

~ Chapter 7: Peppermount ~

After their visit to the ward, Bill made arrangements over the phone to have lunch with his friend Bunnie. Bunnie owned a beach home up the coast in Malibu, just below Peppermount University. They thanked Esther for her invaluable assistance and Bill drove his guests out to Bunnie's Malibu beach house. Bill told the girls, he thought it would be unlikely the Peppermount coach would be in his office during the lunch hour. He suggested they would be better off seeing the coach just after the noon hour. Ryz'n was uncomfortable with Bill's decision, because the trail was hot and she wanted to press on. From her conversation with that Booger yesterday, she remembered the coach was due back to the campus today. *We're so close now*. However, Bill had been so kind to them, she did not want to disagree. Bill pointed out the university, atop a palisade, as they arrived in Malibu on Highway 101. Ryz'n saw the school sat upon a plateau or bluff just above Bunnie's beach home, as Bill had described it.

Ryz'n had learned Bunnie's history from Bill on her previous visits to L. A. with *GRT*. A former showgirl, Bunnie had married during the Second World War out of show business to a very successful businessman. Her husband was a millionaire many times over. The beach house was one of three homes that the middle-aged, childless couple owned. Their Beverly Hills home backed up to the famous Wilshire Country Club, of which Bunnie and her spouse were card-carrying members. Their other home was in the desert at Palm Springs. But Bunnie didn't give a hoot for the country club set or any of that fancy social scene, except to the extent it could help her raise money for her "boys," the paralyzed war vets at the Long Beach hospital.

Like Bill, Bunnie was a transplanted Iowan, close to fifty, who easily could have passed for forty. She was a big hearted blonde with an even bigger smile. Her passion in life was to help the "boys," who had been paralyzed in the service to their country. The paraplegic ward at the VA hospital in Long Beach was her number one group of "boys." She had donated the dialysis unit operated by the hospital. Bunnie had obtained the "good Samaritan" bug during the war when she participated in USO shows for the studio. She had helped Bill out many times at Long Beach. Bunnie routinely let the boys take "R&R" in her Malibu beach home, allowing them to fish off the back deck into the Pacific Ocean below. Then she would wine and dine her paralyzed guests by preparing surf and turf, wine dinners. She never sought any personal gain from her philanthropy. Her heart was pure gold. Like Ryz'n, she was the type of individual who merely liked to help. She had even helped Ryz'n to locate a PI to help Ryz'n find Nick. Ryz'n knew people like Bunnie were rare commodities.

Even so, Bunnie's earlier efforts to help Ryz'n find her husband had proven fruitless. Her PI had come up empty. It was difficult to comprehend, given Nick's unique physical appearance, unless, of course, as everyone told her, Nick were dead in Nam, a hypothesis Ryz'n had refused to accept.

Ryz'n, Bill and Sheena arrived at the Malibu beach home to find that Bunnie, not the servants, but Bunnie herself, had prepared a feast. There were hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, ribs. It was incredible. She had cooked them all on her grill out on her spacious deck, which is where they ate. From the front, the two story adobe home with the red tiled roof was almost obscured by the squat multi-car garage, which was made of the same materials as the home. But inside, the home was spacious. Everything was in white: the walls, the furniture, the carpet and the ceiling. The opaque whiteness of the interior became more than a decorative ploy. The total whiteness produced a sanguine, free and open atmosphere, a way of seeing and feeling, everything as larger than life.

The four of them sat and ate on a redwood deck which lagged over half the width of the home's back side. The foursome overlooked the mesmerizing deep, blue Pacific Ocean. From their vantage point, they could watch the Hollywood celebrity set stroll up and down the beach during the Friday lunch hour, as though it were a grand boulevard. Sheena was favorably impressed, but Ryz'n merely picked at her food quietly. Her lack of appetite was obvious to the others.

"What's the matter, Honey?" asked Bunnie genuinely concerned for her young guest. "Are you not feeling well? Would you like to lie down in the bedroom for a while?" Bunnie's, frosted, sunny blonde hair piled high on her head in a twist. She dressed in white cotton peddle pushers, white opened toed, low-heeled, leather sandals and a light blue, front-buttoned cotton shirt. Her tapered shirt tail hung stylishly over her slacks and her sleeves were rolled quarter way up her arms. She reached out from her seat to place her hand upon Ryz'n's forearm and blinked sincerely, as she awaited a response from her young guest. Embarrassed at having worried her kind hostess, Ryz'n looked down at her plate and spoke without looking at Bunnie.

"No Ma'am. I just want to find Nicky. That's all. We're so close now. I can't think about anything else. I can't eat." She dropped her fork and raised up to meet Bunnie's sympathetic eyes. "I'm sorry you went to such trouble, Ma'am."

Bunnie set her half-eaten hamburger down, with her janglely twin bracelets, filled with precious stones, clattering to the deck table. She got up out of her seat to comfort the young woman, as if Ryz'n had been her own daughter.

"Why it's no trouble at all Sweetie and, of course, you're absolutely right!" Bunnie smiled brightly. "And you're such a cutie, too." The older woman stroked Ryz'n's double layered cheek and hugged Ryz'n's shoulders. She pressed her cheek to Ryz'n's, as her golden diamond necklace caught for an instant on Ryz'n's chin. "Of course, Baby, of course, you're right. Well, I think we should all go up the hill and see this, this coach."

Ryz'n asked perplexed, "You mean, right now?"

“Why, of course, right now, Honey.” Bunny shook her head once jiggling her matching set of golden diamond ear rings. “Why, having lunch at a time like this was inconsiderate of me. Please forgive me, Dear. Let’s get up there right away, ‘toute de suite,’ as the French say.” She smiled pleasantly. “We’ll get to the bottom of this thing right now.” The blonde do-gooder may have dressed as simply chic as any of the Malibu crowd, but her kind consideration now showed Ryz’n, she was still a simple Iowa farm girl at heart. Bunny smacked her right fist into the palm of her open left hand for emphasis, jangling her bracelets again. “Bill?”

Bill had a mouthful of chicken and ribs. He swallowed as quickly as he could, coughing out a reply. “Gee, Bunnie, I can finish this plate off in five minutes.”

“Willie, we’ve made this poor girl wait long enough! Over three years! But not another minute! Now, let’s make a move! Let’s rattle and roll.” She clapped her hands together for emphasis. “Come on now Willie, let’s get a move on!”

Ryz’n quickly dropped some honey from the vial in her purse onto her tongue. With Bunnie scolding and pushing, Bill and Sheena scarfed down their meals as best as they could, before they all piled into Bill’s black Caddy. Bunnie and Ryz’n sat in front with Bill while Sheena sat in the back with Bill’s chair in it’s customary parking spot, folded behind the back of the driver’s seat.

Although the small university sat directly above Bunnie’s beach house, high on a plateau which cut into the side of a palisade, the searchers had to backtrack down the coast highway to the nearest cross street. There, they climbed almost vertically, to reach the university campus. When they arrived, Ryz’n thought, oh, what a beautiful ocean view that campus enjoyed! The morning fog-smog had burned off, revealing the dark blue Pacific with its white-capped waves below them. Ryz’n even stopped for a minute to admire the view.

“If this is where Nicky is going to school,’ she murmured more to herself than the others, “he sure picked a lovely place. I can’t imagine getting any class work done in a setting like this.”

The foursome made their way amidst the palm trees and fragrant, blooming jasmine and roses to the administration building, where they obtained a campus map. The map also contained directions to the field house and the coaches’ offices. They found a note taped to the coach’s door.

Gone to lunch. Back at one. See Booger in the trainer’s room, if you need help right away.

It was about twenty-five minutes to one. Bill looked at them, knowingly. Ryz’n, feigning innocence, stared at the ground away from his accusatory gaze. She chewed sheepishly on her right thumb and twirled her engagement ring about her finger anxiously with her left. Bill did not say anything. He did not have to.

In a loud voice, Bunnie startled them all, “Oh be quiet Bill. Let’s go find this Booger character.”

Bill protested, “But I didn’t say a word.”

“You didn’t have to. With that look on your puss, we all heard you loud and clear. Now come on. Where do you suppose these trainer’s facilities are, anyway?” Bill relinquished his anger to follow the determined women.

The foursome roamed the field house halls, until they heard the sound of distant, echoing voices coming from behind a closed door of the men’s locker room. Ryz’n tiptoed between the maze of lockers and benches to the back of the room. Behind her, the others followed the trail of male voices through the locker aisles to a closed, smaller room on the opposite side of the lockers, near the showers. The sound of male voices grew louder as the foursome approached a closed, white pine door at the rear of the locker room. Ryz’n started to knock on the door. She thought she recognized Booger’s high pitched cackle.

She whispered, “That Booger is one of the characters I spoke with on the phone yesterday. Think that’s him talking now. Be real curious to see what he looks like.” She knocked on the extra wide, varnished pine door, and pulled the large handle, swinging the door open.

Ryz’n led the way, by sticking her head inside the trainer’s room.

“Hello?” she called skeptically.

She knocked on the doorframe. There were three individuals within. One, a muscular red haired kid with freckles, stood on the far side of the room. Wearing gym trunks and a grey sweatshirt with the arms torn off at the shoulders, he was hooked up to some apparatus that enabled him to pull on a ring attached to weights behind him. Another shaggy, dark-haired kid sat in a whirlpool bath with his bare left arm resting on the top of either side of the stainless steel tub. His right arm and shoulder dipped into the tub, out of sight. The third kid had frizzy reddish brown hair. He was about five feet six inches short and appeared to weigh about a hundred twenty pounds. The shrimp dressed in a uniform-like silver slacks with a purple stripe down the outside of the pant leg, black coach’s sneakers and a grey T-shirt. He was folding and stacking clean towels on some shelves, near a three-foot high tray on wheels upon which rested a black phone.

Dark looks overcame their faces when Ryz’n popped her head through the doorway. Apparently, they were all shocked to see a woman in their private, male domain. However, when they saw how beautiful Ryz’n was, the faces of all but the littlest one brightened considerably. The little one assumed authority by puffing himself up like a toad.

“Who do you think you are, coming in here? This facility is off limits to females. Ya better scram.” Ryz’n could tell he had deepened his voice artificially, because she recognized it immediately as that of Booger. Ryz’n pushed the door open, revealing Sheena, Bill and Bunnie who stepped just across the threshold into the crowded room.

“Oh?” Ryz’n feigned surprise. “You don’t have any female athletes here who require the use of the trainer’s facilities?” She appeared dismayed.

“Well, uh, sure. We have a couple I guess, but they don’t come in here. They take care of themselves, uh, somewheres else, I guess.” Ryz’n clucked her tongue repeatedly.

“Now that hardly seems fair, does it?”

The kid in the whirlpool grew bold. “Sure Baby, you can come in here anytime you want. Maybe you wanna hop in this tub with me, right now. Fix what ails ya, know what I mean?”

Ryz’n recognized his voice as the rude one on the phone yesterday. The little guy, she recognized as Booger. She noticed ice in a bucket. An idea occurred to her, but she needed to get some information first.

Bunnie rebuked the boy. “Sonny, that’s not being very polite. I think you should watch your mouth around we ladies.”

The brash kid shot right back at her.

“Why, I don’t know how much friendlier I could be, lady. I don’t offer to share my tub with just anyone, you know?”

The red haired kid back against the far wall cracked up, while the brash kid chuckled at his own wit. Ryz’n cut through the bull.

“Booger! I spoke with you yesterday on the phone, just about 24 hours ago, as a matter of fact. I was in Maryland then. I’m here now. And I would like some answers to some questions about this Strickler kid who plays ball for you.”

“Maryland? Yesterday? Gee, lady, I, I didn’t know you was serious about that. I thought you was just one of them chicks wanted to get into Dixie’s pants after they seen him on TV.”

The other two cracked up. Booger turned towards them, laughing nervously, before he returned his attention to Ryz’n.

“Honest, lady. You gotta believe me.”

The whirlpool kid volunteered, “Yeah, me too, I never figure—“

Ryz’n cut him off quickly, “Booger, YOU, I believe. But it’s all right. It’s okay. Just tell me where Nicky, I mean, this Strickler fellow is or give me a number at which I may reach him. That’s all I want.”

The whirlpool kid mimicked Ryz’n sarcastically, “Oooh, ‘at which I may reach him.’ Now that’s impressive, ain’t it Doc?” The befreckled, red head behind him suddenly displayed a sober expression, apparently realizing now Ryz’n meant business. He kept silent.

Again, Ryz’n ignored the brash kid. She concentrated on Booger.

“Booger, you are in charge when the coach is out, are you not?”

“Well ... yes Ma’am. That’s a fact. I am.” Puffing up his chest, he jabbed a quick sideways glance towards the kid in the whirlpool. “But I don’t know where Dixie is or how to get hold of him. The Coach might know. He just went over to the Porpoise Pen to get a bite to eat. He’ll be back by one.”

“None of you know where, uh, ‘Dixie’ is or how I could get hold of him?” The other two merely shook their heads negatively, suspiciously.

“Look here fellas, I’m not trying to hurt him. I’m here to help him. Y’all should want to help him overcome his amnesia, too.”

“What amnesia?” asked the brash one.

“His amnesia, you know from his head wounds?”

“We don’t know nothin’ of the kind. Dix is a regular guy, just like the rest of us. He ain’t got no amnesia. His head is fine!”

“Oh really? You know that for a fact, do you? Ever hear him talk about his family or where he grew up?”

“Maybe. So what of it? Dix is from Honolulu. We all know that. Ain’t that right, Doc?”

Doc nodded, but Booger said, “Yeah, but that’s all we know. Never heard him talk about his home, at all, never! And he is scarred up all over his neck, ear, shoulder. You know he’s missing a chunk out of his butt and one of his nuts. And them fingers, too!”

Doc spoke for the first time.

“That’s right, Moon. Booger’s right. Look lady, we’d like to help you but Dix is kind of quiet. He don’t hang with the rest of us much. He don’t talk much. I know he likes to go up to Vegas and gamble some, whenever he gets the chance. Last summer, he played ball down in Diego. I guess he’s either gone to Vegas for vacation or back to Diego to play ball or maybe, maybe, he went back home to the Islands. That’s all I know, all any of us knows. He still has another two years of eligibility, so he’ll be back next fall. Other than that, I don’t know nothin.’”

“Hey, doesn’t Dix have some chick down South?” asked the kid in the whirlpool with a smug look on his face. “Yeah, he was shacked up with her. Sure he was. I remember, she had a couple kids, black kids, too! We saw ‘em at the tournament when we played ball down there over spring break, remember?”

Doc shook his head in disgust.

“You know Mooney, you can be a real a-hole sometimes, you know that?” Moon chuckled contentedly.

Bravely, Ryz’n held her seething emotions in check and spoke up.

“Was this woman older? Say, late twenties and blonde, about five-nine or ten and heavily endowed?”

Doc looked to Booger. Ryz’n could tell from the looks on their faces that her description had been accurate.

“Heavily what?” asked Booger.

“Real big in the chest,” replied Ryz’n.

Booger’s eyes widened and he confessed, “Oh yeah, that sounds like her all right. Sure does, especially that emboweled part. She’s even more emboweled than you are!” Booger spoke in all sincerity. Doc nodded to confirm Booger’s assessment. Ryz’n turned to Bill.

“Darn it, Bill! She lied to us. That Dixon woman lied to us last winter! There was one minute, just one, when I thought—” Ryz’n caught herself, regained her composure and turned back to the ball players.

“Well, look fellas. You said this, this Dixie, didn’t talk much. Did he ever sing, play a harmonica, guitar or anything?” They shook their heads.

“No Ma’am. I never heard him sing, not even in the shower with the other guys, not on the bus, never.” Booger turned to the others. “How ‘bout you guys, ever hear him sing?” They shook their heads once more.

Doc confirmed. “No, never heard him sing. He don’t even laugh much, come to think of it. He’s kind of strange, keeps to himself mostly. I roomed with him a couple times on the road. In Vegas, he took me into the casinos. He has a system that works. He always came out with more cash than he had to start. He explained it to me, how it works, something about odds and number of face cards and stuff, but I didn’t quite figure it all out.”

“Ok, one more thing, guys: Take a look at these pictures and tell me if they look like this Dixie character?”

Ryz’n pulled out three pictures of Nicky from her small purse. There was the one she took of him at the beaver ponds leaning up against the “Bonnie,” their old aquamarine ’67 Pontiac Bonneville, before they had totaled it. There was a wedding picture of just the two of them, and there was a picture of him as the Pocomoke baseball MVP taken in his high school baseball uniform wearing his cap over his long black locks, in his batting stance, holding a bat. She handed the photos to Booger. He looked the first two pictures over, remarking that they looked like they could be Dix’s younger brother, but the third picture froze him.

“Yeah, this is Dix, before he got messed up, I guess, when he was younger. Definitely! He holds the bat like that and everything. Here, look guys!”

The other two looked over the pictures and concurred with Booger. The brash Mooney studied the wedding picture hard. He looked at Ryz’n who was wearing a smug, satisfied grin on her face, then he glanced back to the picture a couple times. He looked at her rings. Then he eyed Ryz’n up and down real hard.

“Well, leave something on me Moon or I might catch cold!” Ryz’n was indignant at his unsolicited, lascivious stare.

“Gee lady, I, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I was such a jerk. I, I had no idea. I—”

Ryz’n cut him off again.

“Oh, that’s all right Moon.” As she spoke, with one hand she snatched the photos smartly from his fingers and with the other hand Ryz’n scooped a bucket into a deep tray full of ice. Then Ryz’n dumped the ice and the bucket over the young man’s head and into his lap.

“I forgive you, really, I do, Moon.”

As Moon screamed, Ryz’n placed the photos between her lips and dried off her hands. She mumbled.

“Thanks, fellas. I appreciate all the help.” Ryz’n removed the photos from her mouth to speak more clearly. “By the way, if you happen to see me around

campus here next year with my husband, we'll just forget all about this little gathering, shall we?"

The other two nodded. Mooney cursed and picked ice cubes out of his bath. He tried to throw some ice at Ryz'n with his sore wing, but came up short, wincing in pain.

* * *

Ryz'n's crew left the field house to head back to this Porpoise Pen cafe, when they literally bumped into a dark haired, short, wiry man. Ryz'n took a small chance when she saw that he was wearing a purple and silver baseball cap with a silver 'P' on the front.

"Excuse me, are you the Baseball Coach?"

"Yes, I'm Tom Trahorn. Something I can do for you, Miss?" Tom Trahorn was a short, slender man with broad shoulders and narrow hips. His neatly barbered, dark hair was cropped short. He was clean shaven with firm, square jaw and a five o'clock shadow that ran ahead of schedule. His beaked nose appeared to have been broken on more than one occasion. His eyes were small, hard black coals, roofed by short, thin, black brows. Well tanned, the lines in his forehead and around the corners of his eyes placed him in his mid to late forties. That was Ryz'n's guess anyway.

Ryz'n introduced herself, as well as the others. Then she stated her business, showing the Coach the three photographs. He studied them hard, lingering over the third as his boys in the training room had done just moments earlier. Concern spread across his face as he looked directly at Ryz'n.

"Hmm, obviously he's grown up some. Yes! Well, why don't we go into my office where we can talk, Mrs. , uh, it is Mrs. Sheeboom, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right, Coach." Ryz'n smiled the three dimpled version, hoping to dispel his anxiety whatever it might be.

"Any relation to the Rock'N'Roller?"

"Yes, Coach. We're one in the same." Ryz'n smiled courteously.

"I see. I see. Well, good, won't you come with me, please?" He held his hand out, back toward the field house they had just left. The coach led them into his office, which was located on the first floor. The twenty by fifteen-foot square room was plainly furnished and contained a large walk-in closet and a couple of book shelves, filled with textbooks and pictures, mostly team picture. The office enjoyed a lovely view of the campus' grassy quadrangle from a long window six-foot high, which ran nearly the width of the room. The floor was a silver linoleum. It featured a sizable, purple "P", centered in the midst of four one foot square blocks that lay between his desk and the visitor chairs. Ryz'n thought the Spartan accommodations well suited a baseball coach.

Circa 1950, the metal furniture made the room appear more like a government office. The chairs had green plastic-like seat cushions built into the metal frames and elbow cushions plastered to the grey, metal arm rails. The airy seat backs were punctuated by three vertical metal bars. The austere furnishings struck

Ryz'n oddly because they were in sharp contrast to Dr. Mandl's comfortable office furnishings. Ryz'n reasoned that, compared to psychiatrists, coaches must spend little time in their offices.

Upon Coach Trahorn's desk was a can of pencils and pens, a legal pad, a plain black desk phone set, a large rolodex holding hundreds of cards and a picture frame. Ryz'n could see only the back of the frame. The Venetian blinds were pulled practically up to the ceiling, affording them a fair view of the campus's grassy quadrangle. The coach had only two visitor chairs, so Sheena had to stand, while Ryz'n and Bunnie sat down. Bill, of course, had his chair with him.

Coach Trahorn sat behind his desk and listened to everything Ryz'n had to say. His demeanor told Ryz'n that she had made her case well. This was no prank and she was not some bimbo looking to bed his star ballplayer. The coach leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desktop. He opened his hands and spread his fingers such that he could bounce his finger and thumb tips from one hand against their counterparts on the other. He stared into his desk for a minute before he stopped and pressed his fingers together. He looked up to Ryz'n.

"Look, Mrs. Sheeboom. I'll help you all I can, but, I'll tell you honestly, right up front, I don't know where Dix went." He hesitated and looked out the window at the quad. "Well, that's not exactly true. He was supposed to play summer ball for this friend of mine down in La Jolla, but Dix said he couldn't do it this year. He left me this note. Said he had 'some personal business to take care of' first." The coach turned back to Ryz'n. "Those were his exact words, Ma'am. Here ..." The coach reached inside his top desk drawer to produce an envelope containing a single piece of plain note paper. "Here it is." The coach handed the note over to Ryz'n for inspection. She opened it to read as follows:

Coach, something's come up. Got some personal business to take care of. Don't believe I'll be playing summer ball. Not around here anyways, but maybe back East. If it's possible, I'll play. Have a great summer. See you in September. Dix

Ryz'n was shocked at the neat, legible handwriting. Nicky never wrote like that. He couldn't even read his own handwriting half the time. Nick's philosophy was that writing neatly took too much time and effort for too little result. The fact that he indicated he was headed east, however, she believed to be an encouraging sign. She wondered what it was that had "come up?"

"I emphasized how important it was that he play summer ball to improve for next season," advised the Coach. "You know Miss, we came this close to winning the whole enchilada this year. We were almost there!" The Coach held his right forefinger and thumb so close together they nearly touched. "Dix was a big part of our success. I mean a big part. He was our MVP, far and away, above

the others. I, uh ... I'd sure hate to lose him for next year. Uh, if you know what I mean, Miss?"

The light went on inside Ryz'n's head. The coach was afraid this Dixie character might truly be her Nicky and that she might take his star player back East with her.

"Yes Coach, I think I know exactly what you mean. Actually, you might be interested to know that I have been accepted to three graduate schools, one of which is UCLA's school of business. I happen to be a diver with a year of eligibility left, myself. I've done pretty well in NAIA competition. This, Peppermount, is an NCAA school, isn't it Coach?"

The Coach nodded.

"And you have a co-ed swimming and diving team?"

"Yes, we're a member of the West Coast Conference."

"Well, as an honors student, I was also accepted into the graduate school of business at Stanford. If Peppermount has a similar school, well maybe, I could apply for the fall term. What do you think, Coach? You sure have a beautiful view of the Pacific here. Do you think, I'd have a chance at being accepted here at Peppermount?" The coach brightened noticeably.

"I think you would have no trouble whatsoever in being accepted here Miss, none whatsoever," he glowed. "Tell you what. I'll personally escort you over to the admission's office right now to insure you get everything you need to apply."

"Well thank you, Coach. That's very considerate of you, very considerate, indeed. Before we do that, however, is there anything else you can tell me that might help me to find my husband, I mean, uh, 'Dixie?'" He raised a forefinger and lowered his head as he reached for the phone.

"Hold on one second. Let me make a phone call."

He picked up the phone to dial long distance.

"You know I've always been afraid something like this might happen with Dix. My fortune in finding him has been just too good to be true." Ryz'n and her crew waited patiently as he dialed the number. The coach spoke into the receiver.

"Hello Clyde? Hey, you old so and so, how ya been?" ... "Yeah, for sure. The kids really surprised me this year. I tell you that Strickler kid, just would not let us lose. He damned near pulled out that last one against Texas, too" ... "Yeah. Look, Clyde, Strickler is the reason I'm calling. He's supposed to play for you this summer, so I was wondering if he had shown up yet." ... "Oh yeah? I see, unh-hunh. Did he say where? ... When? ... Uh-hunh? He will?" ... "All right. Thanks, much Clyde. Best of luck this summer." ... "OK. Yeah, yeah" ... Will do and say hello to Edith for me." ... "Right. Same to you. Bye." The coach hung up the phone with a wry smile and shook his head.

"Well, that was Clyde Wryde." The coach's face came alive. "He's a colorful character. Ha!"

The coach smiled and cleared his throat, getting back to the business at hand.

“Clyde coaches the La Jolla Hammers amateur baseball team. Dix played for them last summer.”

(“La Jolla!” It’s all fitting together.)

“He’s supposed to play with them again this year, but he ain’t. Dix told Clyde the same thing he told me. ‘Personal Business!’ Evidently, Dix informed Clyde that he had been to some record company, where Dix had obtained a lead that would help him find out about his past. It’s kinda funny ya know, because I didn’t even know Dix was an amnesic, until I questioned him once. That was after I saw that he had listed me as his next of kin as well as his emergency point of contact on our medical forms. Ha! Darned kid!”

The coach smiled faintly, as he shook his head at the memory. “Anyway, Dix has gone ‘back East somewhere to find [his] past.’ Clyde said those were Dixie’s exact words. So that pretty much confirms the note, you’re holding.” The coach was leaning forward on his forearms with his hands clasped together on his desktop around a yellow pencil. Suddenly, he grew anxious as his brow furrowed and he looked away from them out the window.

“When was that, Coach? When did that Clyde fellow say Nick, er Dix, was going ‘back East?’” Ryz’n was anxious now, too, almost frenetic, as she leaned forward in her seat, opposite the coach’s desk. The coach still looked away.

“That would have been, umm, yesterday, I think he said.”

“MY GOSH! I just missed him!” She slapped down with both hands on the chair’s arm rails. Her jaw fell open as she stared at her sister standing near her. “Sheena, if I hadn’t gone parasailing last Saturday, he’d be in my arms right now.” She turned back to Coach Trahorn. “Coach, did this Clyde fellow say how Nick would be traveling?”

“No, no, he didn’t. However, knowing Dixie, as I do, I believe he’ll be riding his motorcycle. He and I have had several go-rounds about that modified chopper of his, believe me.”

“What about this record company? Did he say which one Ni-Dix had visited?”

“No, he didn’t mention that either. I’m sorry, that’s all the information I have, Miss, I mean Ma’am.” Again, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair and looked out the window, avoiding her gaze. He tapped the eraser end of his yellow-orange pencil on the desk top. The Coach cleared his throat nervously.

“Is it really, Coach?” Surprisingly Ryz’n’s tone changed, turning accusatory.

“Well, yes, yes it is,” replied the coach defensively, still gazing outside.

“You don’t have any other information that might help me, do you?” asked Ryz’n slyly, tilting her head to her right and looking up from under her eyelids at him. “Such as information about a widowed blond by the name of Dixon, who lives in La Jolla with a couple of colored kids?”

Coach Trahorn sighed deeply, slamming down the yellow pencil he had been holding onto the calendar desk blotter. He recoiled back into his huge, overstuffed easy chair. The large, green, executive chair seemed to swallow up the diminutive coach. He rubbed either side of his forehead between the fingers

and thumb of his left hand, slowly massaging as if he were trying to rub a headache out of the sides of his skull.

“I, uh, I didn’t know how to approach that subject with you, I uh ...”

“Well, I suggest you approach it honestly, Coach, like you have with everything else.” Ryz’n remained on the offensive. “What I want to know, is how long have they been together and how serious is it?”

The coach cleared his throat, again, nervously.

“Honestly, I don’t know Ma’am how long it’s been ongoing, but they were together last summer. I know that, because Dix listed her as his emergency contact when he played for Clyde’s club last summer in La Jolla.” The coach sighed. “When we played in this year’s spring tournament down there, she took her kids out of school to come watch our games. I even let the boys sit on the bench with us to act as unofficial batboys. They’re really cute kids, real effervescent and outgoing, eager to please. You know the type?”

He looked at Ryz’n hopefully, but she merely nodded solemnly. She was in no mood to hear good things about the kids of the adulterous woman who had lied to her about knowing Nicky. The coach spoke with equal solemnity.

“As to the other question, as far as I could tell, well, it’s as serious as it gets, Ma’am. Dixie wanted to marry her this summer, now right after our season. He had asked about the school policy for married players. You know, living arrangements, that sort of thing? I told him I discouraged my ballplayers from marrying until after they had graduated, or at least exhausted their athletic eligibility. Of course, we do have a ‘married’ dorm, and there is off campus housing available for rent during the school year just a block or two away. Nevertheless, I asked him to hold off a while longer. Maybe ‘cause I didn’t want him distracted for next year. I don’t know. I do know something didn’t feel right about the whole thing. You know? I mean, I kept thinking her husband was going to show up out of nowhere sooner or later, just like you have now. Who knows? Maybe he will yet? He was listed as an MIA, also, I believe. But, evidently, she has some documentation that corroborates his death, though I don’t know if it’s anything official.”

Now shaken, Ryz’n “zoned out.” This was not something she had counted on. Finding Nick had been her overriding concern. She thought that if she could find him, they’d be together. Then, everything else would work itself out. Ryz’n never dreamed he might be interested in another woman, interested enough to marry her, interested enough to assume responsibility as well for raising her two children, two Negro children at that.

The Coach, Sheena, Bill and Bunnie all watched her, waiting for Ryz’n to regain her composure. Then Sheena resumed the interrogation in Ryz’n’s behalf.

“Coach, tell me, Nick, uh, I mean Dixie, is someone who would stand out easily in a crowd, with his many physical defects, two-toned eyes, gold capped teeth, etc. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The coach nodded as Ryz'n refocused and cut Sheena off, "Yes, so how do you explain that, supposedly, seasoned private investigators, here in L. A. would be unable to pick up his trail and track him down?"

Stumped, the coach shook his head.

"I don't know Ma'am, but there are a hell of a lot of people out here in Southern California. I do know that Dix tried to blend in, to camouflage himself as much as possible. He is very self-conscious about his appearance, his defects as you mentioned."

"What do you mean by camouflage, Coach? 'Splain, Lucy." Ryz'n smiled graciously again. She leaned forward in her chair engagingly, as she burned a hole into the coach's coal black eyes. The Coach chuckled at her humor. She could tell she had won some points with him. He leaned forward over his desk, clasping his hands together as he had earlier.

"Well Ricky, it's like this. Dix has a rubber ear, which he wears over his mutilated one. The ear, constructed especially for him, looks real, honest, it does. The darned thing almost feels real, too. The only time he takes it off in public is to swim or play ball or if he's riding at high speeds on his motorcycle. The gold caps on his dentures are fake. He can pop them on and off, like a pair of sunglasses. He wears them only on special occasions, like our national TV game last Saturday. Otherwise, he wears an upper plate of two white, porcelain dentures, at all other times. As for his fingers, Dix stuffs his right hand in his pockets, as much as possible. He does everything left handed, except throw a baseball. Ya know, Dix can throw left-handed, but he can't control the ball as well as he does throwing from the right side. Then too, night or day, inside or outdoors, he's always wearing his sunglasses. At first, I thought he was some prima donna trying to act cool, but then we all realized he was just shy.

"Dixie also wears his hair extremely long, longer than anyone who has ever played for me. I'm pretty lenient on the hair thing, not like a lot of other coaches, but Dixie stretches my leniency to its maximum limit. I know why he refuses to cut his hair. He wants to hide his ear and his scarred neck. Some of the other ballplayers followed his example, but I let it slide. Humph! After the success we enjoyed this year, I'd say I made a wise decision." He grinned triumphantly.

"You'd almost think that he was trying to conceal his identity," offered Bill.

"Well, some friends of mine who saw him pitch on TV said they could see his deformed ear very clearly," Ryz'n offered. "Evidently, the announcers made a point of it, using it to point out his, uh, unique history or lack of it."

"Yeah, well he doesn't wear his fake ear when he plays ball. He said his ear had been knocked off a couple times during a game and that was kind of embarrassing for him. So he don't wear it any more. And you see, Dix has a habit, when he's on the mound, of putting the baseball in his glove, taking his cap off in his right hand and wiping the sweat off his face and brow with the crook of his right arm and forearm." The coach demonstrated the maneuver for his audience. "Invariably, when he does that, he pulls the hair back away from his

ear and neck. He's usually concentrating so hard on his pitching, he doesn't notice he has exposed his bad ear."

"Yeah, Nicky used to do that. I remember, now. You remember, Sheena?" Sheena nodded uncertainly. Ryz'n sought a little more history on "Dix." "How did you first come across him, Coach?"

"Oh, just a fluke, really." He leaned back in his chair, obviously relishing in the retelling of his greatest find. "Was over in the islands, vacationing with my family just before school started, two years ago. August of '73, it was. My wife wanted to take the girls shopping, so I decided to take my son around, show him some of our military bases over there. We had already toured all the typical sights in Pearl Harbor, so we drove our rental car over to Kaneohe Naval Air station and Marine Corps Base to look around. Little Tommy has always expressed an interest in all things military.

"Well, we happened to find a ball game, wouldn't ya know? Some Marines were playing a team of college kids from Maui College, just kind of informal like. We watched for a while, until little Tommy became bored, asked to leave.

So we're walking away when all of a sudden I hear this fantastic 'CRRRAAACCKKK!' The coach smacked his hands together sharply to imitate the sound. "Just like that slam he hit the other day in Rosenblatt." The coach's eyes flashed with the recollection. "Something, I've only heard in a big league park. I turn around just in time to catch Dixie's follow through. Then he's off like a rabbit. There were no fences, see? Just the parade ground. He had smacked it to dead center, over the fielder's head, the length of the parade ground. I mean that ball was halfway back to the states, by the time Dixie had reached second. And he was still flyin'. From the way he was runnin', you'd have thought the survival of the whole free world rested on his scoring in the next two seconds. Mann! He could fly! Still does." The coach's voice trailed off ...

"Anyway, after the game, I introduced myself, gave him my card, asked him to look me up, if he came to the mainland. Dix was playing for the Marines. The other college coach, from Maui, who had been coaching his college freshman against Dix and the Marines, had beaten me to Dixie. He had persuaded Dix to come play for him when Dixie got out of the service, which Dix did for a year. Then he came over here to look me up. Well, I had no scholarships left. Got him to enroll in Cerritos Junior College where a friend of mine coaches—"

Bill interrupted. "That school is right behind my house a couple of blocks. You mean Nicky was there, just two blocks away and I didn't know it?"

"Gee, I guess so, because he studied there last fall. Then a partial scholarship opened up here. A player flunked out after the fall semester. So I got in touch with Dix, got him enrolled here for the spring semester. That's about it, really.

"Ya know, he's the best, danged ballplayer I ever recruited and I would have never found him if my wife hadn't wanted to go shopping and my son hadn't wanted to inspect a military base." Ryz'n congratulated the coach excitedly.

“You got the best Coach, THE Best! Bet you didn’t know that Nicky practically won the Maryland State Baseball championship single-handed our junior year of high school?”

“Well, no I didn’t.” The Coach leaned forward interested in Ryz’n’s comment.

Emotional now, Ryz’n relied. “Yep! He did. And he also won the state 400 meters and helped our school win the four by one-hundred state relay championship, and finish as state runners-up in the four by four-hundred relays.”

Ryz’n could not restrain herself from proudly recounting all of her husband’s high school athletic feats. The Coach encouraged her with his smiling attentions.

“And you know what else?” The coach shook his head, apparently much amused by Ryz’n’s enthusiastic retelling of her husband’s exploits. “Nicky was county wrestling champ, but he was ‘DQed’ for weight in the state final.

In her excitement, Ryz’n had risen out of her seat, before she noticed the Coach and everyone else grinning at her. Slowly and sheepishly, she sat back down.

“Ooops! I, I guess I, uh, got a little carried away.” A little bit embarrassed, she slid back into her chair, smoothing out her skirt which did not require smoothing.

“No, not at all Ms. Sheeboom. Ya know, I can’t say it surprises me. Never seen a kid, who, in his own quiet way, hates to lose as much as Dixie. He darn near brought us back against Texas, with that slammer in the ninth. If he could have gotten up one more time with runners on base, I believe he’d have won that game for us, too, like he has so many others this year. Dix has got the talent and the temperament to go to ‘The Show.’”

“What ‘Show’ is that, Coach?”

“You know, the ‘Bigs’! Dix could go all the way, if he keeps at it and ...” the Coach looked sideways at Ryz’n ... “Don’t get screwed up with some older dame with two kids!”

“Well, Coach you can bet I intend to do everything I can to prevent that from happening. Believe me, there’s only one person I know who hates to lose more than Nicky, I mean Dixie.”

“Yes? And who is that?”

“ME!!!”

“HA!” the coach slapped the desktop sharply.” Well now, I believe you, Ma’am. And for Dixie’s sake, as well as yours, I’m rooting for you, too. Say! Wait just a second, here. I think I’ve got something you might be interested in.”

The coach rose from his desk, stepping back to his corner closet, where he opened the door to point to some boxes inside. “These are some of Dixie’s things. I volunteered to store them here for him over the summer. Maybe you’d like to take a look.”

“Oh yes, I would, very much. Thank you, Coach.”

Ryz’n and Sheena sauntered over to the closet to inspect the three boxes. Two boxes contained textbooks, notebooks and school supplies. The third contained some bedding materials, a yellow metal desk lamp and a Sony clock radio with snooze alarm. Ryz’n noted the subjects of the textbooks: astronomy,

macroeconomics, biology, literature books, like *The Iliad*, *Gilgamesh*, *The Aeneid*, *Dante's Inferno*, *Don Quixote* (and *Cliff Notes* for everyone of them—she smiled), *History of Western Civilization To 1500 A. D.*, *History of the Church up to the Reformation*, and *Psychology*. In the psychology book, she noted, as she thumbed quickly through it, that all text concerning memory or amnesia was highlighted. She had to chuckle at a Pre-Calculus textbook, because Nicky had passed Calculus with a “B” in his lone semester with her at M&L. Mixed in among the college textbooks, she found some Marine Corps manuals. Those regarding drilling, the manual of arms and technical subjects, she passed over quickly. However, Ryz’n lingered over the third, entitled NAVMC 2643 Manual for Drummers and Buglers.

“Coach? Did Dixie ever bugle? Play the drums?”

“No, no, not to my knowledge.” He shook his head.

“That’s strange. He has a Marine Corps manual here for drumming and bugling.” Ryz’n shrugged her shoulders, before she resumed her treasure hunt. The others looked on with interest, watching Ryz’n rapt in discovery.

Ryz’n came across a Cinema Criticism textbook, which had several chapters concerning films of the Fifties. Nicky had highlighted an entire chapter devoted to James Dean and “The Method.” She also found three Spanish books, two grammar books and one book containing short stories. She had taken Spanish while he had taken French all those years in high school. Now he, too, was studying Spanish. Strangely, the most interesting textbook of all proved to be *The Aesthetic Evolution of Opera*.

Ryz’n found several cartoon drawings inside the front and back covers, as well as on the text’s front flyleaf. She chuckled at some, which obviously depicted his professor and were quite humorous. However, when Ryz’n spotted the back flyleaf, she stopped cold. There was a beautiful pen and pencil silhouette profile drawing of a gorgeously voluptuous nude, young woman. She appeared to be receding into the mist, wearing the moon for a halo, and the mist for a mask. Like Ryz’n, the girl had a pronounced hourglass form and long dark, thick, wavy hair. In the bottom left hand corner of the page were these words:

If I can find you, I will find me.

Ryz’n clutched the opened book to her chest. Close to tears, she bowed her head in silent prayer that he would find her, as well as himself in the process.

“May I have this book, Coach?,” she choked. Her tone was as deadly solemn as a morgue. “If Dixie is not Nick, I’ll return it by next semester ... Please?” implored Ryz’n. The unusual request flabbergasted the coach.

“Well, I, I don’t know. Are you that sure ... ”

“Look Coach, that’s me!” Ryz’n showed the sketch to the coach. “I know the exact moment, he is thinking of there. Believe me, I think of it often, myself.

Nicky, I mean Dixie, even wrote a song about it, ‘Silver Right.’ It was on our third LP. HA! It was a decent hit, even though it was atypically very lyrical.”

“Dixie wrote a song? I’ll be damned. He don’t seem the type. That’s funny.”

“A song? Why! He’s written hundreds.”

“You don’t say?” Coach Trahorn studied the girl, then he studied the picture. Then, like Mooney earlier, he studied Ryz’n again. “There does appear to be ...” He cleared his throat out of embarrassment and paused to think it over. “Well, I guess it will be OK, but please return it at all costs. Though I can’t believe he’s going to major in opera.” They all laughed.

“Don’t worry Coach, I’ll return the book and Nicky, uh Dixie, as well.”

On her knees now, Ryz’n then moved on to the box of bedding, not expecting to find much. Instead, she found one of the strongest clues she could imagine. When she picked up the pillow to look beneath it, the girl caught a whiff of Nicky’s scent: a mixture of Old Spice, sweat, pine needles and sunshine. That scent, she had not smelled so potently in three years, a scent that did not fade away in her memory. It brought him back to her as no other clue had, becoming the very embodiment of her lost lover. She caressed the pillow as if it were her Nick. Nick’s scent brought back, oh, those close, most intimate memories. She felt weak. Her juices started to flow. Separated from her husband for over three years, she now buried her nose in the pillow, barely able to hold back her emotions. She desired so much for him to hold her.

Sheena knelt tenderly beside her older sister. Her concern prompted Ryz’n to become conscious of their parents’ parting admonitions to Sheena about Ryz’n’s alleged mental frailty. Sheena whispered softly into Ryz’n’s ear.

“Oh Baby, what’s wrong? You don’t want the Coach here to feel bad, do you? Come on now, pull yourself together, Honey.” Sheena turned to the Coach, almost pleading, “It’s been over three years Coach since she’s seen him and over two since we even heard from him.” The coach nodded. He seemed to understand.

“Come on, Baby. Come on now, Honey.” Bill and Bunnie’s expressions, reflected their sympathy for Ryz’n, as well.

Ryz’n rose to her feet unsteadily, where she turned to address them all. She wiped away some escaping crocodile tears by bringing her nose into the pillow, before she raised her face from it, thereby hiding the depth of her distress from them. “You see, I can smell him, his scent on this pillow. I always loved his scent, ‘Nickysmell’, except,” she chuckled self-consciously, and looked off into the distant past, “except for about six weeks when I was pregnant. Then I could not stand it—made me sick to my stomach. Nick resented that.” She giggled nervously. “He thought I didn’t love him anymore. I tell you—” She held the pillow aloft. “There’s no doubt in my mind, now, no doubt at all.” Sheena sniffed the pillow, but her expression indicated she had detected nothing special. Sheena eyed her sister suspiciously. Ryz’n purposefully ignored her. “Coach, can I—”

“Sure, sure. Go ahead, it’s yours. Let me know, how else I can help.”

“Well, you’ve already been a huge, huge help, Coach.” The girl rallied with a game smile, as a pair of large tears slid down either cheek. “But, if you could show me around to that admission’s office, I’d really appreciate that, COACH!”

“Yes, Ma’am. Yes Ma’am,” grinned the coach broadly. “Right this way.” They all began to exit the office when Sheena stopped them.

“Ry! Look at this.” From the innocuous box of bedding, in between the blanket and the towels, Sheena had unearthed *GRT*’s first two record albums. The group picture of the band on the back of their first album cover had been cut out and the remaining rectangular aperture covered over with masking tape.

“Incredible! This is incredible!”

Bill asked what was so “incredible?” Ryz’n explained that Nick had the band’s first two albums. The missing picture from the back album cover means he knows, or suspects strongly that he is one of the people in the band. The trouble is the way the names are juxtaposed on that particular cover to the individual band member is misleading. Our keyboardist, trombonist and semi-manager was a fellow by the name of Todd Strickler. He’s dead now but that’s whose name Nick is using, thinking that he is Todd.”

“Well, he goes by James Dean Strickler here,” volunteered the coach.

“Can we look at the point of contact form you were talking about earlier, Coach?”

“Sure.”

The coach crossed the room to open a file drawer in a cabinet by the wall behind Bill. He leafed through some folders before he pulled Dix’s. “Here it is.”

He brought the folder over to show Ryz’n.

“You’re right. Guess I had forgotten. He identified himself here as ‘James Dean Todd Strickler.’ But he never goes by ‘Todd.’”

“Look at that date of birth, Coach, April 17, 1952. He was born September 22, 1953.”

“Well, if he is who you say he is. I imagine there will be quite a few things, Dix will have to put right.”

“Yes, that’s for certain. Suppose we go fill out those application forms now, Coach?”

“Great. Right this way.”

* * *

After Ryz’n had received and completed the forms Coach Trahorn had obtained for her, the Coach gave them a brief, but first class, tour of the ocean side, palisade campus. It was truly a beautiful, immaculate campus. The liberal arts university was a private, Lutheran affiliated school with an undergraduate enrollment a little over three thousand students. There was also a law school and a graduate school in business, which, between them, served another seventeen hundred graduate students. Total student population, including the graduate schools, was just under five thousand. The low buildings, no more than two or three stories high, were made of white stucco and wore gently sloping red tile

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hats. The Spanish style architecture meshed well with the Hispanic heritage of Southern California. As they toured the manicured, green, grass-carpeted school grounds, Ryz'n asked the Coach about Nicky.

Specifically, she wanted to know why the kids in the trainer's room had said that Nick never smiled or laughed, why he never sang and why he kept to himself so much. The Coach explained he did not know for sure, but as long as Dixie was passing in the classroom and excelling on the ball field, the Coach did not feel he should intrude. Coach Trahorn indicated that he felt he was building up a trust with Dix slowly. Eventually, the Coach knew Dixie would come around to open up with him. He reminded Ryz'n that Dixie had been enrolled there only for a semester. The Coach indicated most of his players had followed the same pattern. Dixie was merely shy and taking a little longer than most "to come around." The Coach volunteered that, just a week ago, Dixie had been drafted in the twenty-seventh round of the Major League's fifty round June amateur baseball draft. However, Dix had assured Coach Trahorn that he intended to complete college before he became a professional ballplayer.

Before she left the Peppermount campus, Ryz'n likewise assured the Coach that if, as she felt certain, his Dixie and her Nicky were one in the same, she would return to the lovely little campus by the sea with her husband by her side. Coach Trahorn told Ryz'n that he felt she would be as good as her word. He also said he was relieved to know he would not be losing his star ballplayer. Maybe Peppermount could make another run at the national title next year, because the Fish would have all their key personnel returning. He wished Ryz'n much luck in finding Dixie. She left him her card, just in case Dixie doubled back. She added Bill's number and her parents' to the back of the card.

* * *

Back in Bill's black Caddy, the foursome floated on elation born of hope, hope based in evidentiary fact. "My prayers are being answered Bill. It's just all coming together so beautifully." Ryz'n beamed, momentarily choosing not to think of the Dixon woman.

"It looks good, I must admit. It's looking damned good! What's next, Ry?"

"Halo Platters. That snake in the grass Jerry Stiehlmoir might know something. I'm guessing that's where Nicky went." Ryz'n sniffed her pillow while she looked at Nick's sketch of her.

Bunnie reneged. "Well, kids, I wish you the very best, but Ed's coming off the dialysis machine, you know Bill, so I want to have things ready for him."

"OK, Bunnie. No problem."