

~ Chapter 9: La Jolla Hurt ~

The next morning, Saturday, Ryz'n repeated her early exercise and cooking routine from the previous day. However, before they left for La Jolla, she called home to see if Nicky had somehow obtained the phone number and called there. Her parents assured her that he had not. The Ryans were concerned Ryz'n might be going over the edge. Ryz'n had yet to meet with the psychiatrist her mother had lined up for her. That appointment was set for the next week. They asked to speak with Sheena, who confirmed everything her sister had told them.

Ryz'n listened in on the extensions as Sheena promised her parents that she would look out for her big sister. After she had hung up the receiver, Sheena had to shake her head. Her long, soft and shiny, dark brown hair, shimmered over and around her broad shoulders. Ryz'n asked what was wrong. Sheena said their mom and dad had told her Ryz'n's mind was not to be trusted. They expected Sheena to maintain a level head, so she could protect Ryz'n from herself, as Ryz'n had done for Sheena all those years they had grown up together. Now, they said, it was Sheena's turn to return the favor. Sheena confessed that their parents just were not getting it. Fantastic as it might be to comprehend, Nicky was alive and well and he was coming home, just like Ryz'n had always said he would. Sheena smiled reassuringly and hugged Ryz'n.

On their way south along the coast, the trio again sat, hiding behind their FosterGrants across the Caddy's wide front seat. Sheena asked Ryz'n just how she had known all along Nicky would come home to her, how she could have always been so sure.

"It was Our Lord," claimed Ryz'n matter of factly, sitting barefooted with her feet resting on the hump which ran down the center of the car floor. "When I prayed, I felt Jesus, I mean his words, inside of me, here, next to my heart, [she tapped her chest above her heart with her fist] speaking to me, saying calmly: **'Most assuredly I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you.'** And so I prayed in Jesus' name that Nicky would return to me safely. And then, I felt His word inside of me again: **'Daughter, now you have sorrow, but in a little while he will see you again and your heart will rejoice and your joy no one will take from you.'**"

"Wait a minute. You're saying God talked to you, directly to you?" cried Sheena in disbelief. Ryz'n suspected Sheena thought that maybe their parents knew something Sheena did not know after all, that maybe Ryz'n was a little off upstairs.

"No, that's not what I said. I said 'I felt Jesus, (His Word) inside of me here, in my heart', I *felt* those words. It's like I recalled them from some of the readings

during mass, you know? Nicky had the same thing happen to him a couple of times. You remember, I told you about the Buzzbees and how God's Voice saved Nick and Terri Schieffer and Patty Slattery that fatal night?"

"Yeah, you told me, but I never really bought that. Now you're saying the same thing happened to you? Ryz'n, I think you should keep your appointment with that psychiatrist next week." Sheena turned to Ryz'n. The FosterGrants hid her expression, but the tone of her voice was most serious. Ryz'n looked at her.

"You don't believe me? My own sister! Sheena, Sheena. I forgive you, Honey." Ryz'n looked up at the Caddy's ceiling momentarily. "Oh Lord, please increase her faith." Then to Sheena, she added, "Well, when you see Nicky, in my arms, alive and well, you'll see." Ryz'n nodded knowingly as she turned her face to look forward through the windshield.

"Yeah, well, hey! I'm lookin forward to it, believe me, too" cried Sheena, who returned her gaze to the road ahead, also.

"You and me both," replied Ryz'n, grinning from ear to ear, still staring straight ahead, smug behind her dark glasses.

"Make that three of us" added Bill, who had been listening to the girls quietly, while he drove. "Hey, ya know Ry? We could stop by your property in Laguna if you like. Kind of check it out. We'll be passing right by there on the freeway." Ryz'n turned her head towards Nick's uncle.

"Gee Bill. I don't think so. I know that beach front property is worth close to three-quarters of a million now and it would be the responsible thing to do, but my mind is on Nicky and I can't think of anything else. Besides, it wouldn't be polite of me to drop in on my tenants unannounced. After all he is one of the most famous symphony conductor-composers in the world. Believe I can trust him."

"Yeah, you're right, Ry." Bill patted her on the knee to reassure her. "Ya know, I got some friends in Newport and when I'm in the area, I drive by your place over on Cliff. And it looks like it's still standing up OK." Bill grinned.

"That's good to hear Bill. Ya know since you bring it up, how would you like to go into the real estate business? I'm liable to be buying some more property out here and you could manage them for me, for me and Nicky that is."

"Aw, I wouldn't be any good for ya."

"I'd pay ya top dollar, you know that, Bill."

"Look Ry, most of these places out here got a lot of steps. And my chair can't maneuver on the beach. I don't mind lookin' out for ya once in a while, but, nah, I don't wanna waste my time taking real estate classes." Ryz'n nodded and patted Bill on the knee, forgetting he couldn't feel her hand. She pulled back in despair when, beneath his slacks, she felt how skeletal his leg truly was.

Sheena piped up, leaning forward and turning toward Bill, so she could talk across her sister. "Good for you Bill. Our flippin' accountant Jose has got Ryz'n in over her head with this real estate junk anyway. He thinks he's playin' "Monopoly" with her money. Says his goal is to buy some property for him and

Ryz'n in each of the fifty states and in DC and the territories as well. He's bought a rental home in northwest DC already."

"No kiddin'!"

"Yeah, condominiums is the latest thing and he's into them big time. He got Ryz'n to buy a couple in the District up in some apartment building over by Embassy Row. And you know Ryz'n and Nick bought that penthouse in the oldest high rise resort hotel in Ocean City. And if that wasn't enough, this Jose talks Ryz'n into to goin' halvesies with him and his wife on the penthouse next door to Ry's. Can you believe that?" Sheena talked across her sister to Bill, as if Ryz'n were not even there, let alone sitting right next to her. "And all these properties are for rent, except for some deserted ranch in the middle of nowhere, some mountains in Arizona!"

"New Mexico, Sis. At least, get it right. We only put forty per cent down on all those places. And you forgot about the ski chalet in Aspen, which you and Bryce took full advantage of last winter? Over semester break I might add, while I was in Laos looking for Nicky!" Ryz'n slowly boiled at her sister's comments.

"Well, that place is okay. In fact, if you want to sell it, Bryce and I would be glad to take it off your hands."

"Oh! What a hypo—" Sheena cut in.

"Bill! Yet with all her money, Ry doesn't have a nice place of her own, except that little two bedroom cottage down at M&L! When she's not at school, she lives at home with our parents, for cryin' out loud!"

"Now, wait a minute Sheena. You know why I live at home, if you could call it that. It's because I'm never there, practically never, anyway. And I've told you repeatedly that when Nicky comes back, we'll buy a nice home TOGETHER! You never thought he'd come back until now. So I'm lookin' smarter and smarter, all the time, aren't I?"

"And that real estate Jose got me and Nicky are good investments, everyone of them." Ryz'n turned from Sheena to Bill now to put her case. "Jose explained how you put your down payment into these properties and take out a mortgage. Then, instead of paying your cash out to the government in taxes, you pay off the interest on the mortgages which gives you a great tax deduction and the revenue from the rentals pays the mortgage and insurance. As long as the Government keeps subsidizing the interest like that, we'll make a lot of money." Ryz'n turned back to Sheena indignantly. "That way you use your money to buy more valuable properties instead of paying Frank Federal Worker to count icebergs off Greenland!"

Sheena rejoined, "Yeah, with all them mortgages you're liable to go broke if you lose your renters. And then, see what happens. You'll be dancin' that strip tease for Jerry Stiehmohr yet."

"Oh, please, Sheena!"

"And you know what else, Bill?"

Wisely now, Bill merely shrugged his shoulders and remained silent.

“Well, the real topper is that forsaken pile of dirt and mangroves she bought down in Southwestern Florida near the Everglades. You’ve heard them jokes about buying swamp land down there? Well, that’s my sister!” Sheena nodded knowingly and jerked a thumb at Ryz’n. “Yeah, that one really takes the cake. She bought herself almost two square miles of the most worthless, desolate ground you ever laid your eyes on.” Sheena shook her head with her long hair shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the windshield.

Ryz’n exhaled dramatically as she leaned back against the seat with her arms crossed tightly over her chest, holding her piece.

“Yeah, she’s making faces now Bill, but she knows I’m right on this one,” persisted Sheena unabated. “That place is full of snakes, ‘coons, spiders, all kinds of biting insects. I mean some big man-eatin’ bugs! The whole place is infested with ‘em. They got mosquitoes down there as big as fighter planes and sand fleas, red ants, and horse flies that look B-52’s. And alligators, too!”

“Oh come off it, Sheena. We’ve never seen a gator down there. For cryin’ out loud! It’s right on the Gulf. I have big plans for that property. And those bugs don’t bother me at all. They bother you, because you drink all those soda pops and eat all that sweet stuff that’s bad for you. They sense that sugar right through your pores. I’ve said this before. If you would just eat sensibly like I do—”

“Like you? HA! With all that fish and herring. Yeah, right! ...”

Bill drove on quietly for the most part, leaving the sisters to banter with one another. Occasionally, Bill would be called upon to affirm or refute an opinion with the shrug of his shoulders or a shake of his head. Ryz’n didn’t realize it then, but she later would learn that Bill had put Sheena up to these debates. He had thought it would help take Ryz’n’s mind off of Donna Dixon and Nicky, during what would have otherwise been a long ride, with too much time for Ryz’n to think. In retrospect, Ryz’n would see Bill had been right, but his plan failed. After over half an hour of heated debate, Ryz’n shut up and refused further discussion of any kind. The lying Donna Dixon drew her thoughts like a powerful magnet. Only an occasional glimpse of the eye-pleasing, blue Pacific Ocean from the coastal highway could sidetrack Ryz’n’s thoughts of Mrs. Dixon and only then, momentarily.

After another half hour or so of quiet running, the trio found Donna Dixon’s street. They located her stucco bungalow at the end of the court, where Ryz’n and Bill had left it almost five months ago. Before Ryz’n could follow Sheena out of the passenger seat side of the car, Bill seized Ryz’n forcefully by her left forearm. Bill’s firm grip startled Ryz’n, snapping her head around. He had her full attention. Bill removed his shades so that his bright blue eyes bore through her sunglasses.

“Ryz’n, I know you want to confront this woman, but, remember, she has two children who are old enough to understand some things. If you feel you must lay into her, please do it in private, away from the kids. You can even take her for a ride in the Caddy, if you want, OK? In fact, here, take the keys.”

Ryz'n accepted the car keys from him. She had forgotten Bill was an experienced man, who had survived and overcome many trials and tribulations, accidents, surgeries, marriages, divorces, even the suicides of a step-daughter and a close friend. Bill had played the chauffeur, acted like hired help, staying out of things, but now he was giving her good, sound advice.

"You're right, Uncle Bill. I'll try to do that." She smiled. "If I get out of line, well, just slap me a good one, OK?" Bill winked at her.

"Here. Come around here and help me into my chair, will ya?" Ryz'n had been around Bill long enough to know that Bill did not ask people for help with his chair, unless, as in this case, it benefited the helper more than he. In this instance, by allowing Ryz'n to assist him, he was telling her that he trusted her, but he also was helping her to remain calm by focusing on his needs and not her worries. Ryz'n understood all this.

"Sure, be glad to, Bill."

Ryz'n slung her thin, but long, brown strapped, rawhide handbag over her shoulder, as she helped Bill into his chair. She wheeled the paralytic down the Dixon's sidewalk to the front door, following Sheena's lead. As they stood outside the Dixon's door, both Ryz'n and Sheena dressed as they had the day before, only the colors had changed. Ryz'n wore an identically cut silk suit of sliver grey with a forest green, satin blouse, while Sheena also had outfitted herself in a split front, green denim, high waisted midi-skirt that thankfully concealed her navel because her white cotton midriff, sleeveless top did not. Bill, always dapper, always neat, waited with them in pressed, grey cotton dress slacks, a light blue, rather than the dark blue, ban-lon shirt of the prior day and his spotlessly shiny, black, tasseled loafers. As Ryz'n looked around, she thought the place was somehow different from their last visit during the past winter. Then she realized what it was: all these cars stacked in the driveway and around the court. Sheena knocked, prompting a delayed response from a cute little black boy about six who answered from behind the screen door.

"You have to go 'round back. You can't come in here, Ma'am. My mommy says, 'All cut-termers have to go 'round.'" He repeated the phrase in a sing-song monotone as though he was bored with repeating the rule. The whites of his eyes and teeth, of which the front upper two were missing, shone cutely in contrast to his dark features. The child pointed to his right, dipping his right hand and rolling it over, indicating they had to "go 'round". Sheena looked at Ryz'n, who set Bill's left brake on and walked up to the screen door. She pushed her dark glasses back onto the crown of her head over the ever present, gold ribbon and half-kneeled, half-squatted down, in her accustomed, former softball catcher's stance, only with her knees politely together. She gathered her handbag into her lap and spoke with the boy through the door's bottom window screen. This was no easy task as her tight, suit mini-skirt constricted her, but it was nothing the former softball catcher could not overcome.

“Honey, we aren’t here as customers. We just need to talk to your mommy for a few minutes. That’s all.” Ryz’n smiled appealingly. The boy smiled back. *He’s a cutie all right.* One day she hoped to have a cutie like that of her own.

From around a corner inside the house, she heard the rumbling of a booming, bass voice, which preceded the appearance of a hulking one-armed black man. The half hulk of a man sported an ‘Afro’ beyond his receding hairline and propelled himself in a motorized wheel chair.

“What’s goin’ on, Dre? Lemme see.” The man spoke gruffly as he tugged from behind, on the boy’s shoulder.

The chair’s motor hummed. The small boy stepped aside, climbing over the back of the couch. “Something I can help you people with?” The black man spoke roughly, but when he saw Bill in his wheelchair, his bass softened.

“We just wanted to speak with Mrs. Dixon for a moment, if she’s home,” replied Ryz’n pertly, hiding her unladylike posture by rising erect before the screen door.

The black man eyed Ryz’n up and down a couple times, glancing once over at Sheena and pretty much ignoring Bill, before he answered.

“She’s out back, servin’ her customers.” He motioned slightly with his head backwards, over his right shoulder. Ryz’n stepped close to the screen to peer impolitely through the house, out the sliding glass doors at the back of the dining room and into the back yard. There, she spied a big woman standing behind another person seated in a tall chair.

“Saturday’s her busy day, lady. She don’t got much time for gabbin.’ You look familiar,” observed the man slowly, studiously. “Help me out now, lady. Where have I see ya before?”

As Ryz’n stepped back from the door into the bright June sunlight, she excused herself. The big man propped open the screen door to push his chair halfway out of the house, until he straddled the threshold.

“Well, I’ve been on TV a few times, performed live all over the country. Perhaps—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute!” He shook his lone hand as if to snap his fingers. To Ryz’n, the man’s hand looked as if it had been scorched, leaving the gaps between his fingers full of scar tissue, looking like a duck’s webbed foot. “What’s your name, Miss?”

“I’m Ryzanna Sheeboom. This is Bill Fankell and this is my sister Sheena—”

“SHEEBOOM!?!?!?! Ah HA! HA! HA! I’LL BE DAMNED! I SWEAR, I WILL!” He slapped the arm of his chair zealously and repeatedly. Then, ceasing suddenly, he whispered, asking more of himself than his visitors: “Who would have ever thought I’d run into Nicky and his wife within a day of each other?” In an excited but more normal voice, he asked, “You are Nick’s wife, aren’t ya?” Shocked but ecstatic, Ryz’n answered.

“Well, yes, yes I am. You bet I am. When did you see him last and where is he now and WHO ARE YOU?” Ryz’n could barely contain herself.

The big man laughed a deep rumbling, rolling chuckle that seemed to envelop all of them as well as the court around them.

“I’m very sorry Ma’am, very sorry for being so rude. I’m Big Jim, Big Jim Dixon. Come on in, come on inside.”

He motored himself backwards to allow them to pass through the front portal and makeshift foyer into the dark interior of the living room. The previously muffled sound of the Saturday morning cartoons suddenly blared from the TV set to their right against the far wall. They entered a bandstand of a room. To their right, stood the backside of half of a couch that faced towards the television, perpendicular to the front of the home. The other half of the couch rested with its back against the front wall, beneath a picture window. The little boy who had answered the door sat on the near section of couch, watching television placidly. A larger, lighter skinned boy lay on his stomach, propped on his elbows, with his feet in the air above his bent knees, on the half of the couch which abutted the stucco’s front dry wall.

“Come on in here.” Big Jim made a backwards three-point turn with his chair and led them through the bandbox living room into the even smaller dining room. “Please, sit down” he offered amiably and motioned to the four chairs around the dining table. “Can I get you some coffee or somethin’?” The big man did not offer to shake hands and, given the ugliness of his handicap, Ryz’n did not push it. He wheeled to the kitchen counter, which separated the tiny dining room from the even tinier kitchen, where he grabbed the coffee pot and a coffee cup.

Ryz’n pulled a chair from the closest end of the table and set it back in a corner so Bill could pull in. They seated themselves around the coffee colored, black flecked, oval dining room table. Ryz’n could plainly see Donna Dixon now through the sliding glass doors cutting a woman’s hair on the back patio, while a couple other ladies sat on lawn furniture talking and thumbing through magazines. The blonde hairdresser had pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She wore a pink beautician’s smock with large pockets on either hip, a pair of faded dungarees and what appeared to be some boots. The smock tried but failed to conceal the Amazon’s curvaceous form. Bill accepted a cup of black coffee, as he introduced himself to Big Jim.

Sheena and Ryz’n declined a beverage. Jim noticed the sisters staring at the women on the patio. Ryz’n sat erect in the dining chair, with her left leg crossed over her right and leaning forward slightly from the waist. She had turned her head to the left to watch Donna Dixon at work on the patio, scarcely fifteen feet away. The woman clipped and combed with an efficient, brisk professionalism.

Ryz’n remembered her as being handsomely attractive in a large sort of way. Now, through the glass door, she studied her adversary more closely. The beautician had a squarish forehead and jaw with a turned up nose. Her deep, Pacific blue eyes were large, her blonde brows and red lips were thin. Blonde bangs, which fell to her eyebrows, were equally thin but curved downward, sparsely but evenly spaced, across her broad forehead. Her features revealed a

strong yet unexpected feminine visage. Of course, her enormous chest protruded from under her smock, like the torpedoes through the hull of the *African Queen*. “Dammit”, Ryz’n muttered under her breath as she viewed her for a second time, in a more neutrally critical light. *I can see where a man, especially Nicky, would find her attractive. But udders like that should be hanging from a cow!*

“Yep, that’s my wife Donna out there, givin’ the haircut.” Turning his head toward the living room, Big Jim called out loudly, “Hey! Little Jim!” The boy lying on the far couch responded.

“Yes, Suh?”

“Bring me that album cover we was lookin’ at when Nick, I mean when Dixie, was here the other day.” The larger boy, who had been lying down, stirred indolently from his relaxed resting place on the sofa.

The light-skinned black boy looked to Ryz’n to be about eight years of age with green eyes and light brown hair. Under his father’s sullen stare, the boy began to move with dispatch and produced the album cover as requested. Then, he disappeared again hurriedly back to his cartoons in the living room. Big Jim held the *Lest We Forget* album, which he opened like a sacred book. Then, turning the opened sleeves around, he held the inner cover up for them to see, pointing out pictures of Ryz’n and Sheena to themselves. Then he fingered the big, grayed out basic training graduation picture of Nick in his dress blues that took up most of the right side of the album cover’s inner sleeve. Big Jim tapped that picture hard. “That’s him. That’s Nicky Sheeboom.” He showed them the picture he had identified.

“Well, yes Sir. It sure is Mr. Dixon,” agreed Ryz’n, who sat directly across the table from Big Jim. “Now you said you saw him in the flesh? Recently?”

“Yeah, ‘in the flesh’ all right. Ha! Sure did, if you call last night, recent.”

“LAST NIGHT! YOU SAW HIM LAST NIGHT?” Ryz’n jumped out of her seat and fell back upon it.

“Damn straight I did! He was settin’ right there in that very chair you’re settin’ on now, eatin’ ice cream.”

“I don’t believe it!” Incredulous, Ryz’n turned to Bill. “If we would have come down here last evening, we would have had him!” Bill rolled his eyes and shook his head. Ryz’n chastised herself. “I should have called here last night! Darn it! What a fool I was! And Mr. Dixon, you’re sure about that, that it was Nicky who was here?”

“Damn straight, I’m sure. I can’t walk and I only got one good arm, but my mind is workin’ jes’ fine.” His grin dissolved. He looked down and mumbled “Now anyways.” Jim looked up at them again and resumed the topic under discussion. “Damn right, he was here. BIG AS LIFE!” Ryz’n was both overjoyed and flabbergasted at this terrific news.

“Well, is he coming back? I mean, I mean where is he now?”

“Well, he said he’d stop back at the end of the summer. But he’s taken off for Maryland to find you!”

Ryz'n's jaw dropped a mile. She rested her elbows on the table and her forehead in her hands. She did not know whether she should laugh or cry, but she managed to inhale deeply and compose herself. She couldn't believe the irony of this situation. She had just missed Nicky because he had gone to look for her. *Incredible!*

Bill asked, "You're absolutely sure the guy who was here last night is Nick Sheeboom?"

"Absolutely, positively. We got these 'Semper Fidelis' tattoos together in Saigon on a bet." Big Jim rolled up the short sleeve of his light blue T-shirt over his chocolate colored left arm stump. He turned his left shoulder toward them to reveal the colorful red, gold and blue tattoo of the Marine Corps emblem with *Semper Fidelis* arched over and above the chevron at the top of his shoulder, just above his amputation. He turned sideways to allow all of them a good look at the tattoo. "Nick won the bet," he remarked casually. "If he would have lost, he would have gotten a 'Black is Beautiful' tattoo, like this here." The big man chuckled and pulled down the collar of the V-necked shirt to reveal his chest.

"That S. O. B. never seemed to lose." He looked down, shaking his head and chuckling. "I knew he'd make it back OK. I just knew it." He let loose of the shirt and lifted his head to meet their gazes, lightly tapping the bottom side of his fist on the wooden table top. "If anybody was ever gonna make it back, I knew it would be Nick Sheeboom. He's one lucky Son'bitch." The last, he spoke resolutely without a trace of humor.

Sheena asked, "What was the bet, Mr. Dixon?"

"Aww sheee-ittt! Big Jim! OK?"

"Oh sure, sure 'Big Jim,'" apologized Sheena. They all realized Sheena hadn't meant to upset him.

"That's better, Miss. Well, uh, I think it was over whose cherry the Spider Lady would snag next."

"Spider Lady?"

"Yeah, she was a whore worked out of this place we'd tap in Saigon, if we ever got any leave, which was damned seldom. She was called the Spider Lady because—"

"Please Jim, spare us the details" begged Ryz'n. "I'm sure it was a most descriptive moniker, but tell me—"

"Oh, you don't understand Ma'am. Nicky was never one of the Spider Lady's, uh, clients. You know, he just went along to try to 'witness'—that was the term he used. You know, to witness to 'em? Some things about Nick just never seemed to add up. Yeah, like I could never figure it, a celebrity like him, with a great wife like you and he wasn't even drafted! Hell! I never understood why he did it. I mean, signed up and all. I remember him saying the Lord had led him to help find and save those missin' soldiers. I thought he was kiddin'. But he wasn't. He was damned serious. Yeah! He was a Jesus freak back in the Nam.

Seems toned down about that religious stuff now, like he is about everything else. Guess he don't remember that stuff no more, either."

Ryz'n recalled how her Nick's zeal for Christianity had soared after the two of them narrowly escaped a near fatal automobile accident, the summer before he shipped out. Like Jim said, Nicky had volunteered for the service because he truly had thought God had called him with that vision about rescuing POWs. However, Ryz'n had known that Nick's new-found religion had caused him great inner conflict. He had wrestled to reconcile the demands of the record industry and the call of the typical Rock'N'Roll lifestyle with that which the Lord had called him to lead. In fact, the conflict had tormented him so greatly during that last fall that Ryz'n believed this torment of his soul also had been a major reason for inducing him to sign up with the Corps. Nick had never made that confession to her. However, she believed strongly he had escaped into the Corps in part to avoid the demons within himself, to remove himself from the temptations that had surrounded him.

Ryz'n roused herself from her reverie to display her dimples for Jim. She assured him that she understood what he had meant about the Spider Lady and had taken no offense.

"Yes, Jim, I know. But what I really want to know now is: How and where can I find my husband?"

Jim shrugged. "I dunno, exactly," resumed Big Jim with a sigh. "But he's on the road somewheres, ridin' that modified chopper of his. Figure it will take him at least six days to cross the country on a bike. Should show up at your place next Thursday, maybe Wednesday, if he don't have no problems."

"How do you know for sure that's where he's headed?"

"Cause that's what he told us. He said he got your address from this record comp'ny." Big Jim pointed to the Halo Platters label on the album cover, lying next to him on the dining table.

Ryz'n lowered her voice and peered into the disabled vet's dark brown eyes, asking in a sober but friendly confidence, "Did he, did he recognize you, Jim?"

The big man shook his head sadly.

"Nope. Looked right through me, like I wasn't even there. Mann! It gave me a chill!" The big man shuddered at the recollection. "His eyes are different now. Ya know? They used to always have that spark, that gleam, even during the worst of it. But now, he's different now, not the same old confident, ready-for-anything Nick. Tore me up to see him like that. He moves and speaks slow. Has a bit of a speech problem, ya see? Never figured that would happen to my Nicky boy. He was always so cocky, ya know? Like there was nothing he couldn't handle. Know what I mean?"

Ryz'n nodded again.

"Of course, in one way, he's lucky," confessed the big man.

"How's that, Jim?"

Now Jim's eyes narrowed, becoming cold, hollow.

“He don’t remember all that hell we went through. I’ll tell you what, that husband of yours saved my sorry hide or what’s left of it. If it hadn’t been for him, I’d be in some mass grave over there right now. Last night, I told him that, but ... but I also told him, maybe he shoulda left me in that bamboo prison ... maybe, I’d be better off, maybe ...”

Bill interrupted, speaking sharply and with conviction.

“That’s PURE BULL, Mann, and you know it! You gotta home here, a wife and two boys that need you. Hell! You got more now than I ever had. I don’t want to hear that SHINE!”

Involuntarily, Ryz’n and Sheena backed up in their chairs, fearing a fight might break out between the two paralyzed vets, but Big Jim broke the tension with a soft smile.

“You’re right, Mann! Hey! When you’re right, you’re right!” He reached across the table to give Bill the black man’s handshake. “Here ya go, Brotha!”

Ryz’n would liked to have talked more with Big Jim to learn more about Nick, but she was afraid the big man would go south on them as he just had, by recalling unpleasant memories. She wondered if he knew about his wife and Nicky, but diplomatically refrained from posing such a potentially turbulent question. What she really wanted, was to speak with the big man’s wife, who had lied to her previously about Nick. Ryz’n wanted to nail that Amazon, in the worst way possible. Ryz’n sighted her target, through the sliding glass door, as she carried on cutting a customer’s hair.

“Well, Jim, I’d really like to speak with your wife for a few minutes.” Ryz’n pushed her chair back to stand up. “But before I do, I’d kind of like to know how you think Nicky just happened to drop by here, if his memory is so bad?”

The big man grinned.

“Donna said she met Nicky, when they found my dog tags on him, when he was still stationed at Kaneohe. She said they kept in touch, in case either of ‘em might learn something that would help the other. It was just dumb luck that he dropped by the other day, I guess, because I’ve only been home eight days myself.” His eyes wavered and his quizzical expression belied his confident tone. His failure to look Ryz’n in the eye led her to assume he was being less than truthful. Ryz’n did not press the matter. She had bigger fish to fry.

“Yes, it’s a small, but funny world sometimes, Jim. Look, thanks so much and congratulations on your homecoming!” Ryz’n flashed the three-dimple smile, as she rose, excused herself and stepped out onto the patio. Big Jim seemed both surprised and disappointed that she left so quickly. He would have to content himself with just Sheena and Bill for an audience. As for Ryz’n, she had another more, pressing matter on her mind.

Ryz’n had observed Donna Dixon, who, while plying her trade, had tried to avoid peeking at Ryz’n and her party through the sliding glass patio doors. Mrs. Dixon could not run, so she decided to use the excuse that she was too busy to speak with Ryz’n now, which, of course, she was. However, Ryz’n would not

bite. She gave Mrs. Dixon an ultimatum. She explained that the hairdresser could either take a ten minute break, so they could speak in private, or Ryz'n would just fire away right there in front of her friends and customers. The hairdresser decided to take a break. She apologized to her clients, but she said she would return in ten minutes and suggested the ladies help themselves to the coffee pot or the cooler of soft drinks. Donna's customer's looked at one another suspiciously.

The two young women excused themselves via the back door into the garage. The pair squeezed in between the Dixon's station wagon and the interior garage walls. Ryz'n said nothing but simply stared at her adversary, waiting for an explanation. The place smelled of stale, cut grass and gasoline. Mrs. Dixon turned coldly upon Ryz'n, who noticed something below the hairdresser's eyes.

"Well, what do you want from me, Mrs. Sheeboom? Saturday is my busy day. Those kids inside gotta eat, ya know?" With that callous, brisk opening salvo Donna Dixon had thrown down the gauntlet. Ryz'n picked it up with relish.

"The truth! That's what I want, the whole truth, if you think you know how to give it!" Ryz'n spit the words at her adversary as if they were bitter seeds. She could not hide her contempt for this, this lying adulteress. Indeed, it was all she could do to keep from tearing her eyes out.

The tall, buxom California blonde with the deep suntan, freckles, and perfectly even, white teeth, stared at the ground. She began to pace back and forth slowly at first, along the side of the car. Her sunny blonde hair was tied back in an antiquated pony tail with long bangs sparsely bending over her square forehead to her eyebrows. *Right out of the Fifties, Bee-Bop generation.* The woman was half a foot larger than Ryz'n's five-foot three-inch frame and probably a good forty pounds heavier. If it came down to a physical match between the two of them, Ryz'n knew she would be the underdog. Yet, as a former softball catcher, who never had shrunk from blocking the plate, Ryz'n felt competent to meet any challenge here, just as she had done on the softball diamond. She sincerely hoped it would not come to a physical confrontation, but this lying whore had gotten her blood up. As she stared more closely at the Dixon woman, Ryz'n again noticed the hairdresser's eyes. Large dark circles peeked out from beneath concealing make-up and the woman's eyes looked bloodshot.. The skin below her eyes was puffy, as well. It appeared to Ryz'n as if the woman had been up crying all night long. Ryz'n smelled blood.

Donna Dixon reached shakily into a side pocket of her pale blue smock to fetch a pack of cigarettes. She pulled one out and stuck it in her mouth without lighting it. She paused, as she reached for her matches. Suddenly the larger woman remembered her manners.

"Oh! Would you care for a cigarette?" She proffered Ryz'n the pack.

"No." replied Ryz'n coldly. "I don't smoke."

"Will it bother you, if I smoke?"

“Yes, it will. Tobacco smoke doesn’t agree with me,” responded Ryz’n acidly. (Tobacco smoke had always bothered Ryz’n since she had experienced frequent childhood asthma attacks. Cigarette smoke was a major reason why Ryz’n always tried to avoid playing the club scene. Although she had outgrown her asthma after puberty, Ryz’n still despised tobacco smoke.)

The hairdresser returned the matches and cigarette package to her pocket, but kept the unlit cigarette in her mouth. The butt bobbed up and down as she spoke.

“Well, you’re right, I guess,” she mumbled. “It is a bad habit and I shouldn’t smoke in here around the car and the lawnmower gas can.” She paced some more. Ryz’n held her tongue. Taking the nail from her mouth, the handsome blonde let out a sigh of resignation.

“All right. All right.” She kept pacing back and forth, in the cramped space between the car and garage walls, while she avoided Ryz’n’s penetrating gaze.

“I first met Dixie ... oh, let’s see. It was in late August of ’73 over at Kaneohe. The Corps notified me they had found my husband or thought they had anyway. They wanted me to come over to identify him, because he had amnesia. They thought a full face-to-face meeting would be better for him than us just talking over the phone.” As the woman spoke, she remained agitated. With the unlit cigarette between her fingers, she paced back and forth nervously in the small garage, removing items from her path with her feet, like toy wagons, rakes, etc. She avoided Ryz’n’s direct glare as much as possible. Ryz’n nodded, because what the woman had said made sense, but she never for an instant took her eyes off her rival.

“Anyway, they paid for me to go over. So I went.” She toked nervously on the unlit nail, then folded her arms across her body. “His Marine company commander ushered me into a small room in the recreation hall. There was Dix in his khakis, sitting in a chair at the end of a long table.” She smiled at the recollection, pointing to an old, broken chair in the corner of the garage as if Dix were sitting there. “I remember the sunlight was streaming across him from some partly opened Venetian blinds. The light forced him to squint a little to see me.” Ryz’n frowned, but bit her tongue, allowing the hairdresser to go on enjoying the reliving of her recollection.

“Well shoot! I knew right away he wasn’t my husband, who you’ve met, yes?”

Again, Ryz’n nodded once that she had.

“I never thought to ask the Marines what color he was and they didn’t want me to speak to him over the phone, thinking the shock of a fresh, full, face-to-face meeting might be the best way to help spur his recall. You follow me?”

And again, Ryz’n nodded. “Yes, you just said that.” Ryz’n was cutting this woman no slack, whatsoever.

“Oh yeah, that’s right I did, didn’t I?” She removed the unlighted Lucky from her mouth and shook her head in agreement. “Sorry.”

“Go ahead,” urged Ryz’n. “But if you ask me, it seems the Marines could tell the difference between a white Dixon and a black Dixon.” Ryz’n’s bitterness was

quite evident in her tone. The Dixon woman fidgeted nervously with her unlit cigarette.

“Yes, that’s what I thought, too. It was only when Big Jim came home about a week ago that I learned what happened there. It seems the DOD’s famed Worldwide Locator Service failed in this case. Evidently, servicemen in “the Outfit”, as Jim refers to it, were not entered into the mainstream automated system with all the other servicemen. Seems Big Jim’s file, along with the rest of “the Outfit”, probably Dixie’s, too, were squirreled away under some super “Top Secret” classification, somewhere inside the bowels of the Pentagon. Due to the ultra-clandestine nature of their outfit’s operation, ya understand?” Ryz’n blinked deliberately in reply. “Hell!” exclaimed the hairdresser. “Turns out Big Jim was misfiled with Army records of all places, because he and Dix had been attached to an Army outfit! How do ya like that? Of course, all this came to light, only recently, much after my visit with Dix.

“Poor Dix.” Donna shook her head. “The Marines had just made up a file for him based on what he could tell them about hisself, which was absolutely nothin’. Ha! They even gave him a simulated rank of corporal.” Donna laughed. “But he got busted to private after a dispute with a DI that also cost him a some times in the Brig.” She shook her head and smiled. Then Ryz’n’s hard, impatient stare prompted the blonde to return to her original subject.

“Oh Yeah, about Dix and me. Right. That’s what you were interested in?” Donna took a deep breath, as Ryz’n’s sharp, silent stare bore into Donna’s eyes. Mrs. Dixon looked away but persevered, “Well, I was disappointed, more like devastated, ya know? I could tell he, the kid, was disappointed also that he didn’t belong to me. The captain led me away, consoled me and took me back to his office.” Mrs. Dixon looked back to Ryz’n. “Then I thought, hey! If this kid had Big Jim’s dog tags, maybe I could find out something from him that would help me to locate my husband? Of course, the captain and his fellow Marines told me, Dixie was an amnesic, but I figured, I could finesse some information out of him. You know? HA! Yeah, right!” She shook her head and eyed the garage rafters.

“Anyway, they took me back over to the rec. hall, but Dix had split. They walked me over to the barracks and there he was.” The Dixon woman stopped pacing, using her foot, to right a rake that had slipped down from against the garage wall. Then she resumed both her walk and her talk.

“He was the only marine in the barrack. We caught him in his briefs, I mean, in his under shorts only. Evidently, he was supposed to have been cleaning the latrine or some damned thing, so he was climbing back into his fatigues. Well, I tell you, the sight of that tan, lean, good-lookin’, hard-bodied young man in his skivvies struck me hard ... stuck with me.” Donna was staring off into space now, hardly aware of her interrogator. “Gee! My husband had been gone for almost two years. Been listed as a M. I. A. for seven months. The Government, that is the Nixon Administration, had said that all P. O. W.s had been returned. Yeah! Right, again.”

She stopped pacing and nervously blew imaginary smoke and looked up towards the garage ceiling briefly, before returning to stare at Ryz'n, plaintively

"Well, now, I hadn't so much as looked at another man in all that time. Ya gotta believe me. It's true. Didn't have time, even if I had wanted to, not with working a full time job, trying to raise two kids and runnin' a household, too. Do you know, me and Jim have been married nine years? But we have been separated for almost seven of 'em? Can you believe that?"

"Yes, I can, because Nicky and I have been married going on five years, but we have only been together for less than fifteen months!" Ryz'n was in no mood to sympathize with this adulteress.

Mrs. Dixon became increasingly agitated. Anxiously, she puffed harder on her unlit cigarette. Unable to draw the nicotine that she craved, she reached for the matches again, then, caught herself. Ryz'n could see she desperately needed a smoke

"It's all right, Mrs. Dixon. Go ahead and light up, if it will help."

"Are you sure?"

Again, Ryz'n nodded curtly in reply. She wanted to hear this, even at the expense of sucking in second hand smoke.

"Well, let's get out of here before I blow us both to smithereens. Ha! Then we wouldn't have any more problems. Ever think of that?" Ryz'n smiled weakly at the dark humor.

Donna Dixon reached down, lifted open the garage car door and led Ryz'n out through the open front door into the bright sunlight, where the driveway had queued up customers' cars. There, the big blonde finally lit up. The besmoked hairdresser took that first deep drag and sagged with obvious relief.

"Let's walk," suggested Ryz'n.

The two attractive, young women with a common interest walked down the driveway around the parked cars, looking like a Mutt and Jeff combo. With Ryz'n to Donna's right, they followed the sidewalk to the right around the court on this sun-drenched, Southern California, June Saturday. Once she had inhaled on her Winston again and exhaled deeply, Donna appeared to relax. Her shoulders visibly sagged with relief as she murmured 'Ummmm'. Ryz'n walked stiffly beside her. The back of Ryz'n's right hand rested together behind her on the top of her sharply outward-curved rump. Her left pressed her handbag into her left upper hip. The unlikely pair strolled stiffly, side by side, on the concrete sidewalk that ringed the small suburban court. Fortified by the nicotine, Donna picked up where she had left off.

"So Dix puts on his fatigues and we walk back over to the rec. hall where I quizzed him about Big Jim. Well, as we talked, or I should say, as I talked, Dix listened. He listened with interest. You know, I mean with compassion? But he could not help me. He wanted to help. That was obvious. He just could not recall anything. And that depressed him, hunh, even as it does to this day." Donna zoned out for a few seconds.

“Well, when we had finished our talk, I asked the captain if I could take Dix off the base. I thought, you know, maybe in a more relaxed setting, Dix’d have a breakthrough or something and he could say what happened to Big Jim. The captain called the psychiatrists who were treating Dix. The next thing I know, they give him a four-day liberty. I couldn’t believe it!”

Neither can I.

“Well, we take a cab over to Waikiki. We walk on the beach. Far down the beach. We talk. Dix is pickin’ my brain. I mean, he’s listenin’ to me talk about all my problems, my life without Big Jim, the kids, everything. He was so attentive, so attractive, so, I don’t know, so sweet, so helpless. Well, I fell in love with him right there.” Donna kicked the heel of her wide cuffed, right boot, scraping it against the sidewalk, as if to emphasize her point or perhaps to show regret. Ryz’n could not be certain which. But Donna carried on..

“I sensed the feeling was mutual, but I wasn’t sure. So we go to dinner at a nice quiet, Polynesian restaurant. We walked the beach until well after dark. Dix said he felt like swimmin’. He stripped and went in. Went in naked as a Jaybird, right there in front of me, without even battin’ an eye!” Donna stopped to drool over the recollection. “I don’t know why he did it, because he’s usually so shy about his wounds. Maybe he thought it was so dark I wouldn’t notice. Maybe he was desperate ... like me. Well! My Gosh! Adonis could not have looked better than Dix. I mean, of course, his war wounds aside.

“Then, I followed him in, just like that!” She snapped her fingers of her free hand. “Ha! I couldn’t believe what I was doing either, out there on a public beach like that, even if it was almost midnight. I mean, I just didn’t do things like that, not even growing up on the beach here in San Diego.

Guess, I was a little desperate, too.” Donna’s tone became maudlin. “But Dix, gee, he made it all seem so natural.” She started to stroll again as she became more reflective, more sentimental. “He was easy, so easy to be with, easy to love. And I was so lonely, so lonely. Oh, you don’t know what it’s like—”

They had been walking side by side quietly with Ryz’n holding her emotions in check. However, now Ryz’n stopped dead in her tracks to pivot left on her heel and shoot Mrs. Dixon a laser beam gaze, a penetratingly chilling look. The blonde sighed, inhaling deeply on her cigarette. “Well ... yeah, maybe you do. I mean, sure you do.” She coughed self-consciously. “Of course, you do. I’m, I’m sorry.” Ryz’n resumed their walk without uttering a syllable, but seething, still biting her tongue.

“Well, me and Dix spent a long weekend together. When we parted company, we exchanged addresses, etc., so if either of us heard something that might help the other we’d, well you know ... ” (Righteous indignation welled up within Ryz’n, but she held it in check, keeping her mouth shut and listened.) “When I left Dix, I left my heart in the islands. Truly, I did.” Donna sighed. “But I never expected to hear from him again. I swear it. You gotta believe that Mrs. Sheeboom.”

“Unh, hunh, that’s why you exchanged addresses. But you DID see him again, now DIDN’T YOU?”

Donna Dixon flicked her cigarette butt into the concrete gutter and followed its flight.

“Yeah, yeah, I saw him again.” She paused somewhat ashamed and fetched another nail from the pocket of her smock, which she shakily fired up. The buxom blonde inhaled deeply before she resumed both her talk and her walk. Having reached the corner, the pair turned and crossed the mouth of the short court to walk back down the opposite side as Donna recommenced her tale.

“Yeah, it was a just about a year ago, near the end of May, it was. Dix had come down here to play baseball for the Hammers. You know, he’s really a helluva ballplayer?” She shook her head and paused in awe to look at Ryz’n.

Ryz’n smiled weakly, indulgently.

“Oh sure, of course, you know, of course.” They walked on. “Well, he just showed up at my door late one Saturday night. The Hammers had gotten him a part time job at a fillin’ station around the corner. I had run into him filling up my car one day and he needed a place to stay. We just accepted it as fate, so ...” Ryz’n halted and turned to her rival.

“So you shacked up with my husband for the summer? How did you explain that to your sons?” Donna stopped as well. She dropped her syrupy tone and became very serious.

“Look, I didn’t know he was your husband then, OK? He didn’t know he was your husband, either. And the boys love Dix. To this day, they think he walks on water. Dix makes them laugh again. Why, he’d take us all down to the beach on that modified chopper of his, all four of us, can you believe that? I still don’t believe we did that and never got pulled over, either. Ha! Not once. Dix was lucky that way. Yeah, I was almost as happy for the kids as I was for myself, maybe more, that Dix had come back into my life. They needed a man, a father figure in their lives, someone they could laugh with, but respect at the same time, you know? And you couldn’t ask for a better father figure than Dix. Chronologically, he may not be very old, but from a maturity standpoint, he’s older than I am.”

“And how old is that?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“How old is Dixie?”

“Nicky is twenty-one, just like I am.” (Ryz’n did not feel it appropriate to announce, she’d be twenty-one for only another week.)

“Ouch, I didn’t know he was that young.” Donna shook her head negatively, while Ryz’n stared blankly at her husband’s lover. “OK, OK, you’re right. I ... I mean, I ... I suspected as much, but—well, gee. There’s not much to tell after that, I guess.” She started to walk away but Ryz’n stopped her short.

“Oh, I disagree. I think there’s quite a bit to tell, Mrs. Dixon.”

“Well, maybe ... Maybe there is, something anyway.”

They had reached the Dixon home and resumed their walk around the court for the second time, when another of Donna's hair customers drove up in an El Dorado, asking to know if Donna were open for business. The blonde hairdresser told the prospective customer she was welcome but Donna was running a little behind schedule. Donna told the lady, she could go on around back and pick a pop out of the cooler in the back yard and Donna would be with her shortly. The woman said she'd return in an hour. After the woman drove away, Mrs. Dixon returned her attention to Ryz'n.

Donna murmured to herself. "Hope them other customers don't leave ... Now, where were we?" Ryz'n ignored her remark and quickly redirected her.

"You didn't realize how young Nicky is and that summer—"

"Oh yeah, right." Again, they resumed their stroll. "Well, summer ended. Nicky, uh Dixie, went up to Cerritos Community College, until a grant opened up for him at Peppermount, starting the spring semester. He stayed with us over the Christmas break. Then—"

"Wait a minute," demanded Ryz'n. Once more they halted to face each other. "Are you saying you didn't see him from the end of summer until Christmas?"

"Well, no. I guess not. I mean, you know, he'd come down a couple weekends a month, maybe one or two Tuesday evenings a month."

"Tuesday evenings? Why Tuesdays?"

"Well, Dix didn't have no classes on Wednesday and, at that time, Wednesday was my day off and ..."

"And the kids were in school?"

"Yeah, you got it." She spewed some tobacco smoke out the side of her mouth and hung her head.

"SHHOOO—OOOTTTT!" Ryz'n was incensed.

"Well, you kept askin, lady!" cried Donna angrily, in self defense.

Ryz'n's sunglasses fell down over her face as she jerked her head in disgust. She pulled the dark glasses off her nose and used them as a miniature foil, jabbing them three times towards her adversary as she made her points.

"Just finish this, but don't leave out anything important, not like three months of makin' out! For cryin' out loud!"

"WHAT! What do you want from me, Mrs. Sheeboom? You want me to tell you how great he is in bed? What we did together? Hunh? Well, let me tell you. Honey, we—"

"No, Damn it!" Driven to utter a rare curse, Ryz'n nearly poked Donna's eye out with her FosterGrants. "I want you to tell me what I don't know, not what I don't wanna know! I can figure that out for myself. THANK YOU!"

Donna stared hard at Dixie's wife, who dropped her head and began to walk again.

"Sure, sure. I guess, I guess that was, that was kinda low of me. I, uh ..."

Donna took a deep breath and drew on her nail. "OK, OK, so anyway, Dixie went up to Peppermount. And that's when your detective, and then you, showed

up with your pictures and I, I ... ” Ryz’n stopped walking causing Donna to stop with her.

“You lied to me. Say it, you lied, didn’t you?” Ryz’n seized Donna lightly by the forearm and squared off to face her larger rival, gazing up to the Dixon woman, who towered above her.

Again, the two women halted to stare at one another. Mrs. Dixon broke down first. She sucked anxiously on her cancer stick, holding it in her left hand.

“Yes, I lied to you. OK, you satisfied now?” She spoke in a prissy sort of tone and looked away from Ryz’n’s direct gaze. But Ryz’n was like a terrier nipping at Donna’s heel. Jabbing her sunglasses in the air, she would not be deterred.

“Why? Why? Why did you do it? Didn’t you think Nick had a right to know who he was? If you had really loved him, you’d want what is best for him, wouldn’t you? At least, you could have let him decide for himself what that is! Why? Why did you—”

Suddenly, Donna wheeled back towards Ryz’n with her right fist clenched, jabbing downward beside her hip repeatedly. Then, with her open right palm, she slapped her right buttock with a resounding THWACK!

“BECAUSE! BEE—CAUSE! We were GOOD together—GOOD for each other! You don’t know how GOOD we were together in every way, not just in the sack, but in every way. If you could have seen him with those kids, you ... Ahh! Look! I lied. I screwed up!” Donna Dixon threw her hands up in the air, as though she were under arrest with her cigarette ashes falling onto Ryz’n, who quickly wiped them off her chest and shoulder.

“Sorry,” said Donna curtly without conviction. “Look! When he came down to play in the tournament over his spring break, we went out to dinner. I was gonna tell him about you then, after dinner. Honest, I was. But he took me to the “Top of the Cove” over on the bluff. It’s one of the fanciest, classiest restaurant saround here.”

Her countenance softened considerably as she smiled and began to stroll again with the much shorter Ryz’n beside her. “We enjoyed a candlelight dinner together. A candlelight dinner! Just the TWO OF US! Can you imagine that?” She shook her head in wonder. “Oh, it was wonderful. Glorious! We ate outside in a flower-covered Spanish courtyard, looking out over the Pacific Ocean. Filled with the spring scent of fresh desert wildflowers and blooming cactus.” Her voice trailed off. “It was perfect ... ”

“And where were the kids, Mrs. Dixon, the two boys you’re so concerned about?” asked Ryz’n full of sarcasm. Suddenly, Donna dropped her fairy tale demeanor in favor of righteous indignation.

“Look lady! You gotta right to question me about Dix, but when it comes to my kids, you got no right and no idea what the hell you’re talkin’ about! The kids had been with Dix and me all week. My in-laws babysat them that one night. ONE LOUSY NIGHT! For Pete’s sakes!” The two women ceased walking again.

“Your in-laws? Ha! How convenient!” Ryz’n’s sarcastic tone was not lost on Donna.

“Loook! That was the first time Dixie and I were alone together without the boys that whole week!”

“Except for when you were sleepin’ next to MY husband, right? And don’t tell me you didn’t know he was MY husband then, or that you weren’t committing ADULTERY either, because you were you, you lyin’—” Ryz’n felt her face flush and the vein pop out along her forehead.

Again, Dixie’s lover backed down with remorse and hung her head in shame, admitting, “Well, Dix was supposed to be roomin’ with the team in some motel down by San Diego State, but the Coach cut him some slack.”

Without looking up, she spoke softly, hesitantly. “I, I was gonna tell him ... tell him that very night at the restaurant after dinner ... honest I was. But he said he had something he wanted to say first. He presented me with a seventy-five hundred dollar, diamond engagement ring. He asked me to marry him.”

Donna looked off dreamily again down the street.

“I couldn’t believe it. The answer to all my prayers was right there in front of me, you know?” She turned back to face Ryz’n. “All I had to do was simply say ‘yes’, ‘Yes’ ‘YES!’ If I said it once, I must have said it ten times. I ignored my conscience, thanking the Lord for answering my prayers by bringing me a terrific husband and a father for my kids.” Donna smiled beneficently.

“Well Lady, your prayers have been answered NOW. Haven’t they, Honey? BEE-CAUSE! Your husband and the father of your kids has come home to love you all.” Ryz’n smirked broadly, relishing this moment.

Mrs. Dixon raised her head to look into Ryz’n’s spiteful eyes. Ryz’n could see the wheels turn behind the adulteress’s bloodshot orbs.

“Well, now, then, there,’ as Dix might say. “Lady, you’re just like the rest of us common folk, ain’t ya Miss Supah Staah? If I WAS feelin’ a bit guilty, I ain’t no more. You, uh, had your own sexual escapades, there Honey! And them’s just the ones that was in the newspapers!

“You know, right now, I mean RIGHT NOW! Dixie is looking for you, but he don’t know you from Adam. He only knows what Big Jim pointed out to him on those album covers. But Dixie does know ME, BABY. AND HE LOVES ME! And it wouldn’t surprise me if Dix comes back TO ME.” She jabbed her sternum with the back of her thumb. “Yeah, that’s right, because he loves ME and he loves those kids! Because he’s never really had nobody else. See?

“I’m like a mother, a sister, a fiancée, a friend as well as a lover to him, all rolled into one. See? Yeah! And I make him feel like nobody else can, too. So, we’ll see who he loves, won’t we, MRS. Sheeboom?”

“Yes, we most certainly will, MRS. DIXON!” countered Ryz’n, teeming with resentment. “I wouldn’t hold your breath waiting for him to choose you over me, wouldn’t be healthy for ya. And I hope you enjoy the best of health. MRS.

DIXON! So you had better stop smoking those cancer sticks. You have three men in there counting on you to take care of them.

“Now, I believe this conversation is over, MRS. DIXON! On your way back, please tell my sister and Nick’s uncle to meet me at the car, I don’t relish the idea of re-entering your den of iniquity.” Ryz’n shoved her shades back into place over her nose and ears and crossed her arms over her chest, indicating this conversation was over, yet not backing down an inch.

Donna Dixon exhaled her last draw of second hand cigarette smoke down into Ryz’n’s face, as the jilted mother of two strode past Ryz’n back into and through her garage. Indeed, the conversation had ended. Ryz’n leaned up against Bill’s parked car fanning Donna’s cigarette smoke away from her and coughing, while she waited for Bill and Sheena to come out of the house. Her thoughts raced.

She had acted confidently enough in front of her rival, but, in reality, Ryz’n was anything but confident. What the hairdresser had said made sense. Donna Dixon was an attractive, older, but not too much older, woman. Donna’s age may have appealed to Nick, precisely because he had no family, no mother figure so to speak, as the hairdresser had said. Perhaps Ryz’n was stretching her two semesters of psychology past its limits here. Then, there were the kids, who provided him with a built-in, complete family. And why was Nick so easy, so fun loving around this woman and her children, when everyone else Ryz’n had interviewed, had said Nick never laughed, never even smiled, hardly? These opposing character descriptions seemed to be of two entirely different people. They had Ryz’n worried. She had no kids to offer. With Nick’s medically documented history of infertility, now combined with the loss of a testicle and her own well documented female problems, as well as the complications arising from the miscarriage ...

And then, there was that front on her rival. Why, Dolly Parton would have been proud of that girl’s chest set! Since the summer between her sophomore and junior years of high school, when nature had belatedly kicked in and Ryz’n had molded a new shape for herself, she never had felt shorted in that department. Yet, she probably appeared flat chested next to that Dixon lady—Why, that woman was ridiculous! *Udders like that should be hangin from a cow!*

However, suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, Ryz’n thought of Big Jim and she felt a pang of conscience, of remorse. She had displayed an extremely poor attitude toward Donna Dixon just now. In fact, she had also betrayed her Roman Catholic upbringing with her acerbic behavior towards Stiehlmoir, yesterday, too. Suddenly, she felt acutely ashamed, terribly and overwhelmingly ashamed. After all, the Lord was answering both women’s prayers in His own way and time. Ryz’n decided to reconcile with her rival, not because she wanted to, but precisely because she did not want to and because she felt that is what the Lord would want her to do. Her loss and her pain did not guarantee her the right to inflict those feelings onto others. She prayed for humility, for courage and for compassion.

Respectfully, Ryz'n passed back through the handbox of a house. She noticed the kids, playing in front of the TV. The tiny size of the house impressed her now unfavorably and fueled her guilt. Previously, Ryz'n had not noticed the almost claustrophobic closeness of the small stucco cottage. She observed the one-armed big man in the wheelchair, while his wife worked out on the patio to put food on the table for all of them. Whether she wanted to or not, Ryz'n was overcome with compassion for this family, all of them, including the adulterous Mrs. Dixon.

Ryz'n comprehended instinctively that she and Donna Dixon actually had much in common, as MIA wives and as lovers of the same man. She had sympathized with Mrs. Dixon as a sister MIA widow, when she had visited her last winter. Whether Ryz'n liked it or not, Donna Dixon was bound to her in a way unlike any other woman in the world. Ryz'n announced to the group in the dining room that she had one more thing to do before they would have to leave.

Still gathered around the dining room table, the others halted their talk stare as Ryz'n slipped past them with a quick, polite "Excuse me."

For a second time, Ryz'n slid her glasses back up on the crown of her head. She passed through the glass doors to the patio to seek out Donna Dixon on the patio, among her clients.

Mrs. Dixon assumed a confrontational stance. With scissors in one hand and clippers in another, the larger woman looked to be a formidable opponent. She said nothing, but stared hard down at her former fiancé's wife. Ryz'n whispered under her breath so only she could hear. "Father, please help me for I cannot do this alone. Apart from you, I can do nothing." Then she girded herself and slowly moved forward onto the patio. Ryz'n spoke first as Donna's customers looked on. She spoke humbly, gently, despite the customers' presence.

"I, I behaved rather poorly just now, Mrs. Dixon. You know, we have too much in common, too many trials, too many heartaches, for that kind of behavior. Please ... accept my, my sincere, my ... humble, apology." Haltingly, against her will, Ryz'n extended a hand to her archrival, who, hesitated. Staring first at Ryz'n's hand, then into Ryz'n's eyes, Donna switched the scissors from her right to left hand and slowly reached out to clasp the hand of her lover's wife. As Ryz'n took Donna's hand, a warmth spread from their grasp up Ryz'n's arm to her shoulder. An inexplicable feeling of warm elation, welled up within her chest, into her throat and flowed out of her mouth, forcing a shallow smile which she could not repress, though she tried. Slowly, her smile deepened to produce the dimples, which were her trademark. Mrs. Dixon reciprocated with a smile of her own that pushed her toward Ryz'n, hugging her firmly.

Cheek to cheek, she whispered softly into Ryz'n's left ear, so none of Donna's customers would hear her:

"He's all yours. I was wrong, Honey, dead wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I, I ... " Donna sniffled.

Ryz'n whispered in her rival's left ear, "Yes. It's all right. It's OK. I understand. God bless you and your boys, all three of your boys!"

Almost There

Then Ryz'n broke their embrace abruptly. She apologized to the waiting customers for taking up their hairdresser's time. She walked out of there on air as she collected Bill and Sheena from the dining room.

Big Jim asked them to stay. He wanted to tell her about Nick and himself over in Nam. However, Ryz'n took a rain check. She was anxious to return home to prepare for Nick's homecoming, even if it would not be for several days yet. She mentioned to Jim that both she and Nick might return at the end of the summer, before he came back to school. Ryz'n hugged both boys before she left, providing each of them with some "ice cream" money. The boys were overjoyed. Ryz'n passed out ten-dollar bills like so much confetti.

The warm afterglow from her reconciliation with Donna still filled her chest. Her enthusiasm overwhelmed the boys and all those around her. What a change in attitude that apology had wrought in her! Now Ryz'n bore a joyfully sanguine exuberance about her. Hope adorned Ryz'n like a festive robe. However, the hope she felt in her chest was now, more than just the evidence of things unseen. This hope was certain, born of prayer being answered right before her eyes. She could not wait to get back to Crest Hill Heights to consummate those prayers.