

Totally whacked, running on a meth high and drenched in cold sweat, Ryz'n stumbled through her motel room doorway with her sister and Bryson right behind her. Disgusted, Bryson slammed the door shut after them. Ry convulsed with laughter, falling to her knees against the foot of the nearer of the room's two double beds.

"Wow! Did you see that?!?" Sheena's gleeful excitement was unmistakable, as her eyes darted from her sister to her husband. "That was worse than Portland and a closer call than Little Rock. At least, nobody ever laid hands on me like that before! Woooo!"

"Yeah, too close," agreed Bryson, annoyed. "Didn't think I'd be able to protect you two back there. And if Mickey and Jax hadn't jumped in when they did, I wouldn't have. Both of you would be gettin' raped right about now, I figure."

Ryz'n cried out. "Yeah? Well, bring 'em on, Baby!"

She popped off the floor like a dolphin breaking the ocean's surface and danced about the room. Carefree, Ry laughed with her hands raised and fingers snapping in calypso fashion above her head. Catching her sister's festive spirit, Sheena seized her sister by the hips from behind and tried to imitate her movements, but she was unable to match the rapid, massive motion of her sister's caboose. Sheena remarked to Bryson admiringly.

"Look Bry! Looks like she's got a darn motor in there, doesn't it?" at which point Ryz'n stood in neutral for a second. But then, she revved up her engine again, ratcheting up her tachometer for their enjoyment. Sheena laughed lustily, but her husband became serious. Disgusted, Bryson threw down their single-breasted, butterfly cutaway, costume jackets, which he had managed to rescue from the club, onto the motel's dinette table that was perched next to the door.

"Ry, what the hell were you doin' with Tommy Tux over there? What was that all about? And how come you're wound up so tight?"

"Tight?!?! Does she look tight to you, Bry? She looks pretty dang loose to me!"

"No, I'm serious." Bryson turned back to his sister-in-law and spoke softly. "I'm serious Ry. What happened? You popped the lid off of that joint tonight." His soft, sensitive tone quieted her vibrations.

"Well, Bry, I was feelin' kind o' blue when I saw Nicky walk in with another bimbo!" She clenched her teeth at the painful thought. "And I decided I needed some of my medicine to pick me up." She took up her calypso dancing again and added a touch of hip-shaking hula, very similar to a Tahitian wahine.

"Oh, I thought that was it. What'd I say, Sheena?"

"Yeah, I hear ya. But look how it paid off! Ry ripped off that routine from that East Baltimore Street stripper and BAMM!" Sheena clapped her hands together. "That audience went wild! Think of the publicity we'll generate."

"Yeah, that's what worries me! And *we* got out OK, but what about the others? I better go check. And what about our equipment, the instruments and stuff?"

Bryson had a point. Ryz'n got hold of herself, if only for a moment. She spoke rapidly, running her words together and she couldn't keep her left eye from twitching.

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“You’re right Bry. You better go back. Make sure Neechie’s safe in her room. Get Mick and Jax to help you with the instruments and the sound and recording equipment, too!” Bryson nodded but he was concerned.

“Will you two be OK in here, alone?” Jittery, Ryz’n took him by his oaken forearm and smiled reassuringly.

“Sure Bry, we’ll be OK.” He hesitated and glanced at Sheena who concurred.

“All right, but lock this door and *don’t* open it for anyone, except me. OK? OK?” Both girls nodded in agreement.

“And Bryson?” Ryz’n added one final command. “If there’s any fighting to be done, you do it. We can’t afford to have Mick and Jax hurting their hands.” Bryson grinned.

“Love to.”

And he vanished through the door into the night, closing the door behind him.

Just to be safe, Sheena walked to the door and slipped the catch chain into the lock. She remarked wistfully that she had felt Little Nick’s presence up there on stage tonight. She also noted that the new Nick’s presence in the club on a work night should show Ryz’n how much he cared for her. Ryz’n’s good temper vanished.

“With that—*that hussy*—for a date?”

“*That hussy* was the mother of Paul’s date, Ryzanna. She just came along to keep an eye on her underage daughter. That’s all.”

“How do you know that?”

“Paul told me.”

“When did he have a chance to do that?”

“Right after them two guys felt us up and you went out on the landing with The Tux. Anyway, Paul said he wanted you to know that.”

“Hmmpf! Likely story, that is. Tonya Slutskaya’s a slut if there ever was one. That trollop was all over my husband like a cheap suit!”

“Look Ry,” Sheena took her sister by her hands and soberly peered into Ryz’n’s twitching eyes, “I didn’t say she *wasn’t* on the make for Nicky. Who wouldn’t be? All I’m saying is that *he* wasn’t on the make for *her*. He was just doin’ Paul a favor. That’s all. Now, Paul asked me to tell you and I have.” Sheena acted as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

“What’s wrong with your eyes, Sis? They’re brighter than emeralds and your pupils are as big as over-pumped basketballs. And you’re sweating like a pig!”

Ryz’n averted her sister’s gaze, but Sheena took hold of Ry’s chin, swinging her face back to her own. “Your eyes are twitching so quickly I almost didn’t notice. How many of them damn pills did you take Ryzanna!?!?” Sheena folded her arms beneath her chest and assumed the stance, popularized by her sister.

“I, I don’t remember.” *Didn’t that refrain always work for her husband?* Again, Ry ignored her sister’s penetrating gaze, but she was so antsy, she could not stay still.

“Whaddaya mean, ya don’t remember? That’s bull crap. You ain’t talkin’ to one of the guys now. This is me, Sheena, your kid sister. I know ya, Ry. And you never could lie worth a darn, Ryzanna.”

Sheena seized Ryz’n by the shoulders to stop her from shaking.

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“Now tell me, how many?”

“Jes’ one,” Ryz’n lied meekly, hoping the shy act would get her over the hump. But she was betrayed by her darting eyes and her fingers drumming incessantly against her thighs, neither of which she could restrain. Sheena stepped back from Ryz’n to give her the once over. She shook her head.

“Naw, I ain’t buyin’ that. Now, how many? And what happened outside?”

“What are you talking about outside?”

“You went outside with The Tux for a couple minutes and then you came back inside and practically did him right there up against the wall. It made me sick! You want that new contract so bad that you’d do anything to get it all of a sudden?”

Ryz’n slapped her sister hard right across the face. With all those pull-ups behind her, Ry could deliver quite a blow. Staggered, Sheena palmed her cheek, turned on her heel and strode into her and Bryson’s room through the adjoining doorway. She slammed the door shut behind her. Sheena had been right on, but Ryz’n did not want to think about it. She had to do something, anything to help her forget about her lying and rude part in this argument

Tucked safely alone now inside her room of Woldorn’s half-empty *Starlust* Motel; yet, still higher than a kite, Ryz’n relished reliving her sensual “Loft” performance and her subsequent narrow escape. Still wound up, she was beside herself. In fact, she was wired and she loved it. She had never felt more alive, except during her just delivered, raunchy, live stage performance at *The Loft*. Ryz’n felt her temperature rising inside of her. Still in costume, she turned on the TV with the volume set on high and paced the floor nervously in her spiked heels. Ryz’n was jacked and could not come down. Nothing moved fast enough for her. And because she didn’t have to cater to an audience and a band, she could move as fast as she wanted.

Occasionally, she simulated jumping rope, no cinch feat n high-heels. She alternated sit-ups with push-ups and pull-ups using her mobile chin-up bar. (She had placed the Nicky’s old bar near the top of the bathroom doorway, when they checked in.) Ryz’n loudly sang many of GRT’s songs before the vanity wall mirror above the desk. She replicated her riot-inducing number, while admiring her vampish self in the vanity mirror.

Soon, Sheena and Bryson forced their way into her room from their adjoining suite to try to calm her down. Delighted to have their company, Ryz’n talked to them incessantly. Ry was dismayed when they could not keep up with her. Sheena turned off the blaring television set. Bryson suggested they get her some coffee, but Sheena nixed the idea. She said her sister needed to slow down, not speed up.

Somehow, Ryz’n realized the possible antidote to her manic behavior might be a depressant, like some liquor maybe, and she asked for some. Bryson surprised the sisters by answering Ry’s request with a bottle from a drawer in his room. He handed Ryz’n an almost full pint of “Old Grand Dad,” which he kept for “medicinal purposes only.” Ryz’n unscrewed the bottle cap and sipped the bourbon right from the bottle, drinking the whisky straight down. The hot liquid burned her gullet on its descent, forcing her to cough and shake her head like a just-shampooed dog. She wasn’t used to

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the bourbon. She preferred rum, but it was too fattening, or, in a pinch, vodka. So, in the past, to calm down from her exciting live performances, she had settled on vodka and orange juice, which had worked quite well, except for that New Year's mess with Tommy Tremain. Although she would have preferred vodka now, unwittingly, she had chosen her libation wisely. The bourbon was a depressant, which she hoped would help her to mitigate somewhat the "speed" she had accepted from the lounge lizard.

Ry resumed her pacing and rapid-fire talking. Meth-induced orgasms fired continually within her body, not rushing hard upon her as they had right after the crystal hit, but rather they floated throughout her being nonetheless. She moaned with pleasure, but never reached climax. Unsatisfied and writhing, she tried to explain her feelings to the other two, but they looked at her as if she had lost her mind. Again, Sheena and Bryson tried to calm her, but Ryz'n shook them off. Nevertheless, they stood by ready to help if needed. The Mathers confided they were concerned for her health, both mental as well as physical.

Ryz'n laughed hysterically at the remark. Her laughter grew as the trio rehashed the evening's events. Ryz'n asked if they had seen the looks on Nick's face when she had performed. She described with relish how she had insulted her husband at the table before Sheena had arrived. Lost in herself and not realizing what she was saying, Ryz'n let slip about the incredible rush she had received from inhaling Mano's glass pipe.

Sheena grabbed her sister and shook her hard, asking Ryz'n to explain what she meant about a pipe. Ryz'n was never bubblier. Her heart raced. Though she had erred in revealing her secret, she was only too happy to explain to them now that the slip had occurred. And even though she was sweating like a pig and panting like a dog, Ryz'n was extremely congenial. She should be, as she sat upon the bed purring gutturally with her fists smashed into the mattress. She lifted her body off the bed with her fists and moved her pelvis around, like a gymnast on a pommel horse. Fireworks sparked and flew within her like a Fourth of July celebration. She explained the new, pink medicine Tommy Tux had given her initially had not worked fast enough to suit her, but it sure was working now. Ry alibied that she felt she had to impress Nick, when he had showed up at the club to taunt her with another bimbo. Ryz'n noted such women never seemed to be in short supply where he was concerned. So she had asked The Tux to help her out, though she had said nothing to him about Nick and she did not want Sheena or Bryson to say anything either. The Tux had no idea Nick was around and Ryz'n had not enlightened him. Tommy had sent Mano for something stronger, quicker, which he had brought to her out on the fire escape. That is where she had inhaled the ice cube vapors Mano had brought to her. With her hands now flat on the bed behind her, Ryz'n leaned back and swiveled her hips against the bed enjoying the sumptuous sensations flowing through her with an innocent, child-like delight.

"Ummmm, ummmm! That was the best sex I never had," she cooed.

"DAMN," muttered Bryson under his breath in shocked disgust. "I never actually—
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"What the hell are you talking about Ryz'n? What smoke?" queried Sheena impatiently, not waiting for her husband to finish his thought. Ryz'n reveled in her pommel horse, hip undulations and spoke rapidly almost in a sing-song fashion.

"I told ya Sis, Mano brought me this, I dunno ... glass thingy, looked like uh, uh, the bottom half of a light bulb, and it was giving off smoky vapors. Tux told me to take a whiff and I did, a deep whiff, and BOOM! It hit me right away."

"What, what hit ya Ry," asked Sheena urgently.

"Ecstasy, Sheena ... sheer, unadulterated, ecstatic, sexual ecstasy! God strike me dead, if I'm lying!"

Bryson furrowed his brow and stroked his chin. "Think ... I think I might've heard somethin' about this. It's new and dangerous, too. Heard it was only out on the Coast, though."

"Well, Tux and Mano just came from the Coast," noted Sheena.

"Yeah, and if what I heard is right—Ry won't be feelin' so hot tomorrow—might not be able to make it tomorrow night even."

"Just what are you talking about Bry?"

"Methamphetamine—speed, Sheena. And you know what they say about speed?"

"No, what?"

"Speed kills!"

Ryz'n sat up in ecstasy.

"And don't I look dead? Ha!"

Ryz'n kicked off her high heels at the ceiling one at a time and began doing somersaults back on forth across the bed to prove her point. She stopped suddenly and thrust a grinning face upward as the room started to spin for a few seconds.

"And it worked, too—Big Time. Ooooh, Sheena, that's not the half of it! It was like Nirvana. You can't imagine. I still feel it, even now, the aftershocks, like ocean waves lapping over me, and again. When it first hit me, it felt like ten, ten ... well you know, all at once. Ha! Ha! HA! Mann, something that feels that good shouldn't be legal."

"It is' not," lamented Bryson. "You're doin' speed, Ryzanna, and it's much more lethal and addictive than anything you've ever done with those Desoxyn diet pills. This can be addictive as hell! I never thought you of all people would stoop to such a low, Ryzanna."

"But The Tux said it was OK, Bry. He said it's so new, the Law don't even know about it, yet."

"You believe that piece o' slime?"

Disgust seeped across Bry's face and his brown eyes narrowed angrily at his sister-in-law and it hurt Ryz'n to know she had incurred her bother-in-law's wrath. Bry was the only brother she had ever had and he had always held her in high regard, as a cherished big sister. Even her high could not blot out her shame. It disturbed her to think he felt less of her now. Suddenly, Sheena echoed her husband's sentiments.

"Oh Ryzanna Christine, I'm ashamed of you, too. Yes, you! Of all people, who's always been against drugs. It's the band's rule. It's Little Nick's rule. How are we gonna keep the others on the up and up, if you're hooked on speed?"

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“But The Tux said it's not illegal. He said it's so new the authorities don't even know enough about it to make it illegal. And I'm not hooked on anything! You'll see. Shoot! Little Nick's rule? Little Nick's dead! Gone forever! But tonight I showed him, what I'm capable of. I could have had any guy in the place tonight. Heck! I could have had *all* of 'em at the same time. Tell me now, am I too fat, too corny, too prudish?”

“No Ry. Right now you look like you fit right in with most all of 'em other bimbos and it's downright scary. Sunk right down to their level, too,” scolded Bryson. “Especially, that Tommy Tuccarello. I saw you with him and it made me sick to my stomach. You were all over *him* like a cheap suit.”

Sheena backed up her husband, even as she sat down on the bed next to her sister.

“Oh Ryz'n, Honey. That guy is a criminal. He's disgusting. So is the other one. Yukkk! Him and Mano, both of 'em carry guns. You know that.” She screwed up her nose and shook her head, as she just had a whiff of something putrid.

“Nick carries a gun, too and a stiletto. So how is that! Tommy just happened to be the lucky guy when that awesome rush hit me, that's all. That's when I attacked Tommy Tux. I would have jumped anybody then, even a dog, whoever, whatever was handy. You don't know what it's like Shee. It's like multiplying your, your best time BY TEN! And now, well it just keeps on coming. Nicky saw me and Tommy. Bet it made him jealous. Sure, Tommy supplies me with medicine, occasionally, medicine prescribed by Dr. Georgopoulos, I might add. Funny thing is, tonight The Tux gave me some kind of smooth sided, pink pills not the yellow ones with the bid “D” on 'em.”

“Medicine!?!?” Georgopoulos!?!? Yelled Bryson. “When are you gonna wake up, Ry? That stuff is meth, too, just in a different, less potent form and you never even seen that darned, so-called quack doctor. Shoot! None of us have. Now those pills take longer to work, but it's the same stuff as what you smoked, just not as concentrated for getting into your bloodstream. Shoot, you went off tonight just as you did back in those outta control concerts two summers ago. When are you gonna wise up?”

“What are ya gettin' so shook up for Bryson? Ya know? I had medicine like that when I was a kid to curb my hunger, to help me lose wait and not be depressed. It wasn't illegal then. And that was prescribed by my pediatrician, who we all knew!”

“Yeah, it was legal then, in small doses prescribed by a doctor. But did it work?”

“Well, not, not really. It helped me feel better for a little while, but then I'd feel crummy again and I'd get hungry, too.” Ryz'n kept undulating provocatively on the bed. “Yeah, left me hungry, too, left me hungry, too, left me hungry, too.” She sounded like a broken record.

“Yeah, and that's what's gonna happen to you tomorrow, *too!* Sheesh! You keep repeating stuff as if you were a little kid, Ryzanna!”

Even in her agitated state, Ryz'n was stung by the harsh tone of her bother-in-law's remarks. He never had spoken so angrily to her before. He was usually always very supportive. She was hurt by his sudden disdain and lack of esteem for her.

Sheena took hold of Ryz'n's jittery hand to stroke her and calm her down. She spoke to Ry kindly now, as a mother might to her misunderstood child, as Ry used to do to Sheena.

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“Look Ry, you remember what cured you before? It wasn’t any pill. It was Little Nick. And he’s the only thing that will cure you now. You don’t need any pills or smoking from a bowl. All you need is Nicky. You gotta make up with him for your own good and for the good of the band, too, why, for the good of us all, for cryin’ out loud. You’re gonna ruin everything, if you don’t, My Baby.”

Ryz’n jumped up, jerking her hand away from Sheena’s grasp and bit her lip. Hearing Sheena’s using their mother’s own korny term of endearment, somehow set Ry off again, even though she knew Sheena was trying only to be helpful. Ry twirled her engagement ring using her left thumb and paced back and forth. Then she turned on the two of them and spoke in rapid-fire bursts.

“But Nick doesn’t want me. He’s always with someone else. He doesn’t even remember me. Besides, he’s always been the cause of all my troubles. You remember when I nailed Lena with that softball and hurt her? It was because of Nick. And when I got pregnant? It was because of Nick. And when I went to Laos and nearly killed myself with dysentery? It was because of Nick.”

Sheena interrupted. “And, so tonight, it was because of Nick. And a week ago, when you made a fool of yourself on our way home from the Banks, by the railroad tracks in Wakefield? It was because of Nick,” Sheena added sarcastically.

Ryz’n nodded eagerly. “Yeah! That’s right, that’s right, Sheena. You got it now. Go on.”

“And breaking the band’s rule tonight, not to mention the law, that too, was all because of Nick wasn’t it, Sis?”

“Yes, you bet it was, but I didn’t break the law. You understand completely.”

“Annnnh! Wrong! With the exception of getting pregnant, which was as much your fault as Nick’s, all that other stuff is completely *your* fault!”

“What? How can you say that? That’s utterly ridiculous.”

“No, Sis. It makes perfect sense. It’s your fault because you can’t control your irrational jealousy of Nick—unfounded jealousy, I might add.”

“Sheena, how can you say such a cruel, mendacious thing?” Ryz’n was deeply hurt. Sheena walked over and took both her sister’s hands in her own and looked as lovingly as she could into Ryz’n’s jumpy eyes. She took hold of Ryz’n’s twittering right hand in hers and, once more, stroked Ry’s hand to calm her down.

“Look Ry, Honey. You are my big sister and I love you to death. I’ve always looked up to you even, even ... well even though I often try not to show it.” Sheena looked down to their hands and back up to gaze into Ryz’n’s nervous eyes. “But you are, that is you have been, worthy of my emulation, until this. You are beautiful, talented, caring, outgoing, helpful and intelligent. And you’re my sister and I love ya more than you’ll ever know. But let’s be honest here, Sis, please. Your jealousy of Nick is totally irrational. It’s driven you to this state of being a criminal, a drug user and a porno dancer.”

Ryz’n jumped up, jerking her hand away from Sheena’s grasp and bit her lip. She was hot and she was hurt. She twirled her engagement ring using her left thumb and

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paced back and forth. Then she turned on the two of them spitting out her words again in rapid, machine gun-like fire.

“Criminal? Porn dancer! Oh come off it, Sheena! You know, those were the same steps our grandmothers taught us from all those folk dance—belly dance lessons they gave us, the Rakasse and Igdis, all those shimmies and shakes. There’s nothing criminal in that.” Ryz’n rose and danced the Rakasse to prove her point, arguing as she danced.

Then she stopped, posing for effect. She turned on her sister, pointing her forefinger at a surprised Sheena, who sat on the bed seemingly in shock. “And I can’t believe you are such a little hypocrite, Baby Sister. You’re the one that dresses so provocatively and goes braless all the time, flaunting yourself all over the place for everyone to notice. You’re the one who begged me to make these costumes that are hardly larger than a handful of postage stamps strung together. You’re the one that swings her ass all over the place in front of every male animal in pants.”

Sheena rose off the bed to protest, but Ryz’n pushed her back down by her shoulders. She wasn’t finished yet.

“And as for Nick—Nick? Why he doesn’t even want me. He wants every other ... every other frickin’ bimbo he can find, but I’m not good enough for him. You know, his second night back, I offered myself to him. I stood nearly nude before him and offered myself and all he did was crack wise that my waist was too big—*MY waist was too big!*” Seething, she turned on her brother-in-law. “Well, maybe I did weigh about ten pounds more than when he left, but I’ve lost nearly two-thirds already—and oh what am I saying? Why should I tell you? Besides, you’ve seen him. He’s not the same dashing, confident, fun-loving boy I married. Twice, I might add!” She punctuated her remarks by resuming the motions of the Rakasse, but her sister, unlike she, was patiently persistent, as she trailed a dancing Ryz’n around the beds. Her sister’s calm demeanor befuddled Ryz’n, who had been expecting a full-fledged brawl with Sheena by now, especially after Ry’s remark about Sheena being a hypocrite.

“Honey, Nick may not remember how you *were* back then. All he knows is how you *are*, since he’s come home. And the picture in his mind can’t be any too pleasant and it’s got nothing to do with your weight, believe me Big Sister. Maybe if you had taken Gran’ma Jessie’s advice and danced for him that first night, the way you danced for every drunk in the place tonight, you wouldn’t be in this shape now. And, incidentally Big Sister, Grandma Jessie never danced the way you did tonight, Ry. Don’t delude yourself on that score. No, you caught that act off The Block on East Baltimore Street. Maybe if you had followed Gran’ma’s advice, as I have with Bryson ...”

Ryz’n stopped dancing and quivered in place.

That’s true. I tried to do that, dance for him like that, that night in the motel, as Grandma Jessie had taught me and Sheena. I had tried to follow my grandmother’s wedding day advice to “please your husband with the dance of love and he will please you with never ending devotion in return.” But I just couldn’t. I started to, but I just couldn’t. My head was killing me. I never could without a shot or two of vodka or half

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a bottle of wine in me. I was always too self-conscience, even though I had vowed to overcome my prudishness. And now ...

Sheena's stern lecture had picked up steam, as Ryz'n refocused on what her kid sister had to say.

"... Mom told me about that misunderstanding, the poor joke he made about your waist. But that's all it was on his part, just a poor joke, Sweetie. He was embarrassed. For cryin' out loud! Who wouldn't be considering his wounds? OK, maybe he doesn't recall you yet, but he will. It's only been a couple of weeks, since he's come home. I talked with Mom just today and she said Nick has been calling her every day for you. He is remembering more and more each day, stuff that happened to him up into junior high school even. So how long will it be before he remembers you, another couple of weeks, maybe? And it's blatantly false to say he doesn't want you. He does. Why would he call Mom all the time, asking for you if he didn't? Why did he come down here tonight, uninvited? You know Ry, Barb and I saw the way you treated him on the road, driving back from the Banks and your behavior was downright scandalous. After those antics, you're lucky he cares for you at all."

Bryson agreed with his wife.

"Look Ry, a man has his pride. He just can't let a woman walk all over him because she's beautiful, successful and famous, especially if he's unsure of himself, self-conscious about what happened to him during the War."

"*His* pride? What about *my* pride? Hunh?" Ryz'n fired back by punching herself in the chest with her left fist. "What about all those different women he's with all the time? What about that?"

"Nicky's a really good lookin' guy, Ry. Why, he could be in the movies! Girls are naturally attracted to him. They always have been, even I was once. You know that. You knew that when you married him, *both* times. Just as men are attracted to you, too. But you don't give them a second thought and that's the same with Nick."

"The way you talk about him, sounds as if you're attracted to him yourself, Sheena!" Sheena put her arms about her husband, who stood at her side.

"You know Bryson's my man. We're as tight as they get, always have been, right, Baby?"

The couple smooched, while Ryz'n paced, twitched and twirled her engagement ring about her finger between her two gold wedding bands. Normally, she didn't mind their romancing in front of her, but right now, it seemed more than a bit tacky, like throwing their love in her face. When Sheena and Bryson had finished kissing, Ryz'n said sarcastically.

"Well, send *him* [Bryson] away for three years and three months and take *his* memory of you away from him and let's see how lovey-dovey you two are then?"

The couple broke apart and Sheena responded.

"OK, Ry. Have it your way. You *have* had a tough, tough break. Nobody is denying that, but you are this close—" Sheena held her thumb and forefinger about a half inch apart—"to having all your dreams of the past three years and three months come true.

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Don't throw it all away now with drugs and porn and other men, when you're so close, Honey. Please don't do it, Sis."

Ryz'n became deadly serious, almost surreally so. She was thinking, trying to think, despite her blood and brains rushing at a hundred miles per hour. Then, inexplicably, without responding to her sister's plea, Ry's brain opted out, as if it had overloaded its circuits and she shifted the subject. She told them that she didn't want anyone to know that Nick was back, especially the media. She just didn't want to have to deal with those questions and she didn't want Nick to have to deal with them, either. That type of emotional intrusion might arrest the development of his personal recall.

"... We'll just 'no comment' the heck out of them. And if they don't like it, they can lump it." Then she laughed uncontrollably and began jumping on the bed again. Sheena and Bryson stared at one another, dumbfounded. Then Bryson became angry.

"I suppose that's the excuse you'll give for denying that you ever knew Nick tonight in front of Hayes and his gorillas!"

Ryz'n stopped bouncing, looked away and fidgeted and spoke in a naive, little girl's voice. "Why yes, yes, of course that's it."

Just as he was about to come back at his sister-in-law, someone knocked at Ry's door. Bryson opened the door slightly; keeping the chain hooked, and looked through the opening. Bryson relaxed and released the chain and stuck his head over the doorway.

"Yeah, and what do you want?"

"Hey! What's with the attitude, Mann? We're just checking on Ry, that's all."

Ryz'n recognized the sleazy New Jersey accent of Tommy "the Tux" Tuccarello. She glanced at Sheena, who rolled her eyes towards the ceiling and shook her head. Bryson stepped outside to speak with them, leaving the door ajar behind him. The noise and commotion of police cars and panicking people now had been joined by fire trucks and ambulances, seeping through the partly opened door and into the room. With her drug-heightened senses, Ryz'n overheard Bryson explain what happened. He told them Ryz'n was looped and they were calming her down. No one could see her now. Tommy Tux confessed in a rough whisper to Bryson, "confidentially Mann, Ry took only one small, little whiff of the stuff and she just shot into orbit. But really Bryson, it wasn't that much. I'm telling ya, she should come down within a few hours." He chuckled, adding that he was surprised such a token hit had struck her as hard as it did, remarking that "her blood must be pure as crystal. Crystal, get it? Crystal Meth? Ha!" Then he laughed again and slyly suggested that Ryz'n might like to be alone with him until she came down. Bryson told the sleaze ball to take a hike.

Tommy told Bryson not to be so rude, after all Halo Platters was in position to do GRT a great favor and resign the band. He said after the way the group had performed tonight, he felt sure he could guarantee that would happen.

Ryz'n could keep quiet no longer. She grabbed the pint bottle of bourbon and swaggered to the doorway and opened the door wide so Sheena, too, could see what was going on. Upon seeing her, the lounge lizard licked his lips gleefully and rubbed his hands together. Mano stood silently beside The Tux, as always. Ryz'n stood behind

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Bryson, who did not see her, leaning vulgarly against the doorframe. He told the pair there would be no more dope under any circumstances or he'd turn them in as drug dealers.

The Tux smirked and arched his brows, "You sure that's what Ryz'n wants?" He spoke loudly and nodded past Bryson toward her. Bryson turned around to face Ry, as she spraddled vulgarly back against the door jam in her "special costume."

"Well Ry, that's what you want, isn't it?" asked Bryson.

Ryz'n leaned back against the door jam, holding the bottom of the bottle by its neck so that the bottom of the bottle crept up the front, bottom hem of her mini-skirt. Then she clinched the liquor bottle between her thighs, as she had done with the dead mike earlier during her salacious performance. She eyeballed The Tux first and then Mano, giving off a heat that might scorch them at any second if they came any closer. She casually raised the pint bottle to her lips and took a hit of the bourbon, without coughing this time.

"We'll see," she said with an arrogant swagger. "Then, once she had swallowed the bourbon cleanly, "... We'll see."

The burning liquid fired down her gullet, somewhat calming her churning insides. Then she turned about, swishing her hips saucily and swaggered back inside, shutting the door behind her.

After a minute or two, Bryson re-entered Ryz'n's room in time to watch her take another slug of Old Grandad with results similar to those of the previous hit.

"Oh that was quite an act Ry, swingin' your ass like that. Yeah, real cute! Don't encourage those creeps. Geeze! Say, haven't you had enough of that stuff, Ryzanna?"

"Well, you gave it to me, didn't ya? Whatsamatta? 'Fraid I won't leave ya any?"

He was about to speak, when there was another knock at the door. Bryson opened it to find Mick and Jax waiting to enter. Bryson let them inside and shut the door behind them. The duo crowded into the compact motel room to report to Ryz'n, who, now for their benefit, had hidden the bourbon bottle behind her back and tried to buck up.

"We did what you said Ry," Mickey recounted breathlessly. He noticed Bryson. "Oh, I guess Bryson told ya already." Mick frowned, as if Bryson had stolen his thunder. Ryz'n shook her head derisively.

"No, he hasn't. He's had his mind on other matters."

She peered at Bryson, who shot her an angry look, and returned her attention to her drummer. "Go ahead Mick, I'm listenin'." Always eager to please, Mick grinned, happy with his news, and he laid it out for her.

"Well, we got Neece stashed safe in her room. And we got all the instruments and equipment out of the club OK, too, and into the truck—a little roughed up maybe, but we shouldn't have to replace anything." He beamed and Ryz'n beamed back.

"That's great Mick. That's just great. Good work." She grinned widely.

"It's like a three-ring circus out there, Mann," observed Jax. Very uncool." Above and behind the drummer, the impassive Jax nodded as he leaned back against the door, chewing on his ever-present toothpick.

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Ry nodded and reached past Mickey to pat Jax on the shoulder with her free hand, holding the bottle behind her back with the other.

“And I’ll find them papers and fill ‘em all out for your signature, Ry. I’ll bring ‘em over to your place early tomorrow, OK?” asked Mickey, seeking her confirmation.

“Gee Ry, your eyes look really funny, really wild-like.”

“What papers?”

“You know? The copyright papers for the song.”

“What song?”

Mickey looked at her as if she had lost her mind and then around at the others as well for some kind of confirmation.

“Why ‘Sweet Lovin’, Ry. That’s the one you wanted, wasn’t it? We were recording tonight, remember? So we got it all, the whole thing. Me and Jax just played it back.”

“And?”

Mickey and Jax looked at each other and grinned sheepishly. Mick turned back to her shaking his head, as Double J winked his stamp of approval.

“Oh Mann! It’s really smokin’, Ry. I mean really rockin’—Good Rockin’ Tonight kind o’ rockin’. Know what I mean, Ry? GRT, Baby! Jax really laid it down. And you, Ry, well—” He laughed and waggled his head back forth, as his shoulders shook. “Ry! You were outta sight, just outta sight! It’s really incredible, especially when ya consider we never even practiced that number, with all of us together. Must be somethin’ ‘bout performin’ live, bein’ all loose like that, I guess. In the moment, ya know?”

“So you think we might have a hit then, hunh?”

“Well, if we can find a way to edit it, to cut it down some for commercial radio. But it’s definitely a big time album cut. Definitely!”

Ryz’n took Mick by the shoulder and turned him toward the door. Jax winked at her again and followed his drummer.

“OK guys. That’s great work, just super! Tomorrow, we’ll get that copyright, OK?”

“You bet Ry! Ya know, I think we’re on our way back, Ryzanna, back to the top. I really do. Yeah girl! Got a real good feeling about this one.”

Mick winked at Sheena and pointed his trigger finger at Bryson.

“Me too, Mick! Me too!” Ryz’n grinned and ushered them out the door, with a hand on the back of each of them, unconscious of the bottle in her left hand. As she pushed them out the door, Ryz’n apologized.

“Hey fellas!” They both turned to look at her. “You were simply fantastic tonight, both of you. Ya know, I can’t praise you enough. And if I said anything out of line, well ...”

“Anh forget about it, Ry. Don’t give it a second thought. Sometimes the leader has to lay it down a little thick to get results and, Mann; we got ‘em tonight,” beamed Mick.

“Ry? It’s all cool,” Jax assured her. “Now calm down and try and get some rest, girl. We got another gig tomorrow night.” Jax extracted the ever present toothpick from his mouth and winked his approval once again, for good measure.

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“Good night guys!” Ryz’n grinned and stepped back inside her room. The pair left, basking in the glow of her compliments. Ryz’n closed the door behind them.

With her back against the closed door, Ryz’n sighed and slurped from Bryson’s bottle.

“See? Not to worry. No more visitors tonight, OK Bry?” She could not keep from twirling her ring about her finger anymore than she could prevent the nervous tic of her eyes.

“You bet, Ry. I’ll see to it,” replied her brother-in-law, all prior traces of disrespect absent from his voice.

Ryz’n became unsteady on her feet. While Bryson turned down the covers, Sheena helped her into her bed. They laid her down on the bed with her legs, dangling over the side. Sheena removed her sister’s burned and shredded hose, discovering the tiny burn holes from the electric mike. She was appalled at the fresh wounds and asked Ryz’n how that had happened. Ryz’n reminded her about the mike, popping and crackling. Sheena shook her head and studied Ry’s wounds in the room’s half light. Sheena clucked her tongue.

“You know better than that Ry, especially on a carpeted stage like that, when you build up all that friction from dancing around that way. Shoot! You’re the big sister. You’re supposed to be taking care of me and here I am, taking care of you.” Sheena sighed loudly in exasperation. Ryz’n merely mocked her by pouting in a sad face.

Sheena asked Bry to go into their room next door. Then she bent closer to inspect Ryz’n’s burns and pulled off her torn hose. Already super sensitively charged across her loins and thighs, due to the speed she had inhaled, Ry was near exploding. Now Sheena’s head and drooping, long hair brushed softly against Ry’s inner legs, tickling Ry and exacerbating her situation. And when Sheena sought a closer inspection of Ry’s burn wounds, she unwittingly pressed the top of her head up into Ry’s most sensitive area. The simmering fireworks Ry had been feeling, since her hit on the meth vapors, started to explode all over her. Trying to get a better look at the burns in the dim motel room light, Sheena moved her head, side to side and up and down, incidentally rubbing hard against Ry’s person, titillating her wildly. Already supercharged by the meth, Ry lost all control. She had felt this climax coming since her brief whiff of the vapors out on the stairwell and had only needed that sensitive pressure in the right spot to secure her ecstasy.

All she could do for her sister was yell: “Look out!”

However, her warning came too late. Both sisters fell to the floor next to the bed, amid Ry’s unrestrained throes of ecstasy. All Sheena could do was dodge, choke and curse her sister’s excess. Under the right provocation, both sisters were prone to such outbursts. This was another inherited trait, so Sheena, of all people, should understand. Ry tried unsuccessfully to apologize to Sheena. She alibied that at least she had not milked the thing for all it was worth, as she had with Nick. Nicky had never minded. In fact, he had encouraged Ryz’n. But then, Nick always had liked all things sweet. But now, with one look at her sister’s frowning, glowering visage, Ry exploded into hysterics, spinning off on a laughing jag that lasted nearly half an hour. When a

perturbed Sheena recovered her lost temper, she stripped off Ry's wet costume and placed her Kelly-green satin, thigh-length robe about her. Then she dumped some liquor on a wash cloth and dabbed at Ry's burns. Finally, she pointed an unsteady Ry toward the free bed in Sheena's and Bryson's adjoining motel room door, where Sheena could keep an eye of her all night.

Outside, the police sirens and the raucous commotion had faded, just as the hysterical commotion inside, had all but died away. The Mathers were able to move a now much more docile Ryz'n through the door connecting their two rooms and into the unused, far double bed in their room. The pair told Ryz'n that they wanted to keep her where they could protect her from herself as well as from her predators outside by keeping an eye on her. They promised her that no one would think to look for her in their room. However, clothed solely in her belted, favorite, short, green satin robe, Ryz'n would not enter their room without her bourbon bottle pacifier.

Reluctantly, Bryson handed her the bottle, which Ry sucked on like a baby. Bryson confessed he was astonished at her drinking capacity. Though equally astonished, Ryz'n merely winked. She told Bry it was OK if he and Sheena wanted to get it on in their bed. It would not bother her in the least. She suggested she might learn something and cracked up. Bryson merely shook his head in pity at her uncharacteristically earthy remarks. In bed, Ryz'n sang and danced while lying upon her back, much to her sister's chagrin. Ry was keeping Sheena and Bryson awake, so Sheena found the room's Gideon's Bible. She stuck it Ryz'n's paws and told Ry to focus all her excessive powers of concentration on reading and comprehending the truths of eternity, noting the Good Book is the best seller of all time. Wide-eyed and suddenly obedient, Ryz'n took her sister at her word, promising earnestly to do just that.

Lying side by side in bed facing each other, the newlyweds whispered about Ry. However, Ryz'n overheard them, though she pretended she did not. Ry turned and lay on her side in bed with her back to them, listening keenly with a drug-heightened, super-attenuated sense of astute hearing acuity previously unknown to her. Shoot! She could eavesdrop on a couple of ants if she wanted to. Sheena and Bryson concluded that reconciliation between Nick and Ry was the only thing that could straighten Ryz'n out and they would have to try to make such a reunion happen. Before they slept, Bryson echoed Sheena's earlier observation that Ryz'n's performance tonight had crossed the line from entertainment to pornography. Ryz'n was surprised when she heard Sheena agree with her husband. Her kid sister was and always had been much more liberal than Ryz'n in matters sexual. Now Sheena admitted that even *she* wouldn't have pulled that last stunt.

What a little hypocrite my baby sister is! If the situation were reversed and Bryson were in Nicky's place, she would have done the same thing in a heartbeat, if she could have had the brains to think of it and the ability to pull it off.

Sheena believed something more had been wrong with Ryz'n tonight, beyond the speed. She said Ry just wasn't herself. Sheena concluded by saying she would make sure Ryz'n saw her psychiatrist soon, if possible, before they left for their beach gigs that weekend. If not, then Ry would see the shrink the first thing when they returned.

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Bryson whispered that Sheena would have to do more than that. He said he'd try to keep Tommy Tux and Mano from pushing speed onto Ryz'n, but Sheena would have to watch Ryz'n round the clock to keep her away from them. He said tomorrow she would be craving the stuff and feeling "rotten as hell." He warned that there's no telling what she might do to land herself some speed. Bryson whispered:

"Baby, I know she's your big sister and she's taken care of you all your life, but now, you're gonna have to return the favor. This is super serious. It could mean her life. You'll have to put her first. Will you do it? For all our sakes?"

"Yes. Of course, I will. You know I will," Sheena whispered.

"That's the girl! Now let's get some rest, cuz, tomorrow, we're gonna need it ... Hey, Shee?"

"Hmmm?"

"At least, she didn't try doin' the Black Betty." Sheena smacked him in the back.

"Shut up and go to sleep and don't even dare think of somethin' like that!"

Fiddlesticks! Then Ryz'n heard the couple smooch and whisper "good night, Baby" to one another, soft and low. *Yukkk! Always the perfect, loving couple. Sheesh! They don't know how lucky they are.* Within a few minutes, she heard them both snoring.

No sooner had they fallen asleep, than Ry heard loud knocks at the door coming from her adjacent room. It was three a.m. The groggy, muscular Bryson rose angrily from bed, pulled on his pants and entered Ry's vacated room to answer the door. Both sisters sat up in their respective beds to listen, via the partly open, adjoining doorway.

Newspaper reporters wanted to interview Ryz'n. It sounded to Ry as if there were a slew of them. Bryson stood in the breach before the outside portal and stated Ryz'n had not been feeling well and had gone to sleep. The reporters wanted to know who he was, so he told them. Then they wanted to interview him. Ryz'n could not see them, but now, in the absence of all the earlier outside noises, she could hear the reporters clearly as the rural Southern Maryland night quiet had reassumed its typical pastoral place in the natural outdoors order. The reporters asked him in particular about Ryz'n's reported antics on stage. Bryson said the standing audience had blocked his view for most of it. They asked him to confirm other eyewitness accounts about her stunt with the microphone. He said he saw part of the act but not all. As he had said before, the audience crowding the stage had blocked his view.

The news reporters asked him to confirm rumors that Nick Sheeboom had been in the club, but Bryson said he could not help them with that. They countered that a bouncer thought he had recognized Sheeboom and that the manager said he had spoken with Nick at the bar. The reporter further alleged that the guy had said Bryson himself had identified his famous brother-in-law to the night club manager. From her bed, Ryz'n listened carefully through the open interconnecting bedroom door, as Bryson followed her adamant instructions. Bryson admitted their allegations were interesting, but he could not confirm what these people thought they had seen or heard. The place had been a madhouse. Bryson noted there had been a customer, whom Bryson had thought had much resembled his celebrated brother-in-law, but it was just a fleeting thought in the midst of a *mêlée*. Bryson did add that since it had become known

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publicly that Nick was an MIA, there had been many imposters claiming to be the celebrated Rock'N'Roller. He added that Little Nick was fast-becoming a national legend because of his tragic, mysterious disappearance. He asserted that many people now wanted to keep the legend alive as they had wanted to do with James Dean. He told the reporters that Nick was becoming a cult figure and there were people, imposters, who fed that idea.

The reporters concluded by asking to speak with Ryz'n one final time or, if not Ryz'n, they would even settle for an interview with her sister Sheena. Bryson assured them both sisters were sleeping peacefully and should not be disturbed. There was a pause. Then Bryson spoke lower and Ryz'n could not hear the rest of the conversation. He stepped outside, gently closing the outer motel door on the eaves-dropping sisters.

When the reporters left and Bryson returned to bed, he told both girls that he felt a little guilty for telling half of the truth. Ryz'n asked him what happened when he closed the door, because she could not hear. He explained that he had suggested the reporters might try Nick's parents; maybe they could be of some help. The Southern Maryland reporters had responded that both the *Washington Evening Star* and the *Washington Post* had already interviewed Nick's parents a couple weeks previous when the Sheebooms would only confirm their son's official military status still as MIA. The local reporters claimed there was no need to bother those poor folks again.

Taking a cue from her impromptu bible study, Ryz'n told Bryson "that was good, Bry. That was very good!"

Ryz'n knew Bryson's remarks were true from earlier published accounts in the *Star*. Technically, Nick's parents were correct at the time. His MIA status had not been altered then. At Nick's request, and backed up by a confirmation call from Nick's psychiatrist in L.A., Dr. Mandl, Lattimore had kept the matter quiet. However, Nick yet retained his medical disability and was receiving financial benefits. Mr. and Mrs. Sheeboom did not want to advertise that fact, given their son's mental condition. They hoped that, as he became reacquainted with his past, his story could be told with minimal damage to Nick's fragile psyche and Nick would accept all the honors due him. Nick's dad, especially, had gone out of his way to keep Nick's return secret. He had asked his neighbors and relatives for help in that regard, securing silence from the Pocomoke High Staff, the Printers ball club and Nick's co-workers, too. Ryz'n hoped the reporters would not go the Freedom of Information Act route or they might find what they were seeking. She thought it only proper that Bryson would let the Sheeboom's be the first to break the story publicly. Ryz'n understood that as merely Nick's brother-in-law, Bryson did not feel it was his responsibility to do so. Moreover, he had honored her wishes in this matter by lying for her and she loved him for it.

Bryson lay back down next to Sheena, but Ryz'n was not yet at all sleepy. In fact, she had never felt more alive. She returned to her bestseller and started over with the Big Inning.