Johnny's* up in Baltimore. Last night, the band had played to a standing room only crowd at the *Starlust* in Woldorn. GRT did not disappoint. More than any other play date for Ry, this one had been like coming home again, even though it was a Monday night. The band was looking forward to a similar reception tonight at *Mr. Rowdy's Loft*. Both Clarence Muddy of the *Starlust* and Henry Rowdy had requested the band to play them early in the week when attendance was low. Ry obliged.

Trying to wind down now in the wee hours, after their raucous *Starlust* performance, Ry sat alone now in her *Starlust* motel room. She picked up GRT's schedule that rested next to a stale cup of coffee on the little table in her motel room. Ry read with smug satisfaction the itinerary for the little "tour" she had put together on such short notice after Halo Platters so tactlessly had shown the band the door.

Thu. June 26, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *Gusti's*, Small Springs, MD
Fri. June 27, 9:30 p.m.-2:00 a.m. *The Fin and Claw*, Annapolis, MD
Sat. June 28, 9:30 p.m.-2:00 a.m. *Johnny's*, Baltimore, MD
Mon. June 30, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *Starlust*, Woldorn, MD
Tues. July 1, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *Mr. Rowdy's Loft*, Woldorn, MD
Wed. July 2, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *Klassiks V*, Sunnyside, MD
Thu. July 3, 9:00 p.m.-2:00 a.m. *The Irish Brogue*, Ocean City, MD
Fri. July 4, 2:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m. *Surf's Well Patio*, North Ocean City, MD
(simulcast live over WROC)
Fri. July 4, 10:00 p.m.-2:00 a.m. *The Irish Brogue*, Ocean, City MD
Sat. July 5, 9:00 p.m.-2:00 a.m. *The Wild & Crazy*, Wildwood, New Jersey
Tue. July 8, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *Bathroom Window*, Georgetown, Wash. DC
Wed. July 9, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *The Castille*, College Park, MD
Thu. July 10, 9:00 p.m.-1:30 a.m. *Foxy Lady*, Richmond, VA
Fri. July 11, 9:30 p.m.-2:00 a.m. *The Paddock*, Norfolk, VA
Sat. July 12, 2 shows} Virginia Beach Civic Auditorium, Virginia
Beach, VA, 2:00-4:00 p.m. and 8:00-10:00 p.m.

She tapped the cardboard itinerary triumphantly. As far as GRT was concerned, they were back on the map, locally, at least. The schedule was strenuous, but she hoped playing around home would take some of the starch out of it. Reviewing the schedule now had put the capper on her long day, giving her a sense of completion. She drained her stale coffee and made sure the motel doors were locked, except the adjoining door to Sheena and Bryson's room next door. Retiring for the night, she pushed Nick out of her mind. She must forget him and focus on the band now. The next few days would be full of hard work and crucial to the band's success. Sheena would have to shape up.

Ryz'n should not have drunken the coffee. She tossed and turned in bed and could not sleep. She took a sleeping pill to calm herself down. Yet her mind raced. After four play dates, Ryz'n could not have been more pleased with the band's success. The

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numerous local radio and TV spots, which she had made to advertise GRT's "comeback," had brought out the crowds. And Jimmy Jax had proved awesome, more than living up to her advance billing. Ryz'n was beginning to think her plans for the band might just work out. Perhaps they would get an offer from a big-time record company. Tomorrow night, well tonight, they were playing *Mr. Rowdy's*, which would be another homecoming, filled with nostalgia for her. From the band's perspective she could not be happier. The only problem for GRT now was Halo Platters. Somehow, that snake-in-the-grass Halo executive Jerry Stiehlmoir had learned about the new sound-a-like replacement for Little Nick. Stiehlmoir had sent a couple Halo agents to scout GRT with an eye toward re-signing the band, if they "sounded decent, that is like the original GRT." At least that's what the scurvy pair had told Ryz'n.

Ryz'n did not much care for these two record company bozos, both of whom she knew. One reminded her of a lounge lizard. That would be Tommy 'the Tux' Tuccarello, a really greasy, slimy used car salesman type. The other dubious agent went simply by the moniker of "Mano (the Shark)." However, he reminded Ryz'n of Goldfinger's "Odd Job" in both manner and physique, so that's what Ryz'n called the blocky Samoan and he had not objected. She would have been surprised if he had, for he almost never spoke. These two were Halo's watchdogs and jacks of all trades sleazy. This same dashing, dynamic duo had "escorted" GRT for Halo back in 1973 when Tommy Tremain and his wife Terri had tried to replace Nicky. Now, as then, the lounge lizard and Odd Job worked hard to ingratiate themselves to the band members, in general, to the Ryan girls in particular, and especially to Ryz'n.

Yet Ryz'n had found the pair to be useful in two respects. The burly Odd Job helped Bryson control the overly enthusiastic crowds. That first tour without Nick, the band had played to standing room only crowds everywhere they appeared. However now, the lounge lizard was up to his old tricks, encouraging Ry to wear her sexy stage costumes. He also offered Ryz'n his unique brand of "prescription candy," which he referred to as "prescription medication. The stuff tasted like "toned down Tic-Tacs." However, Ryz'n had considered the yellow pills to be more bitter than sweet. In fact, they seemed very similar to a prescription her pediatrician had given her to effect weight loss and overcome depression when she had been a chubby teen. Ry had taken the prescribed medication for a while after the Cal Newberry affair in eighth grade. However, the overly stimulating effects of that prescription had scared her more than Cal's feeble attack upon her person in the girls' locker room. Thus, she had discontinued use of the prescription after a couple of months. Her physician did not push the drug on her, noting that Ryz'n was "overly sensitive or predisposed towards the medication."

Tommy Tux first had supplied her with medicine during the "Still More" tour in the summer of '73. GRT's heavy touring schedule that summer. Her depression over Nick's then, recently disclosed, MIA status had rendered her virtually incapable of performing. Ready or not, Ryz'n had to become the face and voice of the group, GRT's number one out front performer. Expectations were great and she had not been ready to fulfill them. The Tux had assured her that the medication he offered was

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commonplace in the entertainment industry, merely “a tool of the trade.” He had convinced Ryz’n that the medication was no different from the microphone she held in her hand or the costume she wore on stage. He said all the big time performers used the stuff sometimes, “to get over the hump.” “Hell,” he had confessed that “even Elvis used the stuff.” To reassure her and soothe her conscious about using the drug, The Tux had given Ryz’n the pills in a prescription bottle so she could read the label. There, plain as day, she could read her name as the patient and the name of a Dr. Georgopoulos as the prescribing physician for something called Desoxyn. The fact Ryz’n had never met this “Dr. Georgopoulos” was immaterial to The Tux. Willing to please, to fulfill their wishes for the band, Ryz’n had gone along.

Her severe depression at that time over the Corp’s newly announced MIA status for Nicky had staggered her both emotionally and mentally. However, she had tried to keep the devastating effect of the news to herself. Ryz’n reasoned that if a prescription medication could shoot her a little bit of pep before a concert, why shouldn’t she avail herself of its wonders? After all, she had Nicky’s band to consider, too. She could not let them or the paying customers down, so she had gone for it. The medication had gained Ryz’n a completely new, freshly energized perspective on life, as well as a sharp shot of pep just before her performances. The medicinal “candy” appeared to have been just what the doctor ordered, both figuratively as well as literally. Ryz’n had thought the toned down, yellow pills tasted a little bitter, but what really impressed her about them was the terrific boost of energy they always shot into her. And if two yellow pills could help her, what might four do, if she was really down? A double dose, taken about a half hour before she went on, had given her a terrific boost, which lasted the length of the concert and helped her see things in a new and different light.

Within minutes of downing a double dose of the pink pills, Ry became transformed. Suddenly, she felt as if she were the center of the universe, like Super Woman. Shedding her inhibitions as a snake sheds its skin; Ry sometimes had acted, if not as Super Woman, then as her evil twin Super Sexy, according to the gossip the day after the riotous concert. Unfortunately, the next day, Ryz’n never really was very clear on what she had done under the influence of the medicine the previous night and she refused to listen to anyone who was willing to enlighten her. In such a case, ignorance was bliss, she reasoned. However, when the reporters in Portland had descended on her in the hotel lobby with such fury after the band’s performance there, claiming that she had incited a riot and people had been injured in the mêlée, Ry had stopped using the medicine. She also instituted the now infamous “get away quick” principle. The band would leave town right after a concert, from stage to plane, and not the next day.

Her medication had prompted licentious behavior on the “Still More” tour. Moreover, the especially provocative costumes (which she had designed for her and Sheena during the previous school year, at Halo’s strong recommendation but against her better judgment) had aided also in precipitating the riots of their summer of ’73 tour. Afterwards, Ryz’n had felt terrible about the riots and her severe headaches the next day had heightened her remorse. However, Halo management had noted how ticket sales had jumped over thirty percent after those incidents. The company had sold

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out the remainder of the tour. Vice-President Stiehlmoir and his smarmy assistant Leonard Varmint made a special trip to visit the band on tour to recommend that Ryz'n keep up the good work by taking "her medicine" prior to each show. Ryz'n did not heed their advice. Instead, she stowed away both the fetching costumes and her special prescription. She took nothing more than aspirin and vitamins before she performed.

Her Roman Catholic conscious had gotten the better of her. She had determined the results of using the drugs and her "show clothes" to be worse than not using them. After the riotous concert in Salem, Oregon, Ryz'n had refrained from taking the medication at all. Unlike Little Nick, who had been a natural showman and entertainer, Ryz'n always had to talk herself into performing and putting herself out there before an audience of strangers. Ry had grown to enjoy, even crave, performing live, without the pills. Yet, she still had to talk herself into getting up and out on that stage before each concert. The old insecurities from her chubby adolescence had haunted her unmercifully, while her then-present discord over Nick revisited upon her, that former lack of self confidence with a vengeance. During every such anxious self-examination prior to every performance, Ryz'n had flirted, even if only briefly, with the idea of ingesting the little yellow pills to assuage her fears. But she did not take them.

With Nick's philandering ways now ever on her mind, she felt more compelled than ever to use the stuff and her brief flirtations with the drug had begun to mushroom. Tommy Tux wasn't helping matters any by making the stuff readily available. Absent Nick's presence and usually sound advice, Ryz'n had stumbled and drifted astray under the tempting draw of The Tux's medicinal little helper. Had she stopped and seriously thought a minute about the "candy" and its peppy and mind-altering effects upon her, Ryz'n would have realized that she was breaking Nicky's one, hard and fast rule, established when GRT first had begun: *NO DRUGS*. However, Ryz'n refused to acknowledge that she was breaking Nick's rule. Yet, in her own heart, she knew she was kidding no one, least of all herself. To enforce this reasoning on the band, Ry recalled that Little Nick used to sing a little jingle of a song in a lilting tone, which his brother Ramon had devised: "Stop and think. It's just a little thing to do. People, who take drugs, do not stop and think. People, who land in jail, do not stop and think ... So stop and think. You know, it's just a little thing to do."

GRT's first four one-niters had gone well, better than Ryz'n could have hoped. The audiences had been forgiving of the few blunders they had made. Now, the band had their act down pretty solid. Even though, Jimmy Jax occasionally had to throw down to cover for one of Sheena's occasional gaffes. Ryz'n followed Nicky's old formula, the one, which had proven to be so popular for them when they were high school students. The first and sometimes part of the second set the band played Top 40 to encourage their audience to dance. The second set was more like a set and a half taking them on a brief tour of the "History of Rock'N'Roll" and rolled over into "Show Time," which had always been a GRT club favorite.

During that segment of the show, GRT would perform skits to songs, often old "Coasters" tunes and select or persuade members of the audience to participate in the roles called for by the lyrics. Although somewhat flavored with schmaltz, the "feel

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good” nature of their act succeeded with audiences, because Nick’s charisma and, later, Ryz’n’s beauty and affability had made it succeed. Filling Nick’s showman’s role now, Ryz’n would call even the club manager up on stage to employ him as the song’s villainous “Salty Sam” who was trying to compromise the damsel in distress, poor “Sweet Sue,” whom Ryz’n would pluck at random, blushing and grinning, from the audience. Ryz’n respectfully noted Nicky’s entertainment ideas from high school still proved sound. Unlike some acts, which disdained audience participation, Ryz’n and GRT went out of their way to encourage it and treat their on-stage helpers with respect, making sure they got a big round of applause as they left the stage. Nicky had taught her to be accessible to the public while the band was performing. “After all,” he had reasoned, “they’re paying our salary.” Aside from the facts that Nick had real talent and could give the people what they liked to hear, Ryz’n thought, in his long absence, a lot of the band’s lingering audience appeal stemmed from the residue of Little Nick’s aura, of his genuine appreciation for their audience. The public had accepted Nick as one of their own and they never forgot him for it. She noted with no little disdain that this phenomenon had held particularly true for the teeny bopper set.

“Get the audience involved,” Nicky had said, “and they’ll be your friend, as long as you treat them with respect. Most people are extroverts, especially the ones that go clubbin’. They’re just dying to get up here with us. Once they do, they never forget ya. And those, who aren’t extroverts when they walk in, become extroverts after a couple of drinks. The key thing is to treat them all kindly. Never laugh at them. Only laugh with them. After all, they’re giving us their money, so take it graciously.”

And Nick never had been wrong about the entertainment industry. Ryz’n wished the present Nick was more like the one she had wed.

Ryz’n’s mom had said that Nick had been calling her parents’ place every night looking for his wife. However, at Ryz’n’s request, her mom had withheld from Nick, Ry’s true location and phone number. Ryz’n wished to remain incognito, because she had to focus on the band now and she felt incapable of giving him all he needed from her. However, she also did it partly to freeze him out and teach him a tough love lesson that he would never forget. Still, with the band’s announced tour schedule blasting all over the radio and newspapers, Ryz’n had expected to see him already at one of her performances. So far, he had not shown up and his absence both irked and depressed her. She also wondered who else he might be seeing. As long as she had known Nicky, it seemed like he could not live without female companionship for more than a few days, lest he develop something stupid like hives or a myriad of other imagined but harmless mental distresses. His unreasonable penchant for constant female companionship formed the basis for her unreasonable jealousy of him. It was driving her to distraction. Maybe tonight, he would show up at *Mr. Rowdy’s* and they could resolve their problems once and for all.