

~ Chapter: Rude Awakening ~  
(Excerpt from Dixie's forthcoming novel *Home Safe*)

Ryz'n called in to him, "What is it, Nicky?" Her rich contralto bounced all over the pond, echoing her curiosity back to her. "Aw nothing. Just these fishes nibblin' at my toes."

"Fishes, what fishes?"

Drifting backwards towards the opposite shore more than she had realized, Ryz'n found that she was in over her head now. She was attempting, unsuccessfully, to stand on one tippy-toe, ballerina style. Ry held her head back slightly to keep her chin above the black water, but she couldn't locate the bottom with her foot. Nick had been so right about the joys of skinny-dipping. She felt as though she were flying through liquid air, with all her senses fully alive.

Gliding through the clear, black water on a starry but dark, summer, country night, something large brushed close beside Ry's left calf. This was no small fish. The underwater wake left by her surprise visitor was strong, evident of a formidable mass. Startled and frantic, Ry pulled up with a scream to tread water. "What's wrong?" called Nicky from the pond bank, evincing genuine concern. Ry knew his lower left leg cast anchored Nick helplessly to the levee. From a good thirty yards across the pond's placid surface, under the moon light, Ry scarcely could make out her new boyfriend, the boy who had been her crush for nearly two years. Ry knew that, unlike she, Nick could see very well at night, all too well sometimes. Trying not to panic and with the help of silvery moon-bright, her frightened shout had carried clearly to him across the pond's smooth surface.

"I dunno, Baby. Something just swooshed by me under the water." Ryz'n was not panicked yet, but she wasn't far from it, either.

"Aw, was just a fish, prob'ly," Nick answered lazily, sitting his carcass back down on the grassy bank.

"No! No! It was big, *real* big!" Her recent musings on the joys of skinny-dipping vanished completely from her mind. Ryz'n kept treading water. "Ahh! Ahh! There it goes again. I'm, I'm getting out o' *heeere*, Nicky. And Ah!"

"And what?" he answered.

"There's, there's oooh! My gosh! I'm coming back in. I'm getting out Nick. I bet it's those beavers we heard."

Despite her promises of retreat however, Ry kept treading water, too afraid to move one way or the other, in case she might bump into the unidentified swimming object (USO) or, by any excessive movement, might attract it to her.

"I don't think so, Baby," replied Nick calmly. "Beavers are shy. I mean, they shy away from people. They eat trees, not people."

The pond's surface carried his voice to her from the levee bank, as though he were just a few feet away.

"Well, what is it then?" Ryz'n took a deep breath and held it, as if that somehow would render her invisible to the denizens of the deep, which were taking her measure.

"I dunno know—The Creature from the Black Lagoon, maybe? Ha! Did you see that movie Ry? I thought it was good. Had an awesome lookin' chick in it. Not as awesome as you though, Baby."

*Creature?* Somehow, Nick's suggestion was not filling her with relief.

"Seriously though, I don't know what's down there, Ry."

Ryz'n had troubled making him out. By the light of the half moon, she guessed he was lying down on his side again, on the grassy levee bank. Her newly acquired but long hoped-for boyfriend pondered philosophically in safety, while she trod water out in harm's way.

"... But I still think it was just a big fish," he asserted.

"Are you sure they don't eat people?"

"What? Fish? Well, some do, like sharks and killer whales and such, but I don't think we got any of them in this pond here. Could be piranha, if someone from South America came up here and seeded the pond with 'em. But I don't think so. People in North America don't even know 'bout this place—just us, chickens. Say! Maybe it's a cousin of the Loch Ness Monster that swam across the ocean, or maybe—!"

"NO! Not fish, Nicky! *Beavers!*"

"Oh. Well, uh, I don't think so. I think they eat plants probably, not people, ya think? Yeah, they got sharp teeth so they can eat trees, I know that. HA! Like Ewell Gibbons. Or—Ha! Or maybe they *really are man-eaters*, just not *woman-eaters*. Ha! Ever think of that, Ry?"

*Sharp teeth?* Angry now, Ryz'n lost her cool and smashed down on the pond surface with her left hand and arm. Then she cursed her impetuous actions, afraid of the potential consequences of her rash behavior. Slowly, her ire grew towards her date. Ry glanced about the pond for beaver sign and muttered a quick prayer to St. Jude, before she spoke loudly and deeply, hoping a human male voice would discourage her underwater visitor.

"What the heck does that mean? Darn it, Nicky! You got me into this, this mess, swimmin' in here without any clothes on. Now you can get me out!" She looked up to see if her tantrum had any effect on his nonchalant demeanor. But no, it had not. She just could make Nick out lying there on the bank n the half-moonlight, unflappable as always, apparently, totally unconcerned for her safety. Then he remarked in a low voice, rather off-handedly, believing she could not hear him. However, the pond acoustics were too resonant.

"Yeah, 'no clothes on,' Mann, that's the best part of this whole deal." Then louder, he said, "but I wouldn't worry if I were you, Ry."

"Yeah? Why not?"

Ryz'n rode her invisible, stationary underwater unicycle, afraid to move, hoping the mysterious pond creature would not seek out a stationary target.

"Well, I guess that 'man-eater' means that they only eat men and not women, so I guess you're off the hook, Ry. HA! Off the hook, get it? See, ya got nothin' to worry about, Baby. Unless they mistake you for a mermaid and, gee, you sure are as beautiful as a mermaid, you know that? Yes, you are. But the trouble with mermaids, of course, is they ain't got no p—"

*Ohhh! That Nicky! What am I going to do with him? Just look at what he's gotten me into—man-eating beavers! For cyrin' out loud! And he's babbling about mermaids!*"

"Nicky! When I get in there—"

"Well, OK, OK, but stay cool now, stay cool. Say! Ry! Hey, I got an idea. I got a good idea."

"Oh? Considering my predicament, that's very reassuring, Nicholas." Surely, he could not mistake her overt sarcasm.

“No, I really mean it, Ry. See, you’re probably about the best lookin’ girl in the state, or the county at least, in my humble opinion, anyway.”

“You been nippin’ on that beer Nicky, when I asked you to wait til I got back in there?”

“Well, just a little. I’m lonely here, Baby, all by myself. I ain’t got no monster beavers to keep me comp’ny, just these damn, monster, man-eatin’ bugs! Sheese! Think I need to light some more incense sticks.”

“Very funny, Nicholas. You’re a real card, Nicky, yes you are.”

“Well thanks, Ryzanna. I’ll take that as a compliment, but I’m gonna light some more o’ these smelly sticks anyway.”

“You would!”

“Yeah well, you ain’t gettin’ et up by these bugs either, Ry.”

She could make him out, ignoring her plight, crawling upon the bank, presumably burning more incense to deflect the bugs, but he kept talking.

“Anyway see, I figure with your beauty and my photographic talents, we could make “Shutterbug” history and earn some righteous bucks besides. So why don’t we cash in on some of that easy money for ourselves now with a few candid photos of you. Fog is starting to roll in now, Baby. Bet we could get some real cool-lookin’, film noir-like shots of your finer points pokin’ through the fog, I bet. Whaddaya say, Ry?”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me! Geeze! Maybe I ought to take some candid photographs of your finer points, if you got any? What do you think of that?”

“Ha! Well, if you think we could make some cash out of it, I’m up for it Ry (no pun intended), but frankly, I just don’t see it. I ain’t the best lookin’ girl in the state like you are.”

“Look at me here in this mess and you talkin’ about takin’ cheesy photographs! Just who do you think you are anyway, Nicholas? Foolin’ me into skinny-dippin’ with hungry beavers and you don’t even come in the water and now you wanna—”

“OK, OK, whatever you want, Sweetie—or don’t want. Geeze! It was only a suggestion, that’s all. I—”

“*Sweetie?* Now it’s *Sweetie!* Ohh you! And no, it’s not OK, William Nicholas, not at all. For Pete’s sake, what have you gotten me into here anyway?”

Ryz’n hoped her enraged tantrum might frighten off the USO, even if it didn’t scare Nick much; however, her beau’s disgraceful banter had distracted her only momentarily. Still deeply frightened, Ryz’n worried her strategy with the creature below may have backfired. Ryz’n was treading water so fast now she feared she might get a speeding ticket from her underwater friend. She slowed down a bit, hoping to escape its radar.

“Oh, I dunno. Good times, I guess. Fun and excitement? Whaddaya think? Like to get you on a magazine cover though all mysterious like, make ya famous, maybe win us a prize? Hey?”

“Prize?!?! Like Hell! No! No! Dammit! Now you just get me out of this fix, Nicky and no candid pictures, either. You hear me? You put that camera back in its case. You hear me, Nicholas?”

“Gee, I didn’t know you could get so feisty, Baby. Never heard you cuss like that before. Think you might make a great class president after all. But I think I hear you. Yes, I do. I think I hear you speaking to me.”

“Oh shoot! There it goes again. Ahhhh! Nuts! Nickeeee!!!”

“All right, all right, no pictures, but we’re gonna miss out on that fog deal and you with the best danged, female shape in the state, too—for a white girl, anyway.”

“FOR A WHITE GIRL?!?! NICKY!! I bet I’m gonna—”

“Ok, but what can I do, Ry? I can’t get this cast wet. I’m helpless here.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that ... that—”

“All right then, Ry. Gee. Just swim on back in, if you’re gonna be such a sissy about it. Make a dash for it. You be OK.”

“Yeah? How do you know that?”

“Well, ain’t never yet seen no headlines yet that read, “Beaver Eats Teen.”

“Oh! That’s a big help, Nick, very comforting.”

“Well, you’re welcome then. I hoped you might like it. Of course then, maybe those news articles ain’t on the front page, maybe they’re tucked away back in the Metro Section. Ya know, I don’t read the Metro Section.” He laughed. “Believe I might o’ seen an article though that said, uh, lemme think, said ‘Beaver Eats Mermaid’ or maybe I got that backwards, maybe it was ‘Merman Eats Beaver?’ Ah! Ha! Ah Ha! Ha! Ha!”

About twenty feet to her right, Ryz’n heard something disturb the pond’s surface, followed by a loud, angry “Hissss” and then a plopping splash. That did it! A rapidly moving mini-submarine shot past Ryz’n’s uni-cycling thighs. Another one? Ry sunk deep to push strongly off the mushy bottom to make her escape and, as she spread her legs to motor on out of there, she felt a rush, gliding from her front to back, right between her split legs! Something tipped the lower inside of her right calf as it passed her. Her stomach knotted and, despite her submersion, Ry felt every hair on her considerably hirsute body stand on end. Ryz’n blasted off the pond bottom, popping up through the surface like some kind of nuclear warhead! She let out a long primal scream that curdled the pond water.

“AUUUGGGGHHH!”

Then she reached forward with both hands and kicked like hell, as if her life depended on it, making a beeline in to Nick on shore. The novice skinny-dipper raced off like an Olympic free-stylist in a twenty-five meter sprint for the gold medal. Halfway home, she took a quick peek at Nick, who had stood up to see what the matter was, but he wobbled and slipped back down upon the bank. Big help, her date, her hero and knight in shining armor. Of course, she knew his armor, in the form of that darned leg cast, was holding him down, but that didn’t make her feel any better. Ry kept on motoring, as fast she could go. Then something nipped at her bare bottom and—

\* \* \*

“Ouch! YIPES!” Ryz’n woke with a start, flipped onto her “bitten” backside and sat up rudely. Her heart was pounding and she was sweating like the proverbial pig.

“Ry, wake up. You’re having another bad dream. Come on; snap out of it, Sis!”

Ryz’n tore off her sleep shades and grabbed her behind, feeling her sister’s fingerprints; just to make sure she was still all there.

“Gracious sake, Sheena. I thought you were a beaver, taking a chunk out of my backside.”

“Gee, that’s strange. You know beavers don’t eat people. And since we’re at the beach, I would’ve thought, at least it would have had a shark bitin’ ya. You know Ry, if you wore

clothes to bed like most people and slept under the sheets like most people, you're bare bottom wouldn't be so tempting to pinch ... Glad I didn't send Bry in here to wake you. Shoot!"

"Vey funny, Sheena. I'm sure your husband would not have been so rude."

Ryz'n yawned and snuggled back down onto one of her many, extra long pillows, clutching it and wrapping her left leg around it, as she might a lover. She had been dreaming about that special night with Nicky five years ago down at the beaver ponds, the night they first made love on the grassy levee bank by the shimmering, moonlit pond. Ry had conjured this dream many times since Nicky had left her to join the Corps. Her kid sister had cost Ry yet another opportunity to lose her virginity with Nick and Ry was determined to retrieve it before it was too late.

"That dream was so real, I actually felt wet. Now go away, Sheena, please, and let me sleep? I'm exhausted."

Relieved, Ryz'n placed her sleep shades back over her eyes. She retreated into her dream about the beaver pond and Nicky. She recalled that later he had confessed to her why he had acted so blasé concerning her watery predicament that wonderful, fateful night. He had explained that he had been afraid that if he had showed undue concern, she might have panicked, caught a leg cramp and, with his cast, he could have done nothing in time to save her. For the same reason, he had avoided talk of otters, which was what he guessed her underwater visitors to be. He had explained, after the fact, that otters usually were friendly and playful, at least amongst themselves, but, unlike beavers, they were carnivores and could be downright feisty in defending their fishing territory. He had thought that piece of information might not have comforted her too much, so he had kept it to himself. Then too, by irritating her, Nick had figured he would have prompted Ryz'n into beating a hasty retreat to shore, wanting to beat the tar out of him. And that was exactly how it had played out. Gosh, how she loved him! Where was that love now? Where was that boy now? Where was he—

"—From fighting off man-eatin' beavers again, hunh Ry?"

"What? What?? Sheena had interrupted Ry's favorite reverie once again. Ryz'n spoke into her oversized pillow loud enough so that her kid sister could hear her.

"Yeah, now please let me get some rest, will ya Sheena? I haven't slept well since, since—"

"Since you brought down the house at *The Loft* the other night, yeah I know."

"Well, if you know, then let me sleep."

"Sorry, no can do, Big Sister. Dad's on the line. He wants to speak with you."

"Well, you handle it Sheena. As bandleader and as your big sister, I authorize you to handle it."

"I can't. He wants to speak with you, personally." Ry pulled the pillow from her face and Sheena arched her brow.

"About what?"

"I dunno, but he says it's important."

Ryz'n turned on her back and sat up. Resignedly, she tugged her gold and black sleep shades off once more.

"Hmmpf! Important *to him*, you mean."

Ry's sister stood quietly by the bed with her long brown hair parted down the middle, as it had been for the last six years. Sheena looked like a hippie refugee from the Sixties.

“Pretty risky, there Ryzanna.” Sheena arched one eyebrow and nodded at Ryz’n’s naked torso.

Ryz’n frowned and haphazardly threw the gold sheet about her. Mildly ticked, she dropped her sleep shades on the nightstand next to the oversized, king-sized bed that her husband had custom-made especially for the two of them four years ago, when they had purchased this beach penthouse. Her kid sister Sheena bent over the nightstand next to the bed to pick up the old gold “princess” phone and handed it to Ryz’n. Still grouchy from her rude awakening, Ryz’n kept one pillow by her side and propped her many other pillows up behind her against the bed head.

Her room was essentially a glass house, with mirrors everywhere there were hardly any real walls to speak of, another design feature of her husband. With the golden floor-to-ceiling drapes drawn completely shut, Ryz’n had no idea what kind of day lay outside of her cool, lofty penthouse on this Fourth of July, 1975. She and Nicky had purchased this opulent, modestly priced, twenty-second story condominium penthouse at the renowned Surf’s Well four years ago, after their music royalties had started to pour in. The hotel was Maryland’s swankiest ocean beach resort. However, the wear and tear on the place, due to the resort’s heavy popularity over the years, had diminished some of the hotel’s original luster. Thanks to her husband’s penchant for Rococo styles, Ry now had the swankiest place in the resort, whether she wanted it or not. But Ry had to admit, over the years, she had grown fond of “the palace,” as she facetiously spoke of it to others. However secretly, she was proud to call the place home. As with so many other outrageous ideas of Nick’s, this place had turned out to be a godsend in its utility, as a source of rental income, as well as a source of warm, loving memories, proof of their once happy, vibrant marriage and symbol of their overnight rise to fame and fortune.

Waiting patiently, Sheena held the receiver in both hands with her left hand cupped over the mouthpiece. She mildly scolded her big sister. “It’s time to get up anyway, Ry. It’s after noon and we’ve got that patio gig in less than two hours, ya know. Here, take the phone.”

Patio gig? Oh yeah. Ryz’n bet it would be hot as blazes out there this afternoon, too.

Remaining beneath the gold, satin sheets, Ryz’n was still yawning and brushing the sleep from her eyes, as she took the phone from Sheena, who acted as if the receiver were some deadly snake that she was glad to have foisted onto her older sister.

“OK, please hang up the extension now, Sheena.” Ryz’n sleepily took the phone, as Sheena scurried out of the ostentatious Louis XVI bedroom, leaving Ryz’n alone.

“Hello, Father?”

“Hello, Ryzanna Christine?”

*”Uh-oh, it’s a bad sign when the old man calls me by my full, given name.”*

“Yes Father, this is Ry. How are you and Mother?”

Ryz’n pushed her fist into the sheet covering the water bed and scooted further back to sit up straighter against the numerous pillows. She yawned deeply, as she drew her knees up towards her and leaned her head forward to rest them against her legs. Ryz’n was too tired to sit up straight. She had to rest her head against something soft. She snatched the free pillow to her left and plopped it across her bended legs and placed her left arm around her knees. Recalling Sheena’s warning, Ry made sure to wrap the sheet about her naked torso to conceal both her front and behind, as they do in the movies. She laughed. Yeah, she was a movie star all right.

Ryz'n heard two clicks, separate and apart. She realized that she was not alone on the line with her dad.

"Ryzanna?"

"Yes, yes Father, I'm here."

"Well, since you asked, we're not too well, Ryzanna. *Your* husband was here the other night, breaking down the door, yelling and screaming like a maniac. He attacked me and cut up your mother's feet. She's got eighteen stitches and can't walk without pain—"

"But--"

"Hold on now. I'm not finished. Then he left here and smashed up Matt Yikes parked car and when Matt came out to see about it, *your* husband, damn near killed Matt. If it hadn't been for Lena's courageous intervention, he would have. Matt's been in the hospital ever since with a fractured face and ribs. We think he's sworn out a complaint against *your* husband. So there's probably a warrant out for his arrest right—"

Ryz'n was awake now. Her father had her attention. This truly was important. Mindless of the sheets, Ry sat straight up in bed with pillows behind propping her up and another long one across her lap. Anxiously, she twirled her engagement ring about her slender finger, biting down on the left half of her lower lip as she was prone to do when she was agitated. And boy! That wayward husband of hers could agitate her as no one else could.

"Now Roy, please."

*There was no mistaking Mother's contralto on the extension. Well, that explained at least one of the two clicks I heard. I think I can guess who the other one was.*

"We have no knowledge of any warrants being written, Roy."

"That's because, Rose," answered her dad in a pained and tedious tone, "the Allenbees, who have been our good and faithful neighbors for the last ten years, are so angry with us they, won't even speak to us."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," pleaded Ryz'n. "Please, could just one of you, please tell me what *is* going on. Mother? Please?"

Ryz'n had always been able to talk better with her mother than with her father, with whom she scarcely conversed at all. She and her mother thought so much alike, because they were so much alike, in so many respects, half the time they knew each other's thoughts, often before the other spoke.

"Well, Sweetie, your father is right—"

"Right? Right, about what? What's going on, Mother?" Ryz'n was beginning to lose her Irish temper.

"About a lot of it, My Baby, only, only Nicky didn't cut my feet up or break the door down on purpose. He just kicked it real hard and it shook so much that the little window panes in the top of the door cracked and broke and fell on the foyer floor and I stepped on the sharp pieces when he left. That's all."

"Well, are you all right, Mother? How badly are you hurt?"

"Welllll ... like your father said, I did take some stitches, mostly in the ball of my right foot. I'm afraid I won't be driving for a few days."

"My gosh! That's terrible, Mother—"

Ryz'n's eyes darted frantically about the room. The gold, satin sheet slipped down to Ry's hips. She quickly pulled the bedding back up about her torso, covering her ample chest once more, clamping the bedding down against her sides with her arms and elbows to hold the sheet and spread in place.

"—What on earth caused all this, Mother?"

"YOU!" shouted her father. "You drove the boy off his rocker. He went berserk. Now he can't control either of his heads."

"Now Roy, please! You know I don't like that vulgar kind of talk, Dear."

"Rose—"

"Well, finish your story mother, please." Ryz'n begged.

"Well, your father is right, Dear. Nicky came in here all wild. The look in his eyes was, was, well, it was downright frightening. Why, he looked like the Devil himself. He wanted to speak with you. He wanted your location and your phone number. When I told him you were probably on the way to the beach, he accused me of lying, be-be-ohhh!" Her mother started to snuffle into the phone.

"Mother calm yourself, now please, take it easy. What's wrong?"

"I'm upset, because he was right, Ryzanna. I had been lying for you, concealing your whereabouts from him. And I should never have done that Ryzanna, never! And I won't lie for you ever again. You understand?"

Ryz'n felt a little guilty. She *had* asked her mom to lie to Nick about her sleeping accommodations, because she just couldn't deal with him, not with the band trying to make a comeback and starting up on this local tour. And since Ry did not know how to deal with her amnesiac spouse, she had put him out of her mind as best as she could, using her mother as a less than honest go-between.

"Ryzanna? Are you listening?"

"Yes, yes Mother. Go on, please."

"Well, he made me give you, your tour schedule and asked where you would stay in Ocean City and I told him you'd be at the penthouse. He knows where that is, because that's where Dave and Val took him by mistake, that weekend he should have come down to the Banks for your birthday. You remember—"

"Yes, Yes, Mother, I remember. Is that all? What was that about Matt Yikes?"

"Yes, My Baby, I'm coming to that. You see Nick stormed out the front door madder than a hornet and—"

"Hey, Rose. What about me? Aren't you going to tell her that *your* son-in-law assaulted me, knocking me down to the living room floor?"

"Well, I didn't see that Dear. I just heard the scuffling and by the time I got to the living room, he was sitting on you, threatening you to behave. You know Dear, you really were very rude to the boy. That's what set him off so. I heard the whole thing from the bedroom."

"Rude? For cryin' out loud, Rose! He woke us up at three o'clock in the morning, breaking down our door. What'd you expect me to do?"

"Yes Dear, but he had a valid reason and I'm mostly to blame for it. I'd hoped that you would have shown him a little more compassion Dear; especially considering, you know, his unique, uh, condition. Now please Sweetie, let me finish speaking to Ry, OK? Ry?"

“Yes, I’m listening.”

“Well, Nicky went off angry and he took off in the Bonneville in too big of a hurry I guess, because he smashed into Lena’s car, parked on the street next door, and tore the bumper off. All the neighbors heard it and, oh my, they all came running out and so did Lena’s husband Matt. And so did I. That’s when I cut my feet, but I hobbled out to the street anyway and your dad came out, too. Then, oh my, when he saw what had happened—”

“When who saw what happen, Mother—Dad?”

“Why no, Dear. Matt Yikes. Yes and when Matt saw what Nicky had done to his car, he got mad and confronted Nick. Matt picked up the bumper and sort of charged at Nick with it and ... oh my, oh dear, it was terrible, a terrible thing to see ...”

“What was Mother?” Her mother seemed to be stymied.

“I told ya Ryzanna, Nicky went crazy,” explained her dad with overt satisfaction in his voice. “He became a freak, a killer. Why, he went through big boy Matt like he wasn’t even there. It was damned terrifying. The next thing you know, he’s got Matt on Matt’s back on top of the trunk of Lena’s car and *your* husband’s already to deliver the death blow with his hand raised, when Lena jumped up on the trunk and stuck her head in front of Matt’s face. It was a good thing she did, too, because that nut of a husband of *yours* would have killed Matt for sure. I’m certain of it. *Your* husband’s come back from the War a freak and a killer, Ryzanna. I don’t like to admit it, but the whole neighborhood saw it, the Allenbees of course, the Verniers, the Martines. It was embarrassing as Hell for your mother and me.”

Ryz’n mumbled weakly above the mouthpiece. “Not to mention for Nicky, I suppose.”

“What? What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Ryz’n sighed deeply. “Well, what do you want me to do? I haven’t heard from him, no one has? Isn’t that right, *Sheena!!!???*”

Quiet.

“Come on Sheena, I know you’re listening in on the extension.”

Sheepishly, Sheena spoke up. “Well, sure, sure I am. I’m very concerned for you Sis. And this is important for the band, too. After all, Ry, you’re the one out front and we’re all depending on you. As you go, we go. We’re all together in this, you know.”

“Yes, well I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right.”

“OK, well all right Mother, just what am I supposed to do now? Barricade myself in my room here?”

“No darling, just beware that he’s on his way and, and when you see him, Dear—”

“When you see him call us, Ryzanna,” interrupted her dad again, “so we can call the police and let them know where he is for the arrest. It won’t help him any to run from the law. That will only make matters worse.”

“But Roy! You don’t even know for sure that Matt has sworn out a complaint against the boy.”

“The boy?!?! Know for sure?” Does a bear crap in the woods? Why wouldn’t Matt swear out a complaint against the guy, who destroyed his wife’s car and practically killed him?”

“I don’t know, Roy. Maybe Lena, maybe she can, can persuade him, soften her husband up somehow. After all, Lena could see first hand how Nicky wasn’t himself the other night and she’s, well she’s always had a soft spot for Nicky. Everybody knows that—”

“Mother!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Dear. But I was saying, that is I meant to say, uh ... yes that’s it. Just be kind to him, My Baby. Show him how very much you love him and I think he’ll be OK. It’s all you can do.”

“Sort of soothe the raging beast, hunh Mother?”

“Yes Sheena, something like that.”

Ryz’n pondered aloud. “You know, this is the worst possible time for something like this to happen. I don’t want anyone, you all, Lena or anyone for that matter to let the press know Nick’s back here yet, especially if, well, if he’s unstable right now. It could be damaging for all of us as well as for him.”

“That’s right,” yelled her dad. “That’s exactly right, Ryzanna. Now you’re talking some sense, Daughter. All this love talk, this ‘be kind to him, Dear’ talk is, is dangerous. Put the boy in custody and he won’t bother anyone. You know, love never conquered the world or a raging beast except in fairy tales. And while your husband may have turned into a wild beast, this sure as hell ain’t any fairy tale.”

“Oh? Is that so Dear? I was under the impression our Lord and Savior conquered the world *through love*?”

“Yeah Rose, and look what happened to Him!”

“Roy! You should be ashamed of yourself. That’s blasphemy.”

“Hold on, hold on, please.” Ryz’n begged. “This isn’t helping matters any now,” complained Ryz’n. “Maybe, maybe, there won’t be a problem? Maybe he won’t even come down here?”

“Oh, I don’t think you have to worry about that, Daughter. He’s coming down there all right. And the clock is ticking, just like in *High Noon*.”

“How do you know that Father?”

Because *your* mother-in-law already said that *your* husband mentioned he was coming to see you one last time. He packed up and left home for good with a van full of long-haired, commie hippies. And from what I understand, one of ‘em is a real beauty queen, too, and she’s riding on the back of his bike with *your* husband. I know because I was outside watering the grass when he stopped by the Allenbees to drop off an envelope. I saw ‘em—bunch of damned hippie freaks. Ya know all them war vets comin’ back from Viet Nam turn into long-haired, peace-nik, hippie freaks and *your* husband is no exception!”

Ryz’n was frightfully shocked now. The horror tales about her mother’s feet, her father’s assault and the near murder of Matt Yikes rightfully had concerned her. Yet, those acts, as dark and violent as they were, did not strike at her heart the way her dad’s last remark had—the one about Nick coming to visit her “one last time” with a good-looking, hippie girl riding on his bike behind him. Now that did concern Ryz’n, very much. How did he do it? Damn him. Nick attracted beautiful girls to him as honey attracted bees or as crap attracted flies!

“Ryzanna, My Baby? Did you hear what your father just said?”

“What? Oh, yes, yes I did, but, but where did he find such people? We don’t know anyone like that.”

“*Your* mother-in-law said *your* husband met them on his trip back here, back east, camping in some park in the Smokys a few weeks ago. *Your* mother-in-law—“

“Oh Roy, please Dear, please, darling, be kind. The Sheebooms are good people, you know they are Dear.”

“Rose, to quote your precious son-in-law: ‘You upsets me, Baby.’”

“Can we just get through this quickly, please?” asked a frustrated Ryz’n. “I’ve got a show to do very shortly. Now what were you going to say, Dad, something about the hippies?”

“Nothin’ much, just that *your mother-in*—that is, Wauneta said they had come to town to sightsee over the Fourth and watch the fireworks down on the Ellipse, but apparently your husband talked them out of it, because they all left for the beach, instead.”

“And when did all this happen?”

“Why, they just left here a few minutes ago. I called you right away to warn you.”

Ryz’n let out a sigh of relief. That gave her some time to collect herself and think this thing out. With holiday traffic, Nick and his hippie friends would need at least three to four hours to get down here.

“OK, thanks very much, Dad. I’ll take care of it ... somehow. And Mother, I shouldn’t have asked you to lie for me. I put you in an awkward position. I know it and I’m sorry. I apologize.”

“Oh well, I accept your apology, My Baby. I should have known better than to cover for you in such a deceitful manner anyway. I just hope Nick will forgive me.”

“OK. Now Sheena, are you still there?”

“Yes Dad!”

“All right, I know I’ve got one daughter who knows the score.” (Ryz’n cringed on her end of the line, but she let her father’s slight pass. This was no time for a test of wills.) “Tell your husband Bryson—”

“He’s right here listenin’ with me, too, Dad.”

“Good, Bryson?”

“Yes sir?”

“You’re *my* son-in-law, the one I can count on.”

“Yes sir.”

“Now you’re number one task down there is to protect *my* girls—both of them. You hear me?”

“Yes sir.”

“I don’t give a damn about the music or the money or any other damned thing, except my two babies. And if that means, you have to put that crazy, fool brother-in-law of yours in the hospital, you do it. Understand?”

“But Mr. Ryan, I, I don’t know if I could do something like that. I—”

“Now listen to me son, I know you’re fond of him, but I would hope that you are more fond of your bride. When Sheena’s safety is at stake, you do whatever you have to, to protect her. Hear me? Like you did during that riot the other night it that night club, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, then we understand each other.”

“Yes sir.”

Ryz'n intervened angrily. "Well Father, I'm so glad to hear you have such concern for Sheena's safety and such lack of concern for me and *my* husband! Now I think I've had enough of this over-extended, testosterone-laden conversation, so I'm hanging up. OK? Good-bye now. Goodbye Mother."

With an oath, as unbecoming as it was uncharacteristic of her, Ryz'n slapped the phone down hard into the cradle of the receiver, which she yet held on the pillow in her lap with the bedding collapsing down about her hips once more.

"Well, I better drag this 'bodacious butt' of mine, as Nicky used to call it, out of bed pronto and 'get crackin'', as he used to say. Oooh, that Nicky! What am I going to do with him?"

She stalked off to the shower to make plans for answering that ponderous question: one, which had stumped her for the last seven years, ever since she had first met the boy.

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