

~ Chapter 21: Meatloaf ~

Ryz'n took Dixie by the hand and led him through the Roman archway into the cozy dining room, where the others were seated and waiting for them. Once inside the dining room, Dixie glanced around at the set-up. Mr. Ryan sat at the head of the table, nearest the back wall of the house. Mrs. Ryan sat opposite her husband at the foot of the table, closest to the living room. The seating arrangement was such that the daughters sat opposite each other, on either side of their father, while the sons-in-law sat opposite each other on either side of Mrs. Ryan. Ryz'n and Dixie sat together with the kitchen door just a few feet behind them. The food was on the table and consisted of mashed potatoes, beans, coleslaw and meatloaf, which Dixie sniffed before he saw it. In the center of the table sat a fresh floral piece filled with various colored impatiens. Dixie held the chair for his wife, while Sheena laughed at her brother-in-law's formality. As Ryz'n sat down, she thanked her husband for his aid, while she simultaneously shot daggers at her sister once again for her rude behavior.

Dixie noticed a pair of matching large, dark cherry wood, glass-enclosed, china cabinets diagonally opposite him in the opposite corners of the room. One was behind and to Mr. Ryan's left with the other one behind and to his spouse's right. China plates in one and crystal glassware in the other stood on display for all to see. Cherry wood seemed to be the furniture of choice for the Ryan household. Between the cabinets stood a large sash window, opposite Dixie and Ryz'n. A similar window rested in the wall behind Mr. Ryan. Because the shades were not completely drawn on the window behind his father-in-law, Dixie glimpsed what looked like a deck and some kind of white framed shed out back. A short, chain link fence bordered the grassy, green back yard. Full length, cream-colored curtains trimmed in gold fringe adorned both windows. The dining room walls were papered in a green and gold motif of forest scenery, featuring majestic-looking deer.

Dixie observed everything acutely, hoping he might recall something, anything, but no dice. He didn't even recognize what passed for a magnificent glass chandelier light fixture, in the ceiling directly over the table. As he sat down, Dixie peeked around Mrs. Ryan to find Scruffy Jr.'s box empty.

"We serve Scruffy out on the back porch in good weather and in the kitchen in bad," explained his mother-in-law, reading his mind. Dixie nodded. Now that was just fine by him and seemed like a sensible thing to do. She added, "We're all drinking beer with our meals. I took the liberty of pouring you one, Nicholas. I hope that was all right. Of course, we have other beverages—"

"No, no Ma'am ... be-be-beer's j-just per-per uh fine."

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Something was in the air. Dixie sensed it. It was as though the freshness of this idyllic, late June afternoon permeated the Ryan home, serving up hope, thankfulness and joy in ample quantities for all seated here about the dining room table. But there was something else looming with a portent that was less than harmonious. Dixie could just feel it.

Before they ate, the family paused to give thanks, as was their custom. Mr. Ryan led the prayer:

“Bless us Father in these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty through Christ Our Lord. Ame—OH! And thank You Lord so much, for bringing our Boy home to us, alive and well. AH-MEN!”

“AH-MEN!”

The family echoed their agreement in a loud chorus with each one crossing themselves afterwards. Dixie, who had been observing them closely, crossed himself, as well. They all noticed his belated, uncharacteristic action.

“Well Nicholas, have you converted?” inquired his mother-in-law hopefully. Pa-Par-don me, Ma’am?”

“Have you converted to Catholicism?”

“Uh, n-no.”

“Well, why did you bless yourself, just then Dear?”

Dixie, who had just been trying merely to get along, just trying to fit in, evidently had committed a faux pas. Embarrassed, he simply shrugged. Like a little kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, he looked down at his plate and the white linen tablecloth upon which it sat.

Mr. Ryan began passing the food to his right, where Ryz’n would intercept it and serve Dixie first and then herself before passing the plates onward, through Dixie to her mother. Dixie noticed approvingly that she gave him a thin, single piece of meatloaf, but a triple helping of mashed potatoes. Obviously, she knew his likes and dislikes, when it came to food, at least.

Although Mrs. Ryan had not intended to embarrass her long lost son-in-law with that remark about conversion, nevertheless, she had. As a result, an uncomfortable quiet fell across the dinner table now, while they slowly began to eat. Never shy, Sheena eventually broke the silence.

“This saltshaker is empty,” she chimed, mildly perturbed. She persisted in vigorously shaking the shaker, vainly hoping to dislodge some salt, but none was forthcoming. The Ryans glanced at Ryz’n who jumped out of her seat quickly. She reached across the table to accept the saltshaker from her sister and disappeared just as quickly into the kitchen behind her chair. Dixie watched in mildly stunned silence.

Upbeat, Bryson picked up the conversation.

“Well, gee Nick, you sure got a lotta medals, Mann,” he chuckled. “Seems like we shoulda won that danged War with all them medals you got.”

Dixie turned himself back from watching Ryz’n through the kitchen door. He shook his head negatively, while he mumbled over his plate into his food.

“Don’ ... ‘membra. Gotta ... cou-cou-ple me-dals ... in ma b-bag for sh-sharp-sh-shoottin.’ Ga-got a u-unit cita-tation. N-No-thin’ spe ... cial.”

“Are you crazy? Why, Ryz’n’s gotta a couple shoe boxes full of your medals and citations.” Bryson looked to the others for confirmation which they provided with eagerly nodding heads.

Ryz’n returned with the filled saltshaker, sitting down beside Dixie. She passed the shaker to her dad enroute to her sister across the table. Dixie questioned his brother-in-law silently with his eyes. Ryz’n tugged softly on his suit coat sleeve.

“It’s true, Nicky. They’re in my closet. I can show ya later, if ya like.”

She sat down again. Proudly, she dished a triple serving of cold slaw onto his plate and a single serving onto her own. Dixie shook his head in disbelief over the medals. But the girl assured him.

“Seems like you got practically every medal a Marine could get, Nicky, except for the Medal of Honor. And you might even get that one now, after what we learned about that miraculous escape you pulled off from that POW camp!”

Dixie shook his head. Staring vacantly into his food, he mumbled again that he could not believe it. Big Jim had told Dixie of some of their exploits, including the escape, but he never really had mentioned anything about medals.

Again, an uncomfortable silence settled over the dining table. The family ate quietly for a few minutes, when Ryz’n offered a considered opinion.

“You know, I’ve been thinking.” She glanced around the table at her family. “Yes, I’ve thought about this quite a lot actually, not just right now, but in my dealings with the Cause and the MIA-POW widows over the last couple of years. And, well, it seems to me, there should be a medal for prisoners of war. You know? For all the terrible ordeals you, and all those other boys, went through, Nicky,” opined Ryz’n. “I mean, it wasn’t like you wanted to get captured. I mean, you certainly did your utmost to avoid capture, right?”

She looked to him for confirmation that she had forgotten he could not give. However, he ate on silently, so she kept talking.

“Well, I feel quite certain you did. It was, why your capture was ... Well it was just part of the fortunes of war. That’s all. And you and the other boys should get a prisoner of war medal for all your trials and tribulations. That’s what I think anyway. How about you?”

Again she looked to him for a positive response, but none was forthcoming. He merely bobbed his head slightly as he chowed down. He didn’t like meatloaf, but this Mrs. Ryan sure could cook it. She had used some garlic and some other herbs, which, in his opinion, made the stuff more than tolerable.

Sheena opined, “Sounds more like the MISfortunes of war, if you ask me, hey Nick?”

Dixie replied absent mindedly: “Uh, yeah, g-guesso.” He stopped eating to think out loud about Ryzanna’s proposal.

“Medal for b-being a pri-pri-prisoner, hunh? That’s a n-n-new one.” He reached for and sipped on his glass of beer.

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Now that he was thinking about it, Ryz'n became animated.

"Why sure, Baby! That's right. Don't you think that's a good idea? Maybe I should bring it up to our Congressman? He listens to me now, after he saw that my little talk with the President paid off. And maybe we can discuss the Medal of Honor for you while we're at it?"

She smiled brightly, anticipating his response.

Dixie, shook his head slowly in a negative, sober fashion.

"P-President, hunh? Well, ja-ja-gee, I, I dunno 'bout that. Only, ya know I was a pri-prisoner once. G-g-got thrown in the b-b-brig. Di-Didn't get n-no me-dal for that though. N-N-no Sir! The C.O. gave me a "ma-ma-mast" and I got t-t-ten days in the ba-brig and bu-busted down to bu-buck private!"

He chuckled.

Ryz'n's shoulders slumped with her countenance. He sure wasn't helping her to reinforce the heroic image she had of him or that they all had of him, for that matter, even the Corps.

Bryson spoke up excitedly.

"Hey Nick! What'd ya get busted for? Smokin' dope?"

Dixie shook his head.

"So why? You can tell us, Nick. We're all your family here, right Ry? No secrets."

Ry smiled weakly.

Dixie swallowed and raised his fork with a couple beans skewered upon it.

"For bein' st-st-TUPID! That's what."

Bryson persisted. "Yeah? Well, what did ya do? Come on tell us, Mann."

"Yeah," concurred Sheena. "We wanna know." She leaned forward in her low-cut, orange halter top and batted her long lashes at him, ticking her sister off in the process.

Dix looked around the table, all except Ryz'n were nodding in the affirmative and smiling. So Dixie scooped up some mashed potatoes and shoved them in his face and started to speak with his mouth full. However, he caught himself and swallowed twice before he spoke.

"Jes' los' ma-my head is all. Fought b-b-ack when my-my -plata-toon sergeant ca-ca-cold-cocked me once. St-st-tupid!" He shook his head in disgust.

"Shoooo!" exclaimed Bryce. "I bet you really clobbered him, didn't ya Nick? I mean you always did back in school. The bigger they were, the harder they fell. Didn't they, Ry?"

Again, Ry smiled weakly, but her stomach felt queasy. This was not the conversation she had expected to hold. She longed to be alone with her husband, just the two of them. She could not bear to see her ideal, her knight in shining armor, fall off the white steed upon which she had placed him and upheld him for the last three years.

Dixie swallowed some meat loaf and agreed with his brother-in-law.

"Gu-Guess so. But there's where I really ma-messed up. If I had ju-just t-t-took it and d-done nothin', na-nothin' woulda hap-p-pened. B-b-b-ut, I had to cr-cream 'im. St-tupid! But I got a l'il lu-lucky, cause they pr-proved I was unreason'b-bly pro-vo-voked! And cause of my condi-di-dition and all.'"

However, Sheena supported her husband.

"Well you had to defend yourself, Nick. We all respect that." She looked around the table to see several nods.

Dixie grinned, staring at his plate, shaking his head and chuckled.

"You d-don' unna-st-stand. You da-don't da-do that. N-n-not in the Co-Corps, n-n-ot with your plat-too-toon sergeant!"

"That seems a terribly cowardly thing to do—for him to strike you like that," admitted his father-in-law.

"Yes it does, Dear. Why did he do that, Nicholas?" asked Mrs. Ryan.

"Du-dunno M-Ma'am." Dixie frowned, shrugged and shook his head.

"G-Guess, some pe-people just hate for no-no-no reason, I g-g-guess. Think he di-didn't like the way I ta-ta-talked." Dixie curled the right corner of his mouth in a feeble attempt to smile at her.

Mrs. Ryan tried to assuage him. "Well, you learned your lesson, Dear. It's all over now. ' She reached over to tap the table affectionately near his plate and looked at him with sympathetic eyes.

Dixie looked up in earnest.

"Yes Ma-ma'mam, I guessso b-b-but the worst p-p-part was I got bu-busted down to bu-bu-buck, co-co-cost me some ca-cash. B-B-But the Corps upped me b-b-back to Lance 'fore I g-g-got out."

Dixie grinned, but he was kicking himself for stuttering so much. He resolved to speak more deliberately to prevent it.

"Lance? Lance Corporal? Is that all, Nicky?" asked Ryz'n.

"Yeah, that's ... what I was," answered Dixie.

"Well gee, Baby! You were a platoon sergeant when you were captured, Sweetie! You had gotten some in field promotions based on your bravery and your demonstrated natural leadership skills."

She smiled, delighted to shove her white knight back up on his trusty steed.

"Pla-pla-t-toon Sergeant? N-No way, I coulda got so-so high so-so quick.

"But Sweetie, I told ya. You were a bona fide hero."

"Hero, hunh?" Dixie shook his head suspiciously. "That don't seem po-poss'ble neither."

"Well, believe it, Baby, because it's true. Yes, and just before your capture, your superiors were putting in the paperwork for you to go to OCS. I think you would have made a very handsome officer, don't you?" She grinned and arched her right eyebrow.

"An off-off'cer?" asked Dixie in shock. She had spoken heresy. He shook his head 'no' as a light went on in his eyes. Ryz'n noticed the change in his visage.

"Well, what is it, Nicky?"

“Well ... was jes' thinkin. What ... grade was it, exactly? D-Did you say?”

“Well I didn't say, but E6 is the grade that was on your pay stubs.”

“Staff Sergeant, hunh? Well, if I c-c-can prove that ... the V. A. would owe me a na-nice ch-chunk of ch-ch-change ... I mean, of ... change. My enti-ti-titlement” (for he could not bring himself to call it a disability benefit) “would come to, oh ... maybe seventy-five bu-bucks m-m-more a month for the last eighteen mo-months. That'd be-be close to a nine hundred ... bucks a year.” His eyes widened. “And I'd be g-getting' it from here on out, too.” He looked pleased as punch until Sheena burst his bubble.

“Seventy-five dollars a month?” Sheena cracked up. “Hell, Nick! You and Ryz'n make more than three times that much in one day, just in royalties, alone.”

Dixie choked on a string bean that got caught in his throat. Ryz'n pounded him on the back and he coughed the bean back up into his mouth. When he gathered himself, he turned to Sheena.

“Could you re ... peat that, p-please? I think I ma-must have ... heard you wrong.” He spoke almost perfectly that time. Talk of money always had a way of focusing him.

Ryz'n noticed when he made a conscious effort to slow down his speech, he spoke much more fluently. She recalled the psychiatrist remarks to that effect. Ryz'n answered for her sister.

“Why yes, that's right, Baby. Those records of ours just keep on selling, you see? Like I mentioned earlier. And you negotiated us such an excellent deal with old Mr. Saperstein that those royalties keep flowing in, too. Gee, you spoke very well just then, Honey, very well.”

Dixie smiled weakly, a little embarrassed about the fact that he had been stuttering so much to begin with. It angered him, especially after he had spoken so well the day before with those flippin' hippies! But he didn't let that deter the ongoing calculations in his head. Of all his academic subjects, math was one of his best. And when it came to figures, if you gave him the numbers, he could calculate the odds or the profits. Now, if they were right about these royalties, he had it made. That would be somewhere between seventy and eighty grand a year. That was over three times the amount Donna made in a year and she worked her butt off for it. Yet Dixie, without having to lift a finger (except to endorse a royalty check), could split that pot with the girl seated next to him and he'd still be on easy street. He couldn't believe that. Why, he could even become a high roller with that kind of dough. He would not need to worry about having to hedge his bets, except to conceal his play. *How long would this gravy train last?*

While Dixie zoned out on his new financial horizon. Mr. Ryan, who had remained mostly quiet, cleared his throat.

“Well now Nicholas!” he opened in a man-to-man sort of tone. “Speaking of finances, just what do you plan to do with yourself now, Son? For a career, I mean. Now that you're back?”

“Oh Roy! The boy hasn’t been home half an hour and you’re giving him a job interview. Really, now Honey!” Mrs. Ryan scolded her husband for his lack of taste.

“Well, I don’t—”

“It’s, OK-K Mrs. Ryan, really.” Dixie turned innocently towards her to allay her fears.

“Well, if you say so Nicholas, and please call me Rose or Mom, but you really don’t—”

Dixie flashed his A-number-one personality smile at her and she retreated.

“Well, OK, sure, you go right ahead, Son.” She smiled sweetly at him.

“So Nick, as I was saying, before I was interrupted.” The patriarch flashed his green eyes at his wife before he turned them back to Nick. “Are you going to pick up with your music or maybe go to graduate school first, like our Ryzanna here?” Mr. Ryan reached and leaned far over to his right to pat his eldest approvingly on the back of her left shoulder. “Or are you going to go into business, maybe become a professional person, or maybe go to law school, become a lawyer maybe? You always were pretty good at arguing a point.”

Ryz’n watched Mr. Ryan smirk while he glanced briefly at his wife, bespeaking of past battles he had engaged in with his elder son-in-law. Ryz’n’s mother shook her head silently indicating her husband should cease this line of commentary. They all waited as Dixie chewed his food thoroughly and swallowed before he would respond. Ryz’n noted the elder couple’s byplay had not escaped the returning vet, making Ryz’n, more than a little embarrassed. She had difficulty determining who was more rude, her father or her sister. It was just like old times. She thought Paul Simon was right, “After changes upon changes, we are more or less the same.”

As for Dixie, the truth was, he did not know how to answer his father-in-law’s question. He knew his grades were pretty lousy. He hoped he could graduate and play baseball as much as possible. That was it. That was his entire career plan! He spoke with all the solemnity, befitting the occasion, as he slowly turned to address Mr. Ryan..

“Well, S-Sir, I’d like to play ... ball in the ... ‘Sh-Show.’”

Mr. Ryan looked at his wife, completely bewildered.

“Play ball? In a show?” What the hell kind of an answer is that?”

Flabbergasted, Mr. Ryan looked to his spouse for an adequate explanation.

“Father!” scolded Ryz’n.

“Well Honey, I, I’m sorry. I, I didn’t mean any offense, really.” He looked past his daughter to her husband. “I just, well, maybe I didn’t hear the boy so good. Is that right, Nick? Can you clarify your answer for me, Son?”

Dixie looked around. They were all leaning forward, anticipating his response, even the glowing, young woman beside him.

“The B-B-Bigs. Wanna ... play ... in ... the Ma-a-jors, S-Sir.”

Mr. Ryan collapsed back into his chair, disenchanted. Nick had just let the air of the older man's balloon. Then his father-in-law leaned forward and slapped both hands on the table on either side of his plate and began to laugh heartily. "Hell Rose! The boy hasn't changed a bit, not one damned bit!" He kept laughing, but Ryz'n defended her husband, shutting her father up in the process.

"Father, if that's what Nicky wants to do, then that's what he'll do! Nick has always been able get it done on the ball field. You know that. He'll do this as well. You'll see, just like you see him sitting here now when you didn't think he would be." She glared at her father, searing that last fact into his brain. Then she turned back around to her husband, petting him sympathetically through the silk suit coat sleeve upon his left forearm.

"You can do it, Nicky. You always said if you could grow a few more inches, you could make the 'Bigs.' And well, you sure have grown! So now you'll do it!" She smiled sweet encouragement upon him. Again, sarcasm overcame Dixie.

The rich bitch, hunh? Why! She was positively angelic!

"Honey, we're out of condiments." Mrs. Ryan passed the relish dish to Ryz'n via Dixie. "There are plenty more in the refrigerator, My Baby," she noted.

Dixie concluded that maybe he should get them, the cream colored swinging kitchen doorway was just a few feet behind him, but Mrs. Ryan very clearly indicated she wanted her eldest to serve them. Again, the girl hopped up with a smile. Then she disappeared through the open, wood-trimmed kitchen door, only to return a couple of minutes later with a relish dish filled with pickles, olives and celery. Dixie noticed this Ryzanna seemed eager to please. He further noticed nobody else seemed to think anything of either the matron's request or her older daughter's sweet, even eager, complicity.

Strange behavior for a spoiled rock star!

Bryson piped up. "Are ya still as fast as ya useta be, Nick?"

"Dunno. Three-f-four or three-three-five to f-first—from the right side."

"Darn! That's plenty quick, Nick. Why don't you come play football for us next year? Down at M&L?" asked Bryce seriously.

Nick shook his head. "That g-game's ta-too, t-too dan-dan-dan-ge-rous!"

"Too dangerous? Hell, that's a hot one comin' from you."

The Ryans, except for Ryz'n, laughed. Mistakenly, they believed Nick was jesting when he wasn't. Instinctively, Ryz'n knew that. Just back from the kitchen with the condiments, she was not sure how her husband would react to their ill-timed laughter. His naivety overwhelmed her. He merely smiled affably and kept on eating, as he hunched over his plate. Ryz'n noticed he ate left-handed, as did she. Unlike her, however, he was not naturally a southpaw. Out of curiosity, she asked him why he ate like one. Dixie said he just preferred it. At the same time, he shoved his maimed right hand deeper between his legs, under his napkin. The conversation lulled again for several minutes. Never lacking for words, Sheena kick-started their chat.

“Hey Ry, you and Nicky are gonna come down to the Banks with us now, aren’t you?” Dixie looked at Ryz’n. He did not know what Sheena meant. Ryz’n explained:

“Nicky: Sheena and Bryce are going to our beach resort home on the Outer Banks of North Carolina for the rest of the week. It’s near where the Wright Brothers made the first flight?” She looked for recognition from him, but he merely blinked.

“Anyway, that’s why we were loading up the car outside. If you want, we can go down there, too. Bryce has a football camp he has to leave for on Sunday afternoon, but we, that is the rest of the family, plan to stay another day.” She beamed proudly, “Actually, Sunday’s my birthday and we had thought we’d all celebrate it together down at the beach.”

Ryz’n studied his blank stare, taking it as a lack of enthusiasm for the suggestion. Before he could answer, Bryson asked for another napkin. Ryz’n noticed the empty napkin holder in the center of the table, but she continued.

“Maybe we can go down to the Banks over the weekend. OK? If you want?”

“Oh dear,” exhaled Mrs. Ryan cutting in on her daughter’s request and acknowledging the lack of napkins. “I’m afraid Nick’s return has just befuddled me. I’m so happy. I guess, I guess I wasn’t concentrating on my chores.” She smiled weakly. Again, her elder daughter came to her rescue.

“It’s OK, Mom, I can get them. No problem.” She exited to retrieve some napkins. Dixie thought this Ryz’n was like a jack-in-the-box. Now he could understand why her waist was so dang slender. The poor girl never gets a chance to eat. However, she sure moved like a goddess, make that a temptress, a guileless temptress, if such a creature existed. *Maybe that’s what a goddess is?* He had never thought of that.

“How old will you be?” asked Dixie perfectly, before she crossed the kitchen threshold, surprising them all and himself as well, with his elocution. Ryz’n stopped in the kitchen doorway to turn back to him. Happily, she replied.

“Why Baby, I’ll be twenty-two, twenty-two on the twenty-second. And you’ll be twenty-two on the twenty-second also, the twenty-second of September!” She smiled pertly. So that was his real birthday! He was a year and half younger than he had guessed. After he acknowledged her, she turned back around for the napkins. When she returned, Dixie deadpanned:

“Oh, I s-see. You’re an older wo-woman.”

His sly smile belied his dry delivery, causing her to giggle like a schoolgirl. He had maintained his sense of humor and that was good. That was very good, but she couldn’t help but think that he had plenty of experience with older women! However, now was not the time for that discussion, she reckoned. Besides, as far as she knew, Nick had no inkling of her talk with Donna Dixon. She just hoped Sheena would keep her trap shut just this once. Ryz’n got her wish for her family merely chuckled at Nick’s dry wit, as well.

Ryz'n had only just returned with the napkins and resumed her seat at the table, when Mr. Ryan observed Dixie had finished his beer, as had he.

"Believe Nicholas could use a refill, Ryzanna, and so could I," requested Mr. Ryan holding up his empty glass.

"Me, too," piped in Bryson, who shook his empty beer mug between his long fingers. Ryz'n placed her napkin on the table, as she began to rise again, when her husband stopped her.

Dixie seized her right forearm firmly in protest. "No, I can d-do it. You eat," ordered Dixie, resolutely. As he rose, Dixie felt the wispy softness of her dark, hirsute forearm, which surprised but also pleased him. The long, dark wispy hairs lay densely flat against the contour of her arm. Neither Lori Lei nor Donna had exhibited that unusual characteristic. Moons may have been unshaven, but she wasn't as densely hairy as this girl. Dixie discovered pleasantly that Ryz'n's hirsutism intrigued him, raising his curiosity. Ryz'n acquiesced to his wish. Her obedience likewise pleased him.

"There should be some cold ones in the refrigerator, Nicky" suggested the young woman softly as she smiled brightly up at him.

Dixie rose, removed his grey silk suit coat, and hung it over the back of his chair to reveal his lean, muscular, athletic frame. The muscles bulged from his sleeveless, snug, cotton crew neck shirt. It did not escape Dixie that Ryz'n's gorgeous, now emerald, eyes almost popped out of her head as she studied him unabashedly.

She recalled he had always been muscular, but now his muscles were so huge! Truly, he was a man now. Evidently Sheena was no less impressed.

Dixie felt Sheena's eyes burning through him as well, but he ignored her. He winked at Ryz'n, lightly patting her on the right shoulder, as he turned past her into the kitchen. Ryz'n touched the top of his hand lightly as he pulled it from her shoulder. It was all Ryz'n could do to maintain her composure. She wanted him all to herself, now and for as long as she chose. *Hang in there a little longer, Ry.*

From the kitchen, Dixie heard his father-in-law's whisper as he mildly chastised his eldest. She should be waiting on her long lost husband, not the other way around. Meanwhile, Dixie looked around the kitchen and found nothing special, nothing familiar anyway. There was a closed white painted door the near side of the refrigerator and he wondered what lay behind it. Dixie located three beers on the second shelf of the refrigerator, all National Bohemian brand, a brand that was unfamiliar to him. Nevertheless, he pulled the bottles out of the icebox and brought them into the dining room. He set them down on the corner of the table between Ryz'n and her father. The bottle tops were not twist off. Dixie pulled his bottle opener out from under his shirt, letting it dangle from its chain against his chest.

Ryz'n also extracted her mini bottle opener that she carried on a chain around her neck from beneath her blouse. But her husband proved to be faster on the draw. He popped the top off one of the bottles. The bottle cap flipped out of

control, wildly landing on the table, hopping and spinning over to his left, bouncing across the tablecloth and dancing into Mr. Ryan's mashed potatoes. The room hushed as son-in-law and father-in-law studied each other awkwardly for a second with neither one speaking.

"Sorree, Sir. I'll ... g-get it." Dixie began to reach for the metal cap but his father-in-law used the back of his open right hand to shield Dixie from his food.

"I can do that myself. Thank you," he objected indignantly.

Dixie nodded. "Sir. Yes Sir!" He responded as he might to the platoon sergeant. *It was good to know somebody here besides Ryz'n could do something for themselves!* However, Dixie chose not to voice his opinion. He left the bottle of National Bo for Mr. Ryan, to pour for himself. Ryz'n used Nick's opener to open Bryce's bottle, which she passed to him across the table by way of Sheena, who rose to accept it. Dixie started to open his own bottle of beer when Mr. Ryan eyed him suspiciously and commanded his son-in-law to move back to his seat first. Dixie complied.

Once seated, Dixie grinned, holding his bottle opener between his thumb and forefinger out towards Ryz'n's. "Just ... like me," he beamed.

Ryz'n gushed, only too happy to describe the origin of her opener.

"Why sure Nicky, you gave this to me." She held the opener and the chain out from her chest. "And asked me to wear it and keep it for you. Don't you remember? Guess I don't need to keep it anymore."

She leaned in toward him and began to remove the opener's chain from behind her neck, to hand it over to him, but he held up his left hand to decline.

"You keep it. I, I have ... one."

"Well, OK, if that's what you want Nicky." She appeared a little disappointed as she slid the flat, round opener back down between her sizable breasts, causing Dixie to swallow hard. "But I have something else I've been keeping for you, too, Nicky. I carry it everywhere."

Ryz'n reached for her front shorts pocket. However, her shorts fit so snugly, she had to stand to reach in the pocket. Ryz'n pushed her chair back with the backs of her legs, inhaling deeply, to retrieve the contents from the pocket of her cuffed short-shorts. She sucked in her middle and reached into her pocket. Once again, the severe shapeliness of her womanly figure, highlighted by her slender waist, struck Dixie hard, like a lightening bolt, right between the eyes. *Mann! This girl is positively stacked!* It was not as if he had not noticed earlier, because, of course, he had. However, at the table she had mesmerized him with her humility, her fairness of face, her effervescent, cheerleader personality and her helpful, positive, complicit demeanor. Bowled over by her ebulliently buoyant personality, he had forgotten for a few minutes how stacked she truly was!

Again, he felt as safe and secure in her dimpled smile, as he had resting upon Donna's treasure chest. Moreover, there was a freshness about this girl, which he had noticed earlier, too, but whose origin he still could not decipher. There was a kind of a glow about her, for lack of a better term, that neither Rose, Donna or

Lori Lei had emanated. Suddenly, with a relieved sigh, Ryz'n produced a harmonica from her shorts pocket.

"This is yours, too, Baby. You asked me to keep it for you and I have, just like the opener, just like ... just like everything." As she sat back down, her naturally raspy voice softened to a low purr, as if they were the only two in the room.

Her look was warmer even than her tone. Her large, almond-shaped, emerald eyes peered passionately into his soul. From beneath long, raven black eyelashes and dense, naturally arched, sweeping eyebrows, Ryz'n invited him to dive into her welcoming, wet emerald pools. Full, glossy pink lips begged him to kiss her. Aroused, but embarrassed, Dixie cleared his throat.

Sensing his emotions but realizing unfortunately, this was neither the time or place for their first embrace, Ryz'n saved him by redirecting him to the object in her hand.

"Ya see, I blow it out every once in a while, to clean out the lint, but I carry it everywhere. Now here! It's for you and I've kept it for you, Sweetie. I want you to have it back now. You've made us a lot of cash with this blues harp, Baby."

She proffered the mouth organ to him, as though it were some kind of relic. She took his right hand very matter of factly and placed the mouth organ in it. Then she closed his fingers around the harmonica. Dixie's hand tingled warmly as he received the harmonica with uncertainty. Ryz'n lowered herself back into her seat and mentioned, "It's a USMC harmonica. You've been playin' it since you were a kid. It's the one you made all our hit records with, Nicky."

Dixie had already turned down the bottle opener, he couldn't turn this down. Besides, he thought he might like to try out the mouth organ sometime, when he was alone. He accepted the gift as graciously, as she had bestowed it upon him.

The other diners looked on a little sheepishly. This was a private moment for the reunited young couple and the looks on their faces showed Dixie that they felt like intruders. However, Ryzanna was all aglow. The heavy, syrupy tone of the conversation evidently repulsed Sheena. She had sat silent far too long, for her anyway. Now she showed her displeasure as only she could, by jibing sarcastically:

"Well, now, then, there', as you used to say Nicky, guess we won't have to be buying so much herring anymore." Bryson laughed out loud, involuntarily. Ryz'n's velvet tone hardened as she asked her sister to please change the subject.

"But why should I?" asked her kid sister in a mock, snooty sneer. "Nicky might like to know about his wife's famous raw fish diet. Whaddaya think, Nick?"

Recalling the tenderness of her touch, Dixie was still looking into his wife's green eyes, which had flashed briefly across the table towards her sister. He was not used to answering to the moniker of "Nicky," so he ignored his sister-in-law's challenge.

"Hey Nick! Whaddaya say?" repeated the insistent Sheena a little louder.

"Excuse me?" replied Dixie. *She sounds like a damned ballplayer!*

His speech was flowing more fluently now. These were just regular folks with his best interests at heart. He was feeling more and more relaxed here.

“About the raw herring?”

“What a-b-bout it?”

“SHEEE-NAAA! Please!” Impulsively, Ryz’n turned her whole attention upon her kid sister.

“Please? OK. Well, it’s like this Nick. When your wife gets horny, which is pretty darn often, she finds eating raw herring helps her to overcome her craving for you.” The others grimaced in embarrassment.

Ryz’n rested her head in her hands with her elbows resting upon the table straddling her plate, but Ry’s obvious grief did not deter Sheena.

“I’m not talking about little sardines, Nicky. I’m talking six to eight-inch herring.” Sheena paused to allow her remark to sink into her brother-in-law. She held her hands more than half a foot apart over her plate to indicate the size of the fish. But Dixie simply kept eating, glancing up at her from time to time, giving her only perfunctory recognition. Ryz’n was peeved, but the others listened with interest.

Ryz’n parted her semi-circular, cupped hands, speaking through them as if they were a megaphone.

“All right Sheena, you’ve made your point.” Ryz’n dropped her hands to the table. “Now can we get onto something else? And quit being so prosaic.” Ryz’n was more than mildly perturbed and she spoke in a condescending tone.

“PROSAIC?!?! Well, ain’t we edumacated? Shoooooeee! Besides, I haven’t finished yet, Sis!” Sheena picked up a quarter of a dill pickle that had been sliced lengthwise. She held it by one end to demonstrate her point. “She takes ‘em like this see? By the tail? Then she—”

Ryz’n sat bolt upright with her forearms on the table now. “SHEENA! Mother, please make her stop!” Though trying not to laugh, by covering his mouth and holding his sides, Bryson was laughing so hard his body shook, which only served to encourage his wife all the more. Dixie looked toward the patriarch for order. However, ignoring his younger daughter’s behavior, Mr. Ryan concentrated sublimely on his meal. Dixie concluded that evidently his non-intervention in his daughters’ squabbles was the man’s normal practice. Meanwhile, Sheena proceeded, as she imagined Ryz’n would have.

“She licks off the salt that it’s been stored in, like this. Then she drinks her beer or wine or whatever. And she uses that long tongue of hers, like this.”

Sheena tilted her head back and lowered the pickle inside her mouth, lowering down into her throat repeatedly. Then, clamping her mouth around the end of the pickle near her fingertips, she bit down and slowly extracted the pickle out of her still closed mouth. She left only the husk to simulate the spine of the herring and a bit of pickle on the opposite end to simulate the fish head. She chewed a couple times, swallowed and chugged on her beer, believing she had mimicked her older sister’s ritual perfectly, when, in fact, she had not come close. Sheena eyed the

last of the pickle. Then she lowered it slightly and tried to flick a long tongue up to wrap around it like a lizard snagging it's prey. Ryz'n glared at her sister. *For cryin' out loud, she can't even get it right!*

From the corner of his eye, Dixie could see Ryz'n's face becoming redder and redder, even scarlet, as a vein popped out along her forehead beneath her bangs. At the same time, her now clenched fists became whiter and whiter as her knuckles dug into the white linen tablecloth. Unconsciously, she pulled the cloth so hard that the serving dishes as well as the floral centerpiece were dragged towards her. With Ryz'n slowly boiling, Sheena ripped off the imaginary fish's "head" from its "spine." She sumptuously sucked the remainder into her mouth.

Ryz'n simply could not understand her sister's outrageous behavior. Whether she was trying far too hard to impress Nick, or Bryson, or simply was going way overboard to make Nick feel a part of the family, Ryz'n neither knew nor cared. The two of them had gotten along so well on their recent jaunt to California. Sheena had been so sweet and supportive. And now this, this despicable, juvenile display! It was as if Sheena were suddenly intentionally thrusting them back into junior high school.

It had been a long, long while, since those school days when she and Sheen had shared their last, honest-to-goodness, knock-down, drag-out battle. However, it was not so long ago that Ryz'n couldn't recall how she had kicked her kid sister's butt. Although Sheena had matured faster than her older sister, she could never lick Ryz'n. Ryz'n had been too determined and always had outlasted Sheena, primarily because Ryz'n had a much higher tolerance for pain than her kid sister. (That tolerance had frightened Ryz'n. Because deep within, where she was too afraid to look, Ryz'n had learned that pain could please her.) Ryz'n had thought she and her sister had long since outgrown such barbaric behavior. But now, Ryz'n was about ready to kick her sister's behind again, if Sheena wouldn't just *SHUT UP!*

Beneath Ryz'n's normally placid demeanor and self-deprecating manner lay the toughness of the former, terrier-sized softball catcher. As the only southpaw catcher in the league, she had made All-County in part because of her pluck as much as her quick release. That tigress never had shirked from blocking the plate against a hard-charging base runner, regardless of the size of the opponent. In fact, she had anticipated and relished the contact.

And Sheena would not let up. She swooned, feigning orgasmic ecstasy, briefly. Finally, she lay back against the back of her chair and broke out laughing uncontrollably, as did her husband, who had ceased trying to control himself. In the midst of his convulsions, he reminded his wife about the bottle of beer.

Mrs. Ryan, who had been wringing her hands, as well as her napkin, set the napkin down and spoke for the first time. "Now that's quite enough Sheena Sherree, more than enough!" remanded Mrs. Ryan sternly, calling her baby by her full name. "You've had your little joke, now let it go."

She turned to Dixie and spoke in a placating tone, forcing a very meek smile, in an effort to smooth things over.

“You see Nicholas we’re just a very informal family here, Honey.”

The mild reprimand did not pacify Ryz’n, who was boiling. Nor did it dissuade Mrs. Ryan’s snickering, younger daughter. Sheena persisted, unwilling to leave any supposed, tawdry detail unmentioned.

“Oh yeah, she’ll keep the beer bottle or wine bottle, as the case may be, between her legs when she does it. She really gets into the fish, moanin’ and groanin’, rockin’ n’ rollin’. Sometimes, she’ll have two or three. It don’t seem to matter whether she’s already eaten or not, though usually she enjoys these feasts late at night, often in the bathtub.”

Sheena grinned like a devil, before she resumed.

“Of course, we don’t really know for sure what all goes on in there.”

The raconteur slung a sly, sideways glance at Dixie as she drew the last word out sufficiently to cast suspicion upon her sister’s bathroom conduct. “But you know what? One time, she—”

Without warning, a beautiful volcano erupted beside Dixie. Ryz’n shot to her feet like a rocket, propelled by the slapping of her open palms upon the tabletop, knocking her chair recklessly backwards as she rose.

“DAMN IT! THAT IS E-NOUGH! E-NOUGH! DO YOU HEAR ME, SHEENA? I’d like to see how you would handle the situation, if Bryson weren’t around for THREE AND A HALF YEARS! In fact, I can IMAGINE how YOU’D handle it!” Ryz’n snatched up her napkin with her left hand, crumpling the tissue into a ball. Now Sheena became indignant.

“What is that supposed to mean?” cried Sheena angrily. “What are you implying? Just who—” The doorbell rang.

Bryson, who was in the best position to see who it was, leaned to his left to look around his mother-in-law and whispered in a smug, hushed tone, “It’s Don.”

“Don Juan?” Sheena repeated in loud sarcasm and batted her eyelids coquettishly, as she tilted her head gaily to her right. Then she brought her elbows into her sides, enmeshing her fingers together, placing the heels of her palms downward and slightly apart. She rested her chin on the top side of her clasped fingers, still batting her eyelids heavily.

“Oh, shut up, Sheena! I’ll handle this,” shot back Ryz’n snidely.

The agitated Ryz’n then fired a strike, hitting her sister squarely in the nose with her wadded up napkin fastball. Dixie marveled at that stunt for Ryz’n had not thrown at all “like a girl”. No, she threw like an honest to goodness ballplayer. *This girl really is something else. And she’s a southpaw, to boot!* Ryz’n simply amazed him.

After Ryz’n had beamed her sister, she pivoted sharply about on her heel while brushing her hair back from her forehead, preparatory to answering the doorbell. She righted her chair, gruffly placing it under the table. As she passed behind Dixie, he noticed she mechanically slipped the flat bottle opener back inside her

cleavage, which was heaving with rage beneath her blouse. The opener had popped out from its lair during her tirade and she had replaced it with a well-practiced, automatic motion. Then, Ryz'n stopped just short of the living room to take a deep breath and collect herself. She turned about, whispering quietly, over Dixie's head to her sister in an amazingly calm but still forceful tone.

"You better behave yourself now Sheena or you're liable to be thumbing your way down to the Banks!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Sheena again, indignantly.

"Well, you'll have to ask Nicky." Ryz'n reached back and out to her side to touch her husband's shoulder. "It's his car you have loaded up out there, not yours. He just might want to cruise in it himself, now that he's home."

Dixie turned his head to look up at his wife, who smiled, winked and tapped him on the shoulder twice, before she turned and strolled calmly to the front door, apparently fully relaxed now.

Dixie marveled at her, shaking his head to think that she had been able to regain her self control as well as her sense of humor so dramatically. Bryson interrupted his brother-in-law's thoughts.

"Uh, say Nicky? Seriously, Ry's got a point there. Uh, you did loan us the keys three years ago and well, the car IS in your name."

Dixie turned around to face his brother-in-law, but he said nothing, giving the impression he might be thinking about reclaiming his '63 Bonneville convertible. Bryson took the opportunity to turn on the charm.

"She sure is a great handling car, Nick. Real fun to drive, especially in the summer with the top down. Not much on gas mileage, but she sure can scoot! Hugs them curves tighter than I hug Sheena's. Yeah, Mann! Jes' great for runnin' 'round the back country roads, 'specially them hills down at M&L. And—"

Sheena shoved an elbow into her husband's ribs and frowned at him because Ryz'n had opened the front door and her greeting had become audible.

"Why, Don? What a pleasant surprise. Come on in," offered Ryz'n in a most amiable tone. Dixie noted that all trace of irritability had dropped from Ryz'n's smoky alto. Her honey tone dripped with sweet hospitality. Dixie heard the screen door creak open and a deep male voice respond.

"Well, hello Ry. I thought you knew I might stop by. Last night, remember, I—"

Sheena giggled across the table from Dixie. Bryson pretended to eat and maintained a straight face. Dixie did not know what was going on. Mrs. Ryan sighed deeply, rolling her eyes and setting her fork down hard on her plate. She placed her forehead in her left hand and her elbow on the table, while Mr. Ryan belched loudly. He chugged on his beer, seemingly unconcerned.

"Why certainly, Don. Come on in. Please do."

Dixie heard the screen door swing shut. He assumed Don had stepped further into the living room. He couldn't see the visitor, but he could hear him fine.

"Well, I, I didn't think you'd all still be eating, Ry. I, I can come back later, if you like?"

Undaunted by the fastball to her nose, Sheena leaned toward Bryson and yelled past her mother, out around the corner of the dining room archway.

“Hey, Donny. Come on in. We’re about done. Besides, we’ve got a surprise for you.” Then whispering into her dish, she said smugly, “A helluva surprise!”

Sheena’s outburst had distracted Dixie from his meal. He looked up from his dish, where suddenly he found that he could see vaguely what was happening around the corner in the living room. By peering over his mother-in-law’s Sixties style bouffant hairdo, Dixie could look through the archway separating the living and dining rooms. From the reflection in the glass frame of the picture of the Thunderbirds above Mr. Ryan’s easy chair, Dixie could make out the elongated images of Ryz’n and the newcomer in the other room.

Ryz’n leaned forward to shoot her sister a nasty glare around the corner of the archway. At the same time, she spread her left hand towards the dining room for Don. She acted like a hostess revealing what’s behind “Door Number Three” on the television show “Let’s Make A Deal.” Dixie smirked to himself that Ryz’n and Don traversed the living room toward the dining room as though they were doing the crossover step in the “Cha-Cha-Cha.”

Ryz’n proclaimed, “Yes, we have some wonderful news, Don, truly amazing.”

“Oh, really? What is it? Hello Bryson, Sheena, Mr. and Mrs. Ry—Ry?” Dixie stood up to make Don’s acquaintance.

Don Leipzig, had well groomed, David Cassidy-styled sandy brown hair that crept over his long, pointed white and blue shirt collar. His face was squarish and he had dark brown, straight eyebrows but light brown eyes. In his light tan platform shoes, he stood eye to eye with Dixie, but Don carried a thicker build. Dixie sized this dude up and silently dubbed him “Disco Don.” Disco Don was dressed in sky blue, flared, polyester slacks, held up by a wide, white leather belt, and a matching long sleeved, tight, satin, powder blue shirt. The tightly tapered shirt featured French cuffs and the obligatory, contemporary, long, pointed collar. His shirt was unbuttoned down his sternum to his midriff, revealing a wiry light brown mat of chest hair that rose to the base of his neck. A large linked, gold chain encircled his throat. Dixie was not in the habit of judging men’s looks, but he would have to admit, if pressed, this guy wasn’t too bad.

There was a difficult history among the three of them with which Ryz’n and Don were familiar, but Dixie was not. Ryz’n knew Don was an old high school beau of hers who had taken to visiting the Ryan household again, whenever he knew Ryz’n would be available. Don had always carried a torch for her, which she had found flattering. While she could never accept him totally, she could not bring herself to douse that torch outright. She had hinted to Don on many occasions that he should look elsewhere. And he had, but he always seemed to come back to her. The longer Nick remained absent, the more frequent and intense his visits had become. Unfortunately for Don, between Ryz’n’s touring schedule, her searching for Nick and her schooling the last three years, Ryz’n seldom had been available to him for social outings.

When Don saw Dixie, he lost his voice and the blood drained from his tanned face. Dixie was not sure what he had done to cause such a reaction, but he felt compelled to stand and smile politely for the friendly visitor, who greeted him uncertainly.

“Hey-hello, Nick. I ... I didn’t know. I—” The young man swallowed hard. He was quite obviously unnerved by Dixie’s presence. *Shocked was more like it.* It looked to Dixie as if someone had kicked the young visitor in the stomach. Dixie sensed that he must be the kicker. Sheena reached over and elbowed her husband, who nodded.

Ryz’n introduced Dixie to Don.

“Nicky, this is Don Leipzig. He went to school with us,” announced Ryz’n.

“Oh well, it’s n-n-nish to m-meet you ... D-D-Don.” Nick shook hands with the stranger. Don stared at Dixie’s hand for a few seconds, making Dixie conscious of his missing fingers and forcing him to retract his hand quickly, hiding it in his pants pocket.

“Meet me? What, are you kiddin’? You don’t know me?” Don’s incredulity registered plainly across his face as well as in his tone. Ryz’n saw Sheena elbow Bryson again, twice, and smirk, arching her brow.

Dixie placed his hands together behind his rump, rocking back on his heels slowly, staring at Don’s platform shoes as he answered. “No, I’m ... afraid I, I d-don’t.”

Don looked to Ryz’n for an explanation.

“It’s true, Donny. Nicky has amnesia, but we’re hopeful his memory will return soon. Isn’t that right, Nick?” replied Ryz’n pertly.

“Hunh? Oh, oh yeah, ’s r-right,” replied Dixie, looking up at her skeptically.

“Well gee, I’m glad to see you’re back, uh, OK, I mean, Nick. We all thought you were ... well ... dead. Ha! But, well, it’s good, it’s good ... to, to see you’re not.” Don grinned sheepishly.

“Thanks, feels g-g-good, too,” Dixie joked. Only Ryz’n smiled with her husband, whom she knew appeared so pathetic to the others. They watched this painful introduction in disbelieving, rapt silence.

“So you don’t remember who you are, hunh Nick? You don’t remember Ry, here?”

He attempted to place a hand on Ryz’n’s shoulder, which Ryz’n deftly avoided.

“You don’t remember me?” Don cocked his eyebrows.

Nick shook his head negatively, forcing a tepid smile.

Don brightened a little for the first time since he had seen Dixie.

“So you don’t remember anybody? Not even your folks?”

Dixie dropped his listless manner and sprang to life, looking sharply into Don’s eyes.

“Folks? MY FOLKS! WHAT FOLKS? Where are they?”

The Ryans evinced surprise, no less by Dixie’s sudden emotionally forceful manner and tone as they were by his perfect elocution.

Ryz'n explained, "Well Nicky, they're at home, Honey. You know. They just got back from their trip the other day and—"

"What home? WHERE IS IT?"

"Why Nicky, I'm sorry, Sweetie. I guess we should have gone over there first. But I thought we'd go right after dinner, you know?"

"WHERE IS MY HOME? Is it far?"

Dixie clenched his fists by his side. Now it was his turn to get hot. Dixie noted Don was smiling smugly at his predicament. The idea shot through Dixie's mind that this Don must have been seeing him as the famous, proud rocker at a loss. And evidently, Dixie surmised he must have once been and evidently still was the bane of Don's existence, for some unknown reason.

Mrs. Ryan rose from her chair to interrupt.

"We should have taken you over there right away, Honey. I thought about it, too, but I wasn't sure they had gotten back from their—"

"I wanna go there. Right now!" Dix was adamant.

He quickly picked his suit coat off the chair back and slipped it on. Nobody moved or spoke. They were in the middle of dinner for Pete's sake! Dixie looked around for help. Mr. Ryan asked if Dixie did not want to finish his meal first to which Dixie politely declined.

"I'm sorry, but I kind of need to know who I am. Don't stop on my account, please. I don't mean to inconvenience you any more than I already have." Dixie noted Mr. Ryan did not appear inconvenienced at all. He ate and drank, seemingly unconcerned though merely surprised by his son-in-law's fine speech.

Dixie added, "Please, just give me the address and I'll let you finish your meal in peace. Is it close by?"

No longer tongue-tied, Dixie spoke forcefully, perfectly. Ryz'n remembered the VA psychiatrist's advice concerning Nick's inability to speak fluently in emotional or pressure like situations. She considered Nick's present fluent outburst a good sign that he could probably overcome his speech problems, if he kept working at it. However, she could not help but notice unhappily his formal, cold treatment of her family. Even despite the meal they had shared, he obviously failed to recall any of them at all.

Don said he would be glad to take Nick over to his parents' house while the Ryans' finished their meal. However, Ryz'n intervened angrily.

"You will do no such thing, Donald! I'm not giving you a second chance to ruin my life!" Ryz'n glared at Don.

This was an unveiled reference to an underhanded trick Don had pulled their junior year of high school in a similar circumstance. Don's high school shenanigans had effectively separated Ryz'n from Nick for their entire junior year. Don's return glance told her he had understood well her meaning.

Ryz'n asked if she and her spouse could be excused from the dinner table, while she took her husband by the hand.

“Come on, Sweetie. I should have taken you over there before anyway. It was my fault, Baby, and mine alone. I’m sorry. Just let me get my purse. It will only take a minute.” Her dimpled smile softened Dixie’s attitude considerably.

Then she excused herself to Don. “I’m sorry Donny, but we have to go.”

She led Dixie by the hand into the living room. He turned back politely to thank Mrs. Ryan for dinner and said “it was very nice to have made their acquaintances.” His sincere remark left them all speechless, until Sheena yelled to her sister that this was just a slick trick by Ryz’n to escape kitchen duty.

Undeterred, Ryz’n dashed into her room to grab her purse and to reapply some hot pink lip gloss and “Love’s Fresh Lemon” cologne behind her ears, on her wrists and about her neck and chest. Nicky had always raved over the lemon cologne. *Pickles!* She noticed the sleepless circles under her eyes and quickly brushed over them with some concealer she kept it in a seldom used cosmetics kit. She dug in her closet for a pair of platform sandals and hopped alternately on first one foot and then the other while she hurriedly shod her feet. The platforms would add a couple inches to her stature, diminishing the difference between her height and Nick’s. As she finished, Ryz’n almost fell, but found the top of her dressing table to steady herself. Then she noticed on top of her dressing table near her jewelry box, the gold anklet Nicky had given her in high school, which she typically wore. She scooped up the trinket and fastened it around her right ankle, before she hustled back past all of them. She ran into the kitchen with a fleeting “Just a sec, Baby” to Dixie, who waited patiently by the front door.

She followed her post meal custom by applying some honey to the tip and base of her tongue. She also extracted some of the sweet golden liquid into a vial. She stopped the vial with an eyedropper, both of which she carried in her purse. She checked her purse to insure it held her keys and driver’s license. On her way out, hurrying past the diners and Don, she apologized to her family again for not being around to help with the dishes. Her mother told her “It was quite all right”, although Sheena persisted in protesting loudly to the contrary.