

~ Chapter 26: Hot Breath of the Cossack ~

The Slutskaya “sisters” lived behind the Crest Hill Shopping Center on 23rd Boulevard in the Walnut Hill Apartments. Dixie had learned that he and Ryzanna had lived there when they were newly weds, as had Ramon and Jolynne when they were newlyweds and where Matt and Allena Yikes were living now in Nick and Ry’s former apartment. The Slutskaya’s place was in the last of the three-story brick garden apartment buildings on the side of grassy hill, nearest the Baptist Church. Actually, the building dug into the hill just beneath the crest, from which the area drew its name. The Slutskaya’s place, on the ground floor, afforded them easy access to the parking lot as well as to a concrete patio deck, just outside the sliding glass doors that served as a second, but more popular means, of entrance and egress to and from their apartment.

Paul led Dixie up the brief, grassy bank between the parking lot and the sidewalk, bordering the building, and across the recessed, concrete patio that led to the sliding glass doors. Dixie had been here once before when he had taken Natasha home to keep Paul and that Bernie character from fisticuffs. Before he knocked on the sliding glass door, Paul turned to Dixie with his arms wide apart like an entertainer and crooned this little one-line ditty, which was obviously of his own composition.

“Loo-kee, loo-kee! Here comes noo-kee!” Dixie shook his head.

“Dude, you been too long with them foul-mouthed school teachers.”

Paul laughed.

“Never know Nick, it might be your next top ten hit, dude. Just remember: I want fifty per cent of the royalties!”

Then he knocked on the door and stepped back to admire his image in the glass, with Dixie still shaking his head and choking back a belly-busting laugh. Paul kept repeating his latest composition as he fussed with his hair by pressing his thick blond curls to his head with the heels of his hands, but never with his fingers. Both boys sported fashionable, thick mustaches, which made them look more like men than their driver’s licenses indicated. They were an ebony and ivory couple. Dixie peered at the glass for his own image, but he failed to find himself in the reflection.

From inside, a female voice pleaded sweetly. “Come on in. The door’s unlocked!” Paul winked to his buddy, slid the door back and entered into the dining room. From behind the drywall, they heard another voice, a little deeper. “Make du selv like home. Ve be right outtt.” There was no mistaking the Russian accent.

“OK, we will,” replied Paul loudly, as he raised and lowered his eyebrows, mugging for Dixie’s benefit.

Paul walked in as if he owned the place. He checked out the dining room liquor cabinet, which was the bottom compartment in the floor to ceiling, glass-enclosed closet. The liquor resided in the bottom most of those glass cabinets, which recessed into the pillar, abutting the open walkway to the kitchen. Squatting as the catcher he had once been in Little League, Paul opened the bottom cabinet door and pulled out an unopened bottle of Smirnoff’s. Still squatting, he showed the liquor to Dixie and whispered.

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“Ya can drink this stuff with anything. Gimme the keys to your car.”

“What for?”

“We can put the hooch in the trunk for later.”

Dixie whispered. “You mean just take their liquor, like that? No way, Mann!”

“Sure. We’ll all enjoy it, Mann.” Paul stood, with the fifth under his arm and walked briskly out of the apartment to the car, where it looked to Nick like he stuck the bottle under the front passenger’s seat. Walking in Paul’s wake back to the glass door, Dixie started to protest but the “sisters” came out of hiding behind him.

“Ta-DA!”

Natasha smiled grandly as she threw her right arm up in the air and stretched her left behind her as she turned her left profile to Dixie.

“Oh,” she said rather disappointed. “I thought Paul was out here.” She looked around sheepishly. “Thought for sure I heard his—”

Just then, Paul slid back the glass door and stepped through the opening, closing the door behind him.

“Hey, Natasha. You look great, Baby!”

Natasha’s older sister Tonya entered the room looking equally great. Both wore one-piece dresses with A-line skirts and short, cuffed sleeves, made of a kind of shiny, clingy fabric. Each dress had a vertex to vertex design of repeated, inverted Vs where the downward point of the V on the bodice of the dress disappeared in to the waist, while the upward pointed, inverted V’s on the skirt likewise disappeared into the waist. The open V necks were cut deeply, revealing ample cleavage on the part of each of the two sisters. The sleeve cuffs about the upper arm were a couple inches high and were spiked by an inverted V that pointed an inch above the rest of the cuff. Tasha’s dress was blue with long, loud, red-orange V’s which spread out from the front and rear center line of the dress to either side like Christmas tree limbs. Those colors complemented her magnificently. Her shiny, sandy-red hair was immaculately bobbed. Tonya’s red dress featured a pattern of blue V’s. Tonya’s sandy blonde hair was also bobbed. Paul whispered to Dixie that the sisters’ respective haircuts had the effect of making the younger woman look older and the older, younger. Both Tasha and her sister’s hairstyles were bobbed in the manner of the celebrated singer Tenille. Paul threw out his arms and approached Natasha.

“My, my, look at you umm-umm—a new haircut and everything. You look just awesome, Tasha.”

The seventeen year old blushed as she received Paul’s enthusiastic embrace. Dixie smiled, happy for both of them, before he felt a burning gaze upon himself. Not wanting to lead her on with any false impressions, Dix had averted eye contact with the elder woman. Dixie recognized her now as the same person he had spoken with that night he had ridden Tasha home on the back of his bike. Both women were wearing open-toed, two and a half-inch, block-heeled shoes with platform soles. Dixie was thankful to be wearing his brown, square-toed Dingos. The boots added almost an inch to his heel, which he needed if he were to enjoy a meager two-inch advantage in height over his date. Both women had high cheekbones, big ears submerged beneath their hair

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and beautiful, large blue eyes and wide, bright toothy white smiles. Both were well tanned, but their hair color, like their skin tone, was ruddy. Tasha had a figure fit for a fashion model. Her sister Tonya, sported the same proportions as Tasha, only she was probably about a couple inches thicker than her sister, everywhere it mattered.

Paul slipped his right arm behind Natasha, while holding his left out to his side toward Dixie.

“Nicholas, this is Tonya Slutskaya. Tonya, meet Nicholas Sheeboom.”

Tonya stepped forward easily, offering her hand, which Dixie took in his. Her hand was very warm. She looked directly into his eyes, not dwelling on the surface colors, but looking more deeply into him.

“Goott ta meitchu Neeck. I hearrt ggreat many goott vings ‘boutchu. Truly, It honorr meitchu. Whad 'tractif yung man yu arrr teu.” Then she looked him over once more and licked her lips, as if he were the evening's main course. Dixie smiled uncomfortably and noted the almost sickening sweet scent of her perfume, which reminded him of the odor of a hair spray worn by a coed he had dated in Maui.

Her Russian accent was moderate but more than perceptible.

“Well, uh, we met already, remember? Out there?” Dixie thumbed towards the patio outside the glass door.

Tonya was a little embarrassed, but she recovered quickly.

“We shusd 'gree vad chu plissed to meit me, too.”

“O-OK.”

“OK, now that’s all settled” cried Paul. “Let’s get something to eat. We’ve got reservations for eight o’clock sharp and I’m starved.”

With the conclusion to their formal introductions, Dixie drove them to *Gusti’s* about ten minutes away. On the way, Dixie said he had thought GRT had played *Gusti’s* over the weekend and wondered why they had not gone out then. With a sardonic wink, Paul explained that neither of the sisters had been available that night.

Gusti’s was full of ambiance, which exuded a dark romantic aura, just what Dix had hoped to avoid. During their tasty Italian meal, Dixie noted that the older sister seemed to hold a strange power over the younger one. Truth be told, Tonya acted more like her mother than a sister. However, they were both good looking women and lively conversationalists. Even so, as Tonya began to drink, Dixie noticed some of her annoying, domineering traits began to extend to Paul at first and then even to him, as well. Initially, Dixie had figured Tonya to be maybe fifteen years older than her kid sister but now he wondered what their actual age difference was. He looked closely at Tonya, trying to guess. He studied the corners of her mouth and eyes in search of crow’s feet, but if she had any, she had concealed them well. Based on his observations, Dixie revised his earlier assessment slightly and guessed Tonya to be closer to Donna’s age.

At nine, a rock band took the stage to provide live music. The two couples finished their dinners and danced for a while with the other patrons, before Dixie reminded Paul about *Mr. Rowdy’s Loft*. Tonya didn’t want to leave. She was having a good time and saw no reason to leave. Tonya had been just a little too overbearing for Dixie’s tastes

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all evening. Finally, about a half past ten, Dixie had had enough. He had not wanted to be with her in the first place. He had only come on this deal to placate Paul, because the older sister would not allow Tasha to date Paul, without Tonya as a chaperone. Dixie excused himself by placing forty dollars down on the table for dinner and a tip and adding another twenty for their cab fare. Tearing a page from Ryz'n's playbook, he told his party that he was going to *The Loft* in Woldorn, but they could stay and enjoy themselves at *Gusti's*, if they so desired.

Paul and Tonya argued, as Dixie made for the Bonneville. Soon, the other three were hurrying out the door of *Gusti's*, flagging Dixie down, as he was about to drive out of the restaurant parking lot. He had put the top down, so Paul climbed over the side into the back seat and then helped Tasha in beside him. Dixie stepped on the gas, but, from behind the car, Tonya threw her purse into the front seat striking the dashboard and splattering the contents of the purse all over the front seat and floor.

She screamed loudly in Russian. Dixie held up just long enough for her to sit down and then peeled out of the parking lot down Old Veer Avenue. Once she sat down inside the car, she searched around to replenish the contents of her purse without ceasing her scalding Russian diatribe. As they drove down the winding, single lane road, Dixie imagined his date was calling him every name in the book or so he guessed, since he did not paar Ruuskie. But he did understand uncalled-for angry very well. By the time, they got to Chris-Mar just a few miles down the road, Dixie had had enough. He screeched the Bonny to a halt. Though he did not understand Russian, he told her that he could not misconstrue her rude meaning. Then he asked his date to get out. He was serious. With his wife's peanut country example still fresh in his mind, he told the Cossack a drive-in theatre was just up the hill there to her left. She could call a cab from there.

Suddenly, butter wouldn't melt in Tonya's mouth. She oozed apologies and sensuality. She told Dixie she would do *whatever* he wanted, as long as he would take her along with him. Had Dixie not been such a nice fellow under the circumstances and agreed, had he gone down to see Ryz'n alone, had he just stopped to think for a minute, he might have saved himself a lot of trouble. However, he didn't. He relented, somehow sensing uneasily that he was making a costly mistake.

It was a little after eleven when Dixie and his party strolled across the parking lot of *Mr. Rowdy's Loft* with Dixie's temper still ruffled. *The Loft* sat over the Woldorn Restaurant. The restaurant was a glorified truck stop, which, according to the signs, stayed open until three a.m., an hour after *The Loft* closed. A long, mildly pitched roof covered the nightclub, giving the two-story building a rustic mountain lodge-like quality. The actual club was located upstairs on the second floor of the place, above the restaurant. "Greeters" stood at the foot of the stairs in the center of the main entrance of the establishment, which served as a foyer to both the ground floor diner and the upstairs club. Their main job was to screen unsavory characters from going upstairs, as well as would-be underage patrons, like Tasha.

Natasha wore her older sister's huge frame glasses to meet the greeters. She passed the initial screen downstairs, but the checkers carded all of them at the top of the stairs,

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where two employees checked identification due to the long line. While Dixie and Paul were paying the cover charges, Tonya showed her ID first and then she bumped into Tasha, causing both of them to drop their ID cards. Tasha picked up Tonya's card accidentally on purpose and showed it to the *other* ID checker. The sisters managed the whole thing slickly. The carder looked closely, but he let the underage Tasha inside.

Paralleling the stairwell, to their immediate right, walked an aisle, lined with pay phones and cigarette machines. Back beyond them were the rest rooms. Except for the hallway back to the bathrooms, the rest of the club quite naturally was dimly lit.

The place pulsed with live music from behind closed double doors. As other customers passed through the opaquely windowed, double doors, Dixie caught glimpses of the dark interior as his group waited their turn to pass through the door into the club itself. The customer area of *The Loft* appeared to sprawl into a long, reversed, mirror image of an upside-down "L" or boot. Against the opposite wall, directly in front of the top of the stairs, stood the bar which ran along the long branch of the "L." Severely tinted, waist-low windows reached the ceiling, enclosing the perimeter of the joint. The roof pitched over the bar opposite the stairwell, and sloped gently toward his right and his left, on either side of the building; hence, the name *The Loft*. When they stepped inside, live music from GRT assailed their ears. Cigarette smoke consumed the place, and their nostrils, in a blue haze as a dark camera filter consumes a viewer. Standing at the threshold, Dixie decided the club presented an open yet simultaneously cozy atmosphere and he felt at home there immediately. Paul tugged on Dixie's elbow and whispered in his ear above the din.

"Don't look now but the school teachers are here with their wives."

"What? Where?"

"They're sitting in the back to our left, back up against the wall under the windows. They're tryin' to get our attention. Just ignore 'em."

"But—"

"Hey Dude! You wanna sit with Larry all night?"

"Yeah, good point. Guess that college education is paying benefits for you already."

"Ha! Yeah."

As Dixie came right around the corner, he faced the stage, where GRT was performing their magic. Dixie tried not to be obvious, but he could not help but stare at Ryz'n as she sang. Tonya's overly possessive nature had been ticking him off all night. Now she watched him like a soaring hawk, eying its prey below. A hostess, a perky little blonde with a bright smile, asked them if four were the total number in their party. Dixie said yes and that they would like to get as close to the band's table as possible, prompting a frown from Tonya. It was a quarter after eleven.

"Well, I don't know if we have any ..."

The hostess turned around toward the stage to survey the scene. Luckily, a couple at a table to the right of the dance floor was just leaving.

"Right this way," commanded the blonde with a pleasant smile. As they followed the blonde down the center aisle of the long stem of the backwards "L," Dixie glanced at the band in the corner of that backwards "L." He spied Ryz'n from the corner of his

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eye. She was good. Her boards were rockin'. And that smoky, raspy voice of hers had just enough catch in it to tempt you into wanting to hear more. Secretly, he was proud of her. The guitar player was clean, and very smooth, too. The drummer, if not spectacular, was steadily precise and enthusiastic. The band played a current, pop hit by a band named Ace, titled "How Long?" How appropriate that was, thought Dixie. Funny, he mused, how his ear picked all of that music stuff up so quickly.

Sheena's bass, was, uh, uninspired, a bit loose, to say the least. But she looked like dynamite in a red satin halter top, dress that fit so snugly it appeared she wore nothing else. The bottom hem of the dress halted not halfway down her thigh. With her long dark hair, reaching clear down her back, she appeared quite desirable. The skirt had about a six-inch slit up the front hem, so she could walk, Dixie figured. Ryz'n dressed sharp but sexy as well, yet much differently from her sister. Ry's ultra short mini-skirt was mint green in color but her butterfly, canary yellow, cut-away waist coat covered most of her upper torso. The jacket's sweetheart neckline left just enough of a hint of the ample pair of round mounds, which lay beneath the hem. Ry looked good, too good maybe, for all the gaping apes in this glorified road house.

As his party sat down, Dixie noted Bryson sitting at what Dix deemed to be the "band table" back by the wall in front and forward of Dixie's right. He raised his head and caught Bryson's eye. Bryson smiled and waved a two-finger salute in cordial acknowledgement, as if everything was cool. Dixie chuckled inwardly at his brother-in-law who was so enamored of Dixie's military accomplishments. Ever the gentleman, Dixie held the chair for Tonya to sit to his right, facing the dance floor. Paul took Natasha the long way around the tiny table and sat her down next to her sister. Seated next to and with her back to the dance floor, Tasha sat opposite Dixie, who faced the band and Ryz'n, with Paul on Dix's left and Tonya on his right...

Dixie surveyed the festive club scene. His happy party was sitting at the instep of the boot-shaped room. The management had arranged tables here with booths lined up against the walls about the foot of the backwards boot, as well as back at the opposite end of the place where the school teachers sat. Dozens of white, linen-covered tables filled the area between them and the school teachers. Dixie had noted the signs outside boasted *The Loft* had "The Largest Dance Floor in Southern Maryland." From where Dixie sat, the floor looked to be a parquet trapezoid close to five hundred square feet. The short riser for the bandstand backed up to the heel of the boot. The dancers on the large dance floor shifted gears, as the band had finished the soft rock tune by Ace and now Ryz'n belted out Linda Rondstadt's recent number one smash, "You're No Good." Ry had noticed him come in and he got the message quickly, shooting him an onerous, sidelong glance as she sang the hook line. Natasha jumped up as quickly as she had sat down to take Paul by the hand and lead him onto the dance floor.

"This is my favorite song," she gushed.

Dixie watched the two with amusement. Paul's dancing style was akin to that of a chicken pecking at the air with his beaked, hawk's nose. The boy pursed his lips and rolled one fist over another in a backwards motion, while rolling his shoulders from

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one side to the next. Every few seconds, Paul would shuffle his submarine-sized feet for effect.

Dixie cracked up at his friend's dancing skills.

"Go for it Paul! You go for it, Mann!"

Dixie had not laughed so hard in a long time, yet he noticed Tasha approved of her date's moves and Dixie guessed that was all that really mattered. The waitress asked for their drink requests. Dixie ordered four beverages for his table, based on what they had drunk at *Gusti's*. Tonya asked for two shots of vodka on the side, as she had at *Gusti's*. With Ryz'n watching, Tonya laughed, latched onto Dixie's arm and reached over to kiss him on the cheek. Dixie pulled away from his date angrily, totally ignoring Tonya's antics, but Ryz'n sure did not ignore them. When the song ended, Ryz'n left the stage quickly, leaving Sheena as the master of ceremonies (MC).

"Thank you all, thank you so much. It's both a privilege and a pleasure to be here at *Mr. Rowdy's* famous *Loft* in historic Southern Maryland," announced Sheena who seemed to Dixie to relish this opportunity to address the audience. The applause for Southern Maryland lasted a while, so Sheena milked it for all it was worth. Ryz'n had stepped off the stage to converse with a greasy looking character in a wide-collared, white polyester suit and an opened, black satin shirt. Dixie observed his wife carefully as she asked the man for something, which he provided from his outer coat pocket. It must have been some kind of pills, because he plopped something into her open palm from a small dark plastic vial that looked like a prescription vial. Then Ryz'n popped her fist into her mouth. Whereupon she picked up a glass and drank. Dixie tried not to stare, but he couldn't help himself. Ryz'n thanked the man graciously, before she jumped back, up onto the stage. She took the microphone out of her sister's hand.

"Wheweee! Thank y'all so much. My kid sister is so right. Playing *The Loft* is always a special treat for us. We started out here about five years ago and it's a real honor and privilege to be back. Say! Is it me or what? I believe it's getting a little warm in here, isn't it?" Some folks nodded. A few yelled out "Yeah, baby" or "You're just one hot Mama!"

Ryz'n ignored the catcalls.

"Now don't you all go anywhere. We're going to dip into our bag of tricks as soon as I can get this jacket off."

"Yeah! Take it off Baby, we don't mind," shouted another enthusiastic patron.

Ryz'n removed her canary yellow butterfly, cutaway one-button, single-breasted, long-sleeved jacket with French cuffs—very classy, thought Dixie. When he had first seen her, he had concentrated on the color and the neckline. Now Dixie watched with the audience as Ry discarded the jacket, hanging it over an unused microphone stand behind her. In so doing, his wife revealed plenty of skin and her stunning figure. Standing in spiked, black high heels, ultra sheer dark hose, a low-waisted, hip-hugging knit, sea foam green mini mini-skirt, Ryz'n posed like the Greek goddess of love. No wider than a hand towel, the very short mini-skirt stretched so tightly across her ultra curvaceous thighs and her solid, round buttocks that Dixie figured he could have bounced a baseball off the snug fabric. Yeah, the fabric stretched so snugly against her

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firm backside that he could have used the skirt as the pitch-back net of one of those back yard, pitching machines for little kids. The hip-hugging, short skirt revealed her tempting upper hips, longer than average waist, and what's this? There's some kind of sparkling gemstone lodged in her navel? Whether it was an authentic gem, Dixie could not tell, but it sure sparkled like one. This was the first time he had seen her dressed in anything but high-waisted shorts or skirts. She had confessed to him that she preferred high-waisted garments because she felt her waist was maybe a tad too long. Looking at her now, he felt her waist was neither too long, nor too short, but rather it was just right. Finally, the piece de resistance was that slick and shiny, canary yellow top.

Dixie had never seen anything quite like it. He recalled she had mentioned that she and Sheena owned an undergarment factory manufacturer down near M&L. She said that she had worked with the manufacturer to create "some super sharp, state of the art, stage clothes for her and Sheena." Ryz'n said she had special-ordered the "costumes" from her garment factory, expressly for her live performances, at the behest of Halo Platter executives' to "spruce up the act." But this yellow top was incredible. It appeared to be made of some shiny, canary yellow material, which he could only describe from his vantage point, possibly as latex or maybe a moldable plastic. Moldable, because the material conformed so tightly to every curve and contour of her ample bust, it appeared, well frankly, it looked to Dixie as though she had poured herself into a new outer layer of shiny, yellow skin. There were no back straps; merely the half inch-wide vertical shoulder straps, which, rendered her entire, back virtually naked and much of her chest as well. The futuristic straps barely covered the points of her shoulders, evidently, clinging just strongly enough to provide all the support she needed as the bands curved over the outside edge of her shoulder blades and back under her arms, like some kind of outfit worn by a character from "Star Trek." A *Clingon cuz they were definitely clinging on. Ha!* Having seen her in the flesh, Dixie knew she did not need much support. That girl was as firm as they come, very tight. Not even Moons could better Ryz'n on that score, though she might tie her. Dixie grinned faintly at the thought of trying to test that theory. However, he feared one sharp tug on either strap would bring her undone. The petal-shaped, tulip tips of the décolleté top front over her nipples featured just enough shiny material over her substantial bosom to preclude her from being arrested. The valley between those same tips sprouted cleavage galore. Dixie woke from the spell she cast upon him to realize the rest of the audience appreciated her bona fides as well as he did—maybe more, because the applause was deafening. She had not even sung a note yet! Sporadic catcalls sprouted from the heretofore tame crowd. The sleaze ball in the white leisure suit at the band table gave Ryz'n a boisterous, standing ovation. Who was that guy?

Beaming broadly, Ryz'n gushed to the audience, exuding charm and grace, as she bounced (liberally) behind her keyboard. She yelled into the stand-up mike next to her piano. "Now folks, we'd like to do one of my all time GRT favorites for you." Dixie observed that Sheena and the other band members seemed surprised, as they looked at each other with blank stares. Ryz'n turned to Mickey and commanded: "Bang! Bang! Bang!"

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“But Ry—”

“NO BUTS, Sheena!”

Ryz’n stepped out from behind her electric keyboard and motioned to a black girl in the band, holding a tambourine, to assume Ryz’n’s place behind the keyboard and tickle the ivories. Ryz’n grinned at the willowy girl and coaxed her over to the piano. She patted the girl on the shoulder, as if she were reassuring the girl. Then Ryz’n took the mike head off its stand and strutted out to stage front and center.

“OK,” she yelled. “Mick— One-two! One-two-three-fo!”

Ryz’n and the band launched into one of GRT’s biggest hits, much to the delight of Loft customers. This is why most of them had come out on a Tuesday night, to hear GRT’s tunes. They rose as one to race each other to the dance floor.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!” had a soulful Motown, rocking, bluesy feel to it, which induced one’s feet and body to move easily to its beat. Tonya dragged Dixie onto the dance floor to join Paul and Tasha for a little “hand-dancing.” The shapely woman behind the mike with the sensational costume and long wavy hair, drooping over half her face, oozed into a bump and grind routine worthy of a stripper. A dancing Paul leaned over to Dixie and advised that he had never seen Ryz’n perform like that before. “Must be for your benefit, Buddy.” He winked and whispered knowingly. “See our plan is working already. I told ya, Mann.”

As Dixie watched his wife bump and grind on stage, he was so shocked that he lost his balance. He would have fallen right onto his posterior, too, had not his sturdy Russian dance partner been clever and quick enough to anticipate disaster and strong enough to save her date from a major nightclub embarrassment.

Meanwhile, dancers crowded one another off the dance floor, at first to dance to the popular old standby, but then just to watch Ryz’n do it right up there on the two-foot high stage above them. Ry dragged out a few extra refrains of “Bang” amid accompanying pelvic thrusts much to the delight of the audience, at least the male audience. When she finished, the applause was ear-shattering. Ryz’n’s plastic yellow chest heaved but miraculously retained its place, while her grin displayed her trademark dimples. Audiences know when someone puts their heart and soul into a performance. In this instance, Dixie thought Ryz’n had gone well beyond that.

Suddenly, Ryz’n’s appeared to be supercharged. She threw her head back, pushing her long hair back over her head with her hand and letting her hair fall provocatively across her face again. The diminutive, well-built singer brought her unfashionably spiked, three-inch, heels together and, straight-legged, bowed deeply from the waist. She leaned in almost on top of the mike and whispered “Thank you” in her most sultry of tones. With her deep bow in that top, Dixie swore he could see everything she had, which was a considerable amount. Then she threw her head back again as she had done previously, turned sideways and waved grandly to acknowledge the band behind her.

With her opposite hands, Ryz’n pulled back on her shoulder straps, lest an accident befall her. “We’re going to take a brief break, but we’ll be back in about twenty, short minutes. I think we’ll have a surprise or two for you, so please stick around.”

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Ry cued the band with her thumb and forefinger by mocking a handgun to play what Dixie figured was the break tune, which he learned from Paul was called, appropriately enough, “Good Rockin’ Tonight.” Paul said they used Elvis’ cover version, which featured the lead guitar.

Then Ryz’n sashayed sexily past the other band members to exit stage left, before the group could congratulate her on the last number. A well-dressed man, whom Dixie did not know, stepped up onstage to the microphone.

“Weren’t they terrific Ladies and Gentleman? Let’s really hear it now for GRT—Good Rockin’ Tonight!”

The applause was long and loud.

“Now remember folks, if you want to hear some more Good Rockin’ Tonight, let the band have their break. They’ll be available at closing for a half hour autograph session. So give them the space they need to rejuvenate themselves for the rest of the evening.”

The greasy-looking man was applauding wildly off to Dixie’s right. He opened his arms wide apart, as a beaming Ryz’n strode right into them. She checked to see if Dixie were watching. He was. Ryz’n’s friend shook his head approvingly, hugged her tightly and patted her smartly on her double-bubblicious, jello-shaking rump. She held her hand out and he offered her something, which she declined. Ryz’n wagged her head and forefinger in front of the greaser’s face. He threw his hands down to his sides, while Dixie could read his lips asking “What then?” Ry leaned into him and whispered into his ear. He seemed surprised at her response and asked her for verification. She nodded, kissed him on the cheek and rubbed the shiny crown of his bald head.

Then the would-be impresario called a squat, burly Polynesian man over to him and gave the man some instructions. The greaser in the white suit jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the back corner of *The Loft*. The burly guy bobbed his head, as if he understood. The greasy character in the white leisure suit patted his Polynesian associate on the shoulder and rolled his forefinger over and over, as though he were telling the guy to start an engine. The Polynesian left hurriedly and the grease ball yelled at him loud enough for Dixie to hear, “Don’t forget—back here.” He pointed to the back corner again. This time Dixie noticed the “EXIT” sign over a door in that location. The greaser smiled at Ryz’n and hugged her, whereupon she kissed him sumptuously on the lips!

Dixie watched more perplexed than angry, while the rest of his party diverted their attentions from Ryz’n to absorb one another in small talk, evidently in an attempt to ignore an embarrassing situation. Dixie guessed the whole thing was his fault and he kicked himself mentally. Natasha said she needed to use the rest room. Reluctantly, Tonya rose to join her. The elder Slutskaya indicated she did not want to leave Dixie alone, not for a minute, but she felt obligated to look after Tasha. After the sisters had left, Dixie told Paul he was glad to be rid of her. Paul nodded sympathetically.

“Hey, I hear ya, Mann. I appreciate this, really I do, Nick. I owe ya one, Dude.”

“You sure as heck do. Seems the least you could do is let Ry know, I’m here helpin’ you out, seeing as she ain’t speaking to me.” Paul nodded and changed the subject.

Hot Breath of the Cossack

“Say, Ryz’n was really great with that last number, hey? I always liked that song. It’s my favorite.” He proclaimed with a dirt-eating grin.

“So far, it seems like all of ‘em are *your favorites*, Paul.”

“Ha! Yeah, they’re all great.”

“Believe me though Paul, if I could, I wouldn’t let my wife act like that in front of a bunch of drunks. Would not let her go around smoochin’ grease balls, old enough to be her old man, either. Who is that guy, anyway?”

“Not sure, think he’s from some record company or something.” Observing Nick’s furrowed brow, Paul added.

“Hey Nick, that’s just show business, Mann. No big deal.”

“Now how the heck would you know about show business, Paul? I mean from the business end of a shovel and all?”

“Well, I gotta admit, I never saw her do anything like that before, Nick. Maybe she was doin’ it just for you, ya think? Hey!” Paul snapped his fingers and grinned like the Devil. “I’ll bet that’s it. Maybe *our plan is workin’*, after all? *Yeah!*”