

As the trio reached the front door of the Ryan home, Ryz'n's mother emerged from the house on her way to work. She gave no evidence that she knew of last night's raucous GRT performance and the sisters did not enlighten her. Quite the contrary, her mom was surprised to see her girls, but she told them that the house was theirs. And, because it was, they could do a few things to help around the place. She did remark coolly upon Ry's attire or lack thereof; yet, preoccupied with getting to work on time, her mom did not let that deter her from giving domestic instructions for the day. She advised there was a load of laundry going and another lying in wait. There were more dirty clothes in the hampers and the house needed vacuuming. Scruffy Jr. needed to be let out in the back yard and the dishwasher needed to be unloaded. Also, she had left the basement door unlocked, because the meter man might stop by.

Ryz'n watched Sheena blow her mother off in typical Sheena fashion. Sheena alibied that after a bowl of cereal, she and Bryson were going right to bed and they did not want to be disturbed! Then she and Bryson straggled off to make good Sheena's threat. Ryz'n stood by silently, trying not to shake and twitch; hiding behind her scarf and shades, so her eyes would not give her away. After the refreshing ride home, Ryz'n was feeling somewhat energetic again. The fifteen minute fresh air drive had helped restore her spirits. She told her mother not to worry, because she would take care of everything. Her mom wanted to know if the threesome would be home for dinner and would they spend the night. Ry had not thought that far ahead. She indicated they probably would stay for dinner, but they might leave after their gig that night at the *Klassiks V* and head straight to the beach and their OC holiday weekend dates. Ryz'n wasn't sure yet.

"Well, all right," conceded her mom, "but you really must make up with Nicholas now, Ryzanna Christine. He's been calling here everyday and he's very upset and I'm very upset, too. I am tired of fibbing for you, My Baby. Now, this long holiday weekend down at your beach penthouse will be a perfect time for you two to make up. I think you've punished him enough Ry and I know I have. Now goodbye, Dear and have a nice day."

Smiling gently, her mom reached over with her left hand, pinched Ry's cheek between her thumb and fingers and plopped a motherly kiss on Ryz'n's pink lips.

"Scruffy, NO! You STAY! Ryzanna! Get hold of that dog. Goodbye now." Ryz'n bent down and scooped up Scruffy Junior before she could get out into the yard. Her mother turned and glanced around. "Looks like a nice day, Dear. Bye now."

Ry watched her June Cleaver mom walk to the car and climb in. Then Ryz'n shut the front door and let the dog out in the back yard. Ry was the mother now and that was a familiar role for her. The house was hers and she was mistress of all she surveyed. Reassuming her customary role as caregiver, Ryz'n served Sheena and Bryson cereal and orange juice. The sisters' typical roles had reversed last night and now the natural order had been reestablished. After breakfast, the young couple trudged downstairs to rest in their bedroom apartment in the partially finished basement. Their departure left

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the household chores to Ryz'n, which also was customary. Ever since her mother had taken on that part-time job at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) when the family had first moved up here from Warner-Robbins, Ryz'n had been the "go to" girl for all household duties and for looking after her kid sister, as well. However, she didn't mind. She liked being chief cook and bottle washer, as long as Sheena behaved and that was always a fifty-fifty proposition with her kid sister. Ryz'n was about halfway through unloading the dishwasher, when the doorbell rang. Having removed her scarf and her shades, she still wore only the belted, short, green, satin robe.

Ry made her way into the living room. Standing on the balls of her feet, she peeped through the three, small, diagonally staggered, privacy windows in the wooden, upper front door, Ryz'n found Mickey Saxon looking towards the Larrabee's yard next door.

"What on earth is he doing here at this hour?" Ry spoke aloud as she stood down upon her heels once more. However, she knew he could not view her through the closed front door. She wanted to keep busy. She did not need visitors when she was fighting against losing her edge from her long-running meth high. With a deep sigh, Ry opened the door reluctantly and let him in.

Mickey removed his sunglasses, as he stepped politely inside the house. Although bleary-eyed, the drummer appeared to be bushy-tailed and in good humor, as he beamed widely at her.

"Hey Ry! How ya doin' today? Gee, it doesn't look like you're ready to go." He was obviously disappointed with his boss.

"Go? Go where?"

"To get the song copyrighted, remember?"

"What song? What are you talking about Michael?"

"Sweet Lovin—Turtle Dovin', doncha remember? Last night, you said we'd get it copyrighted this morning, in case anybody else might want to steal the song."

It was starting to come back to Ryz'n, vaguely.

"See? I got the forms and a couple taped copies of the song, right here in this envelope." He had a couple of envelopes, but he held up one eight by eleven manila envelop for her inspection. She could see the bulge of a couple of cassettes inside. "Gee, doncha rememba, Ry? I know you was kind o' out of it last night, but—"

Ryz'n closed her eyes and felt her head with her left hand, while she held up her right hand palm outward towards the eager drummer. She had to focus through the throbbing pain in her head.

This can't be happenin'. I must be dreamin' this.

"Yes, yes, I'm afraid I, I do remember, something, but we don't have to do it right now, Mick. Trust me. Nobody's gonna beat us to it. They're all probably sleeping it off right now, anyway."

"Yeah, that's right, Ry. That's why we gotta get it done now—before they come to!" Ryz'n exhaled deeply. The kid was soberly earnest.

"Look, Mick, My mom's got a ton of housework for me to do and I gotta try to rest up for tonight, too—we'll do it later. OK?" She smiled pleasantly and pushed him gently back through the doorway. She began to close the door behind him, thinking he

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had accepted her tactful brush-off. But Mick turned quickly and stuck his foot across the threshold, wedging the door back open a little.

“When?” he asked genuinely concerned. “Tomorrow, we’re going to OC and we’ll be out of town for a while, playing those beach gigs you got for us. Somebody could beat us to the copyright by then.”

The kid was right. It was possible, unlikely, but possible. It was not as if it had never happened. Nicky and Todd had always taken care of these details in the past and then, after Nick had enlisted, Mr. Saperstein of Sable Records and later Halo Platters had secured the copyrights for them. That Halo—they had this sort of thing down to a science, Mann. Ryz’n never had to worry about a thing when they were in charge. She had to give the devil his due there. Yes, she had to give them that, the jerks!

“Look Ry! I filled out all the forms. All you gotta do is sign ‘em. I’ll take ‘em over to the Copyright Office and everything. You don’t even have to go. OK?” The kid was making sense to her. She agreed. Ry glanced through the papers, while Mick held the door by the knob, so she could prop the forms against the door. Ry signed in the appropriate blocks. Then she had a pang of conscience.

“There’s just one thing, Mick. I didn’t compose these songs *or* the lyrics. That was Nicky, not me.”

“Gee Ry; I don’t think he’d mind. Besides, you already signed them. What do I have to do now, go get another set of forms and fill them out and then go hunt Nick up? And if his signature gets on the public file that he’s back, well, that would screw up everything, wouldn’t it?”

The kid was right, again. Still, she didn’t like signing for someone else’s work as her own, even her husband’s. Grudgingly, she gave him the OK.

“Great! Now what’s the best way to get there from here, Ry?”

She had to stop and think about that. At this time of day, with the morning rush hour, that was a very difficult question indeed. Ry took a step back and closed her eyes. She rubbed her forehead and flexed her right leg so that her knee and thigh split between the hems of the short robe.

“Gee Mick. That’s tough to say. There’s two basic ways, I suppose. You can use the Parkway and take one of the Anacostia River bridges and follow the Southwest Freeway to the Case Bridge onto Three-Ninety-Five and follow the signs to the Crystal City Mall. OR ... you can truck up to the beltway heading south over the Wilson Bridge and then take Route One North. You know where it is in Crystal City over by the movie theatres, right?”

No response.

Ryz’n opened her eyes and pulled her hand down from her forehead.

“Mick?”

The kid was staring at her exposed, upper thighs. The inner leg burns from last night’s microphone dance were obvious. Self-consciously, Ryz’n quickly crossed her legs to hide the burns. She took hold of the flaps of her robe and closed them, holding the garment together with one hand.

“Damn Ry! How’d ya do *that*?” Mick was horrified.

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"It's nothing, Mick, just forget it, please." She smiled wanly, barely able to produce a single dimple.

"Are you sure you're alright, Ry? Your eye is twitchin' and you look jes' awful, white as a ghost. And your pupils are all big."

She assumed "the stance."

"Thanks Mick, for making me feel *so* much better!"

Mick had been on the receiving end of "the stance" before. The kid back-tracked up against the front screen door, propping it slightly open. She knew he did not want any part of her when she was on the mad, which wasn't often, but when she was, it was sure choice and they both knew it. Mickey shifted gears quickly.

"O-OK, Ry. Well, uh, the copyright place is downtown near the Capitol, right? I'll find it."

"No, Mick they moved it temporarily to Crystal City due to reconstruction. That's what I've been tellin' ya."

"Oh yeah, that's right. I, I guess I'll take the Wilson Bridge then." He backed out of the door putting on his shades, with the envelope of important materials in his hand. Ryz'n nodded and followed him to the door like a Japanese geisha, taking small steps and primly holding her skirt tightly closed in front of her.

"Oh, I almost forgot. What about them other tunes?"

"What other tunes?"

"You know, some of them other, rockin' R&B tunes that Nick wrote that you banned cuz you said they were too raunchy." Mick scrunched up his face playfully as if he had smelled something bad. "Maybe we can take care of a few birds with one stone?"

"Like what?"

"You know, like 'Hop On!', 'Was a Girl Like You,' stuff like that. Might as well do 'em all at once, doncha think? I don't like drivin' cross the river into Virginia more'n I have ta."

Ryz'n grabbed her forehead with her right hand to massage her temple, while she thumbed her engagement ring, spinning it about her ring finger. She was trying to squeeze the memory of those tunes back into her brain. She shook her head. "No, I don't think so, not now. They aren't even recorded yet."

"Oh, sure they are. We recorded 'em in Todd's garage. That was before you came along, Ry." The boy grinned. "And I got Nick's original words and music, right here." He grinned affably and patted the other manila envelope he carried. Ryz'n had forgotten that Mick had volunteered to be the band's music librarian in Nick's absence.

"Let me see that," Ryz'n responded testily. Mick handed her the envelope and she pulled out one of the songs: "Was a Girl Like You."

"Yeah, that's a good one, Ry. Gotta great beat."

She ignored the music and read the lyrics partly aloud, then silently.

Was hitchin' alone, when you gave me a ride.
You took me home, Baby. You took me inside.

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Was a girl like you, who gave me a ride.
Yeah, you took me in. Made me sit down.
And then you showed me, Baby. You showed me around.
Was a girl like you, who took me on down.

Well I declare. You know I was green.
But you showed me some tricks like I never seen.
Was a girl like you, stepped outta my dream.
You made love to me Baby, again and again.
Yeah, you showed me how, Honey, and you told me when.
Was a girl like you, became my best friend.

Can't say it was love, no, it was closer to lust.
Can't say it was right, Honey, and won't say it was just.
But 'twas a girl like you, I knew I could trust.

Then I took you home, to the family retreat.
Where they met you, liked you and found you so sweet.
Yeah, was a girl like you that they liked to meet.
Well, I couldn't believe, what I had just heard,
How they lauded you, Baby, how they hung on your word.
Said it was a girl like you, for me, they preferred.

We stayed at the lake, the whole summer long.
And it's because of you, girl, that I wrote this song.
Cuz of a girl like you, who loved me so strong.
You made love to me Baby, again and again.
Yeah, you showed me how, Honey, and you told me when.
Was a girl like you, became my best friend.

Can't say it was love, no, it was closer to lust.
Can't say it was right, Honey, and won't say it was just.
But was a girl like you, I knew I could trust.

The more Ry read, the madder she got. This was just like Little Nick. When she finished, Ryz'n exploded. Unable to suppress her unreasonable jealousy over one of Nick's former, summer vacation girlfriends, whom she had never met and never would, Ry turned the papers sideways and ripped them asunder. She took the two halves, placing them one upon the other and ripped them in two again. Then she back handed them towards Mickey, flinging them in the poor guy's face.

"Don't you, don't you EVER bring me that trash again, you hear Michael Saxon?"

"But Ry, it's jes' like—"

"TRASH! That's what it's like. I don't ever want to see it again! You hear me?"

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Mickey backed down the stairs awkwardly picking up the torn pieces of the song as he went. "Yeah, sure, OK Ry. Whatever you say. I'm, I'm sorry. I'll jes' be goin' now." Like a whipped dog, he slinked off the bottom stoop step.

Ryz'n turned her back on him and entered the house. She was in the process of slamming the door shut when she became angry with herself for her uncalled rudeness to her drummer, who had only tried to please her.

That darned Nicky! He could make me do anything! He had written that about some bimbo he met, vacationing out in Clear Lake, Iowa, his grandparents' home town. He claimed that the girl claimed she had been a coed widow, whose officer husband had been killed in Viet Nam. Nicky had said he had only been consoling the poor girl. CONSOLING?!?! Pete's sake! She was twenty-one and he had been just fifteen!!

She stopped, stomped her left foot, slapped her thigh and whistled shrilly. Then she parroted her mother, quoting her verbatim in a petty, jeering, sing-song voice:

"You really must make up with Nicky now, Ryzanna. He's been calling here everyday and he's very upset and I'm very upset, too ... I think you've punished him enough and I know I have. Now goodbye, Dear and have a nice day." *Have a nice day! Pickles!* Though she was angry over Nick, she was more embarrassed for her rudeness to Mickey. Ryz'n collected herself, opened the door and poked her head out. She lifted high an apologetic voice, for Mickey whom she had driven down to the end of the stepping stone, slate walk, almost to his car, about fifteen yards away. Ry called out as if nothing untoward had occurred.

"Yeah Mick, that's, that's probably the best way to go this time of day."

"What, what are you talking about?"

"The best way to go to the Patent Office—is probably the Beltway, and if it's backed up at the Wilson Bridge, you can always veer off onto Two-Ninety-Five and then cross one of the Anacostia bridges to the Southwest Freeway. Might take a while with the morning rush hour though."

"Oh Yeah," Mickey nodded emphatically. "Yeah, yeah you're probably right. Well, take care Ry. Hope your legs are better. See ya tonight over at the Klassiks."

"Yeah, see ya tonight, Mick." The drummer "with wrists extraordinaire," as Ryz'n introduced him to live audiences, was beating a hasty retreat. He was about to step into his car when Ryz'n pushed open the screen door fully and stepped out onto the front doorstep. She spoke up loudly, but warmly.

"Mick, I really do appreciate this. I really do. And not just this, but everything—sticking by Sheena and me, the way you've taken in Jax and Neechie, providing the truck, taking care of the equipment and well, just about everything. You make it easy for me, Mann. You really do." She watched her jack-of-all-trades drummer blush, as he saluted her with the envelope.

"My pleasure, Ry. After all, we're a team, right—GRT? We're all in this together."

She nodded. "That's right Mick, 'all for one and one for all!'"

He grinned.

"See ya tonight—and Ry?"

"Yes?"

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“Don’t worry about a thing!”

He flashed a grin, waved the envelope with a flourish and jumped into his car. She watched him go and shut the front door behind her.

Mann, the Lord is sure looking out for me by having people like Mick around me. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for Mick, for Sheena and Bryson, Jax and Neecie. God bless ‘em all. But Nicky ... Ugh!

Ryz’n snatched her old blue and gold Pocomoke softball cap from the closet in her room. The cap featured a gold, Olde English **P** on the front of a dark blue cap. She liked to wear the cap, when she did housework. For some reason, perched upon her head, the cap produced memories of ball field exploits, which psyched her up for completing menial, domestic tasks. It was hard to explain to her family, who never failed to laugh at her for it, but they could not argue with the results. Yet, with that cap on her head, Ry cleaned better than the White Tornado.

It was about a quarter to eight and Ryz’n still was not sleepy. She returned to her chores. She wondered when the speed would slow down. Ry finished unloading the dishwasher. She threw some more laundry into the washing machine and dryer down in the basement, much to Sheena’s chagrin, because her sister was trying to sleep with Bryson downstairs in their room.

When Ryz’n had finished vacuuming, she gathered up the rest of the dirty laundry from throughout the house. That included dirty clothes from her sister’s and Bryson’s bags, which, typically, they had dropped on the living room sofa. Ryz’n took the remainder of the dirty laundry downstairs and loaded up the machines again. Unlike her sister and most other women she knew, Ryz’n kind of liked doing household chores. She liked being about the house, knowing that when she was in charge. Things were done how she wanted them done and when she wanted them done. She liked to keep busy. Quietly performing house chores gave Ryz’n a calming sense of satisfaction, of closure. And completing these simple, domestic tasks took her mind off the more complex problems in her life—*like Nicky! Ooooooh! That boy!*

Her robe needed to be washed too. What the heck? She decided to go for it. Alone in the basement, Ryz’n pulled the satin belt from the robe’s belt loops, tied the belt about her waist and disrobed, leaving her wearing only her ball cap and the satin belt. She lifted the washer lid, temporarily stopping the wash cycle, and threw in her robe, less the belt, with a load of lights and set the dial to “Fragile.” Then she resumed ironing a couple of her father’s dress shirts and some shorts for her and Sheena. Later, when the washer and dryer stopped, Ryz’n pulled a load out of the dryer and dumped the washer’s load, including her satin robe into the dryer, set the dial on “light” and started the machine. She folded the dried clothes into the empty clothes basket.

Ryz’n turned back to the ironing board, spit on her finger and touched the iron. It was hot all right. As she ironed, Ryz’n thought about the burns on the insides of her upper thighs. Her mind drifted ...

After the disappointment of her thirteenth birthday, Ryz’n had not only gained weight but, occasionally, she had taken to inflicting pain on her person. Sometimes she had burned herself lightly with the iron, or re-lighted her father’s spent cigarettes and

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extinguishing them in places where her mother would not see, usually on the soles of her feet or high up on her thigh. Once, when Ryz'n was about fourteen, her mother had caught her in the act of putting out a cigarette on the sole of her foot. Her mom had taken the cigarette from her hand and smacked Ryz'n in the face, hard. That was a shock, because her mother rarely struck either her or Sheena. She didn't have to. Her mom's icy looks could wither any wayward soul. Ryz'n never forgot that slap or her mother's concise scolding.

“Never, *ever*, give into that temptation again, Ryzanna Christine! It will ruin you.”

Ryz'n had not understood at first what her mother had meant, but, over the years, Ry had come to realize her mother had been right. And her mom was right because she understood. And she understood, because Ryz'n concluded that she and her mother were so much alike that they must have shared the same, self destructive urges and the same abnormal penchant for pain. Otherwise, how could her mom know that Ryz'n's willingness to inflict pain upon her person was a *temptation*? Ryz'n had always enjoyed pain and she often had to fight an overwhelming urge to indulge her perverse impulses in that regard.

Her penchant for pain however had insured her perennial physical superiority over her kid sister, even when Sheena had matured physically ahead of Ryz'n. Next to Ry, Sheena's tolerance for pain was pitifully lacking. Even if her kid sister had managed to get the upper hand on Ryz'n during one of their physical tussles, Sheena could not hurt Ryz'n enough to win the war. The more Sheena had hurt Ryz'n, the more Ryz'n had enjoyed it. Ryz'n would outlast her kid sister. In effect, Sheena could never win a physical confrontation between the two of them. To this day, Ryz'n enjoyed both a physical as well as a mental superiority over her kid sister, largely due to Ryz'n's perverse penchant for pain. Of course, as a benevolent dictator, Ryz'n used her superiority over her kid sister sparingly. The fact that Ryz'n did enjoy pain so much had made it easy for her to starve herself, nearly to death, after her dad had forbidden Ryz'n to see Nick, during their first summer together, when they were rising seniors.

Though he might have guessed, even Nicky had never known the depth of Ryz'n's unnatural compulsion for pain, which could so easily evolve into pleasure for her. She could never bear to tell him, for fear he would think her a freak. Nick always said he did not perceive such lovemaking as enthusiastic, merely masochistic. Ryz'n argued that, for her, it was both, She had told him that for her a certain amount of hurt made their lovemaking feel better, sort of like putting “the lime in the coconut to make it feel better,” as Nilsson had sung once upon a time. Nick would merely look into her eyes and laugh, mocking her as “my little tigress.”

The speed was fading now, but it had not yet vanished. She wondered: could it be that inhaling the meth had been another way of inflicting pain on herself? She was about to find out. If so, it certainly had been a pleasurable way to go about it, thus far anyway ...

Ryz'n heard a scratching sound at the walkout basement door, back and to her left. She stirred with alarm from her reverie and faced toward the middle of the room. The grey cloth-covered, ironing board stood before her. She ignored Scruffy junior's

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barking and, in a loud whisper, ordered her to “Shush! You’ll wake up Bryson and Sheena.” The terrier’s tail drooped with her master’s reprimand and she lay down near the ironing board, with her head between her paws.

Taking the hot iron in her hand, Ryz’n raised her heel and pivoted on the ball of her foot, turning her wounded thigh outward. Ry cupped her right hand as a shield about herself. She gazed over her exposed upper thigh, which revealed the scars of previously self-inflicted wounds, from her bygone, adolescent days. It had been a long, long time since she had done anything like this, not since she had discovered the weirdly disgusting but less satisfying effect of engorging herring whole. However, with her left hand on the hot iron and the herring unavailable, Ry turned the tip of the iron towards her thigh and moved the pointed tip forward and upward. She inched the searing tip of the iron closer and closer to her olive skin. Her tongue slipped out over her lower lip, in unabated anticipation of the sensation of pain and pleasure she recalled. Ry imagined surrendering to the temptation. She closed her eyes and imagined touching the iron’s searing tip to the soft, super sensitive, hidden skin high, high up on her inner thigh and holding the iron there for a second—*two—three—*“ahhh! ummm!”—*five*—she embraced the burning sting and her nerve endings vibrated, as if she really were stinging herself, because the drug lingering in her brain permitted that sweet burning, stinging realization.

Ry bit her lip as she anticipated the sizzle of her soft skin scorching. The burn stung so sharply that it felt good, titillating her, raising the hairs on end all over her body. Indeed, her hair seemed to rise up on its feet and stretch itself against her palm and fingers, as if from an electric shock. As the imaginary pain turned to pleasure, she could not repress a giggle at the effect the meth had taken on her. She lifted the burning iron away from her imaginary, scorched skin, while her meth-induced mind smelled the unreal aroma of burnt flesh, which filled her nostrils. She breathed deeply, as deliciously delightful waves of satisfaction heated up again deep inside her, just as they had earlier, during the night. It was as if she could create something real out of nothing.

Her mom was right. Succumbing to such evil inclinations could, in fact, lead to her ruin. But Mann ... it sure could hurt *so good*, even though she was merely imagining the act now from memory. The long-lingering meth and the recent microphone burns had brought out the worst in her dark, sadistic inclinations. She was considering skipping the pretense and actually succumbing to the temptation, when she heard Scruffy bark wildly again at an alarming clatter behind her. Startled, Ry turned to look over her left shoulder.

The white-painted, wooden, basement door stood open. A middle-aged man, wearing a brown uniform with a brown visor cap, was down on one knee picking up a ballpoint pen and a clipboard. Self-consciously, as if by rote, Ryz’n quickly jerked the iron away from her unscathed skin and placed it, butt-end down on the ironing board, away from her dad’s shirt. Scruffy postured and barked vociferously. Ryz’n shushed the dog harshly and threw her hand toward the pet to quiet her. Then Ry motioned for the Skye terrier to come and sit at her feet. The dog obeyed with her tail between her

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legs. Ryz'n quickly turned her attention back to the intruder. For a minute, neither spoke. Each of them was too shocked to speak. Startled, each simply beheld one another for a few, brief seconds. Standing behind the shirt-draped, ironing board, Ryz'n had no fear that he could see below her waist. Not wanting to give him the satisfaction of watching her run and hide, or shamefully pulling her dad's shirt over her front, she calmly folded her arms over her chest, hiding herself. Ryz'n pivoted slightly toward him and simply, boldly, assumed "the stance," only with her left leg forward and her right leg back, reversed from usual. This maneuver served to cover all her crucial points effectively. In fact, she felt that she was covered better than if she were wearing a two-piece, bathing suit at the beach. Ryz'n looked sideways over her shoulder at the befuddled intruder.

The embarrassed man in brown scrambled to his feet, clasping his clipboard and pen to his chest, as if he were covering himself. He stuttered apologetically, "Ju-ju-just reading the ma-meter, Ma'am." He attempted a helpless, placatory smile, but he could not quite bring it off. Then Ryz'n remembered that her mother had said something about the gas meter man—that he might drop by. Suddenly, Ryz'n felt like a complete fool. She tried to retain her poise and act as if everything were normal. Her posture remained rigid, but her voice quivered a bit.

"Oh! And how is it? ... the, the meter I mean. How's it, how is it reading?"

The guy gulped sheepishly. "Up! Yes, it's definitely up a little right now, ma'am."

Ryz'n bowed her face and tried to conceal her grin by rubbing her forehead with the left hand, while her left elbow still shielded her chest from him. With her fist covering her mouth and still using her limbs to cover herself, she turned casually to the guy.

"Oh! Well, it must be that new gas air conditioner. That must be it." She remarked as casually as she possibly could under the forced circumstances.

"Uh, no doubt," he responded in like manner. His initial embarrassment began to wear off and he began to eye her from head to toe, particularly ogling around the edge of the ironing board at her behind. Ry became more uncomfortable. She felt her hirsute heritage might be exposed. As a precaution, she slid her left foot back, so her left cheek would block any view of her tail feathers. Then she spoke.

"Well sir, don't you think you should move onto the next house now?"

"Uh, yes, yes Ma'am. I better be, uh, be heading out. I mean, moving on. Yes."

Ryz'n smiled primly at him. He stared unduly at the top of Ryz'n's head. He backed his butt end out, propping the screen door open, and pulled on the white-painted, brass knob to close the wooden door.

Ryz'n waited for him to leave, but when he hesitated, she turned a bit to her right. Giving him a cold shoulder, she raised her right hand from over her left breast, still shielding herself from his stare by the crook of her left elbow. Ry wiggled her fingers good-bye, dismissing him with her prim smile. But the guy stuck his head back in the door, from where he gave her the once over yet again and remarked sincerely.

"Gee Lady! I sure hope your team wins, cuz that's the best, darned lookin' uniform I ever seen."

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He glanced at her head again, smothered a chuckle and then he turned and stumbled up the basement steps, laughing all the way.

Ryz'n rolled her eyes skyward and, spotting, the bill of her softball cap, realized the cap still sat cock-eyed upon her head. Embarrassment and bewilderment gave way to irony and then to slapstick humor as she slowly came to appreciate how she must have looked to this guy. Here she stood ironing in the nude, wearing only a weather-beaten, old softball cap and a green satin sash about her waist with the belt ends hanging down over her loins. Of course, he could not have seen the belt ends, but still ... She laughed so hard and loud that she collapsed up against the dryer onto the cold, hard cement of the basement floor. She forgot completely about injuring herself. Ry could hear the guy now, when he got home to the wife for dinner that night. What a story, he would have to tell! Ryz'n wondered if the Ryans wouldn't begin to receive more frequent meter readings in the future, too.

He hoped her team wins! Ha! Judas Priest! That was a good one—one for the book or at least one for the humor section of the “Reader’s Digest!”

Ry could not stop laughing. She began to weep from mirth. Her belly convulsed involuntarily, as if she were dancing the Rakasse. Sheena came around the corner from the other side of the dry wall that separated the bedroom from the utility area to complain. However, Ryz'n could not stop her hysterics long enough to explain. She tried but she could not get out more than two words at a time without cracking up. Sheena returned angrily to bed without any explanation from her sister for her hysterics. Shaking her head in disbelief, Sheena promised her older sister that she would never let Ryz'n take any more of that speed stuff, ever again.

Ry's excessive convulsions spawned a backwards head butt against the dryer, which brought on Ry's nausea again. She made it to the downstairs bathroom before disaster struck. Afterwards, once again, the cool clammy feeling and the cold sweats returned to take over her body, as before. Ryz'n selected her robe from amongst the drying clothes and ran upstairs to shower, shave, wash her hair and completely clean up. While her nausea had vanished, she was feeling a bit edgy and took to grinding her teeth and spinning her engagement ring. She still maintained a high level of energy. So Ryz'n lavished herself with body lotion. She painted all her nails with her customary pink gloss and French trim, a thin, white border across the tip of each nail. Then she brushed her teeth and gargled with mouthwash to purge the lingering taste of vomit, which the shower had been unable to wash away fully. She combed out her long, thick wet hair, but did not employ her hair dryer. Her eyes showed dark circles, so regretfully, because she detested make-up, Ryz'n applied some concealer to cover the signs of fatigue. The phone rang. Ry concluded her toilette abruptly.

Not wanting to be caught disrobed again, Ryz'n threw on her now clean, soft, green satin robe and hustled into the kitchen to answer the phone. It was Mickey Saxon. He said he had been third in line at the Copyright Office, but there had been no problems with securing the copyright. He told her he'd see her tonight and hung up. Ryz'n was in the act of hanging up the phone when she heard the doorbell ring.

What a busy day at the Ryans! And it was hardly nine-thirty yet!

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Ryz'n pulled the long comb from her robe's hip pocket and tilted her head to the left side as she combed the tangles out her wet, dense locks. Passing back into the living room, she glanced at herself in the horizontal wall mirror, above the stereo/TV console. She looked a little better. However, things grew a bit scary outside. She saw human shadows and heard voices through the Venetian blinds, which covered the room's picture window. Through the three small privacy windows near the top of the front door, Ry saw men outside, wearing sunglasses like those worn by motorcycle cops.

Oh-Oh! Last night is about to catch up to me. The cops have found me. Shoot!

However, as she approached the door, Ry saw through the privacy panes that the men outside were not the fuzz. Remaining casual, Ryz'n completed the difficult task of combing out her gnarly hair as she opened the front door to welcome the unexpected visitors. As soon as they recognized her, an anxious crowd of reporters, journalists and cameraman pressed close to the front step and the outer screen door, calling her by name. The scene reflected barely controlled mayhem. There was one woman with a pencil and a pad of paper, but the rest were men. Yelling over one another, they called Ry mostly by her married name, but some called her by her maiden name.

Cameras from all four local news networks clamored over her yard, porch and front steps, angling for a favorable position from which to shoot her. Trucks and cars lined the street in front of her house. Little neighbor kids stopped playing ball in the street to stare. The storm door remained closed in front of her. Stunned, Ryz'n stopped combing her lengthy tresses to consider her options. This had to be about last night's performance and Nick's public appearance. She twirled her ring and bit her lower lip. She could blow them off and risk a lot of negative press. But they would hound her until they got their story, anyway. Or, she could buck up and act as cheerfully pleasant and polite as possible. Considering that the euphoria from her speed-inhaling finally had begun to desert her and, that she was feeling fatigued and irritable, she would need an academy award performance to pull it off.

Well, I'm a native Georgian and so was Scarlett O'Hara. If my sister Georgian could face hostile Yankees with a brave and pleasing smile, so can I. But St. Brigid, please pray Our Lord in intercession to help me to do it, to be kind to these, these carnivorous, drooling Yankees!

Ry reached up above her head to lower the upper sash storm window to the first catch notch, so her visitors could hear her through the screen. Amid a twittering of flashes, cameramen zeroed in on her. She realized why. Raising her hands high above her head to lower the sash had raised the hem of her green robe. *Uh-oh!* "Hello," she replied as sprightly as she could over her embarrassment. From behind the storm door, she combed out the wet gnarls from her hair, projecting a business-as-usual, every-day-casual air.

"Forgive me if I don't invite y'all in, but my sister and brother-in-law are trying to sleep. They had a long night, so please try to be quiet." That ploy had worked well for Bryson last night, so she hoped it would work as well for her now.

Ryz'n smiled winningly as she held a forefinger to her lips to shush them. Then she reached back with her left hand and pulled the front door forward, tightly up against

her butt. She resumed her previous stance, now wedged in between the two doors with her braless, robe-covered chest pressed into the storm door glass. The journalists quieted for a minute, but when she concluded her greeting, they began firing questions at her like an attacking pack of piranhas. Ryz'n softly shushed them again by applying a forefinger lightly to her pursed lips and reminded them about those trying to sleep. Smiling her natural three-dimpled smile, she directed a forefinger toward Mike Concannon, a reporter she knew and trusted, selecting to talk to him from the others.

Close to a dozen people stood before her on the front steps and porch, including reporters she recognized from the "Washington Evening Post," the "R. G. County Journal," WRGC radio and television news crews, including WTOP's "Channel 9 Eyewitness News" and its camera crew. Ryz'n remained unfazed. She had faced much tougher, public speaking engagements, even if this was as impromptu as it gets. *Let the public see how the media attacks me, like so many piranha, and let them see how gracefully I can handle it.* Despite her internal false bravado, the half-clad modern day Scarlett O'Hara prayed a hurried Hail Mary.

"Ms. Sheeboom, Ms. Sheeboom." It was Mike Concannon from Eyewitness News.

He had interviewed Ryz'n many times. The first time was after Nick had helped Pocomoke High win a big season-ending football game their senior year. That night she and Nicky had eloped. Mike was a good egg, as far as Ryz'n was concerned. He had treated her fairly in the past and she hoped he would do so now.

"Ms. Sheeboom, I apologize for catching you off guard like this, but would you care to make a statement about what happened last night at "*Mr. Rowdy's Loft*" in Woldorn?"

Ryz'n had worked through her tangles and finished combing her hair, so she stuck her comb in her spacious, robe pocket. Then she pulled on the door knob behind her to pull the heavy, front door close to her rear. To converse better with her uninvited guests, Ry finished what she had started earlier by rising up on her tiptoes, reaching high to unhook the top, sash glass window in the storm door. However, this time she took the precaution of crossing her legs and making sure the lengthy ends of her sash belt dipped well below her hem. Ry came down upon her heels as she slid the top sash on the storm door down now as far as it would go, so she might speak through the screen unimpeded by the glass. She placed one hand over the other parallel to the floor and even with her shoulders, resting her forearms on the top of the lowered storm window and her chin atop her folded hands. Yet even so, out of the corner of her eye, she caught one reporter nudging another and whispering: "Did you see that!" The lone female reporter glared at the offending journalist. Ryz'n gulped. *Oooops!* However, she recovered quickly by tightening the sash of her robe belt again, just in case, and made sure the belt ends dangled down demurely right between her crossed legs. This was no time for a meter man reprisal.

"Why certainly. I'd be happy to, Mike. If you all will back off the porch, down the steps a little, I'll come out and address your questions."

Concannon motioned the others back. He himself retreated halfway down the stoop. "How's this Mrs. Sheeboom? Is this far enough?"

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Ryz'n answered by pulling the front door to behind her without closing the door tightly. She stepped gingerly onto the glazed over, green-painted concrete, front porch and let the screen door shut lazily behind her. Then she stepped backwards up onto the broad front door step, adding eight inches to her height. She replied pertly and, out of nervous anxiety, again began combing the back of her head casually. She spoke as if she were perfectly relaxed and as if this were another routine event in the course of a routine day. However, behind her back, the fingers of her free, right hand seized upon the ornamental, aluminum brocade facing of the screen door, claspings tightly around the decorative metal framework.

"Certainly, Mike, whenever you're crew is ready." Ryz'n tried to sparkle.

Below her, other newspaper reporters were vying for her attention as well, but she ignored them, focusing on Concannon. They got the message. This was her interview and Concannon was her man.

The TV news reporter turned toward his camera crew, "OK, guys?" The crew nodded OK. "OK, on my count then—five ... four ... three ... two ... one and go!" Concannon threw his right forefinger to cue the cameraman as he held a microphone in his left hand.

Concannon: "This is Mike Concannon from Channel Nine Eyewitness News, coming to you live from the home of Ryzanna Sheeboom, celebrated leader of the DC Metro Area's own award-winning Rock'N'Roll band Good Rockin' Tonight."

The reporter, standing on the front steps, turned from the camera to interview Ryz'n, who stood on the front door step above him. Ry tried to sparkle a little for the camera, as she consciously used her fingers to comb deliberately once more through her lengthy, coarse, still wet tresses.

Concannon: "Ms. Sheeboom: There was quite a disturbance last night at "*Mr. Rowdy's Loft*" in Woldorn, MD, where your band Good Rockin' Tonight, also known as GRT, performed live. Eyewitnesses, including the club's manager, claim that your band, that is you, specifically as the front person, incited a riot, which resulted in between fifteen hundred and three thousand dollars worth of property damages, with several people incurring injuries. Nine of those injured received treatment at a local hospital. Could you please explain what happened last night, Ms. Sheeboom?"

Somewhat nervously, Ryz'n stopped combing her wet hair. She pulled her dense hair back behind her large ears, but her unruly hair misbehaved, popping back out over her right ear, concealing that appendage. Ignoring her obnoxious hair, Ry became serious.

Ryz'n: "Well Mr. Concannon, this is news to me. I honestly had no idea about the injuries and the damage, well the extent of the damage anyway. Let me say right now, to those nine individuals who were hurt. If you have any problem in paying those medical bills to please let me know, care of Eyewitness News, because Good Rockin'

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Tonight will defray your expenses. In fact, you just let Mr. Concannon know and I'll see those bills get paid, period! And I do apologize sincerely for any pain and suffering incurred by anyone on our account. That's just terrible! Why, it's *inexcusable!* Please accept my humblest apologies."

As she spoke, Ry sensed her leggy, earnest sincerity was coming across and that the unpolished, natural beauty, hewn upon her person by the Lord, was striking them all favorably, even the lone female reporter. Ry could read it in their faces and her spirit buoyed within her. *This is going to work. Yes, it is going to work.* She dropped her hands to her side and replied confidently to the camera in her naturally husky voice.

Mr. Concannon: "Well yes, Ms. Sheeboom. But—"

Ryz'n: "Yes, yes I know, Mike. I suppose that's what happens when one doesn't stop and think about the consequences of one's actions." (She wagged a penitent forefinger in the air at herself.) "I should have known better. After all, it's just a little thing to do, to stop and think. But I'm afraid I failed to think rightly last night. Honestly, I apologize to all who were hurt by my carelessness." (She frowned.) "Please understand I had no idea such a *mêlée* would erupt." (She lied. It had happened before in Portland and Little Rock, so why would it not have happened last night? Especially, after she had pulled her skirt so high, made that extra wink and blew over the live microphone. Ry slumped a bit outwardly, emphasizing her consternation, but inwardly she acknowledged her guilt in her tepid recount of last night's bawdy, raucous events.)

Mr. Concannon stepped forward, shoving his mike a little closer to her, indicating she should elaborate on the cause of the incident. His competitors followed his lead. Ryz'n peered into the camera lens, hoping to appear as a sad, as a helpless basset hound pup. She felt it was working and if it worked, it would be because she truly was genuinely repentant and her sincerity would penetrate the camera lens. She fully intended to confess all these faults, her most grievous faults, when she made her next sacrament of confession. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!*

Ryz'n: "Well, as for the monetary damages to the club, GRT will be happy to reimburse Mr. Rowdy for whatever he needs to make the place look like new. Hank? If you're listening, please get in touch and we'll straighten this whole matter out, immediately." She smiled the two-dimple smile and bowed politely from the chest toward the camera.

Concannon: "But Ms. Sheeboom, could you please explain what *actually happened* last night?"

Ryz'n: "Oh yes, I'm sorry. That was your question, wasn't it, Mike? Well, let's see. (Ryz'n rolled her eyes, took her chin between her left thumb and forefinger and

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clutched across her body under floppy bosom with her right hand. She was figuring a way to spin her story without lying so much.) “Well it’s kind of difficult to explain, really, Mike.” (Ryz’n grabbed her forehead again briefly and giggled self-consciously.) “You see, as you know, we have a new band member, an excellent lead guitarist and vocalist by the name of Jimmy “Jax” Jackson from Baltimore. And with Jimmy’s help and the help of his lovely wife Denise, who, incidentally, is an excellent vocalist in her own right, well we’ve been trying out a different, more sensual style along with a new, brassier sound. We’d like to get back to GRT’s R&B roots, so to speak. We’ve undertaken this local tour, where so many area club owners, like Mr. Rowdy, graciously have consented to let us try out our new, improved style. I must admit, I’m a novice at this new, raw sound. My ex-husband was an expert with it, of course, but I’m really just feeling my way along. I have my reservations about pursuing it, actually. And last night, well, I think perhaps I pushed the envelope just a bit too far, if you know what I mean.” (She batted her lashes and grinned bashfully at the reporter.)

Concannon: “Well, not exactly, Ms. Sheeboom. Your reply sounded more like an advertisement for GRT. Could you be more specific about the cause of the fracas? After all, inciting a riot that caused women to be stomped upon and another customer to be thrown through a second-story plate glass window, well, that must have been some kind of a “raw” live performance. Could you describe it for us at all, please?”

Ryz’n: “Well, I don’t know Mike. Frankly, I’m shocked, shocked at the fallout from our performance. Why, I, I had no idea someone went through a window. To be honest, and I don’t really care to admit this, but I did partake in some alcoholic libation to get me loosened up enough to, to perform in that manner. ‘Sex’ (Ry crossed her legs, as she raised her hands, one on either side of her head. Then she squeezed the first two fingers and thumb of each hand together in the air beside her head to indicate quotation marks.) “is not my normal thing, not my trademark, as y’all know. You know me, Mr. Concannon.” She beamed at the newsman, like the innocent, high school, cheerleader type she hoped he would remember. However, in the back of her mind, Ry feared that her explanation might not have come off quite right, possibly she had sounded too trite.

Concannon: “Well, I’ve been interviewing you, on and off over the last five years, Ms. Sheeboom, and this incident does seem quite out of character for you. That’s precisely why I’d like to know what really happened, to get your side of things, Ryzanna. Witnesses claim you performed a number with a dead microphone that stopped the show and started the riot.”

Ryz’n: “Oh! That! Well, yes, that’s correct. I did.” (Ryz’n nodded wide-eyed as if she were a little girl confessing before her mother.)

Concannon: “Well, would you please describe the number for us?”

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Ryz'n: "Well, I can give you a general idea. The truth is I'm a little fuzzy on the whole thing, myself. As I indicated, I behaved unprofessionally. And, uncharacteristically, I had imbibed a bit before the show. But here, let me borrow that microphone and I'll show you what I remember. For the most part, it was off the cuff, you see. We had never even practiced that number as a group before. I was kind of experimenting." (Ryz'n did not say that she had been practicing the number alone in her room ever since she had witnessed the original performance, which had inspired her up at Naughty Nathan's last March.)

Concannon handed her the mic. She asked for more slack in the electric cord and got it. Ryz'n stepped down off the door step onto the porch. The reporters stepped back down the stoop, while the news cameraman stepped forward and halfway up the porch steps for close-ups. The other cameramen followed close behind the first. Then, as she had done about ten hours earlier, but unaccompanied and with not nearly so much embellishment, Ry gave a mini performance. First, she tightened the robe's satin sash about her waist and ensured the two belt ends trailed straight down several inches beneath the robe's brief hem in front of her. She wanted no accidents here. She glanced up to find the neighborhood kids astonished and wide-eyed, stopped on their bikes and scooters, standing at the curb. Ry voiced a silent but quick Hail Mary and hoped those kids and their parents would understand. Then, she hung the cord around her neck, dangled the mike, and bounced the head down along her chest, down to her abdomen and on down to her thighs. There she alternated kicking her knees up slightly and lightly bouncing the mike back and forth very tamely from one thigh to the other. With her legs closed tightly together, she bounced the mike in an unenthusiastic manner, as if she were a soccer player warming up before a match.

Of course, Ry was not singing the raunchy lyrics to Little Nick's bawdy R&B tune, because there was no such song to be heard. And she was careful scarcely to raise her knees to avoid any tawdry mishaps. Also, conspicuous by their absence, were a dimly lit club and a hip-shaking, chest-quaking vixen with her bouncing bounty barely sheathed in a skimpy, skin tight, latex costume, which she personally had designed for the very purpose of eliciting the animal lust of a drunken crowd. However, Ry reasoned, what these people did not know would not hurt them, or the band or her. Her tepid, leggy exhibition would have to suffice.

As Ryz'n tamely bounced the mike for these reporters and the cameras, from one thigh to the other, she evoked some distracting electrical pops and crackles from the microphone, which she believed to have been the true causes of the riot. She explained that *The Loft's* tremendous sound system magnified the white noise, making customers think the roof was coming off the place. To prove her point she pressed the mike to her lips and blew, once again evoking the rushing sound of the north wind. The technicians with the TV crews reacted adversely by quickly pulling off their headphones temporarily. Ryz'n implied the oddly frightening, static noises were the true causes of the riot and not some alleged, little riot-inducing seductress such as herself. After all, she asked, "Do I look like a seductress?" She arched her eyes, hopefully imitating a sad

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basset hound pup. Even so, belying her as she spoke, were her shapely bare legs obvious to all and her bulbous breasts quivering quietly but firmly beneath her tightened smooth, satin robe. She noticed the cameras giving her the once over. The belt ends guarding her loins, saved her from some true embarrassment. However, Ryz'n thought that a little bit of controlled cheesecake for the Eyewitness News audience might not hurt Channel 9's ratings any. It might even be good copy for the band and serve to get her off the hook. By hinting at what might really have happened last night at *The Loft*, without actually embarrassing herself by stating it, she hope the viewers read between the lines.

When she had concluded her brief performance, the good catholic girl handed the mike back to her interviewer.

Concannon: "And that's all there was to it?" (He was skeptical.)

Ryz'n: "Well, I did drop to my knees to finish the number." She giggled. "And they're still a little sore, so I'd rather not demonstrate that move right now, Mike." (She grinned playfully, resting her case.)

The other reporters sensed an opening and swooped in immediately, all asking numerous questions at the same time. However, once more, Ry waited patiently for her preferred TV reporter Mike Concannon, who stepped forward again to control the interview. Once the others understood that Ry would only respond to him, they let Concannon speak.

Concannon: "Ryz'n, excuse me, I mean Ms. Sheeboom. There has also been a great deal of rumor and conjecture that your husband has returned, from the dead so to speak, and that, in fact, he was at the club last night, and, further, that it was his appearance that sparked the whole episode! Would you care to comment on that please, Ma'am?"

Ryz'n: "My former husband is not dead Mr. Concannon." (Ry spoke with a hint of indignation.) "He was listed as a POW-MIA. You know, you have interviewed me many times about issues regarding our POWs and MIAs and bringing them home. I have been waiting and hoping for over three years and amid many tears, for my Nick to come back to me. Of course, I am still waiting, and hoping, and praying he will return to me, as the *same* Nick who left me so long ago. I suppose that is too much to hope for, after what he has been through, but I pray for his healthy return every night, every morning, every day. I hope you all would pray that prayer for Nick and me, as well, Mr. Concannon. And I would hope all your viewers will pray for us, too." (She stared earnestly into the camera, sincerely assuming a soulful, forlorn expression.) "Nicholas and I, we ... we need all the prayers we can get from each and every one of you, believe me, because, because ..." (The catch in her throat was real. Ryz'n sniffled but caught herself and dammed up the waterworks before they could burst from her.) "I

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fear now that my Nick, that is the boy I once knew, may never return to me. Now please, if you all will just excuse me, I'll ..." (The emotional strain and the growing after effects of last night's hangover had combined to sneak up on her. Ry was close to breaking.)

Concannon: "But Ms. Sheeboom, just a moment ago, you referred to Little Nick as your 'ex-husband?' and then just now as your 'former husband.' Can you explain those remarks?" (The reporter held the mike out for her response.)

Ryz'n: "I did? Well, well, perhaps that was a slip of the tongue then, Mike. I apologize. Sometimes, I, I get so discouraged, you know? I don't know what I'm saying." (Ry's lower lip quivered and her eyes brimmed with tears.)

Concannon backed off respectfully, but the other reporters charged up the Ryan front porch steps to surround her. Ry sensed they smelled blood. There were still too many unanswered questions. However, Ryz'n stepped back up onto the front door step and to rise above them and fended them off with her right forearm before her face. The back of her left hand rested on her bumptious butt with her palm pressed once more against the lower screen. She felt her bosom quivering beneath her thin, satin robe, giving them all a show, but she did not care. She was a mouse, trapped in a lab experiment.

Ryz'n cried out "Please, Please!" But they were a pack of jackals.

Fumbling for the storm door handle now with her left hand, Ry turned and slipped. She righted herself and stepped back, opened the screen door and retreated behind it into the safety of her home, burying her distress beneath her forearm. From behind the safety of the screen door, she bid them all adieu and concluded by answering their persistent requests with "Not now, please, not ... not now, please. Please, I, I just cannot. I can't take any more questions now. I'm sorry."

The jackals persisted, unabated. "Sanctuary," cried Ryz'n finally, in total frustration parroting Charles Laughton in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." The familiar cry checked the carnivores for a moment. Then Ry shut the heavy front door in their faces, locked it and slumped safely back against her rescuing barricade. In this manner, she managed to withhold from their sight, the tears, welling up over her eyelids. When she heard and felt knocks at her back through the heavy door, Ryz'n dashed into her bedroom to throw herself upon her bed and cry her eyes out in private.

However, she could not even do that, as one industrious photographer climbed up by her window sill to take pictures, probably by stepping on the tops of the basement window shutters beneath her room (as Nick had done when he had rescued her from her hunger strike that first summer they were together). Hearing the clicking of a camera outside her window, Ryz'n jumped up and closed the blinds and drapes in the photographer's face. Then she fell back upon her bed to cry some more. Her statement to the press, recalling how Nick had been before he had left for the service and how he was now had caused her to break—that and the delayed hangover, which, just now, was descending heavily upon her. All of a sudden, it felt as though her body had died,

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collapsed into bits. Only her mind was left alive to feel all the ruin. Ryz'n ran to the bathroom, where she became ill. Clammy and shaking, she staggered back to her room. She did not believe it was possible a body could feel so physically abominable and a head so miserably destroyed. *And I have a show to do tonight! Ughh!* Ry lay down upon her forest green and gold four-poster canopy bed and cried herself to sleep.

* * *

The Ryans had finished dinner. The girls were packing for their holiday, beach, road show, when Ry's mother called the family to the living room to watch GRT on "Eyewitness News at Six." A severely hung-over Ryz'n now viewed her earlier interview with Concannon at the front door. She watched herself pose and beguile the journalists in her natural, leggy beauty beneath her shorty, satin bathrobe. Surprisingly, she realized that indeed she had pulled it off, though her father was incensed at his daughter's lack of propriety. Ry watched herself on TV guilelessly playing peek-a-boo with the camera from behind her long, wet locks that would not stay put. She startled herself, as she watched her sexy eyes, sensual, full, pink lips and smoky voice speak sincerely and earnestly to a camera, which adored her. Ry winced when, for a nanosecond, the picture blipped as the hem of her satin robe raised ever higher. Somehow, a film editor must have skipped her faux pas, preserving her modesty before the whole Eyewitness News viewing audience. Nevertheless, her father stormed angrily out of the room. *Thank God for editing.* She had come off Scot clean, better than clean, actually. Normally, few could have pulled off such an innocuous act, without sounding insincere, but Ry had managed the guileless feat superbly. The expression on her angelic face revealed that of a good catholic girl, who had strayed accidentally. She had gone a little too far in having too good a time and gotten her hand caught in the proverbial cookie jar. (Wink!) She had managed to dictate a delicate tight wire balancing act between innocent cheerleader and oversexed chanteuse. Yes, the public would forgive her and she would wonder why, because Ryz'n knew she did not deserve their mercy. The piranha-like attack of the reporters at the close of the interview only served to cast her more sympathetically in the eyes of the viewers.

As her family watched the replay on the news, Sheena shook her head in wonder. She opined that, surrounded by that hungry pack of reporters, Ry looked like the nearly naked, vestal virgin Faye Wray, in hopeless distress as King Kong held her in his hairy paw ready to ravish her. "Damn! That rally cry of 'Sanctuary' really was a nice touch, Ry. Leave it to you to come out smelling like a rose on a stinking deal like this Ryzanna! A million dollars couldn't buy us this kind of publicity. You know that?"

Amazingly, Sheena was right, thought Ryz'n. Moreover, Eyewitness News had gotten all of it, well all except a bit of deftly edited, nip-tuck, film wizardry, which had preserved her family's secret heritage. Yet, Ryz'n sought to impact only one mind among the vast Eyewitness News audience. She prayed that her husband had received her message loud and clear. Nick was the only Eyewitness News viewer who concerned her. Now she had to somehow pull herself out of her hangover and get ready for tonight's performance.